

# The Fall of the “Men in the Middle” in The Friar’s and *The Summoner’s Tales*

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## Abstract

This article discusses *The Friar’s Tale* and *The Summoner’s Tale* as Chaucer’s commentary on the socio-economic transformation that heralded the approach of mercantile economy, which would radically alter men’s social and existential position.

**Keywords:** *The Friar’s Tale, The Summoner’s Tale; The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer, Medieval literature.*

## Özet

Bu makale, *Frer’in ve Tahsildar’ın Hikâyeleri*’ni; Chaucer’in, ufka yavaş yavaş belirmekte olan, insanın toplumsal ve varoluşsal konumlarını kökünden değiştirecek olan Merkantilizmin gelişini haber veren sosyo-ekonomik dönüşümün yorumu olarak tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Frer’in Hikâyesi, Tahsildar’ın Hikâyesi, Canterbury Hikâyeleri, Chaucer, Ortaçağ İngiliz Edebiyatı.*

The Summoner and the Friar have often been perceived as the representatives of the two conflicting medieval religious establishments. The rivalry between the secular clergy, to which the Summoner belongs, and the mendicant orders, represented by the Friar, has been widely discussed by critics in order to shed light on the hostility between the two religious figures. Their tales are aimed at ridiculing each other by means of a fictional counterpart, whose vices are exaggerated. The professional enmity between the two figures accounts for their tales and their presentation by their opponents in an

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unfavourable light. In addition to dramatising the mutual enmity between the Friar and the Summoner, the tales mirror Chaucer's view of these religious figures and the medieval clergy, a view common to his contemporaries.

Because both the Friar's and the Summoner's purpose is to ridicule each other by means of their villain-heroes, hence to retaliate each other, both the fictional summoner and the friar follow a socially and morally downward course, which ends in their final falls. This argument derives, partly, from Kolve's essay " 'Man in the Middle': Art and Religion in Chaucer's *Friar's Tale*." While his theory takes the carter as its focus, the tale will, here, be analysed from the standpoint of the summoner himself. In the two tales the summoner and the friar stand in the middle, the summoner between hell and the world—if not between the cosmic realms of hell and heaven—and the friar between the social realms of the churl and the lord. They both prepare their own ends; their words and actions are, consciously or unconsciously, directed towards their falls. Not only do the representatives of the realm or the rank that is supposedly lower than theirs prove to be superior to them at the end, but both protagonists' humiliating falls point toward larger and more radical shifting of values grounded in deep socio-economic transformations of which Chaucer was keenly aware.

*The Friar's Tale* portrays a summoner in a period of transition from one stage of cosmic experience to another. Morton W. Bloomfield argues that the tale is "a story about a *rite de passage*" (286); the summoner in the tale goes from one realm of experience to another. This passage is irreversible; after the crossing of the threshold, there is no return possible. According to this argument, the devil in the tale is the guide-guardian figure that leads the summoner into hell. V. A. Kolve's above mentioned essay holds a similar outlook towards the tale. " 'Man in the middle' was one of the central paradigms of medieval culture: an explanation not only of the cosmos, and of life in this world, but of the division medieval men and women sensed in their souls" (34). The carter in the tale stands at the threshold between heaven and hell. His action begins with a curse and ends in a blessing. As such, he exemplifies man's ordinary relation to blessing as well as to cursing: his *forgetful* relation, that is, to God as well as the devil, to heaven as much as to hell. . . . If the carter is a trope for Everyman (an image sufficiently capacious to include all of us), he is also a trope for the summoner, who is carried off to hell, utterly oblivious of his destiny. (16, 35) Before his choice of hell, the summoner was also the man in the middle. By making his choice, he exemplifies a fall from this middle ground in which we live our ordinary lives, down to hell, the domain of the evil. *The Friar's Tale* thus dramatises the medieval concept of human condition, in which the man has the freedom of will to choose between hell and heaven

as a result of the conduct he prefers during his lifetime in the middle ground, the world. The summoner fails to make the right choice because he leads his life not by the virtues of honesty and self-restraint, but by avarice, one of the seven deadly sins.

*The Friar's Tale* opens with the description of the summoner's job. The Friar voices the general sentiment in Chaucer's time concerning the summoners when he describes one as "rennere up and doun / With mandenetz for fornicacioun, / And is ybet at every townes ende"<sup>2</sup>. That the abuse of the summoner's office is a common phenomenon is implied to the reader when the summoner is ashamed of announcing his job to the yeoman; as the Friar describes him, there seems to be little difference between "a thief," "a baude," and "a somnour" (1355). The summoner works under the archdeacon as the agent of his "correccioun." Nevertheless, far from being a figure to remind ordinary mortals of the dangers of sin, the summoner himself has become a chief sinner, driven by insatiable greed and avarice. From the beginning, the expectations of the reader are drawn towards a punishment the summoner deserves for his evil deeds, which are too wicked even for the world of ordinary people. He deceives his master by collecting tithes from innocent people on threats of excommunication, without summons from the archdeacon. His avarice has hardened his conscience and compassion for his fellow human beings to such an extent that he is now the nightmare of the innocent and the poor. He corrupts his mission by accepting bribes from sinners in return for granting them forgiveness and by harassing innocent people for made-up sins. Indeed the summoner, even before he meets the devil, has exchanged his master, the archdeacon, for the devil by inadvertently serving him.

As soon as he meets the devil-yeoman, a deep bond of "brotherhood" is established between the two. Their meeting takes place in the forest, a setting associated with evil, supernatural forces. A place out of human control, dark, intricate and full of traps, the forest marks the outer limits of human habitation and serves as a reminder of the lower regions of Hell. In other words, it is Hell on earth. The association between the devil-yeoman and the forest is immediately established by their similar colours: his green outfit and black-fringed hat fit his green, dark, and shadowy environment. His description leaves no doubt in the reader's mind about his identity, yet to the summoner this fact remains unknown until it is literally announced by the devil himself. Although both of them hide their real identities from each other at first, it is in fact only the summoner who appears to be in the dark about who his companion is. The devil-yeoman's address to the summoner, "leeve sire somonour" (1474), proves his knowledge about his sworn brother's identity in spite of the pains the summoner takes to hide it. The devil obviously recognises a kindred spirit and takes it upon himself to remind the summoner of the domain to which he actually belongs.

The summoner, who, as a human being, occupies a higher cosmic position than the devil, immediately assumes an inferior position to him, who, knowing the summoner's greed, uses material charms to trap him: "I have gold and silver in my cheste; / If that thee happe to comen in our shire, / Al shal be thyn, right as thou wolt desire" (1400-1403). This promise creates the desired and expected effect. By asking about the dwelling of the yeoman, the summoner makes his intent clear: he is going to visit his friend to get his promised share of the devil's riches. The agreement they reach in order to share their profits as brothers is the only one to which the summoner remains faithful until the end. This economic contract nullifies all other loyalties, legal or religious, he has previously taken an oath to keep<sup>3</sup>. He is now eager to improve his entrepreneurship. In order to become more sophisticated in his methods, the summoner questions the devil about his profession:

"Now, brother," quod this somonour, "I yow preye,  
Teche me, whil that we ryden by the weye,  
Syn that ye be a bailiff as am I,  
Som subtiltee, and tell me feithfully  
In myn office how that I may moost wyne;  
And spareth not conscience ne synne,  
But as my brother tel me, how do ye." (1417-23)

The Friar's portrayal of the summoner presents a man less honest than even the devil in his dealings with his victims. Instead of hiding behind the pretence of being a yeoman any longer, the devil gradually reveals his identity, which the summoner purposely ignores. When told the true identity of the devil-yeoman, rather than feeling or showing any fear, like any innocent mortal would normally feel, the summoner approaches him with increased curiosity and respect. He is so fascinated by the devil's ability to take as many shapes as he desires—an ability, if he could achieve, would add much to his gains—that he is unable to see why he has taken the shape of the bailiff. The summoner is thus portrayed either as an utterly dishonest man or as one with no intellectual capacity whatsoever. Even when the devil explains that they take the shape that "As moost able is oure preyes for to take" (1471), the summoner is unwilling, rather than unable, to establish the connections that reveal him as the prey in his relationship with the devil.

In addition to the presentations of a stereotypical friar and summoner, and the theme of lifetime as a rite of passage, Chaucer's sources for both tales too were familiar to his audience. Chaucer's source for *The Friar's Tale* is a folk tale well known in the Middle Ages. The profession and the identity of the "hero" change according to the narrator

and context (Murphy 134, 136). It has a simple plot. In most of its analogues, a man curses an animal, then a mother curses her child, and finally a woman curses a greedy man. In the first two cases the curses are not heartfelt, but the last one is; therefore it is carried out (Jacobs and Jungman 257). Chaucer reduces the number of the curses to two in his version, but on the whole, the tale demonstrates the distinction between intent and words as powerfully as its analogues.

The first of these curses takes place as the summoner and the devil proceed further and on their way meet a carter, whose hay-loaded cart is stuck in the mud. He curses his horses, giving them up to the devil. The summoner, full of excitement, seizes upon the opportunity and suggests that the devil should take the horse, cart, and its load. In the devil's answer the matter of "entente," which has lurked in the tale since its beginning, surfaces. The devil makes a distinction between what the man says and what he actually means. As soon as the cart is pulled out of the mud, the carter blesses his horses and rides away. His curse was apparently not what he intended.

Ironically, the devil's dealings with the carter are impeccable not only morally but also legally. After he announces his real identity, the devil gives the summoner a chance to nullify the contract that binds them as brothers, which the latter declines in protest. The medieval legal practice required a person to prove the truth of his oath by repeating it correctly and having sufficient number of compurgators. "According to the practice, the compurgator lost the case in one of two ways: Either the oaths were repeated incorrectly or the defendant failed to gather the appropriate number of compurgators" (Kline 283). The carter finally takes back his oath that gives his cart to the devil by replacing it with a blessing. Unable or unwilling to see the legal procedures used to judge intent, the summoner is ready to twist the law to his interest. That he is already slipping down to Hell is apparent as he is portrayed as a man who is worse than the devil himself.

The second curse in the tale, which seals the Summoner's fall, comes from the old widow Mabely, whom the Summoner accuses of having cheated on her husband and from whom he hopes to extort "twelf pens" for her invented sin. Yet, sure of her innocence, she refuses to pay the summoner any money. When finally the Summoner, content with any profit, threatens to take her pan, her angry curse gives the Summoner to the devil unless he repents. The Summoner openly announces that he will not repent. This answer raises questions about the Summoner's inability to see the old widow's intent. The meaning of Mabely's words is obvious even to the summoner with his limited intelligence. Yet he has made his own intent clear since he first made the devil. Dazzled by the possibility of getting more money, he has two aims in mind: to extort

twelve pence from the widow, and to have his share of the devil's fortune. He tells the devil that he is destined to the widow's house with the intention of getting from her his master's "duetee." Reminded that he is free to leave the devil, the summoner protests:

"Nay," quod this somonour, "that shal not betyde!  
I am a yeman, knowen is ful wyde;  
My trouthe wol I holde, as in this cas.  
For though thou were the devil Sathanas,  
My trouthe wol I holde to my brother,  
As I am sworn, and ech of us til oother,  
For to be trewe brother in this cas;  
And bothe we goon aboute oure purchas.  
Taak thou thy part, what men thou yive,  
And I shal myn; thus may we both lyve.  
And if that any of us have moore than oother,  
Lat him be trewe and parte it with his brother" (1523-1534).

The Summoner's insistence to stay with the devil serves the purposes of the tale's narrator to present to the reader not a gullible, innocent Summoner, but one who is aware of the fact that he is destined to hell. Yet he is blinded with greed to such an extent that the reality of hell is obscured to him. It is not mere coincidence that he is given chances as in the above example from the beginning to the end. Each of his refusals demonstrates the extent of his sinfulness and greed. The only principle that the Summoner acts upon in distinguishing words and the intent behind them is self-interest and avarice. When, for example, he takes the carter's curse literally, he does not really worry about the intent behind the words, because the carter's giving up the horse and the carriage to the devil will add to the devil's treasure that the summoner hopes to share as his sworn brother. Similarly in the next instance, when the widow's curse sends him to hell, it is not possible that he might mistake sincerity of her words. In fact it is the Summoner himself who states his preference between giving up the fee and being carried off to hell by the devil: "the foule feend me feche / If that I th'excuse, though thou shul be spilt!" (1610-11). Similarly, given a final choice between repentance and going to hell, he chooses the latter, because he thinks it is where his interest lies. His answer to the widow reveals his true feelings: "'Nay' olde stot, That is not myn entente,' / Quod this somonour, ' for to repente me / For anything that I have had of thee. / I wolde I hadde thy smok and every clooth!'" (1630-33).

The summoner remains true to his pledge with the demon, and even to the very end the summoner chooses—and fully intends—to associate himself only his devilish peer. . . . [T]he summoner’s failure to repent of his evil intention proves the impossibility of his redemption, yet his absolute devotion to extorting the widow affirms his unconditional fidelity to his initial contractual pledge with the demon. As a result, the highly adaptable nature of informal contracts, which allows the summoner to take advantage of contingent social relations for economic gain, also provides for his own damnation, exactly in the collaborative terms described by the demon. (Kline 286)

By choosing to go with the devil and insistently overlooking his chances of salvation, the Summoner crosses the threshold between this world and hell. His final preference for hell marks his ultimate break with his ties to his master, the archdeacon and the master of the universe, God. In contrast, the devil remains faithful to his own master till the end. It is interesting to note that he appears before the Summoner as a yeoman, an image of the ordinary good man, and this ironic contrast to the Summoner seals the latter’s moral inferiority even before the demon.

According to Klein, *The Friar’s Tale* can be read as an embodiment of “cultural anxiety concerning the nature of changing social and economic relations as mediated by new forms of legal alliance that were superceding traditional feudal relationships” (289). These new legal forms were developed in Chaucer’s time in order to meet the demands of the larger socio-economic changes that were taking place, making the people question their position not only in social environments but also in the universe as they stood before God.

Next to the cosmic overtones of *The Friar’s Tale*, *The Summoner’s Tale* takes place in the man-made universe of a social environment. The tale parodies the assumed erudition and arrogance of the friar, who is supposed to have the virtues of modesty, poverty, and self-restraint. His learning, which he prides himself on, cannot save him from being humiliated by a “lewed” churl much below his “estaat.” Outwitted by a churl, proven less clever than a young squire, he degrades himself in front of his inferiors as well as his superiors. Since all his rhetoric depends on his social and intellectual superiority, Friar John loses the effectiveness of his verbal gift, which he has depended on in order to collect goods from people. Although the Friar’s fall does not at first sight appear as fatal as the Summoner’s since it is primarily concerned with social status and intellectual hierarchy, his loss of status reflects a deeper sense of decline: in fact just like the protagonist of *The Friar’s Tale*, the Friar in this tale is shown to belong to the domain of hell. Not only does he have sins of greed, gluttony, and

avarice he also commits the most important sin, pride, the sin of Lucifer. In other words, through the Summoner's mouth, Chaucer presents another human drama of supernatural significance, this time hidden behind the metaphor of social milieu.

While the Summoner intentionally chooses his doom, the protagonist of *The Summoner's Tale* is unaware of causing his own "downfall." Although he is the main contributor to his end, he cannot perceive the connotations of his own words and actions. His exaggerated self-esteem and over-inflated ego cause him to mistake other's actions for what he projects on them. The Summoner in *The Friar's Tale* was unable to distinguish between others' words and the intent behind them; however, the friar is unable to grasp the consequences and significance of his own words. The Summoner's parody of the friar takes its strength from the ironic contrast in a man who boasts of the power of his speech, yet who is deaf to its content and the effect it creates on the hearer.

*The Summoner's Tale* does not have known sources that Chaucer completely drew upon. The scholars have found similar stories known in the Middle Ages, but they all end at the unexpected gift. The rest of the story is supposed to have been invented by Chaucer himself. The condition on which the gift is presented prepares the grounds for the ending. The ending is highly significant, because it is a parody of the dispensation of the apostolic spirit at Pentecost. Friars, who claim to have inherited this spirit, were subject to a large criticism in medieval literature<sup>4</sup>. Sharing this satiric view, Chaucer employs puns and word plays to add to the humour of the story while poking fun at the Friar. Jay Ruud shows, by an etymological study of the word "spirit," that in *The Summoner's Tale* the spirit Friar John deserves has been reduced to Thomas's fart, instead of "an ineffable holy presence" (133).

From the beginning *The Summoner's Tale* presents a pseudo-apostle Friar enveloped in sins that he is supposed to despise. Friar John violates every rule of Franciscan orders that had originally dedicated themselves to a world of spirituality and poverty. He journeys in a group of three instead of two; he carries a staff, wanders from one house to another, is not content with what is hospitably offered to him; instead of creating a soothing effect, his words have a sickening effect on Thomas; his greeting is "*Deus hic!*" instead of "Peace be to this house" (Olson 217, Ruud 131-32, Szittyá 39-40). Despite having sworn to lead a life of poverty and modesty, he sits at the most comfortable place, removing the cat from the bench (Pearsall 224). He lies about having prayed for the souls of his brethren. He gives a hearty kiss to Thomas's wife and orders a gourmet meal although he claims to be "a man of litel sustenance" (1844). When he hears about the death of Thomas's son, he can easily invent a lie on the spot: " 'His death saugh I by revelacioun,' / Seide this frere, 'at hoom in oure dortour. / I dar

wel seyn that half an hour / After his death, so God me wisse!’ ” (1854-58). Then he goes on to explain why he and his convent are chosen by God for His revelations: they live in poverty, despising worldly riches and have purity of soul. In short he claims to be everything he is not.

After a long speech of self-praise, associating himself with virtuous Biblical figures and bending and twisting the Biblical text, Friar John becomes intolerable to bedridden Thomas, who has been listening to him, probably grinding his teeth all the while. He has spent much money on friars with the hopes that their prayers might heal his illness, but no good has come out from them. Therefore, he refuses to take confession and pay the Friar to purify his soul. Friar John, nonetheless, knows the answer to everything: Thomas’s mistake lies in his dispersing his money among many convents, instead of giving it all to John’s. “What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve? / Lo ech thyng that is oned in himselve / Is moore strong than whan it is toscatered” (1967-69): Friar John, unknowingly prepares the grounds for his punishment at the end of the tale.

John’s preaching shifts from one subject to another. He does not neglect mentioning that they are building a new church so that they can pray God to heal Thomas not only physically but also psychologically as the latter’s anger becomes more and more visible. However, John does not, for a moment, attribute it to himself. Upon his wife’s complaints about Thomas’s wrath, John starts a sermon about the destructiveness of the sin of Ire. Yet instead of demonstrating wrath as a sin for the person who feels it, all the three examples he gives teach a practical moral lesson: keep away from an angry man for your well-being, especially if he is more powerful than you are. This constitutes one of the ironies of the tale: Friar John cannot follow the lesson of his own sermon; on the contrary, he continues to stimulate further Thomas’s anger.

The final and unmistakable “blow” comes when John openly asks Thomas for more money. Promising to divide it equally among the brethren in his convent, he receives his noisy reward. Enraged by this unexpected gift of fart, he goes to the lord of the village. When he tells the lord what has happened, the latter, astounded by the imaginative power of a simple “cherl,” resolves that he is possessed by a devil. Yet the squire, who is carving and dividing the meat for the lord, comes up with a solution to the problem that Thomas has exposed. Each of the twelve friars will sit at one spoke of a cartwheel, with Friar John, located right under the hub, “By cause he is a man of greet honour, / Shal have the firste fruyt, as reson is” while churl Thomas presents his gift sitting on the hub (2276-77). On this ingenious solution, the lord and his household congratulate the squire and compare him to Euclid and Ptolemy as young Jankyn also earns the gown that the lord had promised.

Friar John's punishment comes as result of his hypocrisy, gluttony, wrath, and more than anything else, arrogance and pride in his learning and superiority. "Chaucer invites his courtly audience to move beyond the Summoner's churlish, scatological humor and share in a more private joke, a genteel and more pertinent attack on the friars' pretensions to social position of power in the halls of then rich" (Georgianna 153). *The Summoner's Tale* is prepared for gradually. When the Friar defines a summoner's job in his prologue, the Host interrupts him: "A, sire, ye sholde be hende / And corteys, as a man of youre estaat" (1285-86); the Friar should not lower himself in front his social inferiors. His own tale continues the tone of his superiority. Through it the Friar shows off his ostentatious knowledge of spiritual matters. The tone of the devil to the summoner in the tale echoes Friar Huberd's superior and boastful manner. The Friar's identification of himself with the devil has been noted by H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., who argues that the Friar cannot suppress the urge to display his superiority at the expense of speaking through the devil's mouth.

Although the Friar originally claims that he will not make use of his theological expertise, even his denial makes it clear that he regards his intellectual training and ability as an important aspect of his 'estaaat' that separates him from 'such paraille' as the Summoner. . . In order to find a spokesman for these feelings of superiority . . . the Friar is led to an identification with the devil. (26)

Friar John in the *Summoner's Tale* subtly announces his social position in the tale. He is addressed as "deere master" by Thomas after he salutes him with the words, pretending to represent God. John does not correct Thomas's address despite his claims to modesty. His following speech continues the tone of his sense of superiority to Thomas. He tells Thomas he "seyde a sermon after my simple wit— / Nat al after the text of hooly writ, / For it is hard to yow I suppose" (1789-91). Although he has "simple wit," he is able to understand and "glose" the holy Scripture, which is "hard" for Thomas.

Despite its apparent hierarchical structure in which the friar seems to be the superior one, the relationship between Friar John and Thomas depends on egalitarian trade values.

From the very beginning of the tale the friar establishes his mode of free enterprise, with its strong emphasis on accounting procedures and competitive market sources. . .

The Friar's business with Thomas . . . is a form of private enterprise that depends on his ability to persuade the wealthy villager to pay the friar for his "werk" so that the friars, in return, can continue to produce "effectueel" prayers on Thomas's behalf. (georgianna 158)

It is Thomas's gift that destroys this mercantile relationship. His act supplies instead a hierarchical, feudal one in which the superior and inferior roles are reversed. Since his gift is not a commodity, it should be treated as any act of donation, which only a superior could endow on an inferior, and which receives its "value" from the act of giving itself. Thus it serves as a reminder to Friar John of his humiliation by a churl.

"The shift from Thomas's house to the lord's court completes the move from the horizontal relations of independent agents in a mercantile brotherhood to the vertical relations of older feudal practices associated with the manor" (Georgianna 160-61). John's initial role in the manor is that of a confessor. The lord is the second person that addresses him as "maister." Yet this time John's response is totally different from the previous case: " 'No maister, sire' quod he, 'but servitour, / Thogh I have had scole in that honour' " (2185-86). Before the lord, Friar John has shifted his mercantile values that depend on equality of parties to the hierarchical ones by acknowledging the lord's social superiority. According to Lindahl's social ranking, friars in fact occupy a position between middle and upper middle classes (22). Friar John is absolutely aware of where he stands; not only does he consider himself superior to Thomas but he also looks down on other members of clergy and even other Franciscan orders. However, the Summoner's purpose is to demonstrate that the friars' assumed superiority stands on no firm grounds: "If the Summoner can strip away Huberd's polite veneer and elicit boorish speech from him, he will have made his case: one's words are oneself, and Huberd is simply a churl, in disguise" (Lindahl 119). In fact the Host's warning to Huberd to watch his language to fit his "estaat" has a similar effect on the reader.

In *The Summoner's Tale*, Friar John's churlishness unfolds on multiple layers. In addition to the loss of his spiritual status the friar has to suffer intellectual humiliation. Already insulted by Thomas, he is intellectually humiliated by a young squire. John, who thinks that he and his order keep the world from destruction by their scriptural erudition, is not only humiliated by a simple churl like Thomas but also surpassed in "ars-metrike" by a young scholar. Furthermore, as a result, he is socially downgraded before the lord. Although he had initially been the lord's confessor and a respectable scholar in his manor, the lord gradually sees no harm in giving up his respectful attitude towards the friar and takes over his superior role. "In this role the lord becomes more dominant and distanced from the friar, even as Friar John's wounded pride compels him to inflate the consequences of Thomas's insult without naming it" (Georgianna 165). When he loses the most important image that he wears, Friar John becomes "salt" that has lost its saltiness and turned into "nothing but to be thrown out and trodden under foot" (Ruud 129). The friar's intellectual humiliation does not end here; despite his boasted learning, he cannot go beyond literalness. When he goes to the lord's dwelling,

his main concern is how to find a solution to divide Thomas's fart equally among the brethren in his order. "The friar, in treating Thomas's terms as a contract—or text to be glossed, has already unwittingly elevated Thomas to the status of a scholar" (Georgianna 169). John's self-confident, patronising tone with Thomas at the beginning turns into a helpless, protesting request with the lord to restore the initial order. However, also the lord recognises Thomas's new position; and with his judgment, acknowledges him as a scholar (169). The man who located himself between the lord and the churl thus falls from his position by a tricky gift. At the end of the tale it is admitted that "heigh wit made [Thomas] speken as he spak; / He nys no fool ne no demonyak" (2291-92).

The lord's appreciation of Thomas's "wit" functions in more ways than humiliating the falsity of Friar John; it also shifts the grounds of argument from religion to "natural science" (Somerset 206). Thus, according to Finlayson,

[t]he lord . . . shifts the "meaning" of Thomas's gift from a religious gift to a secular one. . . . [A]the very end of the Tale Friar John's claim to authority has been rejected by the lord of the manor through the secular "ars-metrical" solution of the wheel. . . . By siding with Thomas and resolving the problem through the application of the lay knowledge of the squire, rather than through the appeals to theology or ecclesiastical dogma, the lord of the manor ends the tale on the supremacy of secular authority. (464, 468)

Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale* can thus be read as a testimony of the upcoming collapse of the very foundations of the medieval system in which religious authority prevailed over the worldly authority, and the latter could function not as self-justifiable entities but only as embodiments or extensions of religious authority.

Similarly, in her discussion to demonstrate the connection between money and scatology, Beechy finds *The Summoner's Prologue* and *Tale* as "fitting choices as interlocutors and parodic referents for Gay's critique of greed in early capitalist England, as Chaucer's satire in fact prefigures the paradox of value and money that was to become such an issue in the socio-economic order of Gay's England" (76). Gay's adaptation of Chaucer's *Tale* for his criticism of the economic transformations in eighteenth century England demonstrates the latter's awareness of the seeds of these transformations at his time, which would culminate in more radical changes by the time of Gay's England.

The anxiety over such changes informs not only this tale but the previously discussed *Friar's Tale*, for despite their narrators' animosity and hostility, both narrators

are very much aware that they will be the first to fall in the upcoming socio-economic system. As the figures of both the Summoner and the Friar represent middle statuses in the tales, they also figure as centers of the systems in which they exist. Therefore, their falls in these tales point at larger social and economic changes that were already on the horizon in Chaucer's time. Mercantile economy was gradually but surely replacing the feudal economy and money, which was rising next to the barter economy, was already becoming more than a means of exchange and the new alternative value for the old values of honor and loyalty. Therefore, it is no coincidence that both of the protagonists commit the sin of greed and fall primarily because of this. Furthermore, their fall as men in the middle or as pillars of the old system announces the fast approaching fall of the whole system: what is on the horizon is not a partial social and economic change but a radical transformation that will shatter everything that the medieval men and women believed and lived by. This transformation will alter not only the world and things of the world, but, as is apparent from the cosmic tone of *The Friar's Tale* and the protagonist and his profession in *The Summoner's Tale*, also otherworldly perceptions and man's relations to God. As such then, both tales can be taken as Chaucer's heralding of the forthcoming age that approaches without warning and much delay.

### Notes

- <sup>2</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. Ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1987), 1283-85. All subsequent quotations from Chaucer are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text.
- <sup>3</sup> For a full argument on the competing discourses of religion, law and economics in *The Friar's Tale*, see Daniel Kline, " 'Myne by right': Oath Making and Intent in *The Friar's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 77.3 (1998): 271-93.
- <sup>4</sup> Some of the pioneering work that regards *The Summoner's Tale* as Chaucer's contribution to antifraternal satire can be found in John V. Fleming, "The Antifraternalism of *The Summoner's Tale*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 65 (1966) 688-700; Alan Levitan, "The Parody of Pentecost in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40 (1971): 236-46; and Penn R. Szittyta, "The Friar as False Apostle: Antifraternal Exegesis and *The Summoner's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 71 (1974): 19-46.

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