

The Summoner

The Summoner is described in the Prologue as a lecherous man whose red face is disfigured with boils and—like the Miller and the Cook—something of a drunkard. Chaucer's first hearers would probably have recognised him a corrupt servant of the church and a much-hated member of the ecclesiastical establishment. The Summoner tells a story about a friar who goes preaching and begging in a marshy region of Yorkshire called Holderness. Going from door to door, he comes to the home of a merchant called Thomas who normally fêtes him but is ill on this occasion. No breath of sympathy can stop the friar from boasting about the sermon he has given earlier in the day where he interpreted the Bible to his own satisfaction: “Glosynge is a glorious thyng”, he declares, in a famous line. Next then orders Thomas's wife to make him dinner, and when she mentions that she has just lost a child he informs her that the infant has already entered heaven, claiming that his fellow-friars have had a similar vision being privy to God's secrets. Only friars, he says, enjoy this gift in view of their vow of poverty. Seemingly he also knows that the merchant's illness is due to his failure to donate sufficient funds to the servants of the church (obviously meaning himself).

Thomas claims in return that he has given “ful many a pound” to friars and never fared any the better for it. Characteristically the Friar takes offence at the thought that the gifts hadn't been reserved for him, pointing out that a farthing [i.e., a quarter of a penny] is worth nothing when divided into twelve. He then lectures Thomas against anger (“ire”) with a lengthy tale about an angry king who sentences a knight to death when he returns to court without his companion-in-arms whom the king assumes to have been murdered by him. A third knight who is commissioned to bring the unhappy man away to execution finds the lost companion alive and well and returns to the king in the hope of having the verdict reversed. Unfortunately the king is too intemperate to show mercy and sentences all three to death, explaining that the first deserved to die because he has already been sentenced while his companion was the cause of his being charged and the third was guilty of disobedience.

Having rounded off that tale, the friar follows on with another on the same theme involving King Cambyses whose drunken example is said to have impaired his soldiers's ability to use the bow and arrow. When one of his officers (or “knights”) makes the point to him, Cambyses draws his bow and shoots the officer's son to demonstrate that he is still a master of the weapon. Next, the friar speaks of Cyrus, King of Persia, who destroyed the bed of the River Gyndes because one of his horses had drowned in it—a patently self-destructive act since the river supplies the only water in his kingdom.

At this point the Friar asks Thomas to use his wealth to building of a cloister for the friary. Irritated by his hypocrisy and greed, the merchant tells him that the Friar that he (Thomas) is sitting on a gift which he will only give him if he promised to share it with the others. When the Friar agrees to this and bends down to extract the gift, the merchant lets off a fart louder than any horse could make and orders his servant to chase the Friar out of his house when he threatens to repay him for such an insult.

Turning to the Lord of the Manor—a nobleman living nearby—the Friar complains about the treatment he received from Thomas while pondering aloud how he was supposed to divide a fart into twelve portions. It falls to the Lord's squire to solve the problem with an answer that wins him a gown (“gowne-clooth”) from his master: take a cartwheel with twelve spokes and tell each of friars to place his nose at the end of one of them; then sit on the hub at the centre and blow off as much gas as you can and let the others friars inhale it as it wafts down the spokes towards them. Evidently, then, neither Lord or squire have any sympathy with the Friar.