The Transmutation of Friar Johine in "The Freiris of Berwik"

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Notes and Documents

The Transmutation of Friar Johine in
“The Freiris of Berwik”

The anonymous early sixteenth-century poem “The Freiris of Berwik” has most of the attributes of a fabliau: It is a short (ca. 570 lines) verse tale; the principal characters are middle-class (an inn-keeper, his wife, and three friars); the inn-keeper is in jeopardy of being cuckolded by one of the friars; and throughout the poem we are reminded of the duplicity of friars, the simplicity of middle-class husbands, and the lechery of middle-class wives.

The plot is simple: Two traveling Dominicans, Friar Allane and Friar Robert, are given reluctant hospitality by an inn-keeper’s wife, Alesone, while her husband, Symone, is away on business. The two friars are relagated to a garret, but when Friar Robert later peeps out he discovers that the wife is entertaining a third friar, Johine, her lover. The husband returns unexpectedly, the elaborate feast is quickly hidden, and Friar Johine is forced to hide in a meal trough. Friar Robert exposes the trick most ingeniously.

Friar Allane and Friar Robert are described as “Jacobyne freiris”; obviously they were of the Dominican Order, or Black Friars. Alesone’s lover, Friar Johine, is described as “ane Gray Freir” (124), which would make him a Franciscan. However, the Bannatyne Manuscript of 1568, which contains this poem, makes Friar Johine a Black Friar, just like Friar Allane and Friar Robert. I believe that modern editions of this poem should show Friar Johine as a Black Friar. There was rivalry between the Franciscans (Gray Friars) and Dominicans (Black Friars) in England during this time, and the main plot of the poem is, as I shall demonstrate, the humiliation of the Franciscan Order by a clever Dominican, accomplished mainly through a change of identity. Specifically, I shall prove that it was a transmutation by flour.

1 At one time attributed to William Dunbar, but now generally regarded as anonymous.

2 The text used here is W. Mackay Mackenzie’s The Poems of William Dunbar (London, 1960). Mackenzie admits that the poem is not Dunbar’s.
Friar Johine and Alesone are at their elegant feast, when a sudden knocking and crying out at the gate announces the unexpected return of Symone. The despairing Friar Johine is advised to hide in a nearby meal trough:

'Hyd yow,' scho said, 'quhilk he be broth to rest,
In to yone troich, I think it for the best;
It lyis melde and huge in all yone nuke,
It held a boll of melill quhen that we buke. (199-202)

The maid is commanded to hide the feast, put away the table, sweep up the litter, douse the fire, and otherwise remove evidence of the tryst. Alesone jumps quickly into bed, and then pretends to be awakened by her husband's knocking and crying out. She welcomes him home, and he calls for food. She produces a simple meal of pickled neat's foot, cold sheep's head, a few other cold items, and ordinary wine. Friar Robert, who with mounting hunger had watched the tryst and subsequent interruption, makes his presence in the garret known; he and Friar Allane are invited by Symone to share the meagre food. Friar Robert, knowing that a far better meal is hidden in a nearby locker, offers to conjure a feast; to Symone's amazement he does so, after first putting on a grand show which includes reading from his book, muttering, glowering, gaping, bowing, and other un-friarlike acts. The credulous Symone is amazed and delighted, while the terror-stricken Alesone realizes that she is in imminent danger of being exposed. After feasting and drinking, Symone asks to see this marvelous spirit-servant of Friar Robert's who can produce such things. Friar Robert demurs, saying that Symone would be distressed to see such a sight:

He is so fowill and ugly for to se;
I dar nocht awnter for to tak on me
To bring him hitter hein in to our sicht, (442-4)

He does admit that he could make him appear in another form, so as not to offend the assemblage. Symone then asks Friar Robert to make the spirit appear

'In likness of a Freir,
In quhyt cuntour, richt as your self it war,
For quhyt cuntour will na body deir,' (455-7)

It is necessary to digress here to explain the "quhyt cuntour." The Dominicans, Friar Robert's order, wore a white habit, over which a black mantle was thrown; the name Black Friars owes, of course, to this mantle, which they were accustomed to remove indoors. Symone's allusion to the color white need not confound us here;
the main point is that he asked Friar Robert to conjure the spirit dressed in the same color as Friar Robert was wearing.

Friar Robert replies that it would be a disservice to his order (i.e., the Dominicans) if he were to produce the spirit in such a habit. But he does offer to produce him in the likeness of a Franciscan:

Ye sall him se in liknes of a Freir;
In habeit gray it was his kynd to weir. (465-6)

He then advises Symone to stand near the door with a staff, ready to strike the spirit in the neck. When all is ready, Friar Robert turns to the meal trough, where he knows Friar Johine is hiding, and commands the "spirit" to appear:

'Ha, how, Hurlybas, now I conjure the,
That thow uprys and sone to me appeir
In habeit gray in liknes of a freir;
Owt of this troch, quhair that thow dois ly. (495-8)

Now, recall that Friar Johine has for some time been lying in a meal trough. Doubtless the greyish-white meal or flour has permeated his outer clothing. He steps out of the trough, obviously looking like a Gray Friar (i.e., a Franciscan), and runs for the door. "Stryk, stryk herdey," shouts Friar Robert. Symone strikes the spectre (i.e., Friar Johine) with his staff, but in the effort he falls down and is knocked unconscious. Friar Johine is tumbled into a puddle, whence he emerges and bolts over the fence to safety. Symone is resuscitated by Friar Robert, and the poet sums up the situation:

Thus Symonis heid upoun the stane wes brokin,
And our the stair the Freir in myre hes loppin,
And tap our taul he fyld wes woundir ill;
And Atesone on na wayis gat hir will. (538-61)

I hope that I have made the following points: First, Friar Johine was a Dominican, a Black Friar just like Friar Allane and Friar Robert; the Bannatyne reading of "black" should be honored by modern editors, not only for philological reasons but so we can appreciate the full ingenuity of the poet. Second, Friar Johine is transmuted from Black Friar to Gray Friar by the action of the flour on his clothing. Third, Friar Robert is due an accolade from his order, for through his quick wit he has changed a potentially embarrassing situation—embarrassing to the Dominicans, that is—into a triumph over the Franciscans.

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