“The Summoner’s Tale”

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by

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“The Summoner's Tale” follows *WBT* and *FrT* as the final installment in Group D (Fragment III) of Chaucer's *CT*. With the other tales in its Group, it deals with rash promises, with “glosyng” (a generally discredited activity in 14th-century English intellectual circles), and with the real and potential ambiguities of language—particularly the contest between the letter and the spirit. In addition, *SumT* shares important features with other satiric and comic Canterbury tales, functions to dramatize the fiery (and anal) character of the pilgrim Summoner in his debate with the Friar, and continues a pattern of “quyting” tales found elsewhere in *CT* (such as the Reeve's tale against the Miller). More broadly, *SumT* belongs to a well-established tradition of late-medieval literature critical of the fraternal orders and of their claims to embody more perfectly than others the apostolic virtues of the Christian life. Group D reveals a continuing concern with anti-fraternal topics: witness the Wife of Bath's argumentative methods in her Prologue, her urbane critique of friars at the opening of *WBT*, and the self-reflexive criticism of *FrT*. While antifraternal themes appear elsewhere in *CT* (e.g., *GenPro* description of the Friar), *SumT* provides the most sustained and overt attack on friars. The Summoner individualizes, names, and makes literal what appears elsewhere in less sustained fashion; we move from abstract conflicts between “experience” and “auctoritee,” text and interpretation, to *SumT*'s earthy and personalized satire. Through its comic, parodic treatment of one friar, it deflates fraternal pretensions to embody the apostolic ideal.

The essential action of *SumT* is as follows: Friar John, raising money for church construction in the area of Holderness, Yorkshire, after preaching at church, visits houses of the parish about March 15 (and therefore presumably a Sunday or feast day in Lent). Arriving at the home of a bedridden “goode man” (1768) named Thomas, John is welcomed as he has frequently been before. Making himself quite at home, he displaces the cat from its comfortable spot on the bench; kisses and flatters Thomas's wife; at her suggestion, lectures Thomas on anger; and itemizes a request for a “hoomly” (1843) dinner not exactly in keeping with his vows or with the penitential spirit of the season. Informed that their child died since his last visit two weeks previously, the friar quickly pretends to have already learned this by revelation and to have prayed diligently with his brothers for the child's soul, now in Heaven. Without offering any sympathy to the bereaved parents, however, he continues his lengthy praises of the poverty and abstinence of friars.

When Thomas points out that the day-and-night prayers for his health by diverse friars have done him no good, Friar John's response is to berate him for making donations to others besides his convent, since “What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve?” (1967). Returning to Thomas's alleged sin of anger with a series of classical *exempla*, he makes a more overt request for money, to which Thomas, his ire now truly raised by the Friar's “false dissymulacioun” (2123), replies by offering a special gift, on condition that the Friar promise to share it equally with his brothers. The Friar agrees and Thomas invites him to reach down in the bed under his buttocks, which he does, and Thomas delivers a loud fart. The Friar, in a rage at this “yifte” (2146) despite all his preaching against anger, threatens Thomas and is chased from the house; he goes to the lord of the village to complain of the insult he has received. The lord and his lady attempt, unsuccessfully, to placate his anger. The lord is especially puzzled about where Thomas, a “cherl,” got the wit to pose such a difficult “probleme” in “ars-metrike” (2216ff) to the friar—”To parte that wol nat departed be” (2214)—and concludes that Thomas must be a “demonyak” (2240). His squire Jankyn, like his master addressing the intellectual problem of dividing the gift—and ignoring the insult—says he can provide a way for the friar to keep his promise to share the gift equally with his brothers. He offers to reveal the solution in return for a “gowne-clooth” (2247). The lord readily agrees. Let the friars be arranged around the rim of a cartwheel, he says, with Friar John under the hub; then Thomas, well prepared for the occasion, should be placed on the hub to deliver another fart, which will be distributed equally among the friars, Friar John to receive the “firste fruyt” (2277). This solution is hailed by all (except Friar John, of course) as worthy of a Euclid or Ptolemy. The tale concludes with the squire's receiving his reward and Thomas's being now praised for his “subtiltee / And heigh wit” (2290-91).

Earlier having been provoked (at the end of *WBP*) by Friar Huberd's threat to bring on the pilgrims' laughter with “a tale or two” (842) about summoners, the pilgrim Summoner swears that he will retaliate with “tales two or thre” (846) of his own to make the Friar “morne” (848). Further angered by the Friar's fulfilling his threat with a tale about a summoner and his “brother” the devil, he responds with a tale in which a hypocritical friar is doubly punished: by a churl's flatulent gift and a squire's exercise in “ars-metrike.” Friar John, a “lymytour” like *GenPro*'s Friar Huberd, is shown up not just once, but twice: he stands condemned not only by the world of practical economic realities (to which he affects condescension), but also by the intellectual, learned world (to which, Pharisee-like, he claims title as “maister”). Unable to solve the terms of Thomas's bequest, he is revealed as an intellectual pretender as well as a social and religious hypocrite. When these two elements of the tale are combined with his prefatory anecdote about the infernal abode of friars in the “develes ers” (1668ff), the Summoner amply fulfills his earlier promise to tell “tales two or thre / Of freres.”

While the tale parallels, in the motif of the “satiric legacy” and in other features, elements of many oral and written narratives, scholars have not identified anything that could fairly be judged an exact or immediate literary source for the tale as a whole. Its contemporary (or near-contemporary) analogues, furthermore, are few and not especially close. Like the Summoner himself (whose appearance corresponds to his moral condition), this tale is a pastiche of comic literalizations of influential scriptural and devotional images: for example, Pentecost (with its loud wind and iconographic wheel of apostles touched by tongues of fire and subsequently filled with the wisdom and articulateness of the Holy Spirit), or Saint Thomas of India (Doubting Thomas, who was invited to “grope” Christ's wounds). It has been suggested that Friar John's allusions to Moses and Elijah may have reminded Chaucer's audience of Biblical stories involving wind, clefts, and backsides; and the Summoner's locating friars in the “develes ers” may also have suggested the popular fraternal image of the “Mater Misericordiae” (which depicts the paradisal residence of friars in Mary's bosom, protected by her cloak). Further parodic allusions to “auctoritees” may also be recognized, such as to the Franciscan Rule and other fraternal documents. Indeed, the majority of published scholarship on *SumT* has been devoted to identifying and elucidating such allusions and their parodic and comic effects. In sum, such studies effectively mark this tale as embodying a “subtle comedy of Biblical and Pentecost parody and of antifraternal lore” (Szittya, 231).

The tale's satire of its friar-protagonist is reinforced by a nearly pervasive attention to the instability (and duplicity) of language. Little in the way of idealizing, or even sympathetic, comment in the tale can be taken simply as stated; double meanings lurk behind the words of all the speakers. This duplicitousness runs from pretentious stupidity and outright hypocrisy (on the part of the friar) to cloaked revenge (on the part of Thomas) to playful (however embarrassed and ironically critical) social entertainment (on the part of lord, lady, and squire). The tale presents Friar John's glossing of Scripture as false and self-serving; but the language of Thomas and his wife, of the lord and his wife and their squire, is structurally, if not tonally, similar: “innocent” literalness can cloak hidden, even vicious, motives.

*SumT* gains unity and coherence through its attention to the various ways social codes of language can disguise individual selfishness; further, by piercing through these codes, the tale reveals the potential of language to rebound against a speaker's intentions and exact public justice. Thomas's promised gift has attributes that fit a purse of money or a fart, and Friar John's punishment results from his failure to grant that others may use language with a subtlety that matches or surpasses his own. His condescension towards others' intelligence reveals his lack of genuine understanding and respect for literal realities. The tale's satire forcefully attacks his self-proclaimed moral worth and pretense to linguistic skill. It also uncovers the falsity of his claimed insight into the words and motives of others: it is as patently extravagant as his claim to have received divine revelation.

This friar's limitations—his high opinion of himself, his active condescension toward everyone else, his inability to read linguistic codes—combine to undercut the literalizing of Biblical values that supports the fraternal ideals of, for example, Francis of Assisi. Friar John's various interlocutors indeed prove more critical and incisive in their understanding of language and its uses than this professional preacher and master. Only the cat, finally, yields its place to him.

Since Group D concludes abruptly at the end of *SumT* we are provided with no indication how Friar Huberd, or anyone else, responds, nor can we test whether the wrathful Summoner himself has realized that his tale's critique of the pilgrim Friar's wrath reflects and implicitly criticizes his own anger. As with the angry exchanges between Miller and Reeve, Pardoner and Host, this compact tale leaves that critique to others; the “ars” of *SumT* gives eloquent voice to its own “subtiltee / And heigh wit.”

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