

Some Verbal Features in *The Summoner's Tale*

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The Summoner was trembling “lyk an aspen leef” (1667) with anger, since he suspected the Friar to have satirized him. In retaliation for his bitter scorn, he made insulting remarks to him. Guided by an angel, he went to see the hell, but he could not find any friars. To his request, the Summoner responded, exclaiming as follows:

‘Hold up thy tayl, thou Sathanas!..

Shewe forth thyn *ers*, and lat the frere se

Where is the nest of freres in this place!’ (1689-91)¹

Then he found the friars’ nest around the arse of the Satan. They were busily going in and out of the arse as usually do a swarm of bees.

The Summoner is particularly interested in “ers” which occurs four times within the forty four lines prior to starting the tale proper. Later this word will be deeply concerned with the import of this tale. Let us consider the use of word and phrase from the contextual and semantic point of view.

I

This Somonour in his styropes hye stood;

Upon this Frere his herte was so *wood*

That *lyk an aspen leef* he quook for ire. (1665-7)²

As we know well, the Summoner retaliates on the Friar, just as the Reeve does on the Miller. Summoners are generally on bad terms with friars. Trevor Whittock suggests that “the quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner arises, we feel, from the rivalry of competitors. Each accuses the other of similar vices, with mutual justice.”

They are speaking ill of each other in their presence. The word for anger is unusually rich within the tale. In order of decreasing frequency, there are “wood, ire, irous, anger, angry, rage, wroth.” The friar is preaching the sermon that anger makes men go to ruin. Latin *ira* for anger is one of the words signifying the seven deadly sins:

Ire is a synne, oon of the grete of sevene,
Abhomynable unto the God of hevene;
And to hymself it is destruccion.
This every lewed viker or person
Kan seye, how ire engendreth homycide.
Ire is, in sooth, executour of pryde.
I koude of ire seye so mucche sorwe,
My tale sholde laste til to-morwe.
And therefore preye I God bothe day and nyght
An irous man, God sende hym litel myght!
It is greet harm and certes greet pitee
To sette an irous man in heigh degree. (2005-16)

The friar is bragging that his tale shall last till the next day and then is making a lengthy tale about cruel deeds done by “an irous potestat,” “irous Cambises” and “irous Cirus.” Although the friar is talking to the

audience concerning the sin of anger, he commits the sin when he obtains Thomas's gift. His sermon is directed at the virtue of poverty, but he himself is addicted to gluttony. In this inconsistent point, he resembles closely the wicked words and deeds of the Pardoner:

His meynee, whiche that herden this affray,
Cam lepyng in and chaced out the frere;
And forth he gooth, with a ful angry cheere,
And fette his felawe, ther as lay his stoor.
He looked as it were a wilde boor;
He grynte with his teeth, so was he wrooth. (2156-61)

He is terribly enraged at Thomas's "fart" offered as a gift. Soon he attempts to retaliate on him. Because of anger, he can hardly speak a word before a village headman, which reminds us of the opening scene where the Summoner is trembling "like an aspen leaf."³ Let us provide a superb example mirroring the discrepancy between what is meant and what is done:

This frere cam as he were *in a rage*,
Where as this lord say etyng at his bord;
Unnethe myghte the frere speke a word... (2166-8)

"Arse," intentionally placed in advance, engenders some scatological terms, such as "tayl," "fundement," "buttok," "pryvetee," "clifte" and "tuwel." "Tuwel," repeated as often as eight times, is directly related with the whole tale. Needless to say, the scene of climax is that the friar puts his hand in Thomas's back and fingers some thing:

"Now thanne, put in thyn hand down by my bak."
Seyde this man, "and grope wel bihynde.

Bynethe my buttok there shaltow fynde
 A thyng that I have hyd in pryvetee."
 "A!" thoghte this frere, "That shal go with me!"
 And doun his hand he launcheth to the clifte
 In hope for to fynde there a yifte.
 And whan this sike man felte this frere
 Aboute his tuwel grope there and heere,
 Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart;
 Ther nys no capul, drawyng in a cart,
 That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun. (2140-51)

The fanny scene appears in *The Miller's Tale* where hende Nicholas's buttock was branded with a hot coulter, as in "And out his ers he putteth pryvely / Over the buttok, to the haunche-bon" (3802-3). (See *The Reeve's Tale* and *The Parson's Tale*). Chaucer makes frequent use of "pryvetee," implying both secret and private parts, as well exemplified in *The Miller's Tale*:

An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
 Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf. (3163-4)

"Clifte," implying 'the cleft between the buttocks,' is exploited figuratively. A more fruitful use is made of "tuwel" in *The House of Fame*:

And such a smoke gan out wende
 Out of his foule trumpes ende,
 Blak, bloo, greynssh, swartish red,
 As doth where that men melte led,
 Loo, al on high fro the tuel. (HF 1645-9)

John H. Fisher observes that “tuel” means explicitly chimney, but implicitly anus, used, of course, as a double entendre.⁴ Therefore, “foule trumpes ende” may be suggestive of “anus”:

Fart is Nis but of eir reverberacioun (2234).

III

The phrase “bees’s going in and out of an hive” is easily associated with “ers.” Consequently the stream of the story is flowing to an unexpected direction:

Right so as bees out swarmen from an hyve,
Out of the develes ers ther gonne dryve
Twenty thousand freres on a route,
And thurghout helle swarmed al aboute,
And comen agayn as faste as they may gon,
And in his ers they crepten everychon.(1693-8)

Interestingly enough, we become aware that Chaucer makes clever use of the imagery of a beehive, though complicatedly entangled with each other. Tatlock states that “chaced” and “chaast,” used homophonically, is “the most delightful and the most natural pun in Chaucer”:⁵

Delivereth out... anon the soules! (1729)

And whan that he was out at dore, anon
He planed away the names everichon
That he biforn had writen in his tables...(1757-9)

Fro Paradys first, if I shal nat lye,

Was man out chaced for his glotonye;
And chaast was man in Paradys, certeyn. (1915-7)

Man was chaste while staying in Paradise, but regrettably, due to gluttony he was “out chaced” from Paradise. We naturally associate man’s banishment with that of John. According to *The Book of Genesis*, Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden because of having eaten the apples forbidden by God:

Corrupt was al this world for glotonye.
Adam oure fader, and his wyf also,
Fro Paradys to labour and to wo
Were dryven for that vice, it is no drede. (*PardT* 504-7)

As noted above, the friar is committing the sin of gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins. Accordingly the terms related to foodstuffs artistically reveal how the friar is leading an extravagant life in which he is addicted to gluttony. Then let us enumerate the variety of “mete” (1875, 2241, 2244).

Talking of “foode” (1881, 2102), there are bacon (1753), beef (1753), brawn (1750), softe breed (1840), capon (1839), chese (1739, 1747), corn (1739), kechyl (1747), lyvere (1839), malt (1746), mele (1739, 1746), muscle (2100), oystre (2100), rosted pigges heed (1841), reye (1746), shyvere (1840), whete (1746).

for many a muscle and many an oystre,
Whan othere men han ben ful wel at eyse,
Hath been oure foode, our cloystre for to reyse. (2100-2)

Talking of “drynke” (1875), it will suffice here to refer to “wyn” (2054, 2058, 2059, 2071).

VI

The preposition “in” here is associated with the abbey within which, he says, the hypocritical friar John saw by revelation the death of Thomas’s son. Day and night the friars is praying in the chapter as declares John:

In loure chapitre praye we day and nyght
To Crist, that he thee sende heele and myght
Thy body forto weelden hastily. (1945-7)

“Belch” is, of course, one of the commonest words easily associated with “out”:

Lo, ‘buf!’ they seye, ‘cor meum eructavit!’ (1934)

“Buf” is the sound of belch. This Latin phrase is quoted from Psalms 45. The surface meaning of Latin is “my heart has uttered,” but “eructavit” has already acquired the derogatory meaning of ‘belched’:⁶

Ther nys no capul, drawyng in a cart,
That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun. (2150-1)

“Soun” occurs also in *The Pardoner’s Tale*:

O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,
Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
At either ende of thee foul is the soun. (*PardT* 534-6)

“The soun” connotes the sound of fart, i.e. the reverberation of air, “buf” is expounded by the acoustic term:

The rumblyng of a fart, and every soun,
Nis but of eir reverberacoun... (2233-4).

Thomas's members jumped in and expelled John:

His meynee, whiche that herden this affray,
Cam lepynge in and chaced out the frere;
And forth he gooth, with a ful angry cheere,
And fette his felawe, ther as lay his stoor. (2156-9)

The most important thing is the relationship of mind to body. John emphasizes the importance of fasting:

Faste leads to fastynge and clene leads to clenness.

This depends on Hieronimus's remark "Melius est animum saginare quam corpus":

Whoso wol preye, he moot faste and be clene,
And fatte his soule, and make his body lene.
We fare as seith th'apostle; clooth and foode
Suffisen us, though they be nat ful goode. (1879-82)

He refers to *Matt. 5 : 3* :

Blessed be they that povere in spirit been. (1923)

"He and his brethren," John says, "see more of Christ's holy things than lay people; for friars live in poverty and abstinence in contrast to the lay person's foul delight and lavish expenditure on food and drink."⁷ The hypocritical friar preaches poverty with a lip compliment. He is steeped in earthly desires. He is the incarnation of avarice. The pursuit of a gaudy life stands out in a bold relief through preaching:

We lyve in poverte and in abstinence,

And burell folk in riches and despence
Of mete and drynke, and in hir ful delit.
We han this worldes lust al in despit. (1873-6)

The point of this tale is how cunningly he twists words in order to satisfy his carnal desire. However desperately he tries to hide it, it is due to the mystery of words that his wicked heart is exposed to light of itself. Speech is a broken air as is fart. In this point, his speech is nothing but fart. John Gardner observes that there are two motifs of impurity and wrath in this tale.⁸ Contrary to sermon on purity and patience, his words displays how he is impure and wrathful.

V

It is notably typical that a variety of animals appear, most of which are traditionally used to make outstanding a person's features:

Right so as bees out swarmen from an hyve,
Out of the develes ers ther gonne dryve...(1692-3)

Chaucer uses "a swarm of been and as thikke as been," and "as bisy as bees" which is associated with "bisy freres" (1940). This is subtly related to the whole organization of the tale:

And fro the bench he droof away the cat,
And leyde adoun his potente and his hat,
And eek his scrippe, and sette hym softe adoun. (1775-7)

He drives away a cat, but ironically he in its turn is driven out of the house. Chaucer pays close points:

The frere ariseth up curteisly,

And hire embraceth in his armes narwe,
And kiste hire swete, and chirketh as a aparwe
With his lypes: (1802-5)

Chaucer uses “lecherous as a sparwe” (*Gen Prol* 626) and “the sparwe, Venus sone” (*PF* 351). Traditionally a sparrow has been regarded as a bird of lecherousness. It is quite suitable to qualify the character of John:

He is as angry as a pissemyre,
Though that he have al that he kan desire; (1825-6)

The *OED* defines “pissemyre” (piss + mire = ant) as ‘the urinous smell of an ant-hill.’ John Fisher notes ‘contemptuous term for an ant’:⁹

He groneth lyk oure boor, lith oure sty. (1829)

This means a pig. Diomede is also compared to boar as follows:

This ilke boor bitokneth Diomede. (*Tr* V 1513)

Again a wild boar appears:

He looked as it were a wild boor. (2160)

Have I nat of a capon but the lyvere,
And of youre softe breed ant but a shyvere,
And after that rosted pligges heed —
But that I nolde no beest for me were deed —
Thanne hadde I with yow hoomly suffisaunce. (1839-43)

“Capon” means “a castrated cock.” It can be easily imagined from the above animal words that the friar would habitually eat a castrated cock, soft

bread, the liver, a shiver and a roasted pig's head, all of which ordinary people cannot relish at all. He is indulged in eating and drinking immoderately. "Hoomly suffisaunce," meaning 'enough plain food,' sounds greatly ironic:

Me thynketh they been lyk Jovinyan,
Fat as a whale, and walkynge as a swan,
Al vinolent as botel in the spence. (1929-31)

This is an appropriate expression to characterize John:

Therefore, right as an hauk up at a sours
Up springeth into th'eir, right so prayeres
Of charitable and chaste bisy freres
Maken hir sours to Goddes eres two. (1938-41)

No doubt, "hauk" here may echo "As any hauk to lure in Engeland" (1340) in *The Friar's Tale* previously told:

Withinne thyn hous ne be thou no leon;
To thy subgiz do noon oppression,
Ne make thyne aqueyntances nat to flee. (1989-91)

Later the friar jumps up like a lion:

The frere up stirte as dooth a wood leoun. (2152)

A serpent occurs figuratively in the form of simile or proverb:

Be war from Ire that in thy bosom slepeth;
War fro the serpent that so slily crepeth
Under the gras and styngeth subtilly. (1993-5)

This goes back to Virgil, *Eclogae* III, 93: *late anguis in herba*,¹⁰ that is 'A snake in the grass,' which means a person who has a wicked mind. Accordingly unknown danger is the most dangerous. Unknown enemy is like a serpent in the grass. Here the friar warns Thomas's wife of repaying, but curiously he comes to resemble a serpent in the grass:

Ther nys, ywys, no serpent so cruel,
Whan man tret on his tayl, ne half so fel,
As womman is, whan she hath caught an ire; (2001-3)

In *The Squire's Tale* is found the comparison of an hypocrite to a serpent:

Right as a serpent hit hym under floure
Til he may seen his tyme for to byte... (*SqT* 512-3)

I have been interested in Chaucer's words, mainly because they evoke new meanings whenever I read. And new meanings are cumulatively added to a word and phrase as the context varies. It is interesting to survey them from the aspects of structure, meaning and style. "Grope," for instance, occurs:

Thisse curatz been ful necligent and slowe
To grope tendrely a conscience
In shrift; in prechyng is my diligence,
And studie in Petres wordes and in Poules. (1816-9)

"Grope" is figuratively used, meaning 'to examine (someone's conscience)' which is one of the priest's terms hearing confession. Accordingly, this word is used in spiritual and at the same time religious meaning. "Grope" has double meaning of 'to feel with the hand or fingers, touch,

stroke' (*MED*) and 'to examine the conscience or to probe the conscience.'
The greedy friar goes to Thomas's house and importunes him for money
and goods. Such a shameful act might have been seen everyday:

Now thanne, put in thyn hand doun by my bak,
...and grope wel bihynde,
Byneth the my buttock there shaltow fynde
A thyng that I have hyd in pryvetee. (2140-3)

The friar puts his hands in Thomas's back and begins to 'grobe' around the
buttock. Then he lets fart:

And doun his hand he launcheth to the clifte
In hope for to fynde there a yifte.
And whan this sike man felte this frere
Aboute his tuwel grope there and heere,
Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart;
Ther nys no capul, drawynge in a cart,
That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun. (2145-51)

"Grobe" has a broad meaning, ranging from spiritual to material. A gift
from Thomas, the first fruits, i.e. fart is divided equally into the twelve
friars in the convent.

VII

Thomas, that jape nys nat worth a myte.
Youre maladye is for we han to lyte.
A, yif that convent half a quarter otes!
A, yif that convent foure and twenty grotes!
A, yif that frere a peny, and lat him go!

Nay, nay, Thomas, it may no thyng be so!
What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve?
Lo, ech thyng that is oned in himselve
Is moore strong than whan it is toscatered. (1961-9)

Paul F. Baum notes that “ferthyng” has the double meaning of ‘farthing, or a quater of a penny’ and ‘farting’:¹¹

What is a farting worth divided into twelve?

“Farting” produces the similar word “fart” (2149, 2151, 2155, 2226, 2233, 2249, 2270).

One of the usual services required to a squire is to carve meat for the guests as represented in the General Prologue:

Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable,
And carf biforn his fader at the table. (*Gen Prol* 99-100)

Now stood the lordes squier at the bord,
That karf his mete, and herde word by word
Of alle thynges whiche I have yow sayd. (2243-5)

The time has come when a gift will be divided by “ars-metrike.” “Ars-metrike” has double meaning of ‘arithmetic’ and ‘ars measurement.’¹²

VIII

Chaucer makes use of various devices to draw the audience’s interest or curiosity. He exploits the art of reading riddle in order to rouse the hearers’ curiosity. The sick man Thomas gets angry at John and he wants to

burn him, if possible. He begins to speak:

Swich thyng as in my possessioun
...that may I yeve, and noon oother.

The hearers are sure to be puzzled at the intended meaning in the “swich thyng.” Further he goes on to speak:

Now wel...and somewhat shal I yive
Unto youre hooly whil I lyve;
And in thyn hand thou shalt it have anon. (2129-30)

Thomas says that he was groped about the buttock. What did John find out there? “Butttok” and “a thyng pryvetee” are colourless and transparent words, both of which are not indecent:

Bynethe my buttok there shaltow fynde
A thyng that I have hyd in pryvetee. (2142-3)

What on earth is a thing secretly concealed? But it has not been known yet. The tale unfolds as follows:

And doun his hand he launcheth to the clifte
In hope for to fynde there a yifte.
And whan this sike man felte this frere
Aboute his tuwel grope there and here,
Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart;
Ther nys no capul, drawynge in a cart,
That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun. (2145-51)

“A thyng” undoubtedly suggests fart. The story does not end here:

