

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## THE FRIAR'S TALE

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

### 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,







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 dispenche;  
 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?"\*  
 "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  
 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."  
 "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,  
 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:  
 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.\*  
 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,

\*at home

\*believe

\*skill, cunning

\*apply myself

\*because\*

\*against it





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 wisly\* 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, Mably, 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 paines 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 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."