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2 Corinthians 11:14—Angels of Light

In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Paul says that Satan sometimes disguises himself as “an angel of light”; therefore, it is not strange that people with evil intent sometimes appear righteous. The reference has caught the imagination of artists and writers throughout history. A few examples:

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), *Comedy of Errors*: Dromio warns against the wiles of a temptress: “It is written they appear to men like angels of light” (Act 4, Scene 3, line 54).

Samuel Butler (1835–1902), *The Way of All Flesh*: Ernest had hoped his marriage to Ellen would preserve him from falling into sin; when that doesn’t happen, “it seemed to him that in his attempt to be moral he had been following a devil which had disguised itself as an angel of light” (chap. 75).

William Cowper (1731–1800), “Table Talk”:

A false courtier is one
“whose trade it is to smile, to crouch, to please,
in smooth dissimulation, skilled to grace,
a devil’s purpose with an angel’s face.”

Lines 128–30

As these instances illustrate, there has been a strong tendency in literature and tradition to identify devils-disguised-as-angels with women whose beauty or charm seduces men into making unwise decisions.

A similar but slightly different sentiment informs a song made popular by **Elvis Presley** (1935–77):

You look like an angel . . .

But I got wise

You're the devil in disguise

Here the woman is more a cheater than a temptress.

In Corinth, the original offenders were men who presented themselves as “super-apostles,” touting their rhetorical skills, commendations, and worldly success as surpassing anything of which the less impressive apostle Paul could boast.

See David Lyle Jeffrey, *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992)