

Study Guide

Book II (1055 ll.): What merit raises Satan to his “bad eminence.” Is it self-conferred? What is damaged in him besides his imagination? ☞ What ambiguities are in his pronouncement, “I give not Heav’n for lost”? Note the frequency of first-person pronouns. How does he disarm rivalry and redirect the debate to the question of how he should lead them? Force or guile? Has he already decided this? ☞ What led to Moloch’s desperation, recklessness? ☞ How is his a counsel of desperation? Nothing can be worse than remaining here. Better to be destroyed than thus. ☞ Belial is less invested in the revolt than Moloch, so his advice is different, more dignified and less rash. His rhetoric “could make the worse appear / The better reason.” But he knows how to please. ☞ Belial advises sizing up the enemy’s strength instead of charging ahead. All or nothing raises the prospect of nothing, a prospect as unknowable as death would be to Adam or Eve. Belial suggests looking at their present comforts. It could be worse, and we can make it better. Resistance is futile. God knows all. We should have seen the futility of revolt. Perhaps one day we can be forgiven and restored. ☞ Why does Milton insist this line of argument is merely “cloth’d in reason’s garb”? What is missing? How does “ignoble ease, and peaceful sloth” differ from “peace”? ☞ Mammon argues that any victory over God will require conspiracy with Fate. If he granted us a reprieve, would we really want to return under his terms? Could we warble hymns or sing forced Hallelujahs? Make the most of Hell rather than serve in Heaven. We’ll get used to this place and can make it an imitation of Heaven. ☞ Congregated demons applaud. The rabble has been hurt enough by the Thunder of God and sword of Michael. All seem reluctant to risk it all again. Beëlzebub senses this approval and rises majestic. ☞ Flatters audience but takes a position contrary to all. Sarcastically repudiates the status quo: “doubtless.” There can be no peace. “War hath determin’d us.” But he recognizes the benefit of indirection. “What if we find / Some easier enterprise?” We can chip away subtly rather attempt a direct attack. What about Earth and Man? Here is a vulnerable frontier. Pervert or destroy his darling creation, “Seduce them to our Party.” “This would surpass / Common revenge.” Where does Beëlzebub get this strategy? Note Milton’s real sense of grief in reflecting on the cunning of this plan. Milton even has to assert the *felix culpa*: “thir spite still serves / His glory to augment,” though the mechanism of this inversion is still vague. Democracy in Hell: they vote. “Joy” in Hell? ☞ Beëlzebub pauses for effect and imputes to the multitude assent, flattering them for making a good choice. Compare Beëlzebub’s eloquence with the previous three speakers. Now the problem is to find a volunteer: “whom shall we send”? A terrifying job description, and our fate lies in his hands. ☞ Suspense and dramatic expectation. “All sat mute.” Satan’s timing is perfect as he nonchalantly steps forward. ☞ Don’t blame yourselves for being silent. It’s only reasonable. Geography of the Cosmos. “Long is the way / And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light.” Between Hell and Heaven is a void that threatens “utter loss of being.” But I wouldn’t deserve to be your leader, if I weren’t up to this charge. He charges them to keep house and improve Hell while he makes his journey. He insists on going alone and suppresses volunteers who might have been inspired by his example. What tyranny does he exert with his voice that ensures he gets his way? The multitudes honor him for his sacrifice, “for neither do the Spirits damn’d / Lose all their virtue.