
*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

¹countenance.

THE PROLOGUE

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

²courtesy.

³thrive.

THE PROLOGUE

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

⁴dissatisfied.

THE PROLOGUE

With mandements⁵ for fornication,
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,

⁵mandates, summonses.

⁶civil, gentle.

THE PROLOGUE

By God, I shall him quiten⁷ every
groat!

I shall him telle what a great hon-
our

It is to be a flattering limitour

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."

⁷pay him off.

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 de-
gree,
That boldly did execution,

⁸once on a time.

In punishing of fornication,
Of witchcraft, and eke of
 bawdery,
Of defamation, and adultery,
Of churche-reeves⁹, and of testa-
 ments,
Of contracts, and of lack of sacra-
 ments,
And eke of many another man-
 ner¹⁰ 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

⁹churchwardens.

¹⁰sort of.

were hent¹¹;
And smale tithers (*Note 1*) were
foul y-shent¹²,
If any person would on them com-
plain;
There might astert them no pecu-
nial pain. (*Note 2*)
For smalle tithes, and small offer-
ing,
He made the people piteously to
sing;
For ere the bishop caught them
with his crook,
They weren in the archedeacon's
book;
Then had he, through his jurisdic-

¹¹ caught.

¹² troubled, put to shame.

tion,
Power to do on them correction.
He had a Sompnour ready to his
hand,
A slier boy was none in Engleland;
For subtley 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,

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 Somp-
nour gale¹⁷,
Nor spare not, mine owen master

¹⁵stews.

¹⁶care.

¹⁷whistle; bawl.

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

¹⁸informers.

¹⁹ignorant.

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,

²⁰ alehouse.

²¹ small.

²² what was owing him.

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 man-
dement,
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

²³plunder, pluck.

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*)
That can a hurt deer from a whole
know,
Bet²⁶ than this Sompnour knew a
sly lechour,

²⁴black.

²⁵need.

²⁶better.

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

²⁷short doublet.

green,
A hat upon his head with fringes
black²⁸.
"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,

²⁸black.

²⁹shade.

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

³⁰dear.

³¹please.

chest;
If that thee hap to come into our
shire,
All shall be thine, right as thou wilt
desire."
"Grand mercy³²," quoth this Somp-
nour, "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,

³²great thanks.

³³die.

³⁴chattering.

As full of venom be those wariangles³⁵, (*Note 7*)
And ev'r inquiring upon every
thing,
"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

³⁵butcher-birds.

³⁶seek, visit.

wiss³⁷,
That of mine house shalt thou
never miss."
Now, brother," quoth this Somp-
nour, "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 faith-
fully
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."

³⁷inform.

³⁸conceal nothing.

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 danger-
ous³⁹,
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 vio-
lence,
From year to year I win all my dis-
pence;
I can no better tell thee faithfully."

³⁹niggardly.

⁴⁰whether.

Now certes⁴¹, " quoth this Somp-
nour, "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;

⁴¹do.

⁴²unless.

⁴³were it not for.

⁴⁴tricks.

⁴⁵confessed.

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,
And here I ride about my purchas-
ing,

To know where men will give me

⁴⁶curse.

⁴⁷confessors.

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

⁴⁸what I can gain is my sole revenue.

⁴⁹thought.

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

⁵⁰at home.

⁵¹believe.

⁵²skill, cunning.

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 Somp-
nour,"

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 de-
clare:

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 in-
struments

And meanes to do his commande-
ments,

When that him list, upon his crea-
tures,

In divers acts and in divers figures:

⁵³apply myself.

⁵⁴because.

Withoute him we have no might
certain,
If that him list to stande therea-
gain⁵⁵.
And sometimes, at our prayer have
we leave
Only the body, not the soul, to
grieve:
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

⁵⁵ against it.

best,
When he withstandeth our tempta-
tion,
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 Dun-
stan,
And to th'apostle servant eke was
I."
"Yet tell me," quoth this Sompnour,
"faithfully,
Make ye you newe bodies thus al-
way

⁵⁶catch.

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,

⁵⁷set no value upon.

⁵⁸jest.

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 expe-
rience
Conne in a chair to rede of this sen-
tence⁶¹,
Better than Virgil, while he was
alive,
Or Dante also. (*Note 10*) Now let us
ride blive⁶²

⁵⁹assuredly know.

⁶⁰learn.

⁶¹learn to understand what I have said.

⁶²briskly.

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 Sa-
tanus,
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 pur-

chase⁶³.

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,

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

⁶³seeking what we may pick up.

⁶⁴shaped.

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,

⁶⁵go.

⁶⁶mad.

⁶⁷sure.

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 rownd⁷⁰ in his
ear:

"Hearken, my brother, hearken, by
thy faith,

Hearest thou not, how that the
carter saith?

⁶⁸endured.

⁶⁹as if nothing were the matter.

⁷⁰whispered.

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 trow-
est⁷⁴ me,
Or elles stint⁷⁵ a while and thou
shalt see."
The carter thwack'd his horses on

⁷¹seize.

⁷²horses.

⁷³whit.

⁷⁴believest.

⁷⁵stop.

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

⁷⁶pulled.

⁷⁷grey.

brother,
The churl spake one thing, but he
thought another.
Let us go forth abouten our voy-
age;
Here win I nothing upon this car-
riage."

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 twelvecence, though

⁷⁸dwells.

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,

⁷⁹mad.

⁸⁰trot.

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 archdea-
con's knee,

To answer to the court of certain
things."

"Now Lord," quoth she, "Christ Je-
sus, king of kings,

So wisly⁸² helpe me, as I not
may⁸³.

I have been sick, and that full many

⁸¹upon.

⁸²surely.

⁸³as I cannot.

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 procura-
tour

To such thing as men would ap-
pose⁸⁴ me?"

"Yes," quoth this Sompnour, "pay
anon, let see,

Twelvepence to me, and I will thee
acquit.

I shall no profit have thereby but
lit⁸⁵:

⁸⁴accuse.

⁸⁵little.

My master hath the profit and not
I.

Come off, and let me ride hastily;
Give me twelvenpence, I may no
longer tarry."

"Twelvenpence!" 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 twelvenpence within
my hold.

Ye know full well that I am poor
and old;

Kithe your almes⁸⁷ upon me poor

⁸⁶surely.

⁸⁷show your charity.

wretch."

"Nay then," quoth he, "the foule
fiend me fetch,

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 hus-
band cuckold, –

I paid at home for thy correction."

"Thou liest," quoth she, "by my sal-
vation;

⁸⁸ruined.

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 re-
pente 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.

⁸⁹die.

⁹⁰unless.

⁹¹polecat.

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 im-
age
Mankinde, save and guide us all
and some,
And let this Sompnour a good man

⁹²secrets.

⁹³seized.

become.
 Lordings, I could have told you
 (quoth this Frere),
 Had I had leisure for this Somp-
 nour 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 de-
 vise⁹⁵, -
 Though that I might a thousand
 winters tell, -

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, Sa-
tan.

Hearken this word, beware as in
this case.

The lion sits in his await⁹⁷ always
(*Note 16*)

To slay the innocent, if that he may.

Disposen aye your heartes to with-
stond

The fiend that would you make

⁹⁶that.

⁹⁷on the watch.

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.

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."