

1962

Exemplary Figures as Characterizing Devices in the Friars Tale and the Summoners Tale

Donald C. Baker
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baker, Donald C. (1962) "Exemplary Figures as Characterizing Devices in the Friars Tale and the Summoners Tale," *Studies in English*: Vol. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol3/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

EXEMPLARY FIGURES AS CHARACTERIZING DEVICES IN THE FRIAR'S TALE AND THE SUMMONER'S TALE

by Donald C. Baker

ONE OF THE most hopeful developments in Chaucerian criticism of the last twenty years has been the re-evaluation of the part that traditional medieval rhetoric played in Chaucer's poetic development.¹ For many decades it had been customary for the critic and annotator to pass off medieval rhetoric as something which Chaucer, the "natural genius," outgrew as he developed in power and perception because he recognized it, as stilted and formalized and therefore useless to the creative writer. This traditional position was perhaps best stated by Professor Manly in his lecture *Chaucer and the Rhetoricians*²—best stated because, in spite of his conclusions, Manly also realized some of the limitations of his argument. Since the 1930's in the general reappearance of a genuinely critical response to Chaucer, there has been an attitude of open-mindedness in the inquiry into Chaucer's use of rhetorical devices. Again and again scholars, working on individual tales or poems, have pointed out Chaucer's use of traditional medieval rhetoric, not in the duller and less spontaneous passages, but oftentimes precisely in those sections which have always appealed

¹Perhaps the best single essay contributing to this interest is the late Dorothy Everett's "Some Reflections on Chaucer's 'Art Poetical,'" Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture for 1950 (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXXVI). Of particular interest is the recent essay of Earle Birney, "Structural Irony within the *Summoner's Tale*," *Anglia*, LXXVIII (1960), 204-218, which, though interested in another problem, touches occasionally upon rhetorical devices including the *exempla* and authorities.

²*Proceedings of the British Academy*, XVII.

because of their "freshness" and "modernity." It has become more and more apparent that Chaucer's most "natural" touches are more often than not owing to his genius in the molding and applying of perfectly traditional modes and "topics" of medieval rhetoric. Manly himself recognized the important and integral part played by rhetoric in the wonderful *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* cited by him as an illustration of the "natural" Chaucer at the height of his powers and out of the grip of the formal rhetoricians.³ Nearly everything from the manuals is there in profusion—*contentio*, *dubitatio*, *occupatio*, *effictio*, and, especially, the superb use of the *exemplum*. The last of these rhetorical devices is the chief subject of this paper.

I have recently made a short study of Chaucer's use of *exempla* and exemplary figures in the *Franklin's Tale*⁴ and wish now to turn to his use of them in the *Friar's Prologue* and *Tale* and the *Summoner's Prologue* and *Tale*, works long considered among Chaucer's most spontaneous and least "arty." Manly goes so far as to say that rhetorical devices do not occupy more than one per cent of the text of these tales.⁵ He is probably right, but the importance of this one per cent I hope to demonstrate.

First, to be brief, the *exemplum* as defined by the medieval rhetoricians, is a brief anecdote used to reinforce the point of a particular argument. There is, however, rather more to the *exemplum* than this. By extension, other figures could be and were considered under the same general heading.⁶ A second one is the exemplary figure which is the citation in analogy of the name of a person whose story is famous. In other words, the anecdote is omitted but is evoked in the mind of the reader who is almost certainly familiar with the story. For example, Absalon's name could be cited in analogy in an argument concerning rebellion without its being necessary to relate the Biblical story. In other words, the exemplary figure is a kind of elliptical *exemplum*. And

³*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴"A Crux in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*: Dorigen's Lament," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, LX (January, 1961), 56-64.

⁵*Chaucer and the Rhetoricians*, p. 15.

⁶E. R. Curtius illustrates this in a brief but brilliant section of his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W. Trask (London, 1953), pp. 57-61. Geoffroi de Vinsauf, in his *Poetria Nova* (ed. E. Faral in *Les Arts Poétiques du XII^e et du XIII^e Siècle*, Paris, 1958), remarks, p. 236, ". . . *Vel cum nomine certi/ Auctoris rem, quam dixit, vel quam prius egit, Exemplum pono. . .*" J. A. Mosher, in his *The Exemplum in England* (New York, 1911), though he argues for a somewhat stricter distinction, admits that "It's quite likely that some writers considered any illustration whatever an *exemplum*"—p. 5.

a third variety, somewhat more loosely connected, is the citation of authority or "auctorite," without which medieval literature would have been poor indeed. It has perhaps little immediate relation to the *exemplum*, but actually serves much the same purpose in illustrating an argument. The three, closely connected in the effect that they achieve, are probably the most common of rhetorical devices used in the Middle Ages. But whether or not my argument for the association of the *exemplum*, exemplary figure, and "auctorite" be granted, they are sufficiently close to be spoken of in an inclusive phrase and thus to aid greatly the cause of convenience in avoiding having to run down the list each time a reference is made to them.

The argument of this paper is that Chaucer uses these rhetorical exemplary figures as a characterizing device. That is, he causes a character to reveal much about himself, about others, and about the tale that he tells, by the use that the character makes, consciously or unconsciously, of the *exemplum*, or by the contrast of his *exempla* with his or others' actions. This generalization can, of course, be extended to include the use of rhetoric in a much broader sense, but I am here concerned specifically with the *exemplum* and its associated figures.

Let us begin with the *Prologue* to the *Friar's Tale*. Friar Huberd, quite obviously tired of the long and rhetorical harangue of the Wife of Bath in her *Prologue*, and irritated by her jab at him in her *Tale*, exclaims "And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,/ To prechyng and to scole eek of clergie" (1276-77).⁷ This ejaculation is, of course, a sly comment on the profusion of authorities in the Wife's diatribe, but it is very interesting, in light of this remark, to see what the Friar himself does with the same devices, chiefly of the exemplary figure and the citation of authority. Far from eschewing these rhetorical devices, I argue, the Friar makes cunning use of them, first, to evidence further what he thinks or would be thought to think of overly rhetorical speeches such as the Wife's, secondly to give a traditional coloring to the characterization of the devil, and, thirdly, to characterize the abysmal ignorance of his enemy, the Summoner. For the Friar is not an unlearned man, whatever show he may make of being amiably "lewd," and he is at pains to insinuate his learning later. And, of course, some irony is to be found in this pretended attitude of the Friar because of the

⁷All line references in parentheses are to *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (2nd ed.; Boston, 1957).

medieval friar's well-known fondness for *exempla* in his preaching. In this respect Mosher even credits the success of the *exempla* used by preaching friars with the sudden popular demand for collections of *exempla* such as that of Jacques de Vitry.⁸

The first exemplary figure mentioned by the Friar is Judas, the arch-thief (1347), by way of a description of the summoner who is to appear in his story. After the *Tale* commences, it is interesting that the only *exempla* and authorities used come from the mouth of the devil, and that none whatever is given to the summoner. The devil, of course, is a learned fellow, in keeping with his traditional character. In describing the services of fiends to man, the devil says "Witnesse on Job . . ." (1491) and alludes similarly to "Seint Dunstan" (1502) and to the Apostles (1503). The fiend explains that sometimes, since all fiends are subject ultimately to the will of God, they are of good service to man, even against their wishes. Again, in describing the methods of devils, the fiend cites "Phitonissa" and "Samual" (1510). Exemplary figures are used further by way of the devil's flattery of the summoner when the fiend says

"For thou shalt, by thyn owene experience,
Konne in chayer rede of this sentence
Bet than Virgile, while he was on lyve,
Or Dant also" (1517-1520)

Friar Huberd himself speaks at the conclusion to his story, saying that had he but the leisure he could say more, after the texts of "Christ, Poul, and John,/ And of our othere doctours many oon" (1647-48). The fact that he chooses not to not only reflects his own reaction to the verbosity of the Wife of Bath but further throws into relief the characters of the summoner and the devil in the *Friar's Tale*. His own character is revealed in his rather ostentatious refusal to expand, thus pretending modesty while actually suggesting great learning should he want to display it. (And, after all, the authorities used in his story *are* his own!) The devil is, as we expect, shown as impressively learned, a facet of his character thoroughly universalized. The summoner of the *Friar's Tale*, and by implication, Chaucer's Summoner, who is given no *exempla* at all in the story, is revealed as "lewd" in addition to his other shortcomings. And so Brother Huberd concludes on an insufferably unctuous note, looking about him for the approval that he expects for so neatly skewering the despised Summoner.

⁸*The Exemplum in England*, p. 13.

When he can control his rage sufficiently to speak, the Summoner, despite the Friar's insinuations as to his ignorance, makes as effective use of *exempla* and authorities as does the Friar, and in very nearly the same manner. In fact, I believe that Chaucer's handling of exemplary figures and authorities in the argument of the second tale is rather superior to that in the first. For the Summoner, who has the advantage of speaking second, and thus having the counter-punch, after delivering a crushing blow to the Friar's complacency in his little *exemplum*-like *hors d'oeuvre* about the last resting place of friars in hell, seizes tellingly upon the suavely learned character that Friar Huberd has insinuated of himself in the course of his own *Prologue* and *Tale*. And this picture of the friar in the *Summoner's Tale*, falsely humble, complacent, glib of tongue and possessed of a ready armory of quotations and citations as well as *exempla*, comes across beautifully. For the friar of the *Summoner's Tale* lets out all the rhetorical stops, even including pretending to be ignorant of high-flown language, in his vain attempt to win the silver of the ungrateful Thomas. He is a perfect parody of the preaching friars in satire, who were famous for *exempla* and authorities in their sermons. He first builds the character of the friars by a host of citations, beginning with the description of the sanctity of friars' lives of the sort found ". . . in Petres wordes, and in Poules" (1619). Later he again describes the friars' holiness, illustrating his thesis by citing Lazar and Dives (1877), Moses (1885), "Elye" (1890), Aaron (1894), and Christ himself as exemplary figure (1904) and as "auctorite" (1923). These authorities all point up the various virtues of fasting, cleanliness, temperate living, abstinence, humility, etc.,—all virtues which the friar claims for his order, and, by extension, for himself.

Jovinian is mentioned (1929) as the symbol of lewdness, and the application made by the friar is to the possessioners, or landed clergy, against whom as a class the friars had always been bitter. This malicious charge contrasts neatly with the humility of which he has just spoken so proudly. "In Thomas lyf of Inde" (1980) the friar finds exemplary instruction in the church's work, particularly for those who wish to give to further this holy work.

The friar's long and complacent rhetorical lecture on the subject of friars and their sanctimonious lives is cunningly spun out by the Summoner to achieve the dramatic effect and contrast afforded by Thomas' ultimate bequest. The wonderful irony of this deflation mirrors exactly the contrast in the tales of the Friar and the Sum-

moner, the Friar's, sly, oily, and insinuating, and the Summoner's, crackling and obscene, but extremely well told.

Further characterizing contrast between *exempla* and the friar's own behavior is to be found in his sermon on ire. Here the friar gives three *exempla* extracted from "Senek." The first concerns an unnamed knight (2018), the second involves Cambises (2043), and the third alludes to Cyrus (2079). All three underline the dangers of wrath, of which Thomas is notably guilty, and the friar ends his discourse with the admonition "Ne be no felawe to an irous man," (2086), an exquisitely ironic touch in view of the friar's subsequent behavior, after Thomas' bequest, when Chaucer likens the friar to a "wood leoun" and a "wilde boor."

Another note to the contrast afforded by some of the friar's *exempla* and events in the story is in the *sententia*-like admonition to Thomas not to give widely but to concentrate his donations upon a small group of friars, for, after all, "What is a ferthing worth parted in twelve?" This analogy pretty obviously gives Thomas the idea for the vexing problem that he later poses to the friar!⁹

The final use of authority in the *Summoner's Tale* is to be found at the conclusion when Jankyn, the houseboy, is judged by his master to have done as well in his solution to the arithmetical problem as Euclid or Ptolemy (2289). Since both were not only mathematicians but were identified in the medieval mind with music, the irony is quite apparent and the tribute richly deserved. And the citation is perhaps the crowning achievement of the Summoner's use of the Friar's learning against him.

To summarize. Chaucer has first, partially by the use of these rhetorical devices, established a subtle character for the Friar by having the Friar deliberately contrast himself with the Wife of Bath and to tell a story designed to hold up his hated enemy the Summoner to ridicule, achieving this in part by clever use of exemplary figures. In the course of which, the Friar unwittingly suggests certain vulnerable parts of his own character, such as his pompous delight in his righteousness, his falsely humble disclaimer of learning, and his malicious anger. Having thus delineated the character of Huberd, Chaucer joyously leaves him to the Summoner, who then descends upon the Friar with his own weapons and drives him from the field.

⁹This anticipation is delightfully observed by Professor Birney, "Structural Irony within the *Summoner's Tale*," p. 213.

Within the framework of the *Summoner's Tale* itself, the friar characterizes himself as a boaster and a liar by the contrast between the *exempla* he uses and his actions as they appear in the Summoner's narrative. The *exempla* and citations of authority therefore heighten the characterization and provide a fuller exposition of the nature of the Friar. The Summoner is himself shown thereby to be a rather rough but extraordinarily witty man, and though perhaps unlearned by the standard of the friars, possessed of at least enough "*questio quid juris*" learning to suit his purpose here. The irony of the choice of authorities, especially the final ones, shows the Summoner to be possessed of a clever and devastating tongue. As a reply to the *Friar's Tale*, the *Summoner's Tale* is extraordinarily effective, and the two complement one another beautifully. I believe that the choice of *exempla* and exemplary figures heightens the effectiveness of each tale and contributes remarkably to this complementary quality of the tales. In other words, there is art here as well as witty ribaldry.