Summary & Analysis of The Friar's Tale

Summary

At the end of the wife of Bath's narration, the Friar wonders whether such heavy academic problems concerning authority and the scriptures shouldn't be left to the proper authorities and offers to tell a tale about a summoner. The Host admonishes the Friar to tell something else, but the Summoner interrupts and says that, if the Friar tells an uncomplimentary tale about a summoner, he will in turn tell an uncomplimentary tale about a friar. The tale the Friar tells is, indeed, uncomplimentary.

An archdeacon (a church official who presided over church courts) uses a crew of spies, including whores, to seek out information about the people living in the parish. With the derogatory information in hand, the archdeacon calls upon the sinners and miscreants and squeezes exorbitant tribute from them so that their names do not appear among those doing evil.

In the employ of the Archdeacon is a summoner who makes his rounds blackmailing the rich and the poor alike. One day, the summoner meets a debonair young yeoman. Discovering that they are both bailiffs, the two men swear to be brothers to their dying day. They each reveal the underhanded means they use to extort money from their victims and agree to enter into a partnership. After exchanging further information, the summoner inquires about the yeoman's name. The yeoman reveals that he is "a fiend, my dwelling is in hell." The summoner says that he made a bargain to join forces with the yeoman, and even if the yeoman is really a fiend, he (the summoner) will honor his word. The two seal the bargain and begin their journey.

The summoner and the demon come upon a farmer whose cart is stuck in the mud. In exasperation, the farmer shouts for the devil to take all — cart, horse, hay, everything. The summoner urges the fiend to do as he is bid, but the fiend explains that, because the curse was not uttered from the heart and in sincerity, he has no power to do so. Later, they go to the home of a rich widow who refuses to pay the summoner's bribes. Again the summoner demands his money; again the woman refuses. When the summoner threatens to take her new frying pan, she cries, "The devil take you and the frying pan." The fiend asks whether she means these words, and she says she does, unless the summoner repents. The summoner refuses, and the fiend drags the summoner off to hell, where all summoners have very special places. The Friar ends his tale by hoping that summoners can someday repent and become good men.

Analysis

The Friar's Tale and the next one, The Summoner's Tale, belong together as a unit because the Friar tells an uncomplimentary tale about a corrupt summoner, and the Summoner, in his turn, tells an uncomplimentary tale about a corrupt friar. The reader should remember that in spite of the personal animosity between the Friar and the Summoner, the greater quarrel is about the importance and validity of their respective professions. Although The Friar's Tale is elegantly simple — partly because of the Friar's intellectual simplicity — the tale has its enriching subtleties. For example, Chaucer plays on the medieval word "rebekke," a type of stringed fiddle-like instrument, and "rebekke," slang for "old woman." The word also puns on the biblical name Rebecca (wife of Isaac and mother to Jacob), whose sacred water vessel in the biblical story is reflected in The Friar's Tale by a comically brown cooking pan. Another literary technique is a type of reversal in that the summoner and the demon ride out seeking "prey" with the pun on "pray." The central irony in the tale, of course, is that the foxy summoner out-foxes himself and becomes the "prey" of the demon.

The Friar's Tale is connected to The Wife of Bath's Tale in that the Wife discusses the problem of authority (that is, the husband or the wife), and the Friar deals with the relative authority in terms of the church and demons. In The Wife of Bath's Tale, authority is given over to a woman — a violation of medieval sense of hierarchy. The Friar continues the theme of authority by first describing the evil machinations of his superior, the archdeacon to whom the summoner is supposedly a "vassal." The summoner, in turn, has his own servants and spies in the form of whores and thieves. Likewise, the demon falls into a hierarchy in that he is assigned by a higher power the responsibility of capturing his prey, the soul of the summoner. Then in the episode of the farmer and his cart of hay, the reader learns that the authority of the demon is limited.

Character Analysis

Chaucer was known for his ironic descriptions of various sojourners in the Canterbury Tales. The description given to the Friar in the "General Prologue" does not stray from Chaucer's trademark. The Friar is described as a "limitour" [begs on the behalf of the poor], yet we see that he is a bachelor on a love hunt, a crooked businessman and does
complete his duties as a Friar. The Friar knows many beautiful women, many affluent men, and rarely associates with the class of people he should live among.

The Friar's duties were to live among the poor, to beg on their behalf and to give his earnings to aid their struggle for livelihood. However, Chaucer allows the reader to see the true character of the Friar. He knows: "so muche of damiance and fair language.." (Norton 211). This no doubt is a way to woo women with sweet words and a crafty tongue. This strategy is also in lines 265-266: "somwhat he lipse for his wantounesse to make his English sweete upon his tongue... " This was repeated in lines 215-217: "Ful wel biloved and familer was he..... with the worthy women of the town". A Friar's duties was not supposed to flirt with the women of the town but to beg for poor. The Friar, using what money he has earned "his tipet was ay farsed ful of knives and pinnes for to yiven faire wives." (233-234). This states that he buys gifts for women as well. The Friar, as it turns out, is not begging for money to appease his goal to feed the poor, but rather is wooing women to appease his flesh!

The Friar is not just a ladies' man under the guise of a humanitarian, he is also a crooked businessman. He uses his position in the church to get money. He spreads the word that he had the power to forgive sins more than a priest in lines 218-219: "For he hadde power of confessioun as saide himself, more than a curat." This gains him much profit from wealthy men as we see: "he was an esy man to yive penaunce ther as he wiste to have a good pituance;" (223-224). He even has the audacity not associate with the "lower" class because "to have with sike lazars aquaintaunce: it is nat honeste, it may nought a-vance." (245-246). The profit he generates is proven because he looked like "a belle out of the presse." (265). This point is reinforced in lines 257-258: " yit wolde he have a ferthing er he wente; his purchas was wel bettre than his rente." His purchases far exceeds his expected income from begging. The Friar should have been very poor, perhaps worse off than the people he helped, however this Friar was eating healthy and living large.

This hero of the poor, the Friar apparently is not doing his duties. As Chaucer gives a description of the Friar we see how this can be surmised. In lines 215-216 we see: "Ful wel biloved and familer was he, With frankelains over al in his contree...." The Friar knew all the well to do country men, when he should know the beggars of the region better. Chaucer evens states in lines 240-242: "he knew the tavernes wel in every towne and every hostiler and tappestre bet than a lazar or a beggestere." This man of God, knew the innkeepers and barmaids better than the poor people of his designated region. This implies he spends much time at bars and inns, rather than living with and aiding the destitute. Another example of the Friar's friends is in line 248 where it states that he knows "...al with riche and selleres of vitaile.." The Friar thought it "improper" to dwell with the poor because of his position, which is the opposite duty of his occupation.

This man of God, hero of the poor and mediator between God and men, turns out to be as fraudulent as his claims of giving penance. This Friar is more consumed with winning the affections of barmaids than winning support to build a shelter for the poor. The limitour is busy scheming to do illegal business rather than to serve the poor. And because of pride the Friar does not accomplish his vow of a life of poverty. His character, dignity and nobility all lack sincerity. This Friar has no burden on his soul to assist the poor, but only to further his distasteful lifestyle. Rather than a shepherd among his flock, the Friar lurks as a hungry wolf.