

The Friar and Tom Walker

By Sierra M

Geoffrey Chaucer could not have known the “splash” that his Canterbury Tales would create in the literary realm, though several of his literary ancestors acclaim his influence highly. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American essayist, makes note that “[the] single fact that he continues to be read by his countrymen now for near five hundred years, might well draw our attention to him” (57). And not a few of his stories have been since his time rewritten into newer, more modern renditions, either by mistake or by design. Chaucer’s “The Friar’s Tale,” for example, is strikingly similar to a much later American work, “The Devil and Tom Walker” by Washington Irving. The story related in The Canterbury Tales was not original in its idea to begin with, and so Irving’s tale seems to be another mere reproduction in its similarities until other, contrasting details make each story unique in their own right.

To a Britain still reeling from Norman conquest some centuries earlier, Chaucer’s style was completely novel in [written at eastern alamancahs in 05]its approach; he used vernacular, meter, and rhyme to tell a story in an age dominated by high speech and unrhymed verse. However, the stories that he has to relate are by no means new to the light of day. In fact, “The Friar’s Tale” “seems to derive from a traditional folktale formula which features, at its climactic moment, the delivery of a heartfelt curse” (Rossignol 146). Therefore, it is probable that Chaucer heard a similar story and tweaked it a bit to provide his friar with one of the two tales required of him on his journey to Canterbury. The idea of the devil snatching a person’s soul away has the potential to have been around for quite some time, and so the exact origin of the story used by Chaucer would be difficult to discover; but, they were European stories, at least. “The tales these pilgrims tell come from all over Europe, many of them from the works of

Chaucer's near contemporaries" (Coghill 17). But, to condemn Chaucer for retelling tales would be unfair; for, as Emerson wrote, "There never was an original writer" (59). It was not Chaucer's intention to create new stories, but to educate and entertain an audience (Coghill 17-18). Besides, as one Henry David Thoreau stated, "[So] new was all his theme in those days, that he did not have to invent, but only to tell" (60).

To an America still reeling from British rule some decades earlier, Washington Irving was a welcome celebrity. At a time when the young nation was just discovering its artistic identity, Irving was among the first to rise to the surface (Gehlmann 500). And, like Chaucer, Irving wrote folk tales from his dearly beloved Mother Country. But, there is one story in particular that both the Englishman and the American share; one calls it "The Friar's Tale" and the other "The Devil and Tom Walker," but both Chaucer and Irving wrote stories in which an evil man gives his soul over to [written at eastern alamanca hs in 05] the devil—stories with striking similarities. For example, both Chaucer's Summoner and Irving's Tom Walker make deals with the devil, if you will—and both devils seem to be men of common occupations. Chaucer introduces his devil as a yeoman, a typical common man (313), and Irving's creation is a woodsman—not at all atypical in the forest (508). Both demons, too, are not shy or ashamed of their identities; the Summoner's devil proclaims, with no ado, "I am a fiend, my dwelling is in hell" (315), and "Old Scratch" brags quite fluently of his many nicknames and occupations to Tom Walker on their first meeting (Irving 508). Also, the protagonists of each story, if indeed they may be so called, are greedy, unscrupulous men willing to go to any lengths for another coin. The Friar, as he tells the tale, describes the greedy Summoner as one who "knew so much of bribery and blackmail I should be two years telling you the tale" (313), and Tom Walker is described by Irving as "a meager, miserly fellow" (506). Interestingly enough, neither

protagonist is employed in upstanding positions, for the Summoner is, true to his name, a summoner for the church, and Tom Walker becomes, at the devil's insistence, a usurer—two very unpopular jobs. Finally, the conclusions to each story ring with familiarity: "If I excuse you, may the devil fetch me off!" exclaims the poor Summoner, and as the tale comes to a close the fiend has done just that (Chaucer 319-320). Tom makes the same utterance—"The devil take me...if I have made a farthing!" (Irving 512)—and is also whisked away to hell. And, while Chaucer's narrator, the Friar, begs summoners to "flee the sins that so beset you, and learn repentance ere the devil get you" (321), Irving admonishes, "Let all griping money-brokers lay this story to heart" (513). Though spoken with different words, both morals offer the same message: beware of ill-gotten wealth.

It may be argued, though, that these similarities are composed only of small, insignificant details that nearly any story under the premise of a deal with the devil might easily contain; the distinction between such stories arises in the other minutiae, the things that are *not* the same. The details, for instance, that make Geoffrey Chaucer's tale his own, as opposed to his fellow author's, are many. The story concerning the Summoner is set in the English countryside and begins with a description of the evils of the man, followed by the plot's action. "The first [part] describes the abusive practices of [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] the summoner...[the] second part is the tale itself, in which the summoner meets a demon disguised as a yeoman" (Rossignol 146). This "yeoman" that he meets is decked out in green—not only the yeoman's color of choice, but also a color that in Medieval times was often associated with the supernatural (Rossignol 146). Despite these and several other clues, the Summoner remains undaunted—and unrepentant—to the very end. In his last words, spoken to old Mother Mabel, he proclaims, "[There's] no repentance due for anything I ever had of you. I'd strip you naked,

smock and rag and clout!” (Chaucer 320). And, Chaucer adds his own little spot of humor to the deal between the Summoner and the demon when he throws Mother Mabel’s pot into the bargain (320). Irving’s rendition of the folktale concerning Tom Walker has nothing of these in it. Tom Walker makes his home in [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] the Boston area, the American countryside, and the narrator describes the primary action of the story before relating the greater part of Tom’s evils. His deal is made with “the black man”, a sooty and rugged woodsman who is known affectionately as “Old Scratch”; but, when it nears the time for “Old Scratch” to collect his due, old Tom Walker suddenly regrets the bargain he made years earlier and does all he can to prevent the trade from taking place—but to no avail. He is eventually dragged away to hell without even a frying pan for company. (Irving 506-513)

Both “The Friar’s Tale” and “The Devil and Tom Walker” could hold their own among devilish plots. And, despite the fact that the older of the two—that written by Chaucer—is not in itself a product of Chaucer’s imagination, and though the two works have a great many things in common with each other, there is also a sufficient amount of contrast between them to allow each its own place in literature. And, for Chaucer, this particular story is only one in a great work of works, each different but made of the same stuff, the same poetry and meter and rhyme; one must agree with Thoreau in saying “Chaucer is fresh and modern still, and no dust settles on his true passages” (59).

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