

# Under satan's skin: milton's portrayal of a pathetic "prince of darkness"

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**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Satan is no longer to be feared: he is to be jeered, scorned, and mocked! At least this is the attitude shared by notable scholars like C. S. Lewis, Martin Luther, and Thomas More. Lewis devoted a whole book, *The Screwtape Letters*, to the cause; Luther once said, "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to the texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn"; and Thomas More said, "The devil... the proude spirite... cannot endure to be mocked." In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton seems to agree with these esteemed scholars, creating a Satan who is so unsure of his actions that he needs to use his own rhetorical tactics on himself to feel confident. Milton's narrator in *Paradise Lost*, especially during the end of Book III and the beginning of Book IV, prepares the reader for seeing Satan with a clarity that can only be found by getting under his skin and taking a genuine look at the feelings of his heart. Satan's speech atop Mt. Niphates affirms the narrator's introduction of a sad, pathetic, and continually submissive Satan who reveals a sense of inner clarity through his soliloquy. This pathetic "Prince of Darkness" who realizes the truth about his actions, lack of any real Prince-like power, and the reality of God's omnipotent nature still persists in using the tactics of questioning and rhetoric-- the very tactics he uses to distract others from the truth--to try to make himself feel better and justify his actions. Overall, it is clear that Milton uses the speech on Mt. Niphates to encourage the readers to realize that Satan is a weak character who has continual inner turmoil and confusion about his actions and any power he may seem to acquire in his dominion over Hell or Earth. Before Satan gives his infamous speech on Mt. Niphates, the narrator creates a sense of Satan's submissiveness and sadness, as well as the inner clarity

that he will acquire. Location is one important indicator of the clarity and personal truth that Satan is about to reveal to the reader in his speech. The reader is told that Satan "...Throws his steep flight in many an airy wheel,/Nor stayed till on Niphates' top he lights" (3. 741-42). First, it is significant that Satan is on a mountaintop. Physically, this place is associated with a view that can show clearly many things that one cannot see from land; metaphorically, mountaintops are places of revelations and extreme clarity (hence the popular Christian idea of a " mountaintop experience" at conversion or being born-again). The mountain's location outside of Eden is another significant detail. The editor's note informs the reader that the name suggests a snow-covered peak. The presence of snow is notable because there are no seasons in Eden (5. 391-395), making it ever more clear that this locale is not to be associated with Paradise. Furthermore, snow and the season of winter is associated traditionally with the Fall. These geographical clues that force that reader to disassociate this place with Paradise seem to allow the reader to use postlapsarian associations because it is outside the realm of the ethically indifferent Eden. A perfect example of one such association is the aforementioned " mountaintop experience." Adam and Even do not need to climb to the top of a mountain to find clarity in Eden before the Fall; however, as fallen creatures like Satan, humans now often need such physical structures to help us find truth about the world around them. The narrator also uses a pun on the word " light" to stress the issue of Satan's self-revelation being close at hand. When the narrator says, " Nor stayed till on Niphates' top he lights" (3. 742) " light" is used in multiple ways. Initially, it means that Satan is physically landing on Mt. Niphates.

However, upon further consideration, one realizes that the word is also used to remind the reader of God's light. The light that is associated with God is one that reveals truth and goodness; likewise, Satan will reveal truth, but a different kind of truth, unlike the goodness that comes from God's light. Furthermore, the narrator describes the state of Satan's soul before his lengthy oration as such: "Now rolling boils in his tumultuous breast / And like a dev'lish engine back recoils / Upon himself. Horror and doubt distract / The Hell within him, for within him Hell" (4. 16-19). There are a few important descriptions in this excerpt that lend to the idea of Satan's self-revelation. First, the idea of boiling is associated with something rising from within. This is reinforced by "in his tumultuous breast" (4. 16). Clearly, what is about to come to the surface is coming from within Satan, not the outward façade that he works so hard to keep. Also, the description of "a dev'lish engine" that "recoils upon himself" effectively creates a metaphor for an inevitable process of continual, automatic self-deprecation, foreshadowing some of Satan's statements. This excerpt also says "The Hell within him, for within him Hell" (4. 19), mirroring almost exactly what Satan will say later in his speech (4. 75). The classic repetition of the phrase here and later in Satan's speech focuses the reader's attention on the state of Satan's soul being connected forever to hell and that state of condemnation and defeat. This repetition also provides validity to the narrator's statements by showing that the portrayal of Satan and the surroundings is accurate. Through examination of these textual clues, it is quite clear that Satan is going to arrive at some inner clarity during the speech he gives on Mt. Niphates. It is now evident that Satan will achieve some sense of coherence about himself, but

the narrator does not end there in preparing the reader for the speech. The narrator also reveals some themes that will arise in Satan's speech--such as sadness and submissiveness. The narrator uses the repetition of ideas to emphasize Satan's low status and his recognition of that place in the hierarchy. Ascribing such words as "bowing low" (3. 735), "beneath" (3. 740), and "down" (3. 740) to Satan's actions create an air of submission, which is affirmed by the statement "Where honor due and reverence none neglects" (3. 737). Note that the narrator does not say "reverence not many neglect" or "reverence no one except Satan neglects;" he makes a point to use an absolute and say that "reverence none neglects." Clearly, Satan is still in a state of submission to God and is lower than the "superior spirits... in Heaven" (3. 736). This submissiveness is likely one cause of Satan's sadness that the narrator also introduces before the speech on Mt. Niphates. The narrator again uses the repetition of ideas to give the scene of the speech an air of melancholy and disappointment, describing Satan with such depressing words as "not rejoicing" (4. 13), "nor with cause to boast" (4. 14), and "dire attempt" (4. 15). The last example is especially condemning because "dire" has particularly dismal connotations such as desperate and hopeless. Moreover, "dire" can often be used as a warning or threat of destruction. This description of Satan's future is not in any way positive; it is obviously preparing the reader for a Satan whose actions are doomed from the start. Apparently, Satan realizes this because he is said to begin his speech "in sighs" (4. 31). Due to the rhetorical clues provided by the narrator thus far, it is safe for the reader to conclude that these are not the kind of sighs that result from admiration or joy but ones of dejection and

depression. With these sighs, Satan finally begins his infamous oration. As the narrator has highlighted, Satan does arrive at some clarity about himself. In fact, his speech begins and ends with a sense truth, but Satan's reasoning takes him around many turns between those points. Before examining the winding path of Satan's logic, it is necessary to examine the obvious truths at the beginning that set the scene for his questions. Among his first statements, Satan acknowledges that he was wrong to be prideful and rebel while simultaneously recognizing God's omnipotence. He says, "Till pride and worse ambition threw me down,/Warring in Heav'n against Heav'n's matchless King" (4. 40-41). From this the audience knows that they are getting the real Satan because in his previous speeches where he had an audience, Satan effectively keeps up a façade of confidence in his actions, never acknowledging the "pride and worse ambition" that brought his fall. Satan also reveals this new, candid attitude when he states without a doubt that God created him: "From me, whom he created what I was" (4. 43). This is in direct opposition to his statements made when convincing other angels to follow him in rebelling: "We know no time when we were not as now,/Self-begot, self-raised/By our own quick'ning power..." (5. 859-61). Clearly, Satan is finally exposing his true feelings. This establishment of truth is soon brought down by Satan's rhetorical techniques. However, Satan is only fooling himself; it is easy to distinguish between Satan's truth and lies due to his use of the classic technique of questioning. Throughout the oration, Satan questions himself rhetorically about nine times in only 83 lines. These questions are almost all accompanied by rhetoric and a new opinion being formed. The first example of many in this speech is when Satan is

considering the service God required of him. He begins by stating, "Nor was His service hard" (4. 45), but then asks himself a rhetorical question that immediately leads to the new conclusion of "The debt immense of endless gratitude/So burdensome--still paying!--still to owe!" (4. 53-54). Satan continues in this way, fluctuating between his fall being his fault and God's. The final conclusion, however, is that it is his own fault, repeating what the narrator expressed earlier in Book IV by saying, "Which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell" (4. 75). In this way, Satan's rhetoric works against him by leading him to the truth of his pathetic, tormented soul. After Satan's failed attempt to comfort himself, he finally reveals his immense grief and self-deprecating nature. Satan acknowledges the false pretense that he presents to others, namely the other fallen angels, saying things like "The lower still I fall, only supreme/in misery" (4. 91), and "Disdain forbids me and my dread of shame/Among the spirits beneath whom I seduced" (4. 81-82). Satan's confession that he is hiding his feelings due to a sense of shame shows that it is a continual, on-going process of lying to those closest to him. Those who should know him best know him least: "they little know...Under what torments inwardly I groan" (4. 86, 88). This statement perfectly summarizes the real Satan: he separates those who are closest to him through lies, creating a pathetic, lonely life where he is constantly tormented "inwardly." Through careful examination of the text, it is clear that Satan's pathetic self is one truth established in the narration. As previously mentioned, Satan begins and ends his speech with truth; his self-realization is part of that, but he also comes to recognize the truth of God's power. The simple assertion "This knows my punisher" (4. 103) shows that Satan is openly acknowledging

God's omniscience. After apparently exhausting his emotional capabilities, Satan ends his oration on a fairly dramatic note, declaring his devotion to an unemotional future: " So farewell hope and with hope farewell fear!/Farewell remorse!" (4. 108-9). Though he immediately contradicts himself once more saying, "... and more than half perhaps will reign" (4. 111). The " perhaps" shows this notion of hope still seeping into Satan's thoughts. Clearly, Satan still has some hope left... even if it's for the fairly pathetic goal of only reigning over part of the world. However, contradictory this statement is to his previous vow against emotion, it shows Satan's sense of clarity about not ever being able to succeed against God by only hoping for a part. Evidently, the audience is meant to achieve the same sense of clarity about the complex character of Satan as he eventually does himself. Milton uses the narrator to prepare the reader for what Satan reveals, effectively highlighting the submissiveness, sadness, and sense of clarity to come. Satan then uncovers his real emotional turmoil that takes him from truth to questioning and back to the truth about his pathetic self and the God whose grace does not apply to him. Altogether, Milton employs both the narrator and Satan's speech on Mt. Niphates to allow the reader to get under Satan's skin and really discover what motivates this pathetic " Prince of Darkness."