The Summoner’s Tale
This is the description of the Summoner from the General Prologue

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.

His physical appearance

A SUMMONER was there with us in that place
That had a fire-red cherubinne's face,¹
For saucéflème 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 afearèd.
There n'as quicksilver, litharge nor brimstone,
Boras, ceruse, nor oil of tartar none,
Nor ointémènt that wouldé 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.

His "accomplishments"

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.

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.
But whoso could in other things him grope,
Then had he spent all his philosophy.
Aye, "Questio quid juris" would he cry.¹

His thoughtfulness to friends

He was a gentle harlot, and a kind.
A better fellow shouldé men not find:
He wouldé suffer for a quart of wine
A good fellow to have his concubine
A twelvemonth, and excuse him at the full.
Full privily a finch eke could he pull.²
And if he found owhere a good fellow,
He wouldé 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,
For in his purse he should y-punished be.
"Purse is the archdeacon's hell," said he.
But well I wot, he liéd right indeed.

Of cursing ought each guilty man to dread,
For curse will slay right as assoiling saveth
And also 'ware him of "Significavit."³

His control of his sources of information

In dauner had he, at his ownè guise
The youngé girles of the diocese ⁴
And knew their counsel and was all their redde.
A garland had he set upon his head
As great as it were for an aléstake.
A buckler had he made him of a cake.⁵

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

⁵ 667: A tavern sign, an aleske, was a large wreath or broom on a pole. Acting the buffoon, the Summoner has also turned a thin cake into a shield, a buckler.
The Summoner’s Tale

Introduction

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. 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 (a small coin) 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,

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1 For a good example of such an Anti-Fratal text, see the statement by Faus-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 this 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.
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 (1/4 of a penny) worth divided in twelve?” He will find out shortly, but in the meantime the enraged Thomas gives him a 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 surprise 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” (ME *squyre*), that is, as true and reliable as the carpenter’s square that was St Thomas’s symbol. However, the squire of the tale (ME *squier*) is the young man who uses another instrument of measurement for getting things right, and the resemblance in sound of ME *squyre* to *squier* is even closer than Modern English *square* and *squire*, and is 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
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? What is air, foul air? How would you divide it in twelve? He ponders on this and on the connection between ars metric (arithmetic, a science of measurement) and arse metric:

\[
\text{In all ars metric shall there no man find} \\
\text{Before this day of such a question.} \\
\text{Who shouldé make a demonstration,} \\
\text{That every man should have alike his part} \\
\text{As of a sound or savor of a fart? ........} \\
\text{................................. Tell me how.} \\
\text{It is an impossible, it may not be.......} \\
\text{The rumbling of a fart, and every sound,} \\
\text{N’is but of air’ reverberation,} \\
\text{And ever it wasteth lite and lite away;} \\
\text{There n’is no man can deemen, by my fay,} \\
\text{If that it were departed equally.}
\]

He is wrong, it appears, for at the end of the tale, his clever squire proposes the instrument for 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, always in vertical position. 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
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, 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 a ribald spoof of the kind of scholastic dispute we have mentioned, the kind mocked 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 Hasenfratz is only one of the latest among a number of scholars who have pointed out the possible relationship between the cartwheel turned fartwheeel 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 Olson 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,

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1 See Fiona Somerset, “'As Just as is a Squire': The Politics of Lewd Translation in the Summoner’s Tale,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999), 187-207.


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). And both 18th century modernizers who were amused by the scatology, and austere 20th-century critics who vehemently deplored it (including Theodore Roosevelt), all nevertheless welcomed what they took to be its early Protestant attitude.
THE SUMMONER’S PROLOGUE

can be found at the end of the preceding tale of the Friar to which it is an understandably hostile response. It is a narrative about friars that inverts a pious story told about how the Virgin Mary hides her proteges under her cloak in heaven.

THE SUMMONER’S TALE.

A longer narrative about a rascally begging friar

LORDINGS, there is in Yorkshire, as I guess,

1710  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 mannèr,
     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,
     As to possessioners that mowen live.
     Thankèd be God, in weal and abundance.
     “Trentals,” said he, “deliver from penance
     Their firendès souls, as well old as young,
     Yea, when they bee hastily u-sung,
     Not for to hold a priest joly and gay;
     Deliver out,” said he “anon the souls.

1730  Full hard it is with flesh-hook or with awls
     To be y-clawed, or to burn or bake:
     Now speed you hastily for Christès sake.”
     And when this friar had said all his intent,
     With qui cum patre forth his way he went.

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.
When folk in church had given him what they wished,
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 begged meal and cheese, or elsè corn.

His fellow had a staff tipped with horn,
A pair of tables all of ivory,
And a pointel polished feteisly,
And wrote alway the names, as he stood,
of all folk that gave them any good,
Askauncès that he would for them pray.
“Give us a bushel wheat, or malt, or rye,
A Godde’s kichel, or a trippe of cheese,
Or elsé what you list, we may not chese;
A Godde’s halfpenny, or a mass penny; ²
Or give us of your brawn, if ye have any
A dagon of your blanket, levi dame.
Our sister dear, (lo, here I write your name,) 
Bacon or beef, or such thing as ye find.”

A sturdy harlot went them aye behind,
That was their host’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 names every one,
That he before had written in his tables:

He servèd them with nifles and with fables.

An interruption

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

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

So long he went from house to house, till he
Came to a house, there he was wont to be

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”
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.

"Deus hic," quod he, “O Thomas friend, good day,”
Saidè this friar all courteously and soft.
“Thomas,” quod he, “God yield it you, full oft
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,
And eke his scrip, and set himself adown.
His fellow was y-walkèd into town
Forth with his knave, into that hostelry

Where as he shope him thilkè night to lie.
“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;
And specially for thy salvation
Have I said many a precious orison,
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,

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 glove.
Glossing is a full glorious thing certain,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?
“Yon in the yard I trowé that she be,”
Said this man, “and she will come anon.”

“Ey, master, welcome be ye, by Saint John”
Saidè this wifè, “How fare you, heartily?”

¹ Glose and glossing: gloss & glossing, strictly defined meant brief explanatory commentary on a text. The italicized words in the right margins of our 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 glossing often had in Chaucer’s day. For this reason I have left the form glossing rather than glossing. Glossing is not a glorious thing but is, hopefully, an honest thing.

² Glossing 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 ariseth up full courteously
And her embraceth in his armès narrow,
And kissed her sweet, and chirketh as a sparrow
With his lips: “Dame,” quod he “right well.
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 church, God so save me.”

1810 “Ye, God amend defaultès, sir,” quod she
“Get along with you !”
“Algates, welcome by you by my fay.”

He wants to hear Thomas’s confession

“Grammercy, Dame, that have I found alway.
But of your greaté goodness, by your leave,
I wouldè pray you that you not you grieve,
I will with Thomas speak a little throw:
These curates be so negligent and slow
To gropen tenderly a conscïence. ¹
In shrift, in preaching is my diligence
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;
To spread his word is set all mine intent.”

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

“No, by your faith, O dearè Sir,” quod she,
“Chideth him well for Saintè Charity.
He is aye angry as is a pissêmire,
Though that he have all that he can desire,
Though I him wry a-night, and make him warm,
And over him lay my leg and eke mine arm,
He groaneth as our boar lies in our sty:

1830 Other disport of him right none have I,
I may not please him in no manner case.”
“O Thomas, je vous dis, Thomas, Thomas,
This makes the fiend, this mustè be amended.
Ire is a thing that high God hath defended,
And thereof will I speak a word or two.”

¹ 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.
“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,
Have I not of a capon but the liver,
And of your white bread not but a shiver,
And after that a roasted pig’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.
My body is aye so ready and so penible
To waken, that my stomach is destroyed.
I pray you, Dame, that ye be nought annoyed,
Though I so friendly you my counsel show;
By God, I n’ould have told it but a few.”

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 weekes two,
Soon after that you went out of this town.”
“His death saw I by revelation,”
Said this friar, “at home in our dortour.
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.
So did our sexton, and our fermerer,
That have been true friars fifty year;
They may now, God be thank’d of his loan,
Maken their jubilee, and walk alone.¹
And up I rose, and all our convent eke,
With many a tear trilling on our cheek,
Withouten noise or clattering of bells,
Te Deum was our song, and nothing else,
Save that to Christ I bade an orison,
Thanking him of my revelation.

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.
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,
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.

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 Godè’s 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 contemplance.
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 service,
They n’olden drinken in no manner wise
No drinkè,¹ which that might them drunken make,
But there in abstinencè pray and wake,
Lest that they die. Take heedè what I say:
But they be sober that for the people pray

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.
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, humbless and abstinence, To persecution for righteousness, 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 highë God more acceptable Than yourës with your feastês at your table.

*He rambles into a sermon against gluttony*

From Paradisë first, if I shall not lie, Was man out chasêd 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, But I shall find it in a manner glose\(^2\) That specially our sweetë Lord Jesus Spoke this by friars, when he saidê thus, ‘Blessed be they that poor in spirit be.’ And so forth all the gospel may ye see, Wh’er it be liker our professïon, Or theirs that swimmen in possesïon, Fie on their pomp, and on their gluttony, And on their lewedness: I them defy. Methinketh they be like Jovinian, Fat as a whale, and walking as a swan,\(^3\) Al violent as bottle in the spence. Their prayer is is of full great reverence When they for soulês say the psalm of David “Lo, buff !” they say, “*cor meum eructavit!*”

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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.”
Who followeth Christ’s gospel and his foors 
But we that humble be and chaste and poor, 
Workers of God’s word, not auditors? 
Therefore, right as a hawk up at a soars 
Up springeth in the air, right so prayers 

Of charitable and chastè busy friars 
Maken their source to Godè’s earès two. 
Thomas, Thomas, so may I ride or go, 
And by that lord that clepèd is Saint Ive, 
N’ere thou our brother, shouldest thou not thrive. 
In our chapter pray we day and night 
To Christ, that He send thee health and might 
Thy body for to wielden hastily.”

Thomas’s sardonic response.

“God wot,” quod he, “nothing thereof feel I 
As help me Christ, as I in fewè years 
Have spended upon divers manner freres 
Full many a pound, yet fare I never the bet; 
Certain my good have I almost beset: 
Farewell my good, for it is all ago.”

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, 
To seeken other leeches in the town? 
Your inconstánce is your confusïon. 
Hold you then me, or else our convent, 
To pray for you be insufficïent? ¹

Thomas, that japè is not worth a mite; 
Your malady is for we have too lite. 
‘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? 
Lo, each thing that is onèd in himself

¹ “Do you think that I or my convent are not sufficient to pray for you”
Is morë 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 highë God, that all this world hath wrought,
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:
And for to builden Christë’s ownè church.
Thomas, if you will learnen for to work
Of building up of churches, may ye find

If it be good, in Thomas’s life of Inde.
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 patïent.
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 lion;
To thy subjécts do none oppressïon;
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.
Now since you have so holy and meek a wife,
What needeth you, Thomas, to maken strife?
There n’is y-wis no serpent so crué1,
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.
Ire is a sin, one of the greaté seven,
Abominable unto the God of heaven,
And to himself it is destruction.
This every lewèd vicar and parson
Can say, how ire engenders homicide;
Ire is, in sooth, executor of pride.
I could of ire say so muchel sorrow,
My talè shouldè lasten till to-morrow.
And therefore pray I God both day and night,
An irous man, God send him little might.
It is great harm, and certès great pity
To set an irous man in high degree.

An anecdote about anger

Whilom there was an irous potestate
As says Senec, that during his estate
Upon a day out riden knightes two
And as Fortunè would that it were so
That one of them came home, that other not.
Anon the knight before the judge was brought
That saidè thus: “Thou has they fellow slain
For which I demè thee to the death, certain.”
And to another knight commanded he
‘Go, lead him to the death, I charge thee.’
And happened, as they wente by the way
Toward the place where that he should die,
The knight came which men weened had been dead.
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.’
Thou shall be dead,’ quod he, ‘so may I thrive,
That is to say, both one, and two, and three.’
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.’
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.

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:
‘A lord is lost, if he be vicious;
And drunkenness is eke a foul record

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 God’s love, drink more tempemately:
Wine maketh man to losen wretchedly
His mind, and eke his limbès every one.’
‘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

And for despite he drank muchel more
A hundred part than he had done before,
And right anon, this cursed icious wretch
This knight’s sonn let before him fetch,
Commanding him he should before him stand:
And suddenly he took his bow in hand,
And up the string he pulléd to his ear,
And with an arrow he slew the child right there
‘Now whe’er have I a siker hand or none’?
Quod he, ‘Is all my might and mind a-gon
Hath wine bereavéed me mine eyen sight’?”
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,
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, thilké Persián,

How he destroyed the river of Gisen,
For that an horse of his was drent therein,
When that he wenté Babylon to win:
He madè that the river was so small,
That women might it waden over all.
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,
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.”

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.”

The friar persists

“Give me then of thy gold to make our cloister,”
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
Performéd is, nor of our pavémènt
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
For elsè mustè we our bookès sell.

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.
The friar praises friars

And if you lack our predication, *preaching*

Then goes this world all to destruction.
For whoso from this world would us bereave,
So God me save, 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 Sainté Charity.”

And down anon he set him on his knee.

Thomas’s patience finally breaks. So does his wind

This sickè man waxed well nigh wood for ire,
He would 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

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.”

¹ “Whover would take us friars out of this world would be taking away the sun.” Friars are indespensable!

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).
“Then put thine hand adown right by my back,”
Saidè this man, “and gropè well behind,
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
Amid his hand he let the friar a fart;
2150 There n’is no capel drawing in a cart,
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:
“Ah, falsè churl,” quod he, “for Godè’s bones,
This hast thou in despite done for the nones ¹
Thou shalt abyè this fart, if that I may.”
His meinie, which that hearden this affray,
Came leaping in, and chasèd out the frere,
And forth he goes with a full angry cheer;”
And fetched his fellow, there as lay his store:
He looked as it were a wildè boar,
2160 And ground with his teeth, so was he wroth.

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

A sturdy pace down to the court he goth,
Where as there woned a man of great honour,
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:
Unnethès might the friar speak one word,
Till at the last he saidè “God you see.”
2170 This lord ’gan look, and said, “Ben’dicite!
What? Friar John, what manner world is this?
I see well that something there is amiss;
You looken as the wood were full of thieves.

¹ for the nones seems to be a largely meaningless tag here as so often in Chaucer (See Select Glossary). Just possibly it means “You’ve done this for the first and last time.”
Sit down anon, and tell me what your grief is,
And it shall be amended, if I may.”

“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 old churl with lockès hoar,
Blasphemèd hath our holy convent eke.”

“Now, master,” quod this lord, “I you beseech.”

“No master, Sir,” quod he, “but servitour ²
Though I have had in schoolès that honouir
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.”

“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.”

“Sir,” quod the lord, “you wot what is to do.
Distemper you not, you be my confessoûr.
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.

The response of the lady of the house

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 elsē? Tell me faithfully.”
“Madame,” quod he, “how thinketh you thereby?”
“How that me thinketh?” quod she; “so God me speed,
I say a churl hath done a churlē’s deed.
What should I say? God let him never thee;
His sickē head is full of vanity.
I hold him in a manner frenesy.”

2210  “Madame,” quod he, “by God, I shall not lie,
But I in other wise may be awreke,
I shall defame him over all there I speak; 2
This false blasphemer, that chargēd me
To parten what will not departed be,
To every man alikē! With mischance!”

The lord muses on the technical difficulty involved

The lord sat still, as he were in a trance,
And in his heart he rollēd up and down,
How had this churl imagination
To showen 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.
In all ars metric shall there no man find
Before this day of such a question.
Who shouldē make a demonstration
That every man should have alike his part
As of a sound or savour of a fart?
O nicē, proudē churl, I shrew his face. 4
Lo, Sires,” quod the lord, “with hardē grace,
Who ever heard of such a thing ere now?

2230  To every man alikē! Tell me how.
It is an impossíble, it may not be.
Ey, nicē churl, God let him never thee.

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;
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.”

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

Now stood the lord’s squire at the board,
That carved his meat, and hearde word by word
Of all this thing, of which I have you said.
“My lord,” quod he, “be you not evil apaid,
I couldë tellë for a gounë-cloth
To you, Sir Friar, so that you be not wroth,
How that this fart should even y-dealëd be
Among your convent, if it liked thee.”
“Tell,” quod the lord, “and thou shalt have anon
A gounë-cloth, by God and by Saint John.”
“My lord,” quod he, “when that the weather is fair
Withouten wind or perturbing of air,
Let bring a cart-wheel here into this hall,
But lookë that it have its spokës all.
Twelve spokës hath a cart-wheel commonly;
And bring me then twelve friars.  Wit you why?
For thirteen is a convent as I guess:
Your confessor here for his worthiness
Shall perform up the number of his convënt.
Then shall they kneel adown by one assent,
And to every spoke’s end in this man너
Full sadly lay his nosë 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-brught;
And set him on the wheel right of this cart

¹ “I think he’s possessed by the devil”.

Jankin, the Lord’s table squire, suggests an ingenious answer
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 spokë’s end,
Save that this worthy man, your confessor,
(Because he is a man of great honór,)
Shall have the firste 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 vouch'safe, I say for me,
He had the firste smell of fartës three, ¹
And so would all his convent hardly
He beareth him so fair and holily."

Everyone except the friar thinks it’s a good answer

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

Touching the churl, they said [that] subtlety
And high wit made him spoken as he spak.
He is no fool nor no demoniac.

And Jankin hath y-won a newe gown.
My tale is done. We be almost at town.

Here ends the Summoner’s Tale

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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.