Paradise Lost: Satan the Rhetorician

Rhetoric pertains to language that is written or spoken, and it is used to either inform or persuade. In John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, language is an essential way in which we come to understand the characters, especially Satan. As a character who is typically seen as the essence of evil, Satan receives much attention throughout the poem. However, his popularity is not due to his heinous reputation, but instead, the way that he expresses himself through language is what captures the attention of most. In books one and nine, Satan confirms his rhetorical abilities by appealing to various modes of persuasion and employing decorative diction, and through this character's complex language, Milton reveals his own purpose behind Satan's swaying rhetoric.

How rhetoric and language contribute to Milton's work has been a matter of interest for many critics of literature. Rhetoric was a topic that the poet was familiar with in his youth. At the start of the seventeenth century, it was seen as a poetic practice, one that placed an intense focus on style and ornamentation. John Major highlights Milton's attitude toward the art, explaining that he valued formalism and saw rhetoric as liberating. The poet shared "the view of Cicero and other ancient orators that eloquence promotes liberty" (692). Putting an emphasis on thinking, knowledge, and emotion in discourse was seen as honorable and brilliant ever since the time of the Greeks. Milton knew and respected the philosophies of the ancients; he once said, "I have pleasure in confessing that whatever literary advance I have made I owe chiefly to steady intimacy with their writings from my youth upwards" (693). If we consider Milton's works as a whole, his mastery of rhetoric becomes evident. However, the poet's command of language can be easily seen in *Paradise Lost*, which is his famous biblical retelling of the fall and is considered to be one of the greatest English poems.

The role of rhetoric in *Paradise Lost* is investigated mainly through Satan's speeches. This character bears the "unmistakable stigma of the 'rhetorician' in the pejorative sense," says Major (698). This label is not an inaccurate description of Milton's Satan. He possesses the power of persuasive and deceptive speech, and we know that he retains this skill because he accomplishes his immediate goals through words. Major delves deeper into Milton's Satan, analyzing his language: "[his] speeches do have a wonderful variety of manner and tone" (698). Indeed, the surface of his speeches illustrate the range of his devious language, but what else accounts for the rhetorician's unending success throughout the poem? In his study of Milton, George Smith discusses the rhetoric of *Paradise Lost* as iterative. Cicero once expressed the importance of replication and beauty in speech, saying "Sometimes the repetitions will produce an impression of force, at other times of grace" (1). The ancient Greeks put placed great significance on iteration, and today, readers still celebrate creative and complex repetitions in written and formal communication. Smith underlines that Milton's audience often associates "rhetoric, oratory, and most ornamental verbal contrivances with Satan and the fallen angels" (3). Satan's style, in particular, receives the most attention from readers and scholars alike. His use of repetition in his speeches illuminates his strength as a speaker. For example, in his speech to Eve, Satan "is trying to distract her from his faulty logic by his intense and pleasing iteration" (7). Repetition is not the only rhetorical tool that Satan uses to achieve his goals. In books one and nine, he appeals to the three modes of persuasion and practices decorative diction. Why does Milton give this character the power to persuade, a skill that has deemed him worthy to be labeled as the rhetorician? In order to answer this enquiry, we must evaluate Satan's most important speeches and discover what is hidden rather than what is explicitly shown on the surface.

We should first inspect the narrator's introduction of Satan in the early lines of book one. The narrator presents Satan's character before he is allowed to speak which provides us with essential clues about his rhetorical abilities. For example, the narrator says, "Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile / Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived / The mother of mankind" (34-35). Here, the narrator is immediately warning readers to approach Satan with caution, and his use of the words "guile" and "deceived" confirms that Satan is out to manipulate. In fact, the narrator makes sure to tell us how this character fools others—he deceives with words. Specifically, we are given hints of Satan's deceptive rhetoric before each speech he gives. For instance, the narrator notes Satan's use of "bold words" before his speech to Beelzebub in book one, signifying that this character expresses alluring and enticing diction when speaking (82). He also calls him a "guileful Tempter" right before his speech to Eve in book nine (567). Indeed, these hints propose that Satan's rhetoric most likely encompasses beautiful words and cunning arguments. Why should readers believe the narrator's advice about this character? The speaker uses the initial lines of book one to establish his own credibility, saying, "Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top / Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire / That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed" (6-8). Here, we can assume the narrator is being guided by a divine spirit who is powerful and truthful, thus making him a reliable figure. With the speaker's warning of Satan's rhetorical abilities, it is now evident that we must explore certain speeches where he appeals to various modes of persuasion and uses decorative diction.

The speeches in which Satan showcases his rhetorical abilities can be seen in books one and nine of *Paradise Lost*. In book one, Satan gives a speech to Beelzebub, who is next to him amidst the fire. In this oration, Satan is attempting to persuade his fellow angel into wanting revenge. In order

to achieve this, he appeals to ethos and pathos. In book nine, Satan is in the form of a serpent as he gives a speech to Eve in Eden. In this oration, he is trying to make her eat the forbidden fruit. To execute his plan, Satan appeals to all three modes of persuasion, ethos, pathos, and logos. Furthermore, Satan's motives behind each speech are not good, and ultimately, he is trying to get retribution against God: the narrator says in book one that Satan was filled with pride and "trusted to have equaled the Most High" and thus "[r]aised impious war in Heav'n and battle proud / With vain attempt" (40, 43-44). Here, the narrator is giving us an authentic depiction of Satan's selfish and egotistical character. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that his speeches to Beelzebub and Eve are shallow at the core.

When Satan begins his speech to Beelzebub in book one, he appeals to a mode of persuasion called ethos. This mode is employed when a speaker needs to establish their credibility. Initially, Satan manages to establish himself as a friend. He proclaims to Beelzebub, "If thou beest he; but O how fall'n!" (84). Here, Satan is voicing shock and grief at the sight of his fellow angel and using language to play the part of a concerned friend, thus allowing him to immediately establish himself as a genuine companion. Satan tells Beelzebub that they are on a "mutual league" and possess "equal hope / And hazard in the glorious enterprise" (87-89). In these lines, Satan is intensifying the notion of their friendship. By placing a communal sense between them, Satan is gaining his fellow angel's trust and portraying himself as an equal. When trying to establish one's credibility, gaining the trust of an audience is an important aspect, and Satan appears to be achieving this with Beelzebub. He continues to build on the communal sense between them and reminds his fellow angel that "misery hath joined [them] / In equal ruin" (90-91). Here, Satan makes sure to remind Beelzebub that they are connected by their given situation which permits him to further

establish himself as Beelzebub's friend. In addition, we can see how Satan's diction is decorative in this part of his speech. It becomes clear that his alluring and enticing words help to convince his fellow angel of their friendship. For instance, by consistently using words such as "mutual," "equal," and "joined," Satan is convincing Beelzebub that he is a friend who is in the same predicament.

As Satan continues to speak to Beelzebub, he focuses on himself and attempts to permanently establish his ethos. Satan now portrays himself as a strong leader in this part of his speech. He opens with a question: "and till then who knew / The force of those dire arms?" (93-94). Answering his own question, Satan says, "Yet not for those, / Nor what the potent victor in his rage / Can else inflict, do I repent or change" (94-96). Here, Satan is painting a picture of God as a tyrannical leader whom he will not change for. He therefore paints a picture of himself, and Satan surely appears as an individual who does not give up when adversities arise. In fact, he lingers on this notion, saying that "the mightiest raised [him] to contend" (99). This statement permits Satan to place the finishing touches on the picture he is trying to paint of himself, and he sustains his image of a brave hero. Satan progresses in his mission to establish himself as a leader, and he says that "the fierce contention brought along / Innumerable force of spirits armed / That durst dislike his reign, and me preferring" (100-102). These lines help strengthen Satan's credibility as a leader because he manages to portray himself as a robust and popular presence among divine beings, claiming that he was chosen by a large sum of them. In addition, Satan's decorative diction can be seen again in this part of his speech. He continues to use alluring words to ensure that he convinces Beelzebub of his leadership skills. For instance, repeating words with the same meaning such as "contend," "merit," and "contention," Satan is convincing Beelzebub that he was the strongest leader in the battle in Heaven.

Approaching the end of his speech in book one, Satan appeals to a mode of persuasion called pathos. This mode is employed when a speaker needs to arouse their listener's emotions. Satan begins to provoke feelings of anger and injustice within Beelzebub by asking and answering his own question again, "What though the field be lost? / All is not lost" (105-106). He follows by confirming what is not gone: will, revenge, hate, and courage. Here, Satan is targeting Beelzebub's emotions by presenting him with hope that he has found in their given situation. In other words, Satan is reminding Beelzebub of the powerful qualities they possess as fallen angels. As his speech progresses, Satan continues to target Beelzebub's emotions by stressing God's tyrannical behavior. In particular, he portrays God as a bully in order to cause his fellow angel to feel betrayed and angry. He proclaims, "That glory never shall his wrath or might / Extort from me" (110-111). Here, Satan is depicting God as an oppressor, which allows him to begin making Beelzebub enraged. Moreover, Satan quickly returns his focus to hope. Since they have gained experience and foresight "of this great event," he wants Beelzebub to understand that they can "with more successful hope resolve / To wage by force or guile eternal Warr / Irreconcileable, to [their] grand Foe" (118, 120-123). Satan finally ends his speech to his fellow angel by putting an intense emphasis on God's cruelty; he claims that God "now triumphs, and in th' excess of joy, / Sole reigning holds the tyranny of Heav'n" (123-124). In his last lines, Satan provides the end of his speech with a powerful statement. Clearly, the word "tyranny" is one that has the ability to activate feelings of anger and injustice within his immediate listener, which is Beelzebub. Satan is using his decorative style to enhance the issue and provide the end of his speech with an emotional, climatic ending.

Satan's first speech proved to be one of complicated rhetoric, so we must now turn our attention to his conversation with Eve in book nine in order to further understand his

persuasiveness. Since this exchange between the two is known as the most critical point in Satan's grand plan of revenge against God, we can only assume that he intensifies and expands his methods during this particular speech. When Satan begins his conversation with Eve, he appeals to ethos first. Satan manages to establish himself as a trustable and honest creature. He states, "Wonder not, sovereign mistress, if perhaps / Thou canst, who art sole wonder, much less arm / Thy looks, the heav'n of mildness, with disdain" (532-534). Here, Satan is gently assuring Eve that she does not need to wonder and is praising her presence. By approaching Eve with assurance and flattery, Satan is able to begin establishing himself as credible and honest. Satan lingers on her form, saying, "Displeased that I approach thee thus, and gaze / Insatiate, I thus single, nor have feared / Thy awful brow, more awful thus retired" (535-537). Satan is immediately admitting why he approached her, and his choice to do so makes him appear as sincere and urgent. Evidently, he understands that recognizing and focusing on Eve's beauty will allow him to gain her full trust. He continues by commenting on her virtues, saying, "Fairest resemblance of thy Maker fair, / Thee all things living gaze on, all thing thine / By gift, and thy celestial beauty adore" (538-540). Clearly taking advantage of Eve's vanity, he speaks of her beauty in order to assert his character. In addition, we can also see the decorative nature of Satan's diction yet again. Undeniably, he uses certain words to capture her attention and gain her trust. For instance, by addressing her as "sovereign mistress" and using words such as "wonder," "awful," and "celestial" to describe her, Satan is carving a path into Eve's mind and convincing her of his trustfulness and honesty.

As Satan continues to speak to Eve, he appeals to pathos. Satan arouses Eve's emotions, producing feelings of anger and injustice, by highlighting a violation done to her; he claims that she is only seen by wild beasts and one man who do not recognize the power of her beauty. Satan states,

"Beholders rude, and shallow to discern / Half what in thee is fair, one man except, / Who sees thee?" (544-546). Here, he is claiming that it is unfortunate that only the beasts and one man have the ability to see her beauty because they barely recognize it. This initial statement from Satan serves to begin activating feelings of anger within Eve. He instantly provides her with his own answer: "who shouldst be seen / A goddess among gods, adored and served / By angels numberless, thy daily train" (546-548). By claiming that she should be admired by divine beings, Satan can intensify the feelings of indignation within Eve because he makes it seem as though admiring her should be common sense. In fact, we know that his words did activate her emotions because the narrator says, "Into the heart of Eve his words made way" (550). Not only does this detail confirm that Eve is emotionally touched by his speech, but it reminds us of how persuasive Satan actually is.

Satan appeals to the final mode of persuasion called logos at the end of his speech to Eve. This mode is employed when a speaker needs to convince their listener through logic. Satan becomes the voice of reason by using simple language and providing Eve with logical reasons to eat the fruit. In the form of a serpent, Satan begins by telling Eve how he came to possess the power to speak. He explains that he was "at first like other beast that graze," but "on a day roving the field, [he] chanced / A godly tree far distant to behold / Loaden with fruit of fairest colors mixed" (571, 575-577). It is important to note that these lines lack the decoration that is usually found in other parts of Satan's rhetoric. The lack of ornamentation suggests that Satan is now trying to merely state facts to Eve and focus on logic. Progressing with simple language, he continues to explain how he can talk: he was "quickened at the scent / Of that alluring fruit" and ate until he was full (587-588). Here, Satan is revealing how he gained the power to speak, which was the forbidden fruit. In the lines that follow, Satan continues from a rational angle by presenting Eve with logical reasons to eat

the fruit. He says, "For high from ground the branches would require / Thy utmost reach or Adam's" (590-591). Here, Satan is telling Eve that humans are the only ones who are able to physically reach the fruit, so they must try it. He gives her another logical reason to eat the fruit, saying, "Look on me, / Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live" (687-688). Not only is he speaking modestly again, but Satan is providing Eve with a plausible reason why eating the forbidden fruit is actually acceptable and should be done.

After examining Satan's rhetorical skills, we should review his strengths as a rhetorician. Readers know that his goals behind each speech were accomplished; he convinced Beelzebub to join him on his journey of retribution, and he also persuaded Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. We can begin to understand how he accomplished his goals by examining his rhetorical strategies. First, Satan appeals to the ethical, emotional, and logical aspects of persuasion. In doing so, he proves that he has an understanding of the art of speech and ultimately touches Beelzebub and Eve through these modes. Second, Satan relies heavily on decorative diction. Repeating certain alluring and enticing words help him to dazzle his targets and distract them from the truth. Through his beautiful words, Satan manages to hide the fact that his motives are selfish and egotistical. Last, Satan uses rhetorical questions occasionally. These dramatic questions are employed to overwhelm his listener and control the direction of his speech. Indeed, Satan is a master of rhetoric, and we can see that this is why he receives much attention throughout the poem, especially in books one and nine. However, Satan's ability to persuade through speech warrants an investigation into the writer's purpose for this complex character. Thus, we are presented with a crucial question: why does Milton give Satan the gift of persuasive speaking? Perhaps the question can be answered if we look back to the narrator's warnings.

If we recall the narrator's warnings about Satan, why Milton gave Satan the power to persuade through language becomes evident. In the beginning of book one, the narrator is clear about the danger of Satan's character. He says that it was Satan "whose guile / Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived / The mother of mankind" (34-35). Our first clue of Satan's cunning character was in the early lines of the poem; we are also given verification of his ulterior motives. However, further clues offered by the narrator throughout the poem serve to regularly remind readers of Satan's complex rhetoric; not only does he mention his bold words right before his first speech, but the narrator constantly refers to Satan as a Tempter throughout his exchange with Eve. Clearly, Satan's language is infectious, difficult, and seductive, and this is what Milton wants us to realize when we come across the narrator's warnings throughout the poem. The author does not want us to succumb to Satan's words. Therefore, Satan transforms into our temptation to fight as we read, and Milton purposefully immerses his readers into a battle of theology and rhetoric. While Satan succeeded in gaining power over the minds of Beelzebub and Eve, he will not gain control over our minds as well, and readers are allowed to become more aware of his deceptive system.

The importance of rhetoric in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is undeniable. We can see that this holds truth after examining the character of Satan whose most destructive weapon is his words. Through various modes of persuasion and decorative diction, Satan reveals how he gains power over Beelzebub in Chaos and Eve in Eden. Moreover, Milton's purpose behind his complex rhetoric has been explored, and it can be implied that the author meant for Satan to transform into our temptation to fight as well. However, this analysis of Satan's speeches can suggest something profound about rhetoric, too. Considering our knowledge of his selfish motives, Satan may actually

represent rhetoric in its darkest form; we can see this concept within the foundation of his words, which is elegant manipulation at its best.

Work Cited

Luxon, Thomas H., ed. *The Milton Reading Room*, https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_1/text.shtml, May 2018.

Luxon, Thomas H., ed. *The Milton Reading Room*, https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_9/text.shtml, May 2018.

Major, John M. "Milton's View of Rhetoric." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 64, no. 5, 1967, pp. 685–711. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4173583.

Smith, George William. "Iterative Rhetoric in 'Paradise Lost.'" *Modern Philology*, vol. 74, no. 1, 1976, pp. 1–19. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/436086.