

The Friar

The Friar's tale is about a Summoner and his relations with the devil. On the way to extort money from a widow, the Summoner encounters a yeoman who is apparently 'down on his luck'. The two men swear brotherhood to each other and exchange the secrets of their respective trades. The Summoner recounts his various crimes in a boastful manner. When the yeoman reveals that he is actually a devil, the Summoner expresses little surprise and begins to enquire about various aspects of hell and the forms that demons take. During their travels, they come upon a carter whose horse are stuck in mud. Frustrated, he says, "May the devil take them!" — a common expression of annoyance. Hearing this, the Summoner asks the yeoman-devil why he doesn't hold him to his word. The other replies that the man didn't truly mean what he said—it is not his "*entente*" or real intention—and therefore he cannot take the horses.

The pair proceed to the house of the widow. Here the Summoner tells the devil that he will out-devil him by fabricating a court summons so the widow will have to buy him off with bribes. He also demands a new frying-pan of hers in payment for a debt, claiming he has paid a fine to get her off a charge of adultery. When the enraged woman damns the summoner to hell the devil confirms that her "*entente*" intention is real enough and, finding that Summoner has no desire to repent, he carries him off body and soul to hell—along with the new frying-pan.

The tale is obviously a satirical attack on the Summoner's profession, informed by particular bitterness against the teller's fellow-traveller of that profession. Summoners were officials empowered to call or 'summon' people to face charges in the ecclesiastical courts. The Friar and the Summoner appear to have a long-standing dislike of each other which may be personal but is more likely an attribute of their respective 'trades' and servants of the church with power over the people.

The Friar is of one of the mendicant orders which were permitted to preach and made their livelihood by collecting alms for that service. In addition, the friar has the ability to annul the mandate of the Summoner since anyone who received absolution from a friar could no longer be charged with the same sin in an ecclesiastical court. While the Friar himself is hardly a guiltless individual, he is certainly more popular than the Summoner who can only bring trouble and expense on people. The Host is clearly aware of the animosity between them and, when the Friar begins with some pointedly rude remarks about summoners, he host reprimands him telling him to be mindful of his social standing and to go straight on with his tale. The Summoner replies that he can say what he wants but may be sure that he will pay it back in skin (that is, an equal amount of discomfort in his own tale).

The Friar's tale accords with his speech in the Prologue in denigrating the trade of summoners in the way shown but also alleges that, besides using bribery and extortion, the summoners employ a network of pimps and prostitutes to act as informants and thus turn their legitimate business into a protection racket. He considers himself lucky that friars, at least, are not under the summoners' jurisdiction.