GEOFFREY CHAUCER

# THE FRIAR'S TALE

## THE PROLOGUE.<1>

This worthy limitour, this noble Frere,
He made always a manner louring cheer* *countenance
Upon the Sompnour; but for honesty* *courtesy
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 the,* *thrive
In school matter a greate difficulty.
Ye have said muche 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 paid;* *dissatisfied*
A Sompnour is a runner up and down
With mandements* for fornicatioun, *mandates, summonses*
And is y-beat at every towne's end."
Then spake our Host; "Ah, sir, ye should be hend* *civil, gentle
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 quiten* every groat! *pay him off
I shall him telle what a great honour
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."

Notes to the Prologue to the Friar's tale

1. 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.

Whilom* there was dwelling in my country *once on a time
An archdeacon, a man of high degree,
That boldely did execution,
In punishing of fornication,
Of witchecraft, and eke of bawdery,
Of defamation, and adultery,
Of churche-reeves,* and of testaments, *churchwardens
Of contracts, and of lack of sacraments,
And eke of many another manner* crime, *sort of
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 hent;* *caught
And smale tithers<1> were foul y-shent,* *troubled, put to shame
If any person would on them complain;
There might astert them no pecunial pain.<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 archedeacon'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 subtlely he had his espiaille,* *espionage
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 wood* be as a hare, — *furious, mad
To tell his harlotry I will not spare,
For we be out of their correction,
They have of us no jurisdiction,
Ne never shall have, term of all their lives.
"Peter; so be the women of the stives,"* *stews
Quoth this Sompnour, "y-put out of our cure."* *care
"Peace, with mischance and with misaventure,"

Our Hoste said, "and let him tell his tale.
Now telle forth, and let the Sompnour gale,* *whistle; bawl
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 approvers* privily. *informers
He took himself at great profit thereby:
His master knew not always what he wan.* *won
Withoute mandement, a lewed* man *ignorant
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 nale.* *alehouse
And right as Judas hadde purses smale,* *small
And was a thief, right such a thief was he,
His master had but half *his duety.* *what was owing him*
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 pill* the man, and let the wenche go. *plunder, pluck
Then would he say, "Friend, I shall for thy sake
Do strike thee out of oure letters blake;* *black
Thee thar* no more as in this case travail; *need
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,<3>
That can a hurt deer from a whole know,
Bet* than this Sompnour knew a sly lechour, *better
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,<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 courtepy* of green, *short doublet
A hat upon his head with fringes blake.* *black
"Sir," quoth this Sompnour, "hail, and well o'ertake."
"Welcome," quoth he, "and every good fellaw;
Whither ridest thou under this green shaw?"* shade
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," <5> quoth this yeoman, "leve* brother, *dear
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 list.* *please
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 mercy,"* quoth this Sompnour, "by my faith." *great thanks
Each in the other's hand his trothe lay'th,
For to be sworne brethren till they dey.* *die<6>
In dalliance they ride forth and play.
This Sompnour, which that was as full of jangles,* *chattering
As full of venom be those wariangles,* * butcher-birds <7>
And ev'r inquiring upon every thing,
"Brother," quoth he, "where is now your dwelling,
Another day if that I should you seech?"* *seek, visit
This yeoman him answered in soft speech;
Brother," quoth he, "far in the North country,<8>
Where as I hope some time I shall thee see
Ere we depart I shall thee so well wiss,* *inform
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 not* for conscience or for sin, *conceal nothing*

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 dangerous,* *niggardly
And mine office is full laborious;
And therefore by extortion I live,
Forsooth I take all that men will me give.
Algate* by sleighte, or by violence, *whether
From year to year I win all my dispence;
I can no better tell thee faithfully."
Now certes," quoth this Sompnour, "so fare* I; *do
I spare not to take, God it wot,
*But if* it be too heavy or too hot. *unless*
What I may get in counsel privily,
No manner conscience of that have I.
N'ere* mine extortion, I might not live, *were it not for
For of such japes* will I not be shrive.** *tricks **confessed
Stomach nor conscience know I none;
I shrew* these shrifte-fathers** every one. *curse **confessors
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 purchasing,
To know where men will give me any thing.
*My purchase is th' effect of all my rent* *what I can gain is my
Look how thou ridest for the same intent sole revenue*
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 ye were a yeoman truly. *thought
Ye have a manne's shape as well as I
Have ye then a figure determinate
In helle, where ye be in your estate?"* *at home
"Nay, certainly," quoth he, there have we none,
But when us liketh we can take us one,
Or elles make you seem* that we be shape *believe
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 craft* than he." *skill, cunning
"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 intend* to winning, if I may, *apply myself
And not intend our thinges to declare:
For, brother mine, thy wit is all too bare
To understand, although I told them thee.
*But for* thou askest why laboure we: *because*
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 thereagain.* *against it
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 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 hent.* *catch
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<9> did Samuel:

And yet will some men say it was not he.
I *do no force of* your divinity. *set no value upon*
But one thing warn I thee, I will not jape,* jest
Thou wilt *algates weet* how we be shape: *assuredly know*
Thou shalt hereafterward, my brother dear,
Come, where thee needeth not of me to lear.* *learn
For thou shalt by thine own experience
*Conne in a chair to rede of this sentence,* *learn to understand
Better than Virgil, while he was alive, what I have said*
Or Dante also. <10> Now let us ride blive,* *briskly
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 purchase.* *seeking what we
Take thou thy part, what that men will thee give, may pick up*
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 shope* him for to wend,** *shaped **go
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 wood,* *mad
"Heit Scot! heit Brok! what, spare ye for the stones?
The fiend (quoth he) you fetch body and bones,
As farforthly* as ever ye were foal'd, *sure
So muche woe as I have with you tholed.* *endured <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 were,* *as if nothing
Full privily, and rowned* in his ear: were the matter*
"Hearken, my brother, hearken, by thy faith, *whispered
Hearest thou not, how that the carter saith?
Hent* it anon, for he hath giv'n it thee, *seize
Both hay and cart, and eke his capels* three." *horses <12>

"Nay," quoth the devil, "God wot, never a deal,* whit
It is not his intent, trust thou me well;
Ask him thyself, if thou not trowest* me, *believest
Or elles stint* a while and thou shalt see." *stop
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 twight,* mine owen liart,** boy, *pulled **grey<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."
When that they came somewhat out of the town,
This Sompnour to his brother gan to rown;
"Brother," quoth he, "here wons* an old rebeck,<14> *dwells
That had almost as lief to lose her neck.
As for to give a penny of her good.
I will have twelvepence, though that she be wood,* *mad
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 trate;* *trot <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.
Up* pain of cursing, looke that thou be *upon
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 wis1y* helpe me, *as I not may.* *surely *as I cannot*
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 appose* me?" *accuse
"Yes," quoth this Sompnour, "pay anon, let see,

Twelvepence to me, and I will thee acquit.
I shall no profit have thereby but lit:* *little
My master hath the profit and not I.
Come off, and let me ride hastily;
Give me twelvepence, I may no longer tarry."
"Twelvepence!" quoth she; "now lady Sainte Mary
So wisly* help me out of care and sin, *surely
This wide world though that I should it win,
No have I not twelvepence within my hold.
Ye know full well that I am poor and old;
*Kithe your almes* upon me poor wretch." *show your charity*
"Nay then," quoth he, "the foule fiend me fetch,
If I excuse thee, though thou should'st be spilt."* *ruined
"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, Mabily, mine owen mother dear,
Is this your will in earnest that ye say?"
"The devil," quoth she, "so fetch him ere he dey,* *die
And pan and all, but* he will him repent." *unless
"Nay, olde stoat,* that is not mine intent," *polecat
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 privity* *secrets
More than a master of divinity."
And with that word the foule fiend him hent.* *seized
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 agrise,* *be horrified
Albeit so, that no tongue may devise,* — *relate
Though that I might a thousand winters tell, —
The pains of thilke* cursed house of hell *that
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 await* alway *on the watch* <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 hent.* *seize

Notes to the Friar's 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 ahsolute 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, possesed 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."