

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE SUMMONER'S TALE

Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer, Geoffrey (1343-1400) - English poet, known as the most important writer of Middle English. His *Canterbury Tales* (~1380) are told by traveling pilgrims who meet at a tavern and have a storytelling contest to pass the time. Each tale is preceded by an introductory prologue. *The Summoner's Tale* - The story of man named Thomas who schemes to humiliate a Friar.

THE SUMMONER'S TALE

Masters, there is in Yorkshire, as I guess,
A marshy region that's called Holderness,
Wherein there went a limiter about
To preach, and to beg too, beyond a doubt.
And so befell that on a day this friar
Had preached in church in his own manner dire,
And specially, and above everything,
Incited he the people, by preaching,
To trentals, and to give, for God's own sake,
The means wherewith men might new churches make,
That there the services of God might flower,
And not to them who waste and wealth devour,
Nor where there's no necessity to give,
As to the monks, who easily may live-
Thanks be to God!- and need no wealth to gain.
"Trentals," said he, "deliver from their pain
The souls of friends who're dead, the old and young,
Yea, even when they have been hastily sung;
Not that I hold as frivolous and gay,

A priest who only sings one mass a day.
"Act quickly now," said he, "their souls redeem,
For hard it is, with spikes and hooks, I deem,
To be so torn, aye, or to burn or bake;
Now speed you all to this, for Christ's own sake!"
And when this friar had said all that he meant,
With cui cum patre on his way he went.
When folk in church had given at his behest,
He went his way, no longer would he rest,
With scrip and ferruled staff and skirts tucked high;
In every house he went to peer and pry,
And beg for flour and cheese, or else for corn.
His fellow had a staff was tipped with horn,
A set of tablets all of ivory,
And stylus that was polished elegantly,
And wrote the names down always as he stood,
Of those that gave him anything of good,
As if for them he later meant to pray.
"Give us of wheat or malt or rye," he'd say,
"A bushel; or a God's cake; or some cheese;
We may not choose, so give us what you please;
Give us God's halfpenny or a mass-penny,

Or give us of your brawn, if you have any;
A small piece of your blanket, my dear dame,
Our sister dear, lo, here I write your name;
Bacon or beef, or such thing as you find."
A sturdy menial went these two behind-
The servant of their host- and bore a sack,
And what men gave them, laid it on his back.
And when they'd left the house, why, then anon
He planed away the names of folk, each one,
That he before had written on his tables;
And thus he served them mockeries and fables.
("Nay, there you lie, you summoner!" cried the friar.
"Peace, for Christ's Mother's sake, call no one liar!"
Our host said. "Tell your tale, nor spare at all."
"So thrive I," said this summoner, "that I shall.")
Along he went from house to house, till he
Came to a house where he was wont to be
Refreshed more than in hundred places round.
And sick the goodman of the place he found;
Bedridden on a couch he prostrate lay.
"Deus hic," said he. "Thomas, my friend, good day,"
Said he, this friar, courteously and soft.

“Thomas,” said he, “may God repay you! Oft
Have I sat on this bench and fared right well.
Here have I eaten many a merry meal.”
And from the bench he drove away the cat,
And laid down there his steel-tipped staff and hat
And his scrip, too, and sat him softly down.
His fellow had gone walking into town,
With the said menial, to a hostelry
Wherein he thought that very night to lie.
“O my dear master,” whispered this sick man,
“How have you fared since this month March began?
“I’ve seen you not this fortnight, aye or more.”
“God knows,” said he, “that I have toiled full sore;
And very specially for your salvation
Have I said precious prayers, and at each station,
And for our other friends, whom may God bless!
I have today been to your church, at Mass,
And preached a sermon after my poor wit,
Not wholly from the text of holy writ,
For that is hard and baffling in the main;
And therefore all its meaning I’ll explain.
Glosing’s a glorious thing, and that’s certain,

For letters kill, as scholars say with pain.
Thus have I taught them to be charitable,
And spend their money reasonably, as well.
And there I saw your dame- ah, where is she?"
"Yonder within the yard I think she'll be,"
Said this sick man, "and she will come anon."
"Eh, master! Welcome be you, by Saint John!"
Exclaimed the wife. "How fare you, heartily?"
The friar arose, and that full courteously,
And her embraced within his two arms narrow,
And kissed her sweetly, chirping like a sparrow
With his two lips. "Ah, dame," said he, "right well
As one that is your servant, let me tell,
Thanks be to God Who gave you soul and life,
For saw I not this day so fair a wife
In all the congregation, God save me!"
"Yea, God correct all faults, sir," answered she,
"But you are always welcome, by my fay!"
"Many thanks, dame, this have I found alway.
But of your innate goodness, by your leave,
I'd beg of you, be cross or grieve
If I with Thomas speak a little now.

These curates are right negligent and slow
In searching tenderly into conscience.
To preach confession is my diligence,
And I do study Peter's words and Paul's.
I walk and fish for Christian persons' souls
To yield to Jesus Christ His increment;
To spread His gospel is my whole intent."
"Now, by your leave, O my dear sir," said she,
"Berate him well, for Holy Trinity.
He is as crabbed as an old pismire,
Though he has everything he can desire.
Though him I cover at night, and make him warm,
And lay my leg across him, or my arm,
He grunts and groans like our old boar in sty
And other sport- just none from him have I.
I cannot please him, no, in any case."
"O Thomas, je vous dis, Thomas, Thomas!
This is the Fiend's work, this must be amended,
Anger's a thing that makes High God offended,
And thereof will I speak a word or two."
"Now, master," said the wife, "before I go,
What will you eat? I will about it scoot."

“Now, dame,” said he then, “je vous dis, sans doute,
Had I of a fat capon but the liver,
And of your soft white bread naught but a sliver,
And after that a pig’s head well roasted
(Save that I would no beast for me were dead),
Then had I with you plain sufficiency.
I am a man of little gluttony.
My spirit has its nourishment in the Bible.
My body is so inured and so pliable
To watching, that my appetite’s destroyed.
I pray you, lady, be you not annoyed
Though I so intimately my secret show;
By God, I would reveal it to but few.”
“Now, sir,” said she, “but one word ere I go;
My child has died within this fortnight- oh,
Soon after you left town last, it did die.”
“His death saw I by revelation, aye,”
Replied this friar, “at home in dormitory
Less than an hour, I dare say, ere to glory,
After his death, I saw him borne in bliss
In vision mine, may God me guide in this!
So did our sexton and infirmarian,

Who have been true friars fifty years, each man;
And may now, God be thanked for mercy shown,
Observe their jubilee and walk alone.
And I rose up and did my brothers seek,
With many a tear down trickling on my cheek,
And without noise or clashing of the bells;
Te deum was our song and nothing else,
Save that to Christ I said an orison,
And thanked Him for the vision he had shown
For, sir and dame, trust me full well in all,
Our orisons are more effectual,
And more we see of Christ's own secret things
Than folk of the laity, though they were kings.
We live in poverty and abstinence
And laymen live in riches and expense
Of meat and drink, and in their gross delight.
This world's desires we hold in great despite.
Dives and Lazarus lived differently,
And different recompense they had thereby.
Whoso would pray, he must fast and be clean,
Fatten his soul and keep his body lean.
We fare as says the apostle; clothes and food

Suffice us, though they be not over-good.
The cleanness and the fasting of us friars
Result in Christ's accepting all our prayers.
"Lo, Moses forty days and forty nights
Fasted before the mightiest God of might
Spoke with him on the Mountain of Sinai.
With empty belly, fasting long, say I,
Received he there the law that had been writ
By God's hand; and Elias (you know of it)
On Mount Horeb, ere he had any speech
With the High God, Who is our spirits' leech,
He fasted long and deep his contemplation.
"Aaron, who ruled the temple of his nation,
And all the other great priests, every one,
When they into the temple would be gone
To pray there for the folk and do their rites.
They would not drink of that which man excites
And makes him drunk or stirs in any way,
But there in abstinence they'd watch and pray
Lest they should die- to what I say take heed!-
Were they not sober when they prayed, indeed.
Beware my words. No more! for it suffices.

Our Lord Christ, as the holy writ apprises,
Gave us example of fasting and of prayers.
Therefore we mendicants, we simple friars,
Are sworn to poverty and continence,
To charity, meekness, and abstinence,
To persecution for our righteousness,
To weeping, pity, and to cleanliness.
And therefore may you see that all our prayers-
I speak of us, we mendicants, we friars-
Are to the High God far more acceptable
Than yours, with all the feasts you make at table.
From Paradise, if I am not to lie,
Was man chased out because of gluttony;
And chaste was man in Paradise, that's plain.
“But hear now, Thomas, lest I speak in vain.
I have no text for it, I must admit,
But by analogy the words will fit,
That specially our sweet Lord Christ Jesus
Spoke of the begging friars when He said thus:
'Blest are the poor in spirit.' So said He,
And so through all the gospel may you see
Whether the Word fit better our profession

Or theirs, the monks', who swim in rich possession,
Fie on their pomp and on their gluttony!
And for their lewdness do I them defy.
"It seems to me they're like Jovinian,
Fat as a whale and waddling as a swan;
As full of wine as bottle in the spence.
Their prayers are always of great reverence,
When they for souls that psalm of David say:
'Cor meum eructavit- bouf!' - that way!
Who follow Christ's Word going on before
But we who are so humble, chaste, and poor,
And doers of God's Word, not hearers, merely?
As falcons rise to heaven, just so clearly
Spring up into the air the holy prayers
Of charitable and chaste and toiling friars
Make their way upward into God's ears two.
Thomas, O Thomas! As I ride or go,
And by that lord whom all we call Saint Yve,
Were you not brother to us, you'd not thrive!
In our chapter we pray both day and night
To Christ, that He will send you health and might
To move about again, and speedily."

“God knows,” said he, “nothing thereof feel I;
So help me Christ as I, these last few years,
Have spent on divers friars, it appears,
Full many a pound; and I’m no better yet.
Truly my wealth have I almost upset.
Farewell my gold! for it has slipped away.”
The friar replied: “Ah, Thomas, so you say!
But why need you to different friars reach?
Why should he need, who has a perfect leech,
To call in other leeches from the town?
Your trouble from your fickleness has grown.
Think you that I, or at least our convent,
Could not suffice to pray? That’s what I meant.
Thomas, your feeble joke’s not worth a tittle;
Your illness lasts because you’ve given too little.
“Ah, give that convent bushels four of oats!”
‘Ah, give that convent four and twenty groats!’
‘Ah, give that friar a penny and let him go!’
“Nay, nay, Thomas, the thing should not be so!
What is a farthing worth, when split twelve ways?
A thing in its integrity displays
Far greater strength than does a unit scattered.

Thomas, by me you shall not here be flattered;
You would you had our labour all for naught.
But the High God, Who all this world has wrought,
Says that the workman's worthy of his hire.
Thomas! Naught of your treasure I desire
As for myself, but that all our convent
To pray for you is always diligent,
And also to build up Christ's holy kirk.
Thomas! If you will learn the way to work,
Of building up of churches you may find
(If it be good) in Thomas' life, of Inde.
You lie here, full of anger and of ire,
Wherewith the Devil set your heart afire,
And you chide here this hapless innocent,
Your wife, who is so meek and so patient.
And therefore, Thomas, trust me if you please,
Scold not your wife, who tries to give you ease;
And bear this word away now, by your faith,
Touching this thing, lo what the wise man saith:
'Within thy house do not the lion play,
Oppress thy subjects in no kind of way,
Nor cause thine equals and thy friends to flee.'

And Thomas, yet again I charge you, be
Wary of her that in your bosom sleeps;
Beware the serpent that so slyly creeps
Under the grass and stings so treacherously.
Beware, my son, and hear this patiently,
That twenty thousand men have lost their lives
For quarrelling with their sweet ones, and their wives.
Now, since you have so holy and meek a wife,
Why need you, Thomas, so to stir up strife?
There is, indeed, no serpent so cruel,
When man treads on his tail, nor half so fell,
As woman is when she is filled with ire;
Vengeance is then the whole of her desire.
Anger's a sin, one of the deadly seven,
Abominable unto the God of Heaven;
And it is sure destruction unto one.
This every vulgar vicar or parson
Can say, how anger leads to homicide.
Truth, anger's the executant of pride.
I could of anger tell you so much sorrow
My tale should last until it were tomorrow.
And therefore I pray God both day and night,

An ireful man, God send him little might!
It is great harm and truly great pity
To set an ireful man in high degree.
“For once there was an ireful potentate,
(As Seneca says) and while he ruled the state,
Upon a day out riding went knights two,
And as Dame Fortune willed it, it was so
That one of them came home, and one did not.
Anon that knight before the judge was brought,
Who said thus: ‘Sir, you have your fellow slain,
For which I doom you to the death, amain.’
And to another knight commanded he,
‘Go lead him to his death, so I charge ye.’
It happened, as they went along their way,
Toward the place where he must die that day,
They met the knight that men had thought was dead
Then thought they, it were best not go ahead,
And so led both unto the judge again.
They said: ‘O lord, this knight, he has not slain
His fellow; for he stands here sound, alive.’
‘You shall die then,’ he cried, ‘so may I thrive!
That is to say, you shall all die, all three!’

And then to the first knight 'twas thus said he:
'I doomed you, and therefore you must be dead.
And you, also, must needs now lose your head,
Since you're the causing of your fellow's end.'
And then on the third knight did he descend:
'You have not done what I ordained should be!'
And thus he did away with all the three.
"Ireful Cambyses was a drunkard too,
And much delighted dirty deeds to do.
And so befell, a lord of his household,
Who loved all moral virtue, we are told,
Said on a day, when they were talking, thus:
'A lord is lost if he be too vicious;
And drunkenness is foul thing to record
Of any man, and specially of a lord.
There is full many an eye and many an ear
Waiting upon a lord, nor knows he where.
For God's dear love, sir, drink more moderately;
Wine causes man to lose, and wretchedly,
His mind, and his limbs' usage, every one.'
"The opposite you'll see,' said he, 'anon;
And you'll prove, by your own experience,

That wine does not to men such foul offence.
There is no wine can rob me of my might
Of hand or foot, nor yet of my eyesight!’
And for despite he drank much wine the more,
A hundred times, than he had drunk before;
And then anon this ireful wicked wretch
Sent one this knight’s young son to go and fetch,
And ordered that before him he should stand.
And suddenly he took his bow in hand,
And drew the string thereof up to his ear,
And with an arrow slew the child right there.
‘Now tell me whether I’ve sure hand, or none!’
He said, ‘And are my might and mind all gone?
Has wine deprived me of my good eyesight?’
‘How shall I tell the answer of the knight?
His son was slain, there is no more to say.
Beware, therefore, with lords look how you play.
But sing placebo, and ‘I shall, if I can,’
Unless it be unto a helpless man.
To a poor man men should his vices tell,
But to a lord, no, though he go to Hell.
“Lo, ireful Cyrus, that great Persian king,

Destroyed the river Gyndes at its spring,
Because a horse of his was drowned therein
When he went forth old Babylon to win.
He caused the river to become so small
That women could go wading through it all.
“Lo, what said he whose teaching all commend?
‘An angry man take never for a friend,
Nor with a madman walk along the way,
Lest you repent.’ There is no more to say.
“Now, Thomas, my dear brother, leave your ire;
You shall find me as just as is a squire.
Hold not the Devil’s knife against your heart;
Your anger does too sorely burn and smart;
But show me all, now, in confession, son.”
“Nay,” said the sick man, “by Saint Simeon!
I have been shriven today by my curate;
I have him told the whole truth of my state;
There’s no more need to speak of it,” said he,
“Save as I please, of my humility.”
“Then give me of your gold to build our cloister,”
Said he, “for many a mussel and an oyster,
When other men have been well at their ease,

Have been our food, that building should not cease,
And yet, God knows, is finished nothing more
Than the foundation, while of all the floor
There's not a tile yet laid to call our own;
By God, we owe full forty pounds for stone!
Now help, Thomas, for Him that harried Hell!
Else must we turn about and our books sell.
And if you laymen lack our high instruction,
Then will the world go all to its destruction.
For whoso shall deny us right to live,
So may God save me, Thomas, by your leave,
He'll have deprived the whole world of the sun.
For who can teach and work as we have done?
And that's not been for little time," said he;
"Elias and Elisha used to be
Friars, you'll find the scriptures do record,
And beggars too, thanks be to the good Lord!
Now, Thomas, help for holy charity!"
And down he went then, kneeling on one knee.
This sick man, he went well-nigh mad for ire;
He would have had that friar set afire
For the hypocrisy that he had shown.

“Such things as I possess and are my own,”
Said he, “those may I give you and no other.
You tell me that I am as your own brother?”
“Yea, truly,” said the friar, “trust me well;
I gave your wife a letter with our seal.”
“That’s well,” said he, “and something will I give
Unto your holy convent while I live,
And right anon you’ll have it in your hand,
On this condition only, understand,
That you divide it so, my own dear brother,
That every friar shall have as much as other.
This shall you swear upon the faith you own,
And without fraud or cavil, be it known.”
“I swear it,” said this friar, “on my faith!”
And on the sick man’s laid his hand therewith.
“Lo, hear my oath! In me shall truth not lack.”
“Now then, come put your hand right down my back,”
Replied this man, “and grope you well behind;
For underneath my buttocks shall you find
A thing that I have hid in privy.”
“Ah,” thought the friar, “this shall go with me!”
And down he thrust his hand right to the cleft,

In hope that he should find there some good gift.
And when the sick man felt the friar here
Groping about his hole and all his rear,
Into his hand he let the friar a fart.
There is no stallion drawing loaded cart
That might have let a fart of such a sound.
The friar leaped up as with wild lion's bound:
"Ah, treacherous churl," he cried, "by God's own bones,
I'll see that he who scorns me thus atones;
You'll suffer for this fart- I'll find a way!"
The servants, who had heard all this affray,
Came leaping in and chased the friar out;
And forth he scowling went, with angry shout,
And found his fellow, where he'd left his store.
He glared about as he were some wild boar;
He ground and gnashed his teeth, so wroth was he.
He quickly sought the manor, there to see
The lord thereof, whose honour was the best,
And always to the friar he confessed;
This worthy man was lord of that village.
The friar came, as he were in a rage,
Where sat the lord at dinner at his board.

And hardly could the friar speak a word,
Till at the last he said, "God be with ye!"
This lord looked up and said then, "Ben' cite!
What, Friar John! What kind of world is this?
I see right well that something is amiss.
You look as if the wood were full of thieves,
Sit down, and tell me what it is that grieves,
And it shall be amended, if I may."
"I have," said he, "insulted been today-
May God reward you!- down in your village.
And in this world is not so poor a page
As would not feel the insult, if 'twere thrown
At him, that I have suffered in your town.
Yet nothing grieves me in this matter more
Than that this peasant, with his long locks hoar,
Has thus blasphemed our holy convent too."
"Now, master," said his lordship, "I pray you-"
"No master, sir," said he, "but servitor,
Though true, I had in school such honour, sir.
But rabbi- God's not pleased that men so call
Us, in the public square or your wide hall."
"No matter," said he, "tell me all your grief."

“Sir,” said this friar, “an odious mischief
Was this day done to my order and me,
And so, per consequens, to each degree
Of Holy Church, may God it soon amend!”
“Sir,” said the lord, “the story I attend.
As my confessor, pray your wrath control;
Salt of the earth are you- the savour whole.
For love of God, I beg you patience hold;
Tell me your grievance.”
And anon he told
As you have heard before, you know well what.
The lady of the house right silent sat
Till she had heard all that the friar said:
“Eh, by God’s Mother,” cried she, “Blessed Maid!
Is there aught else? A point that we did miss?”
“Madam,” asked he, “what do you think of this?”
“What do I think?” she asked, “So God me speed,
I say, a churl has done a churlish deed.
What should I say? May God desert him! See-
Why his sick head is full of vanity.
The man, no doubt, is more or less insane.”
“Madam,” said he, “I will not lie or feign:

If otherwise I cannot vengeance wreak,
I will defame him wheresoe'er I speak,
This false blasphemmer who has dared charge me
Thus to divide what won't divided be,
To every man alike, and with mischance!"
The lord sat still as he were in a trance,
And in his mind he rolled it up and down:
"How had this churl imagination grown
To pose so fine a problem to the friar?
I never heard the like, or I'm a liar;
I think the devil stuck it in his mind.
And in arithmetic did no man find,
Before this day, such puzzling question shown.
Who could be able, now, to make it known
How every man should have an equal part
Of both the sound and savour of a fart?
O scrupulous proud churl, beshrew his face!
Lo, sirs," this lord said then, with hard grimace,
"Who ever heard of such a thing ere now?
To every man alike? But tell me how!
Why it's impossible, it cannot be!
Exacting churl, God give him never glee!

The rumbling of a fart, and every sound,
Is but the air's reverberation round,
And ever it wastes, by little and little, away.
There is no man can judge, aye, by my fay,
Whether it were divided equally.
Behold, my church And yet how cursedly
To my confessor has he made this crack!
I hold him surely a demoniac!
Now eat your meat and let the churl go play,
Let him go hang himself, the devil's way!"
Now the lord's squire stood ready near the board
To carve his meat, and he heard, word for word,
All of the things that I to you have said.
"My lord," said he, "be not ill pleased indeed;
For I could tell, for cloth to make a gown,
To you, sir friar, so you do not frown,
How this said fart evenly doled could be
Among your fellows, if the thing pleased me."
"Tell," said the lord, "and you shall have anon
Cloth for a gown, by God and by Saint John!"
"My lord," said he, "when next the weather's fair,
And there's no wind to stir the quiet air,

Let someone bring a cartwheel to this hall,
But see there are no missing spokes at all.
Twelve spokes a cartwheel has, sir, commonly.
And bring me then twelve friars, and know you why?
Because a convent's thirteen, as I guess.
The present confessor, for his worthiness,
He shall complete the tale of this convent.
Then shall they all kneel down, by one assent,
And at each spoke's end, in this manner, sire,
Let the nose be laid firmly of a friar.
Your noble sir confessor, whom God save,
Shall hold his nose upright beneath the nave.
Then shall this churl, with belly stiff and taut
As any tabour- let him here be brought;
And set him on the wheel of this same cart,
Upon the hub, and make him let a fart.
And you shall see, on peril of my life,
With proof so clear that there shall be no strife,
That equally the sound of it will wend,
And the stink too, to each spoke's utter end;
Save that this worthy man, your confessor,
Because he is a man of great honour,

Shall have first fruits, as reasonable it is;
The noble custom of all friars is this,
The worthy men of them shall be first served;
And certainly this has he well deserved.
He has today taught us so much of good,
With preaching in the pulpit where he stood,
That for my part I gladly should agree,
He might well have the first smell of farts three,
And so would all his convent, generously,
He bears himself so well and holily."
The lord, the lady, and each man, save the friar,
Agreed that Jenkin spoke, as classifier,
As well as Euclid or as Ptolemy.
Touching the churl, they said that subtlety
And great wit taught him how to make his crack.
He was no fool, nor a demoniac.
And Jenkin by this means has won a gown.
My tale is done, we're almost into town.

HERE ENDS THE SUMMONER'S TALE