
*The Canterbury Tales and
Other Poems
Part 10: The Friar's Tale*



by Geoffrey Chaucer

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THE PROLOGUE

(Note 1)

This worthy limitour, this noble Frere,
He made always a manner louring cheer¹
Upon the Sompnour; but for honesty²
No villain word as yet to him spake he:
But at the last he said unto the Wife:
"Dame," quoth he, "God give you right good life,
Ye have here touched, all so may I the³,
In school matter a greate difficulty.
Ye have said mucche thing right well, I say;
But, Dame, here as we ride by the way,
Us needeth not but for to speak of game,
And leave authorities, in Godde's name,
To preaching, and to school eke of clergy.
But if it like unto this company,
I will you of a Sompnour tell a game;
Pardie, ye may well knowe by the name,
That of a Sompnour may no good be said;
I pray that none of you be evil paid⁴;
A Sompnour is a runner up and down
With mandements⁵ for fornicatioun,
And is y-beat at every towne's end."
Then spake our Host; "Ah, sir, ye should be hend⁶
And courteous, as a man of your estate;
In company we will have no debate:
Tell us your tale, and let the Sompnour be."
"Nay," quoth the Sompnour, "let him say by me
What so him list; when it comes to my lot,
By God, I shall him quiten⁷ every groat!
I shall him telle what a great honour
It is to be a flattering limitour

¹countenance.

²courtesy.

³thrive.

⁴dissatisfied.

⁵mandates, summonses.

⁶civil, gentle.

⁷pay him off.

And his office I shall him tell y-wis".
Our Host answered, "Peace, no more of this."
And afterward he said unto the frere,
"Tell forth your tale, mine owen master dear."

NOTE TO THE PROLOGUE

On the Tale of the Friar, and that of the Sompnour which follows, Tyrwhitt has remarked that they "are well engrafted upon that of the Wife of Bath. The ill-humour which shows itself between these two characters is quite natural, as no two professions at that time were at more constant variance. The regular clergy, and particularly the mendicant friars, affected a total exemption from all ecclesiastical jurisdiction, except that of the Pope, which made them exceedingly obnoxious to the bishops and of course to all the inferior officers of the national hierarchy." Both tales, whatever their origin, are bitter satires on the greed and worldliness of the Romish clergy.

THE TALE

Whilom⁸ there was dwelling in my country
An archdeacon, a man of high degree,
That boldely did execution,
In punishing of fornication,
Of witchcraft, and eke of bawdery,
Of defamation, and adultery,
Of churche-reeves⁹, and of testaments,
Of contracts, and of lack of sacraments,
And eke of many another manner¹⁰ crime,
Which needeth not rehearsen at this time,
Of usury, and simony also;
But, certes, lechours did he greatest woe;
They shoulde singen, if that they were hent¹¹;
And smale tithers (*Note 1*) were foul y-shent¹²,
If any person would on them complain;
There might astert them no pecunial pain. (*Note 2*)
For smalle tithes, and small offering,
He made the people piteously to sing;
For ere the bishop caught them with his crook,
They weren in the archdeacon's book;
Then had he, through his jurisdiction,
Power to do on them correction.

He had a Sompnour ready to his hand,
A slier boy was none in Engleland;
For subtly he had his espiaille¹³,
That taught him well where it might aught avail.
He coulde spare of lechours one or two,
To teache him to four and twenty mo'.
For, – though this Sompnour wood¹⁴ be as a hare, –
To tell his harlotry I will not spare,
For we be out of their correction,

⁸once on a time.

⁹churchwardens.

¹⁰sort of.

¹¹caught.

¹²troubled, put to shame.

¹³espionage.

¹⁴furious, mad.

They have of us no jurisdiction,
 Ne never shall have, term of all their lives.

"Peter; so be the women of the stives¹⁵,"
 Quoth this Sompnour, "y-put out of our cure¹⁶."

"Peace, with mischance and with misaventure,"
 Our Hoste said, "and let him tell his tale.
 Now telle forth, and let the Sompnour gale¹⁷,
 Nor spare not, mine owen master dear."

This false thief, the Sompnour (quoth the Frere),
 Had always bawdes ready to his hand,
 As any hawk to lure in Engleland,
 That told him all the secrets that they knew, –
 For their acquaintance was not come of new;
 They were his approvers¹⁸ privily.

He took himself at great profit thereby:
 His master knew not always what he wan¹⁹.
 He could summon, on pain of Christe's curse,
 And they were inly glad to fill his purse,
 And make him greate feastes at the nale²⁰.
 And right as Judas hadde purses smale²¹,
 And was a thief, right such a thief was he,
 His master had but half his duety²².

He was (if I shall give him his laud)
 A thief, and eke a Sompnour, and a bawd.
 And he had wenches at his retinue,
 That whether that Sir Robert or Sir Hugh,
 Or Jack, or Ralph, or whoso that it were
 That lay by them, they told it in his ear.
 Thus were the wench and he of one assent;
 And he would fetch a feigned mandement,
 And to the chapter summon them both two,
 And pill²³ the man, and let the wenche go.
 Then would he say, "Friend, I shall for thy sake
 Do strike thee out of oure letters blake²⁴;
 Thee thar²⁵ no more as in this case travail;
 I am thy friend where I may thee avail."
 Certain he knew of bribers many mo'
 Than possible is to tell in yeare's two:
 For in this world is no dog for the bow, (*Note 3*)

¹⁵stews.

¹⁶care.

¹⁷whistle; bawl.

¹⁸informers.

¹⁹ignorant.

²⁰alehouse.

²¹small.

²²what was owing him.

²³plunder, pluck.

²⁴black.

²⁵need.

That can a hurt deer from a whole know,
 Bet²⁶ than this Sompnour knew a sly lechour,
 Or an adult'rer, or a paramour:
 And, for that was the fruit of all his rent,
 Therefore on it he set all his intent.

And so befell, that once upon a day,
 This Sompnour, waiting ever on his prey,
 Rode forth to summon a widow, an old ribibe, (*Note 4*)
 Feigning a cause, for he would have a bribe.
 And happen'd that he saw before him ride
 A gay yeoman under a forest side:
 A bow he bare, and arrows bright and keen,
 He had upon a courtepy²⁷ of green,
 A hat upon his head with fringes blake²⁸.
 "Sir," quoth this Sompnour, "hail, and well o'ertake."
 "Welcome," quoth he, "and every good fellow;
 Whither ridest thou under this green shaw²⁹?"
 Saide this yeoman; "wilt thou far to-day?"
 This Sompnour answer'd him, and saide, "Nay.
 Here faste by," quoth he, "is mine intent
 To ride, for to raisen up a rent,
 That longeth to my lorde's duety."
 "Ah! art thou then a bailiff?" "Yea," quoth he.
 He durste not for very filth and shame
 Say that he was a Sompnour, for the name.
 "De par dieux," (*Note 5*) quoth this yeoman, "leve³⁰ brother,
 Thou art a bailiff, and I am another.
 I am unknowen, as in this country.
 Of thine acquaintance I will praye thee,
 And eke of brotherhood, if that thee list³¹.
 I have gold and silver lying in my chest;
 If that thee hap to come into our shire,
 All shall be thine, right as thou wilt desire."
 "Grand mercy³²," quoth this Sompnour, "by my faith."
 Each in the other's hand his trothe lay'th,
 For to be sworne brethren till they dey³³. (*Note 6*)
 In dalliance they ride forth and play.

This Sompnour, which that was as full of jangles³⁴,
 As full of venom be those wariangles³⁵, (*Note 7*)
 And ev'r inquiring upon every thing,

²⁶better.

²⁷short doublet.

²⁸black.

²⁹shade.

³⁰dear.

³¹please.

³²great thanks.

³³die.

³⁴chattering.

³⁵butcher-birds.

"Brother," quoth he, "where is now your dwelling,
 Another day if that I should you seech³⁶?"
 This yeoman him answered in soft speech;
 Brother," quoth he, "far in the North country, (*Note 8*)
 Where as I hope some time I shall thee see
 Ere we depart I shall thee so well wiss³⁷,
 That of mine house shalt thou never miss."
 Now, brother," quoth this Sompnour, "I you pray,
 Teach me, while that we ride by the way,
 (Since that ye be a bailiff as am I,
 Some subtilty, and tell me faithfully
 For mine office how that I most may win.
 And spare not³⁸ for conscience or for sin,
 But, as my brother, tell me how do ye."
 Now by my trothe, brother mine," said he,
 As I shall tell to thee a faithful tale:
 My wages be full strait and eke full smale;
 My lord is hard to me and dangerous³⁹,
 And mine office is full laborious;
 And therefore by extortion I live,
 Forsooth I take all that men will me give.
 Algate⁴⁰ by sleighte, or by violence,
 From year to year I win all my dispençe;
 I can no better tell thee faithfully."
 Now certes⁴¹," quoth this Sompnour, "so fare I;
 I spare not to take, God it wot,
 But if⁴² it be too heavy or too hot.
 What I may get in counsel privily,
 No manner conscience of that have I.
 N'ere⁴³ mine extortion, I might not live,
 For of such japes⁴⁴ will I not be shrive⁴⁵,
 Stomach nor conscience know I none;
 I shrew⁴⁶ these shrifte-fathers⁴⁷ every one.
 Well be we met, by God and by St Jame.
 But, leve brother, tell me then thy name,"
 Quoth this Sompnour. Right in this meane while
 This yeoman gan a little for to smile.
 "Brother," quoth he, "wilt thou that I thee tell?
 I am a fiend, my dwelling is in hell,

³⁶seek, visit.

³⁷inform.

³⁸conceal nothing.

³⁹niggardly.

⁴⁰whether.

⁴¹do.

⁴²unless.

⁴³were it not for.

⁴⁴tricks.

⁴⁵confessed.

⁴⁶curse.

⁴⁷confessors.

And here I ride about my purchasing,
 To know where men will give me any thing.
 My purchase is th' effect of all my rent⁴⁸
 Look how thou ridest for the same intent
 To winne good, thou reckest never how,
 Right so fare I, for ride will I now
 Into the worlde's ende for a prey."

"Ah," quoth this Sompnour, "benedicite! what say y'?"

I weened ye⁴⁹ were a yeoman truly.
 Ye have a manne's shape as well as I
 Have ye then a figure determinate
 In helle, where ye be in your estate⁵⁰?"
 "Nay, certainly," quoth he, there have we none,
 But when us liketh we can take us one,
 Or elles make you seem⁵¹ that we be shape
 Sometime like a man, or like an ape;
 Or like an angel can I ride or go;
 It is no wondrous thing though it be so,
 A lousy juggler can deceive thee.

And pardie, yet can I more craft⁵² than he."

"Why," quoth the Sompnour, "ride ye then or gon
 In sundry shapes and not always in one?"

"For we," quoth he, "will us in such form make.
 As most is able our prey for to take."

"What maketh you to have all this labour?"

"Full many a cause, leve Sir Sompnour,"
 Saide this fiend. "But all thing hath a time;
 The day is short and it is passed prime,
 And yet have I won nothing in this day;

I will intend⁵³ to winning, if I may,
 And not intend our thinges to declare:
 For, brother mine, thy wit is all too bare
 To understand, although I told them thee.

But for⁵⁴ thou askest why labour we:
 For sometimes we be Godde's instruments
 And meanes to do his commandements,
 When that him list, upon his creatures,
 In divers acts and in divers figures:
 Withoute him we have no might certain,
 If that him list to stande thereagain⁵⁵.

And sometimes, at our prayer have we leave
 Only the body, not the soul, to grieve:

⁴⁸what I can gain is my sole revenue.

⁴⁹thought.

⁵⁰at home.

⁵¹believe.

⁵²skill, cunning.

⁵³apply myself.

⁵⁴because.

⁵⁵against it.

Witness on Job, whom that we did full woe,
 And sometimes have we might on both the two, –
 This is to say, on soul and body eke,
 And sometimes be we suffer'd for to seek
 Upon a man and do his soul unrest
 And not his body, and all is for the best,
 When he withstandeth our temptation,
 It is a cause of his salvation,
 Albeit that it was not our intent
 He should be safe, but that we would him hent⁵⁶.
 And sometimes be we servants unto man,
 As to the archbishop Saint Dunstan,
 And to th'apostle servant eke was I."
 "Yet tell me," quoth this Sompnour, "faithfully,
 Make ye you newe bodies thus alway
 Of th' elements?" The fiend answered, "Nay:
 Sometimes we feign, and sometimes we arise
 With deade bodies, in full sundry wise,
 And speak as reas'nably, and fair, and well,
 As to the Pythoness (*Note 9*) did Samuel:
 And yet will some men say it was not he.
 I do no force of⁵⁷ your divinity.
 But one thing warn I thee, I will not jape⁵⁸,
 Thou wilt algates weet⁵⁹ how we be shape:
 Thou shalt hereafterward, my brother dear,
 Come, where thee needeth not of me to lear⁶⁰.
 For thou shalt by thine own experience
 Conne in a chair to rede of this sentence⁶¹,
 Better than Virgil, while he was alive,
 Or Dante also. (*Note 10*) Now let us ride blive⁶²
 For I will holde company with thee,
 Till it be so that thou forsake me."
 "Nay," quoth this Sompnour, "that shall ne'er betide.
 I am a yeoman, that is known full wide;
 My trothe will I hold, as in this case;
 For though thou wert the devil Satanas,
 My trothe will I hold to thee, my brother,
 As I have sworn, and each of us to other,
 For to be true brethren in this case,
 And both we go abouten our purchase⁶³.
 Take thou thy part, what that men will thee give,
 And I shall mine, thus may we bothe live.
 And if that any of us have more than other,

⁵⁶catch.

⁵⁷set no value upon.

⁵⁸jest.

⁵⁹assuredly know.

⁶⁰learn.

⁶¹learn to understand what I have said.

⁶²briskly.

⁶³seeking what we may pick up.

Let him be true, and part it with his brother."
 "I grante," quoth the devil, "by my fay."
 And with that word they rode forth their way,
 And right at th'ent'ring of the towne's end,
 To which this Sompnour shope⁶⁴ him for to wend⁶⁵,
 They saw a cart, that charged was with hay,
 Which that a carter drove forth on his way.
 Deep was the way, for which the carte stood:
 The carter smote, and cried as he were wood⁶⁶,
 "Heit Scot! heit Brok! what, spare ye for the stones?
 The fiend (quoth he) you fetch body and bones,
 As farforthly⁶⁷ as ever ye were foal'd,
 So muche woe as I have with you tholed⁶⁸. (Note 11)
 The devil have all, horses, and cart, and hay."
 The Sompnour said, "Here shall we have a prey,"
 And near the fiend he drew, as nought ne were⁶⁹,
 Full privily, and rowned⁷⁰ in his ear:
 "Hearken, my brother, hearken, by thy faith,
 Hearst thou not, how that the carter saith?
 Hent⁷¹ it anon, for he hath giv'n it thee,
 Both hay and cart, and eke his capels⁷² three." (Note 12)
 "Nay," quoth the devil, "God wot, never a deal⁷³
 It is not his intent, trust thou me well;
 Ask him thyself, if thou not trowest⁷⁴ me,
 Or elles stint⁷⁵ a while and thou shalt see."
 The carter thwack'd his horses on the croup,
 And they began to drawen and to stoop.
 "Heit now," quoth he; "there, Jesus Christ you bless,
 And all his handiwork, both more and less!
 That was well twight⁷⁶, = mine owen liart⁷⁷, boy, (Note 13)
 I pray God save thy body, and Saint Loy!
 Now is my cart out of the slough, pardie."
 "Lo, brother," quoth the fiend, "what told I thee?
 Here may ye see, mine owen deare brother,
 The churl spake one thing, but he thought another.
 Let us go forth abouten our voyage;
 Here win I nothing upon this carriage."

⁶⁴shaped.

⁶⁵go.

⁶⁶mad.

⁶⁷sure.

⁶⁸endured.

⁶⁹as if nothing were the matter.

⁷⁰whispered.

⁷¹seize.

⁷²horses.

⁷³whit.

⁷⁴believest.

⁷⁵stop.

⁷⁶pulled.

⁷⁷grey.

When that they came somewhat out of the town,
 This Sompnour to his brother gan to rown;
 "Brother," quoth he, "here wons⁷⁸ an old rebeck, (*Note 14*)
 That had almost as lief to lose her neck.
 As for to give a penny of her good.
 I will have twelpepence, though that she be wood⁷⁹,
 Or I will summon her to our office;
 And yet, God wot, of her know I no vice.
 But for thou canst not, as in this country,
 Winne thy cost, take here example of me."
 This Sompnour clapped at the widow's gate:
 "Come out," he said, "thou olde very trate⁸⁰; (*Note 15*)
 I trow thou hast some friar or priest with thee."
 "Who clappeth?" said this wife; "benedicite,
 God save you, Sir, what is your sweete will?"
 "I have," quoth he, "of summons here a bill.
 Up⁸¹ pain of cursing, looke that thou be
 To-morrow before our archdeacon's knee,
 To answer to the court of certain things."
 "Now Lord," quoth she, "Christ Jesus, king of kings,
 So wisly⁸² helpe me, as I not may⁸³.
 I have been sick, and that full many a day.
 I may not go so far," quoth she, "nor ride,
 But I be dead, so pricketh it my side.
 May I not ask a libel, Sir Sompnour,
 And answer there by my procuratour
 To such thing as men would appose⁸⁴ me?"
 "Yes," quoth this Sompnour, "pay anon, let see,
 Twelpepence to me, and I will thee acquit.
 I shall no profit have thereby but lit⁸⁵:
 My master hath the profit and not I.
 Come off, and let me ride hastily;
 Give me twelpepence, I may no longer tarry."
 "Twelpepence!" quoth she; "now lady Sainte Mary
 So wisly⁸⁶ help me out of care and sin,
 This wide world though that I should it win,
 No have I not twelpepence within my hold.
 Ye know full well that I am poor and old;
 Kithe your almes⁸⁷ upon me poor wretch."
 "Nay then," quoth he, "the foule fiend me fetch,

⁷⁸dwells.

⁷⁹mad.

⁸⁰trot.

⁸¹upon.

⁸²surely.

⁸³as I cannot.

⁸⁴accuse.

⁸⁵little.

⁸⁶surely.

⁸⁷show your charity.

If I excuse thee, though thou should'st be spilt⁸⁸.
 "Alas!" quoth she, "God wot, I have no guilt."
 "Pay me," quoth he, "or, by the sweet Saint Anne,
 As I will bear away thy newe pan
 For debte, which thou owest me of old, –
 When that thou madest thine husband cuckold, –
 I paid at home for thy correction."
 "Thou liest," quoth she, "by my salvation;
 Never was I ere now, widow or wife,
 Summon'd unto your court in all my life;
 Nor never I was but of my body true.
 Unto the devil rough and black of hue
 Give I thy body and my pan also."
 And when the devil heard her curse so
 Upon her knees, he said in this mannere;
 "Now, Mably, mine owen mother dear,
 Is this your will in earnest that ye say?"
 "The devil," quoth she, "so fetch him ere he dey⁸⁹,
 And pan and all, but⁹⁰ he will him repent."
 "Nay, olde stoat⁹¹, that is not mine intent,"
 Quoth this Sompnour, "for to repente me
 For any thing that I have had of thee;
 I would I had thy smock and every cloth."
 "Now, brother," quoth the devil, "be not wroth;
 Thy body and this pan be mine by right.
 Thou shalt with me to helle yet tonight,
 Where thou shalt knowen of our privity⁹²
 More than a master of divinity."

And with that word the foule fiend him hent⁹³.
 Body and soul, he with the devil went,
 Where as the Sompnours have their heritage;
 And God, that maked after his image
 Mankinde, save and guide us all and some,
 And let this Sompnour a good man become.
 Lordings, I could have told you (quoth this Frere),
 Had I had leisure for this Sompnour here,
 After the text of Christ, and Paul, and John,
 And of our other doctors many a one,
 Such paines, that your heartes might agrise⁹⁴,
 Albeit so, that no tongue may devise⁹⁵, –
 Though that I might a thousand winters tell, –

⁸⁸ruined.

⁸⁹die.

⁹⁰unless.

⁹¹polecat.

⁹²secrets.

⁹³seized.

⁹⁴be horrified.

⁹⁵relate.

The pains of thilke⁹⁶ cursed house of hell
But for to keep us from that cursed place
Wake we, and pray we Jesus, of his grace,
So keep us from the tempter, Satanas.
Hearken this word, beware as in this case.
The lion sits in his await⁹⁷ alway (*Note 16*)
To slay the innocent, if that he may.
Disposen aye your heartes to withstond
The fiend that would you make thrall and bond;
He may not tempte you over your might,
For Christ will be your champion and your knight;
And pray, that this our Sompnour him repent
Of his misdeeds ere that the fiend him hent⁹⁸.

⁹⁶that.

⁹⁷on the watch.

⁹⁸seize.

NOTES TO THE TALE

1. Small tithers: people who did not pay their full tithes. Mr Wright remarks that "the sermons of the friars in the fourteenth century were most frequently designed to impress the absolute duty of paying full tithes and offerings".

2. There might astert them no pecunial pain: they got off with no mere pecuniary punishment. (Transcriber's note: "Astert" means "escape". An alternative reading of this line is "there might astert him no pecunial pain" i.e. no fine ever escaped him (the archdeacon))

3. A dog for the bow: a dog attending a huntsman with bow and arrow.

4. Ribibe: the name of a musical instrument; applied to an old woman because of the shrillness of her voice.

5. De par dieux: by the gods.

6. See note 12 to the Knight's Tale.

7. Wariangles: butcher-birds; which are very noisy and ravenous, and tear in pieces the birds on which they prey; the thorn on which they do this was said to become poisonous.

8. Medieval legends located hell in the North.

9. The Pythoness: the witch, or woman, possessed with a prophesying spirit; from the Greek, "Pythia." Chaucer of course refers to the raising of Samuel's spirit by the witch of Endor.

10. Dante and Virgil were both poets who had in fancy visited Hell.

11. Tholed: suffered, endured; "thole" is still used in Scotland in the same sense.

12. Capels: horses. See note 14 to the Reeve's Tale.

13. Liart: grey; elsewhere applied by Chaucer to the hairs of an old man. So Burns, in the "Cotter's Saturday Night," speaks of the gray temples of "the sire" - "His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare."

14. Rebeck: a kind of fiddle; used like "ribibe," as a nickname for a shrill old scold.

15. Trot; a contemptuous term for an old woman who has trotted about much, or who moves with quick short steps.

16. In his await: on the watch; French, "aux aguets."