Character Analysis, Summary, and Analysis of the Monk’s Tale

Character Analysis

The Monk, Chaucer tells us, is a manly man. The Monk’s favorite past-time is hunting, and to this end he keeps gorgeous (and probably expensive) horses and greyhounds. Like the Prioress, the Monk is all sorts of things that, as a religious figure, he should probably not be – a hunter, overfed, expensively-dressed in fur and gold jewelry, and a cultivator of expensive habits. But the Monk is willing to admit that he doesn’t live a traditional religious life of hard work, study, and fasting, claiming as his excuse that he is a modern man, disdainful of the old traditions. So, out with the old fuddy-duddies like Augustine, who would have the monk slaving away over his books in a cloister, and in with the new – the new, in this case, being a comfortable life of sport, fine food and clothing, and amusements outside the monastery’s walls.

Of the Monk’s physical appearance, we learn that he is fat, bald, and greasy, with eyes that roll in his head. In medieval physiognomy, the practice of drawing conclusions about someone's character from their physical appearance, rolling eyes like this might be a sign of impatience and lust for food and women. This part of the Monk's portrait foreshadows the interaction between the Monk and the Host after the Tale of Melibee. At this point, before asking him to tell a tale, the Host praises the Monk’s brawn and bulk and laments that he is a religious figure because, were the Monk not pledged to celibacy, he would surely impregnate lots of women! The Host says that he thinks the Monk would be a stud if given the opportunity, but considering the Monk's lack of respect for the "old" traditions of the religious life (and that mysterious love-knot pendant tying his hood), we think it’s likely that he probably already is one.

With the Monk’s portrait, we see another satire of religious figures who are supposed to live a monastic life of deprivation and hard work, but instead live a life of luxury and ease. Similar to the Prioress, the Monk is doing all kinds of things which, were he really pious, he would not. The Monk, though, is more self-aware about his departure from the pious life, taking the defensive stance of being a "modern" man, an excuse that rings somewhat hollow to discerning ears.

Summary

Although the Host demands a merry tale from the Monk, the Monk instead gives a series of cameo tragedies, all of which deal with the role of fortune in a man’s life. The Monk catalogues the fickleness of Fortune through a series of abbreviated tales about such people as Lucifer, Adam, Hercules, Samson, Nero, and so on — all who were initially favored but eventually abandoned by Fortune. The Monk concludes when the Knight interrupts him and pleads for a merry tale.

Analysis

The Monk’s series of little tragedies report the gloomy news that all wealth and position in the world are pure illusion, and nothing can prevent the fall of the proud. The Monk sums up his theme in the introductory stanza: "For sure it is, if fortune decides to flee, / No man may stay her course or keep his hold; / Let no one trust a blind prosperity." ("For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee, / Ther may no man the cours of hire withhholde. / Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee . . . .")

Why Chaucer wrote these stories for the Monk is unclear. They are monotonous, and the inevitable moral of each — one cannot depend on fickle fortune — comes as no surprise to the reader. This tale is often thought to be one of Chaucer’s early writings. Certainly it has none of the subtly of most of his other tales. Some authorities believe that Chaucer at one time considered writing a book of tragedies, and since he never completed his book of tragedies, this perhaps accounts for the their inclusion in The Canterbury Tales. They were simply available and seemed suitable for the Monk to relate.

Glossary

"now called Damascus" the suggestion is that Damascus now stands where Eden once was.
The Warning the moral "Don't tell your wife any secrets" differs significantly from the usual references to fortune in the other tragedies.

Centaurs, Cerberus, Busiris, Achelous, Cacus, and Antacus all part of the Labors of Hercules.

Trophee a prophet of the Chaldee.

Nessus a centaur slain by Hercules.

Odenatus the ruler of Palmyra.

Shapur king of Persia.

Aurelian (Aurelianus) emperor of Rome, preceded by Gallienus.

King Peter of Spain; King Peter of Cyprus; Bernabo Visconti of Lombardy; Count Ugolino of Pisa figures who relied on fortune and were betrayed, killed, or starved.

Alexander the representative of the ideal for the medieval person.

Brutus Cassius Chaucer erroneously supposes these two famous assassins of Julius Caesar to be one person, not two.

Croesus the king of Lydia who depended too strongly upon fortune.