

The SUMMONER, his PROLOGUE and his TALE

The Summoner

A Summoner was a man who delivered summonses for alleged public sinners to appear at the Archdeacon's ecclesiastical court when accused of public immorality. The job offered opportunities for serious abuse such as bribery, extortion, and especially blackmail of those who went with prostitutes, many of whom the pilgrim summoner used himself, and all of them in his pay. His disgusting physical appearance is meant to suggest his wretched spiritual condition.

This is the description of the Summoner from the General Prologue

His physical appearance

625	A SUMMONER was there with us in that place That had a fire-red cherubinnè's face, ¹ For saucèfleme he was with eyen narrow. And hot he was and lecherous as a sparrow. ² With scalèd browès black, and pilèd beard, Of his viságè children were afeared. There n'as quicksilver, litharge nor brimstone, Boras, ceruse, nor oil of tartar none, Nor ointèment that wouldè cleanse and bite That him might helpèn of his whelkès white, Nor of the knobbès sitting on his cheeks. Well loved he garlic, onion and eke leeks, And for to drinkèn strong wine red as blood; Then would he speak and cry as he were wood.	cherub's leprous / eyes scaly / scraggly was no [medications] boils lumps & also
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His "accomplishments"

640	And when that he well drunkèn had the wine, Then would he speakè no word but Latin. A fewè termès had he, two or three, That he had learnèd out of some decree. No wonder is; he heard it all the day. And eke you knowèn well how that a jay Can clepèn "Wat" as well as can the Pope. But whoso could in other things him grope,	knew also / jaybird call out whoever / test
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¹ 624: Medieval artists painted the faces of cherubs red. The summoner is of course less cherubic than satanic, his appearance being evidence of his vices. It is not necessary to know the precise names of the medicines ineffective for cleansing his facial outbreaks given in the following lines.

² 626: Sparrows were Venus's birds, considered lecherous presumably because they were so many.

Then had he spent all his philosophy.
Aye, "*Questio quid juris*" would he cry.¹

learning
"What is the law?"

His thoughtfulness to friends

He was a gentle harlot, and a kind. *rascal*
A better fellow shouldè men not find:
He wouldè suffer for a quart of wine *allow*
650 A good fellow to have his concubine *keep his mistress*
A twelvemonth, and excuse him at the full. *let him off*
Full privily a finch eke could he pull. ² *secretly*
And if he found owhere a good fellow, *anywhere*
He wouldè teachèn him to have no awe
In such a case, of the archdeacon's curse,
But if a man's soul were in his purse, *Unless*
For in his purse he should y-punished be.
"Purse is the archdeacon's hell," said he.

But well I wot, he lièd right indeed. *I know*
660 Of cursing ought each guilty man to dread,
For curse will slay right as assoiling saveth *absolution*
And also 'ware him of "*Significavit*." ³ *let him beware*

His control of his sources of information

In daunger had he, at his ownè guise *In his power / disposal*
The youngè girlès of the diocese ⁴
And knew their counsel and was all their redde. *their secrets / adviser*
A garland had he set upon his head
As great as it were for an alèstake. *tavern sign*

¹ 646: "The question is: What is the law?" This is a lawyer's phrase which the Summoner heard often in the court of the archdeacon, the church official who could bring charges against public sinners and impose fines on them.

² 652: "Secretly he would enjoy a girl himself" or "He could do a clever trick."

³ 662: The writ of excommunication began with the word "*Significavit*." In these four lines the author is dissociating himself from the Summoner's views.

⁴ 664: *girlès* probably meant "prostitutes," as it still can. See "Friars Tale," 1355 ff for further information on the activities of summoners.

A buckler had he made him of a cake.¹

shield

Introduction or Afterword to **The Summoner's Tale**

The Prologue and Tale of the Summoner continue Chaucer's satire at the expense of the friars which he had begun in the General Prologue with his portrait of Friar Hubert, an engaging rogue, but a rogue nonetheless. A quarrel between Friar Hubert and the Summoner of the pilgrimage had erupted during the Wife of Bath's tale, and the Friar had eventually told a tale against Summoners to which this tale by the Summoner against friars is a response.

To repeat some of what was said in the annotations to the General Prologue, a Friar or Frere (French *frere*: brother) was a cleric, a member of a mendicant order of preachers, vowed to poverty, who lived on what they could get by begging. Friar Hubert, described in the General Prologue, represents a common view of friars in fourteenth-century England.² He has lost whatever ideals he may have set out with; he has certainly lost the ideals of St Francis, the first friar, and has become simply a professional fund-raiser, the best in his friary because of some special skills and considerable personal charm. He can find good economic reasons to cultivate the company of the rich rather than the poor, whom St Francis specialized in serving, and meant his followers to serve.

The friar of the Summoner's tale has little of Hubert's charm, and even less of his talent for wheedling a real farthing out of a victim. He is clumsy by comparison and ends up as the deserved butt of the joke in a fabliau, a naughty tale, somewhat like those other churls' tales of the Miller and the Reeve, but scatological rather than sexual. In the **Canterbury Tales** scheme, the Summoner's tale is, as we have said, a response to the Friar's anti-summoner narrative, as physical as the Friar's tale is theological. This is especially true of the Summoner's Prologue, a particularly vulgar inversion of a pious fable.

The prologue and tale are about hot air, oral and anal. The long-winded rambling sermon about anger by the loquacious friar does not put his hearer Thomas to sleep, as sermons so often did and do, but instead rouses him, understandably, to the very thing it is preaching against: anger. Hot air induces hot ire which produces more hot air. The Friar has asked rhetorically "What is a farthing worth divided in twelve?" He will find out shortly, but in the meantime the enraged Thomas gives him a

¹ 667: A tavern sign, an *alestake*, was a large wreath or broom on a pole. Acting the buffoon, the Summoner has also turned a thin cake into a shield.

² For a good example of such an Anti-Fraternal text, see the statement by "Fals-Semblant," the hypocrite as mendicant friar in the *Romaunt of the Rose* (6135-7292), the English version of the *Roman de la Rose*. Since at least part of the translation may have been done by Chaucer, it generally appears in editions of his collected works. For other examples, see the texts collected in *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, ed. Robert P. Miller, New York, 1977.

farting all to himself.

From the narrative point of view the friar's sermonizing is, as we have suggested, overlong to make the point that the friar is self serving and hypocritical. Moreover, one does not quite believe in the recent death of the child of Thomas and his wife, a fact dragged in like an afterthought to make a point about the Friar's fast but callous thinking, and is then forgotten rather like the baby in the Reeve's tale. The death of a child is not convincingly to be introduced that casually or dismissed that lightly. Similarly, with regard to characterization, the friar of the narrative seems at first to be quite well liked and welcomed by the churl and his wife and by the local lord and his wife; hence it is comes as a little bit of a surprize to be shown that he is a greedy, clumsy and obvious hypocrite deserving the open coarse hostility of Thomas and the more covert hostility of the lord and his family who enjoy the friar's discomfiture.

The friar has sworn to Thomas to be "as just as is a square", that is, as true and reliable as the carpenter's square that was St Thomas's symbol. However, the resemblance in sound to the "squire"(ME *squier*) who uses another instrument of measurement for getting things right is fairly obvious, and probably intended. Thomas's anger at the friar results in his fart right into the friar's fist and in his subsequent challenge to that Master of Arts to divide his farting gift equally among the brothers of his friary. Thomas of Ind, invoked by the friar, has become Thomas of Wind provoking the same friar to furious anger.

Punning induces more punning: the lord, the squire's master, muses on the puzzle posed by the churl Thomas, an unprecedented philosophical conundrum: *questio quid aeris*. He ponders on this and on the connection between *ars metric* (arithmetic, a science of measurement) and *arse* metric:

In all ars metric shall there no man find	<i>arithmetic</i>
Before this day of such a question.	
Who shouldè make a demonstration,	
That every man should have alike his part	
As of a sound or savor of a fart?	
..... Tell me how.	
It is an impossible, it may not be.....	
The rumbling of a fart, and every sound,	
N'is but of air reverberation,	
And ever it wasteth lite and lite away;	<i>bit by bit</i>
There n'is no man can deemen, by my fay,	<i>can judge, by my faith</i>
If that it were departed equally.	<i>divided</i>

He is wrong, it appears, for at the end of the tale, his clever squire proposes a very inventive if earthy solution to the division problem: the humble wheel that moves the cart.

The wheel was also an instrument of torture on which the body of a man could be broken on earth or, together with flesh-hooks and awls, in Purgatory or Hell, a topic on which the friar of the pilgrimage

and the friar of the tale are, apparently, eloquent (see lines 1646-52 of the Friar's Tale and 1672 & 1730 below). The Wheel of Fortune was another common medieval illustration and trope. People climbed on it and fell off it as Fortune spun it. The squire turns the instrument of torture or fortune horizontal so that the churl can break a body of wind upon the wheel, a fart tune.

The friar, a falsely humble scholastic Master of Arts (2185-6), will be outwitted by the schoolboy master of farts, a youth playing a vulgar but clever schoolboy joke in the duodecimal system. This young squire, Jankin, must have been a clerk, a young cousin of Alison of Bath's last husband of the same name who has been to the university. He certainly parodies the scholastic argument in which the university scholar would "make a demonstration" before an audience, propose a thesis and attempt to prove it, and especially the kind of "demonstration" that showed by clever argument or "scientific method" that apparently impossible statements, *insolubilia*, were in fact possible. In this case Jankin offers to show (for a reasonable price) how to divide the invisible and indivisible. It is an earthy spoof of the kind of scholastic dispute we have mentioned or the kind mocked verbally in the question: How many angels can dance on the point of a pin? Here, a devilishly clever court jester proposes to answer the problem posed by a "demoniac" jester: How do you divide a fart into twelve equal parts?

Robert Hasenfratz¹ is only one of the latest among a number of scholars who have pointed out the possible relationship between the cartwheel turned fartwheel on the one hand, and on the other a good deal of medieval and classical lore about the meteorology of winds and thunderclaps as discussed in scholastic circles, especially the wheel illustrations of the Twelve Winds from different parts of the compass. Other scholars have pointed out similar wheels illustrating the descent of the Holy Ghost on the apostles at Pentecost in a "rushing mighty wind". Glending Olson² cites sixteenth-century evidence of a Pentecost custom in St Paul's, London, where a censer swung down from a hole in the roof "breathing out over the whole church a most pleasant perfume" (p.235). If this was also true in the St Paul's of Chaucer's day, the parody would have been even more obvious, though the only one incensed in the tale is the friar. If one wants to take the mockery of the friar rather more seriously one might think he is being portrayed as one of the disciples of the Antichrist who works false miracles, including a magically induced false Pentecost. The Wycliffite critics of the church in Chaucer's day were not shy of equating friars with disciples of Antichrist. (Olson, p.218 ff).

[The edition the **Summoner's Tale** below is a first-draft version. It has numerous differences from Riverside]

¹ "The Science of Flatulence: Possible Sources for the Summoner's Tale" **Chaucer Review** 30 (1996), 241-261.

² Glending Olson, "The End of the Summoner's Tale and the Uses of Pentecost" in **Studies in the Age of Chaucer** 21 (1999), 209-246

THE SUMMONER'S PROLOGUE.

The first response of the pilgrim Summoner to the hostile tale of the pilgrim Friar is a short scatological narrative about friars that inverts a pious story told about how the Virgin Mary hides her proteges under her cloak in heaven.

<p>This Summoner in his stirrups high he stood, Upon this Friar his heartè was so wood, That like an aspen leaf he quoke for ire.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>so angry shook with anger</i></p>
<p>"Lordings," quod he, "but one thing I desire: I you beseech, that of your courtesy, 1670 Since you have heard this falsè Friar lie, As suffer me I may my talè tell.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>allow me</i></p>
<p>This Friar boasteth that he knoweth Hell, And, God it wot, that it is little wonder. Friars and fiendès be but little asunder. For, pardee, you have often time heard tell, How that a friar ravished was to Hell In spirit oncè by a visiõ, And as an angel led him up and down, To shoven him the painès that were there, In all the placè saw he not a frere. Of other folk he saw enough in woe. Unto this angel spoke the friar tho:</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>God knows devils For, by God carried off</i></p>
<p>`Now, Sir,' quod he, `have friars such a grace, That none of them shall come into this place?' `Yes,' quod this angel, `many a million.' And unto Satanas he led him down. `And now has Satanas,' said he, `a tail Broader than of a carrick is the sail.'</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>then</i></p>
<p>"Hold up thy tail, thou Satanas," quod he, 1690 "Show forth thine arse, and let the friar see Where is the nest of friars in this place." And ere that half a furlong way of space,¹ Right so as bees out swarming from a hive, Out of the devil's arse there gan to drive</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>sail of a ship</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>before long</i></p>

¹ *And ere ...*: "And before you could go a furlong" (one eighth of a mile). That is, in a short time.

A twenty thousand friars on a rout
 And throughout Hellè swarmèd all about,
 And came again, as fast as they may go,
 And in his arse they crepten every one.
 He clapt his tail again, and lay full still.

in a mob

This friar, when he lookèd had his fill
 Upon the torments of this sorry place,
 His spirit God restorèd of His grace
 Unto his body again, and he awoke.
 But natheless for fearè yet he quoke,
 1705 So was the devil's arse aye in his mind,
 That is his heritage of very kind.
 God save you allè — save this cursed Frere.
 My prologue will I end in this mannér."

shook

always in

inheritance by nature

THE SUMMONER'S TALE.

A longer narrative about a rascally begging friar

LORDINGS, there is in Yorkshire, as I guess,
 A marshy country callèd Holderness,
 In which there went a limiter about
 To preach, and eke to beg, it is no doubt.
 And so befell that on a day this frere
 Had preachèd at a church in his mannér,
 And specially aboven every thing
 Excited he the people in his preaching
 To trentals; ¹ and to give for Godès sake,
 Wherewith men mighten holy houses make,
 There as divinè service is honóured,
 1720 Not there as it is wasted and devóured,
 Ne there it needeth not for to be given,
 To be y-clawed, or to burn or bake:
 Now speed you hastily for Christès sake."

Ladies & g'men

a begging friar

30 masses

punishments in purgatory

¹ Trentals were units of 30 masses sung for the relief of souls in Purgatory generally one each day. The friar advocates that they should be sung *hastily*, i.e. in a much shorter period, perhaps all in one day, so that the souls will have less time to suffer. He also asks for offerings to build friaries (*holy houses*) where such services can be properly sung.

And when this friar had said all his intent,
With *qui cum patre* forth his way he went.

*a Latin blessing
what they wished*

When folk in church had given him what them lest,
He went his way, no longer would he rest,
With scrip and tipped staff, y-tucked high.¹
In every house he 'gan to pore and pry,
And beggèd meal and cheese, or elsè corn.

1740 His fellow had a staff tipped with horn,
A pair of tables all of ivory,
And a pointel polished fetisly,
And wrote alway the namès, as he stood,
Of allè folk that gave them any good,
Askauncès that he wouldèfor them pray.

*His comrade (another friar)
(wax) writing tablets
a stylus (for writing)*

“Give us a bushel wheat, or malt, or rye,
A Goddè's kichel, or a trippe of cheese,
Or elsè what you list, we may not chese;
A Goddè's halfpenny, or a mass penny;²
Or give us of your brawn, if ye have any
A dagon of your blanket, levè dame,
Our sister dear, (lo, here I write your name,)
Bacon or beef, or such thing as ye find.”

Pretending

*a little cake or slab of c.
what you wish / choose*

A sturdy harlot went them aye behind,
1755 That was their hostè's man, and bore a sack,
And what men gave them, laid it on his back.
And when that he was out at door, anon
He planed away the namès every one,
That he before had written in his tables:
He servèd them with nifles and with fables.

*meat
piece of cloth(?), dear lady*

servant

servant at inn

he = the friar

trifles

An interruption

“Nay, there thou liest, thou Sommoner,” quod the Frere.
“Peace,” quod our Host, “for Christè's mother dear,
Tell forth thy tale, and spare it not at all.”
“So thrive I,” quod this Summoner, “so I shall.”

(the pilgrim Friar)

The tale continues. The begging friar goes to visit a regular patron.

1765 So long he went from house to house, till he

¹ “with bag and tipped walking stick, and (with the skirts of his clerical gown) tucked up.”

² “A half penny in alms or a penny to say mass”

Came to a house, there he was wont to be
 Refreshèd more than in a hundred places.
 Sick lay the goodè man whose that the place is,
 Bed-rid upon a couchè now he lay. *Bedridden*
 “*Deus hic,*” quod he, “O Thomas friend, good day,” *(A Latin blessing)*
 Saidè this friar all courteously and soft.
 “Thomas,” quod he, “God yield it you, full oft *God reward you for it.*
 Have I upon this bench faren full well,
 Here have I eaten many a merry meal.”
 And from the bench he drove away the cat,
 And laid adown his potent and his hat, *his stick*
 And eke his scrip, and set himself adown. *his bag*
 His fellow was y-walkèd into town *His friar companion.*
 Forth with his knave, into that hostelry *w. his servant*
 Where as he shope him thilkè night to lie. *intended to stay*
 “O dearè master,” quod this sickè man,
 “How have ye faren since that March began?
 I saw you not this fourteen night and more.”
 “God wot,” quod he, “laboured have I full sore;
1785 And specially for thy salvation
 Have I said many a precious orison, *prayer*
 And for our other friendès, God them bless.
 I have this day been at your church at mass,
 And said a sermon after my simple wit, *in my simple way*
 Not all after the text of holy writ,
 For it is hard to you, as I suppose,
 And therefore will I teach you aye the glose. *the gloss or commentary*
 Glosing is a full glorious thing certáin, ¹
 For letter slays, so as we clerkès sayn. ²
 There have I taught them to be charitable,
 And spend their good there it is reasonable.
 And there I saw our dame; ah, where is she?”
 “Yonder I trow that in the yard she be,” *where it is*
 Saidè this man, “and she will come anon.” *woman of the house*

¹ *Glose* and *glosing*: gloss & glossing, meaning, strictly speaking, brief explanatory commentary on a text. The italicized words in the right margins of this text, for example, are properly called glosses. But explaining texts at length, especially difficult biblical texts, can easily become explaining away or explaining in self-interested ways. Hence the rather pejorative meaning that *glosing* often had in Chaucer's day. For this reason I have left the form *glosing* rather than *glossing*, which is not a glorious thing but hopefully an honest thing.

² *Glosing* was supposed to explain the *spirit*, not just the literal meaning (*letter*), of a text, for “the letter killeth (but the spirit giveth life), as we scholars (*clerkes*) say.”

The friar greets the wife (over)enthusiastically

1800 “Ey master, welcome be you by Saint John,”

Saidè this wife. “How fare you heartily ?”

This friar riseth up full courteously,

And her embraceth in his armès narrow,

And kissed her sweet, and chirketh as a sparrow

With his lippès: “Dame,” quod he, “right well,

Madam

As he that is your servant every deal.

Thanked be God, that gave you soul and life,

Yet saw I not this day so fair a wife

In all the churchè, God so savè me.”

“Yea, God amend defaultès, Sir,” quod she, ¹

“Algatès welcome be you, by my fay.”

At any rate

He wants to hear Thomas's confession

“Grammercy, Dame, that have I found alway.

Thank you, ma'am

But of your greatè goodness, by your leave,

I wouldè pray you that you not you grieve,

I will with Thomas speak a little throw:

little while

These curates be so negligent and slow

parish priests

To gropen tenderly a conscience. ²

In shrift, in preaching is my diligence

In the confessional

And study in Peter's wordès and in Paul's.

1820 I walk and fishè Christian mennè's souls,

To yielden Jesus Christ his proper rent;

what is due

To spread his word is set all mine intent.”

The wife encourages him to rebuke her husband, and invites him to lunch

“Now by your faith, O dearè Sir,” quod she,

“Chideth him well for Saintè Charity.

Rebuke

He is aye angry as is a pissémire,

continually / an ant

Though that he have all that he can desire,

Though I him wry a-night, and make him warm,

cover

And over him lay my leg and eke mine arm,

He groaneth as our boar lies in our sty:

¹ This line seems to mean something like “God forgive your lies”, a deprecatory remark in response to his compliment.

² In the confessional the priest was supposed not merely to hear the penitent's confession and mechanically give him absolution, but to ask pertinent questions and instruct the penitent's conscience.

1830 Other disport of him right none have I, *comfort*
 I may not please him in no manner case.”

“O Thomas, *je vous dis*, Thomas, Thomas, *I tell you*
 This makes the fiend, this mustè be amended. *The devil does this*
 Ire is a thing that high God hath defended, *Anger / has forbidden*
 And thereof will I speak a word or two.”

“Now, master,” quod the wife, “ere that I go,
 What will ye dine? I will go thereabout.”

“Now, Dame,” quod he, “*je vous dis sans doute*, *I tell you without doubt*
 Have I not of a capon but the liver, *chicken*
1840 And of your whitè bread not but a shiver, *slice*
 And after that a roasted piggè’s head,
 (But I ne would for me no beast were dead) --
 Then had I with you homely suffisance.
 I am a man of little sustenance.
 My spirit hath his fostering in the Bible. *I eat little*
 My body is aye so ready and so penible *so accustomed to penance*
 To waken, that my stomach is destroyed. *To keeping vigils (fasting)*
 I pray you, Dame, that ye be nought annoyed,
 Though I so friendly you my counsel show; *my personal matters*
1850 By God, I n’ould have told it but a few.” *wouldn’t*

She has a surprising announcement. The friar’s quick response with “spiritual” comfort

“Now, Sir,” quod she, “but one word ere I go;
 My child is dead within these weekès two,
 Soon after that you went out of this town.”
 “His death saw I by revelatiòn,”
 Saidè this friar, “at home in our dortour. *dormitory*
 I dare well say, that ere than half an hour
 After his death, I saw him borne to bliss
 In mine avision, so God me wiss. *guide me*
 So did our sexton, and our fermerer, *infirmarian*
 That have been trueI friars fifty year;
 They may now, God be thankèd of his loan, *His gift*
 Maken their jubilee, and walk alone.¹
 And up I rose, and all our convent eke,
 With many a tearè trilling on our cheek, *rolling*
1865 Withouten noise or clattering of bells,

¹ They have celebrated 25 or 50 years as friars and no longer need to follow the rule that requires friars to go in pairs. Hence, they are reliable older men.

Te Deum was our song, and nothing else,
Save that to Christ I bade an orison,
Thanking him of my revelatiōn.

(*hymn of thanksgiving*)
said a prayer

He drifts into praise of friars

For, Sir and Damè, trusteth me right well,
Our orisons be more effectual,
And more we see of Christè's secret things,
Than borel folk, although that they be kings
We live in poverty and abstinence,
And borel folk in riches and dispense
Of meat and drink, and in their foul delight.
We have this worldè's lust all in despite.
Lazar and Dives liveden diversely,¹
And diverse guerdon hadden they thereby.
Whoso will pray, he must fast and be clean,
And fat his soul, and keep his body lean.
We fare as saith the Apostle: cloth and food
Sufficeth us, though they be not full good.
The cleanness and the fasting of us freres,
Maketh that Christ accepteth our prayers.
1885 Lo, Moses forty days and forty nights
Fasted, ere that the high God full of might
Spoke with him in the mountain of Sinay:
With empty womb of fasting many a day,
Receivèd he the lawè that was written
With Godès finger; and Eli, well you witen,
In mount Oreb, ere he had any speech
With highè God, that is our livès leech,
He fasted long, and was in contemplançe.
Aaron, that had the temple in governance,
And eke the other priestès every one,
Into the temple when they shouldè gon
To prayen for the people, and do servíce,
They n'olden drinken in no manner wise
No drinkè,² which that might them drunken make,
1900 But there in abstinencè pray and wake,

layfolk

spending on

contempt

different rewards

We do as the A. said

empty belly

Elijah well you know

physician of our lives

would not

¹ The reference is the biblical parable of Dives, the rich man who ended in hell, and Lazarus, the poor man who went to heaven.

² Note the triple negative for emphasis. It was not ungrammatical.

Lest that they die. Take heedè what I say:
 But they be sober that for the people pray
 Ware that ----- I say no more: for it sufficeth.¹
 Our Lord Jesu, as Holy Writ deviseth,
 Gave us example of fasting and [of] prayers:
 Therefore we mendicants, we sely freres,
 Be wedded to povert' and continence,
 To charity, humbles and abstinence,
 To persecution for righteousness,
 1910 To weeping, misericorde, and to cleanness.
 And therefore may ye see that our prayers
 (I speak of us, we mendicants, we freres),
 Be to the highè God more acceptable
 Than yourès with your feastès at your table.

*Unless they
 it's enough
 as Holy Scripture tells*

*blessed friars
 poverty & chastity*

mercy

He rambles into a sermon against gluttony

From Paradisè first, if I shall not lie,
 Was man out chasèd for his gluttony,
 And chaste was man in Paradise certáin.
 But hearken now, Thomas, what I shall sayn,
 I have no text of it, as I suppose,

1920 But I shall find it in a manner glose ²
 That specially our sweetè Lord Jesus
 Spoke this by friars, when he saidè thus,
 'Blessed be they that poor in spirit be.'
 And so forth all the gospel may ye see,
 Wh'er it be liker our profession,
 Or theirs that swimmen in possession,
 Fie on their pomp, and on their gluttony,
 And on their lewedness: I them defy.
 Methinketh they be like Jovinian,
1930 Fat as a whale, and walking as a swan;³

whether it's more like

¹ "Unless those who pray for the people are sober, beware" For some reason he appears not to finish the sentence.

² He admits that his gloss -- that Jesus meant the Friars when he said these words -- is not in the Bible, but he can work that assumption into his commentary.

³ A variant on St Jerome's derisive portrait of Jovinian as a monk "plump, spruce, whitened (with powder?), processing like a bridegroom."

All vinolent as bottle in the spence ¹
 Their prayer is of full great reverence;
 When they for soulès say the Psalm of David,
 Lo, 'Buff !' they say, '*Cor meum eructavit,*' ²
 Who followeth Christè's gospel and his lore *doctrine.*
 But we that humble be, and chaste and poor,
 Workers of Godè's word, not auditors?
 Therefore right as an hawk upon a source *like a hawk soaring*
 Up springs into the air, right so [the] prayers
 Of charitable and chastè busy freres,
 Maken their source to Godè's earès two. *their flight*
 Thomas, Thomas, so may I ride or go, *as sure as I ride or walk*
 And by that lord that clepèd is Saint Ive,
 N'ere thou our brother, shouldest thou not thrive. *If you weren't*
 In our chapter pray we day and night *our assembly*
 To Christ, that He send thee health and might
 Thy body for to wielden hastily." *to move soon*

Thomas's sardonic response.

"God wot," quod he, "nothing thereof feel I
 As help me Christ, as I in fewè years
1950 Have spended upon divers manner freres *different kinds of*
 Full many a pound, yet fare I never the bet; *better*
 Certain my good have I almost beset: *used up my goods*
 Farewell my good, for it is all ago." *gone*

Undeterred, the friar mixes rebuke with begging

The friar answered: "O Thomas, dost thou so?
 What needeth you diversè friars to seek?
 What needeth him that hath a perfect leech, *a perfect doctor*
 To seeken other leeches in the town?
 Your inconstánce is your confusíon.
 Hold you then me, or elsè our convent,
1960 To pray for you be insufficient ? ³

¹ As full of wine as a bottle in a (wine)cellar. The next passage is a sarcasm.

² *Cor meum eructavit verbum bonum*: My heart hath uttered a good word. But *eructavit* also means "belched".

³ "Do you think that I or my convent are not sufficient to pray for you?"

Thomas, that japè is not worth a mite;
Your malady is for we have too lite.

*that silly idea
because we have too little*

'Ah, give that convent half a quarter oats;
And give that convent four and twenty groats;
And give that friar a penny, and let him go.'

Nay, nay, Thomas, it may no thing be so.
What is a farthing worth parted in twelve?

*farthing = 1/4 of a penny
united in itself*

Lo, each thing that is onéd in himself
Is morè strong than when it is y-scattered.
Thomas, of me thou shalt not be y-flattered,
Thou wouldest have our labor all for nought.
The highè God, that all this world hath wrought,

has made

Saith that the workman worthy is his hire.
Thomas, nought of your treasure I desire
As for myself, but that all our convént
To pray for you is aye so diligent:

is always

And for to builden Christè's ownè church.

Thomas, if you will learnen for to work
Of building up of churches, may ye find

1980 If it be good, in Thomas's life of Inde.

in the life of St T of I.

You lie here full of anger and of ire,
With which the devil sets your heart on fire,
And chiden here this holy innocent
Your wife, that is so good and patient.

And therefore trow me, Thomas, if thee lest,
Ne strive not with thy wife, as for the best.

And bear this word away now by thy faith,
Touching such thing, lo, what the wise man saith:

"Within thy house ne be thou no lión;
To thy subjécts do none oppression;
Ne make thou thine acquaintance not to flee.

He warns Thomas against anger

And yet, Thomas, eftsoonès charge I thee,
Beware from ire that in thy bosom sleepeth,
Ware from the serpent that so slyly creepeth
Under the grass, and stingeth subtly.
Beware, my son, and hearken patiently,
That twenty thousand men have lost their lives
For striving with their lemmans and their wives.

I warn you again

Now since you have so holy and meek a wife,

their lovers

2000 What needeth you, Thomas, to maken strife?
There n'is y-wis no serpent so cruél,

there is not indeed

When man treads on his tail, nor half so fell,
As woman is, when she hath caught an ire;
Very vengeance is then all her desire.

*so savage
once she's enraged*

Ire is a sin, one of the greaté seven,
Abominable unto the God of heaven,
And to himself it is destructiön.

Seven Deadly Sins

This every lewèd vicar and parson
Can say, how ire engenders homicide;
Ire is, in sooth, executor of pride.

ignorant priest

I could of irè say so muchel sorrow,
My talè shouldè lasten till to-morrow.

in truth

And therefore pray I God both day and night,
An irous man, God send him little might.

angry man

It is great harm, and certès great pity
To set an irous man in high degree.

high position

An anecdote about anger

Whilom there was an irous potestate
As saith Senec, that during his estate
Upon a day out riden knightès two;

*angry ruler
term*

2020 And, as fortunè would that it were so,
That one of them came home, that other not.
Anon the knight before the judge is brought,
That saidè thus: 'Thou hast thy fellow slain,
For which I deem thee to the death certáin.'

And to another knight commanded he:

'Go, lead him to the death, I chargè thee.
And happened, as they wenten by the way
Toward the place there as he shouldè die
The knight came, which men wenden had been dead.

*people thought
judgement*

Then thoughten they it was the bestè redde
To lead them bothè to the judge again.

They saiden: 'Lord, the knight ne had not slain
His fellow. Here he stands whole alive.'

'You shall be dead,' quod he, 'so may I thrive,
That is to say, both one, and two, and three.'

I declare

And to the firstè knight right thus spoke he:

'I damnèd thee; thou must algate be dead:
And thou also must needès lose thine head,
For thou art causè why thy fellow dieth.'

*condemned / certainly
[spoken to 2nd knight]*

2040 And to the thirdè knight right thus he sayeth:

'Thou hast not done that I commanded thee.'
And thus he did do slay them allè three.

*that = what
had all 3 killed*

Another exemplum about anger

Irous Cambises was eke dronkelew,
 And aye delighted him to be a shrew.
 And so befell, a lord of his meinie,
 That lovéd virtuous morality,
 Said on a day betwixt them two right thus:

[*k. of Persia*] / *a drunk*
enjoyed being nasty
his household

‘A lord is lost, if he be vicious;
 And drunkenness is eke a foul recórd
 Of any man, and namely of a lord.
 There is full many an eye and many an ear
 Awaiting on a lord, and he n’ot where.
 For Godès love, drink more attemprely:
 Wine maketh man to losen wretchedly
 His mind, and eke his limbès every one.’

and especially

Spying (?) / he doesn’t know
temperately

‘The reverse shalt thou see,’ quod he, ‘anon,
 And prove it by thine own experience,
 That wine ne doth to folk no such offence.
 There is no wine bereaveth me my might
2060 Of hand, nor foot, nor of mine eyen sight.’

harm

And for despite he drankè muchel more
 A hundred part than he had done before,
 And right anon, this cursed irous wretch
 This knightè’s sonnè let before him fetch,
 Commanding him he should before him stand:
 And suddenly he took his bow in hand,
 And up the string he pullèd to his ear,
 And with an arrow he slew the child right there

100 times

had him brought

‘Now whe’er have I a siker hand or none’?
 Quod he, ‘Is all my might and mind a-gone?
 Hath wine bereavèd me mine eyen sight’?’

Do I have a sure hand

robbed me of

What should I tell the answer of the knight?
 His son was slain, there is no more to say.

The “moral” and another brief anecdote

Beware therefore with lordès for to play,
2075 Singeth *Placebo*, and I shall if I can,
 But if it be unto a poorè man:
 To a poor man men should his vices tell,
 But not to a lord, though he should go to hell.
 Lo, irous Cyrus, thilkè Persian,
2080 How he destroyed the river of Gisen,
 For that an horse of his was drent therein,

Unless

even if he

Because ...drowned.

When that he wentè Babylon to win:
He madè that the river was so small,
That women might it waden over all.

He made it so

Another moral and exhortation

Lo, what said he that so well teachen can?
‘Ne be no fellow to no irous man,
Ne with no wood man walkè by the way,
Lest thee repent.’ I will no further say.
Now, Thomas, levè brother, leave thine ire,
2090 Thou shalt me find as just as is a square;
Hold not the devil’s knife aye to thine heart,
Thine anger doth thee all too sorè smart,
But show to me all thy confession.”

*Do not keep company
mad
Lest you regret it
dear brother
[carpenter’s] square
aye = always
causes you too much pain*

Thomas resists

“Nay,” quod the sickè man, “by Saint Simon
I have been shriven this day of my curáte; ¹
I have him told all wholly mine estate.
Needeth no more to speak of it,” saith he,
“But if me list of mine humility.”

Unless I wish

The friar persists

“Give me then of thy gold to make our cloister,”
2100 Quod he, “for many a mussel and many an oyster,
When other men have been full well at ease,
Hath been our food, our cloister for to raise. ²
And yet, God wot, unneth the fundament
Performèd is, nor of our pavèment
N’is not a tile yet within our wones.
By God, we owen forty pound for stones.
Now help, Thomas, for him that harrowed hell, ³

*the foundation is barely ...
... Finished
our dwelling*

¹ Thomas says that he has already been to confession to his parish priest [*been shriven of my curate*] to whom he has opened his soul, and so he does not need to confess again unless he wishes to do so as an exercise in humility.

² Presumably oysters and mussels were considered inferior and cheap food.

³ “For the sake of Christ” who “harrowed Hell” when He released all the Old Testament saints between His Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

For elsè mustè we our bookès sell,
 And if you lack our predication,
2110 Then goes this world all to destruction.
 For whoso from this world would us bereave,
 So God me savè, Thomas, by your leave,
 He would bereave out of this world the sun.¹
 For who can teach and worken as we can?
 And that is not of little time," quod he,
 "But since Elijah was, and Elisee,
 Have friars been, that find I of record,²
 In charity, y-thanked be our Lord.
 Now, Thomas, help for Saintè Charity."
2120 And down anon he set him on his knee.

preaching

Elijah and Elisha

Thomas's patience finally breaks. So does his wind

This sickè man waxed well nigh wood for ire,
 He wouldè that the friar had been a-fire
 With his false dissimulation:
 "Such thing as is in my possession,"
 Quod he, "that may I give you and none other:
 You say me thus, how that I am your brother?"
 "Yea, certès," quod this friar, "yea, trusteth well;
 I took our dame the letter of our seal."³
 "Now well," quod he, "and somewhat shall I give
2130 Unto your holy convent while I live;
 And in thine hand thou shalt it have anon,
 On this condition, and other none,
 That thou depart it so, my dearè brother,
 That every friar have as much as other.
 This shalt thou swear on thy profession
 Withouten fraud or cavillation."
 "I swear it," quod the friar, "upon my faith."
 And therewithal his hand in his he layth;
 "Lo here my faith, in me shall be no lack."
 "Then put thine hand adown right by my back,"
 Saidè this man, "and gropè well behind,

became nearly mad

divide it

or argument

¹ "Whoever would take us friars out of this world would be taking away the sun." Friars are indispensable!

² Carmelite friars asserted that their order had been founded by Elijah and Elisha on Mt Carmel.

³ "I gave your wife the sealed letter" (of enlistment as a lay member of the brotherhood).

Beneath my buttock, therè thou shalt find
A thing that I have hid in privity.”

“Ah,” thought this friar, “that shall go with me.”

And down his hand he launcheth to the clift,

In hopè for to finden there a gift.

And when this sickè man felt this frere

About his towel gropen there and here

his rump

Amid his hand he let the friar a fart;

2150 There n'is no capel drawing in a cart,

no horse

That might have let a fart of such a sound.

The preacher against anger becomes uncontrollably angry

The friar up starts, as does a wood lion:

mad lion

“Ah, falsè churl,” quod he, “for Godè's bones,

“churl” see Endpapers

This hast thou in despite done for the nones ¹

in contempt

Thou shalt abyge this fart, if that I may.”

pay for

His meinie, which that harden this affray,

household / row

Came leaping in, and chasèd out the frere,

And forth he goes with a full angry cheer,”

mood

And fetched his fellow, there as lay his store:

his baggage

He lookèd as it were a wildè boar,

And ground with his teeth, so was he wroth.

so angry

The friar seeks redress from the local lord whose confessor he is

A sturdy pace down to the court he goth,

rapid

Where as there woned a man of great honour,

there lived

To whom that he was alway confessour:

This worthy man was lord of that villáge.

This friar came, as he were in a rage,

Where as this lord sat eating at his board:

his table

Unnethès might the friar speak one word,

Scarcely

Till at the last he saidè “God you see.”

God save you

2170 This lord 'gan look, and said, “*Ben'dicite!*

Bless you (pron. ?Bendisitee)

What? Friar John, what manner world is this?

What's the matter

I see well that something there is amiss;

You looken as the wood were full of thieves.

Sit down anon, and tell me what your grief is,

And it shall be amended, if I may.”

¹ *for the nones* seems to be a largely meaningless tag here as so often in Chaucer (See Endpapers). Just possibly it means “You've done this for the first and last time.”

“I have,” quod he, “had a despite to-day,
 God yield you, adown in your village,
 That in this world there n’is so poor a page,
 That he n’ould have abomination
 Of that I have received in your town: ¹
 And yet ne grieveth me nothing so sore,
 As that the o1dè churl with lockès hoar,
 Blasphemèd hath our holy convent eke.”

*an insult
 God save you*

*white hair
 also*

“Now, master,” quod this lord, “I you beseech.”
 “No master, Sir,” quod he, “but servitour ²
 Though I have had in schoolès that honour
 God liketh not that men us ‘Rabbi’ call,
 Neither in market, nor in your largè hall.”

The lord tries to calm the friar and find out what happened

“No force,” quod he, “but tell me all your grief.”
2190 “Sir,” quod this friar, “an odious mischief
 This day betid is to mine order and me,
 And so *per consequens* to each degree
 Of holy churchè, God amend it soon.”

Never mind

has befallen

“Sir,” quod the lord, “you wot what is to do.
 Distemper you not, you be my confessoúr.
 You be the salt of the earth, and the savour; ³
 For Godès love your patience now hold;
 Tell me your grief.” And he anon him told
 As you have heard before, you wot well what.

*you know what
 Don’t distress yourself*

The response of the lady of the house

2200 The lady of the house aye stillè sat,
 Till she had heardè what the friar said.

¹ “In your town I have had the kind of insult that would have been an abomination to the world’s humblest servant.”

² The friar professes humility by refusing the designation “master” while pointing out that indeed he is entitled to it because of his academic degree (notice his unnecessary use of a Latin phrase a few lines below). He is, he says, following the teaching of Jesus who urged his followers not to covet titles of respect like “rabbi”.

³ An allusion to the Gospel of Matthew 5: 13: “You are the salt of the earth but if the salt have lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?”

"Eh, God's mother," quod she, "blissful maid,¹
 Is there ought elsè? Tell me faithfully."
 "Madame," quod he, "how thinketh you thereby?" *What do you mean?*
 "How that me thinketh?" quod she; "so God me speed,
 I say a churl hath done a churlè's deed. *God help me*
 What should I say? God let him never thee; *a lout*
 His sickè head is full of vanity. *thee = prosper*
 I hold him in a manner frenesy." *quite mad*
 "Madame," quod he, "by God, I shall not lie,
 But I in other wise may be awreke, *Unless I am avenged*
 I shall defame him over all there I speak;²
 This false blasphemèr, that charged me *told me*
 To parten what will not departed be, *divide(d)*
2215 To every man alikè! With mischance!" *Bad luck to him!*

The lord muses on the technical difficulty involved

The lord sat still, as he were in a trance,
 And in his heart he rollèd up and down,
 How had this churl imagination
 To shoven such a problem to the frere?³
2220 "Never erst ere now ne heard I such mattér;
 I trow the Devil put it in his mind. *I guess*
 In all ars metric shall there no man find *arithmetic*
 Before this day of such a question.
 Who shouldè make a demonstration
 That every man should have alike his part
 As of a sound or savour of a fart? *or smell*
 O nicè, proudè churl, I shrew his face.⁴
 Lo, Sires," quod the lord, "with hardè grace,
 Who ever heard of such a thing ere now?
2230 To every man alikè ! Tell me how.
 It is an impossible, it may not be.
 Ey, nicè churl, God let him never thee. *thee = prosper*

¹ The lady exclaims by the Virgin Mary, Christ's mother.

² "I'll denounce him wherever I speak."

³ Part of the following passage consists of the lord's musing to himself, part consists of his words to the friar. It is not easy to decide where exactly the breaks occur.

⁴ This line and the next mean something like: "Oh (what an) insolent (but) subtle fellow. What a nerve ! Well, gentlemen, I'll be damned! "

The rumbling of a fart, and every sound,
 N'is but of air reverberation,
 And ever it wasteth lite and lite away;
 There n'is no man can deemen, by my fay,
 If that it were departed equally.
 What! Lo, my churl, lo yet how shrewedly
 Unto my confessor to-day he spake;
2240 I hold him certain a demoniac.¹
 Now eat your meat, and let the churl go play,
 Let him go hang himself a devil way."

*is nothing but
 bit by bit
 can judge, on my word
 divided*

and be damned

Jankin, the Lord's table squire, suggests an ingenious answer

Now stood the lordès squire at the board,
 That carved his meat, and heardè word by word
 Of all this thing, of which I have you said.
 "My lord," quod he, "be you not evil apaid,
 I couldè tellè for a gownè-cloth
 To you, Sir Friar, so that you be not wroth,
 How that this fart should even y-dealed be
 Among your convent, if it liked thee."
 "Tell," quod the lord, "and thou shalt have anon
 A gownè-cloth, by God and by Saint John."

if you don't mind

*if you won't be angry
 evenly divided*

"Mv lord," quod he, "when that the weather is fair
 Withouten wind or pèrturbing of air,
 Let bring a cart-wheel here into this hall,
 But lookè that it have its spokès all.
 Twelve spokès hath a cart-wheel commonly;
 And bring me then twelve friars. Wit you why?
 For thirteen is a convent as I guess:

have a c-w brought

Want to know why?

2260 Your confessor here for his worthiness
 Shall perform up the number of his convént.
 Then shall they kneel adown by one assent,
 And to every spoke's end in this mannér
 Full sadly lay his nosè shall a frere;
 Your noble confessor, there God him save,
 Shall hold his nose upright under the nave.
 Then shall this churl, with belly stiff and taut
 As any tabor, hither be y-brought;
 And set him on the wheel right of this cart

solemnly

the hub

As a drum

¹ "I think he's possessed by the devil".

Upon the nave, and make him let a fart,
 And you shall see, up peril of my life,
 By very proof that is demonstrative,
 That equally the sound of it will wend,
 And eke the stink, unto the spokè's end,

*Above the hub
 I promise you*

2275 Save that this worthy man, your confessoúr,
 (Because he is a man of great honoúr,)
 Shall have the firstè fruit, as reason is.
 The noble usage of friars yet it is,
 The worthy men of them shall first be served.
 And certainly he hath it well deserved;
 He hath to-day taught us so muchel good,
 With preaching in the pulpit there he stood,
 That I may vouchèsafe, I say for me,
 He had the firstè smell of fartès three,¹
 And so would all his convent hardily
 He beareth him so fair and holily."

*will travel
 And also*

Everyone except the friar thinks it's a good answer

The lord, the lady, and each man save the frere
 Said that Jankin spoke in this mattér
 As well as Euclid or as Ptolemy.²

2290 Touching the churl, they said [that] subtlety
 And high wit made him speaken as he spak.
 He is no fool nor no demoniac.
 And Jankin hath y-won a newè gown.
 My tale is done. We be almost at town.

great intelligence / spoke

Here ends the Summoner's Tale

¹ Which the squire had presumably let off in the church, near the pulpit.

² Euclid was the ancient authority on mathematics; Ptolemy on astronomy.