GREED AND ANTI-FRATERNALISM IN CHAUCER’S
“SUMMONER’S TALE”

Derrick G. Pitard
Slippery Rock University

Abstract: In the “Summoner’s Tale,” the erudite friar/confessor’s avarice compromises his ability to gain alms from a “cherl,” Thomas. Thomas gives him a fart instead, a reductio ad absurdum of his avarice. The fart grounds the satire because it reduces the exchange to a bodily, vulgar utterance in which the friar finally hears Thomas’ refusal to confess. As in the “Pardoner’s Tale,” a cleric’s rhetorical power is stymied because of his commodification of the immaterial.

In the Lollard sermon “Omnis plantacio,” the speaker argues to his congregation that “in couetise” clerics “sell and buy from you with deceitful words, for they sell their prayers or good deeds and buy your worldly welfare with them; and in this way they engage in commerce [doen marchaundise] with you or for you with deceitful [feyned] words.”1 They sell their words of forgiveness to you with other, “feyned wordis.” This traffic in words, the Lollard writer says (invoking Saint Peter), is precisely how you will know them for the hypocrites they are. They commodify words, the means of salvation, and by extension they commodify your souls. To use the classic, Marxist definition, a commodity has value not in terms of what it can do (i.e., use value), but in terms of the money or other goods for which it can be traded (exchange value).2 The clerics’ ability to perform confession or preach has a specific economic exchange value in that it can be converted into cash. To the Lollard writer, then, clerics conceive of the process of penance as an economy in which spiritual values become useful for

1 The Works of a Lollard Preacher: The Sermon Omnis plantacio, the Tract Fundamentum aliud nemo potest ponere and the Tract De oblacione Iugis Sacri, ed. Anne Hudson, EETS os, 317 (Oxford, 2001), Egerton Tract, 473–75: “sillen and bien of 3ou in fayned wordis, for þei sillen her suffragiis or meritis, and bien þerwiþ 3oure worldi good; and þus doen marchaundise wiþ 3ou or of 3ou in feyned wordis.”
the profit they can turn. The “suffragis or meritis” in this economy, which clerics sell with “fayned wordis,” in fact have no cash value in and of themselves, though clerics deceive you into thinking so. This critique, which as we will see also appears in Chaucer’s “Summoner’s Tale,” makes language the keystone of an anti-clerical argument: clerical avarice is the conjoined twin of linguistic hollowness. Both the Friar and the Summoner (and the summoner and the friar in their tales) rely upon what Janette Richardson has called the “art of glibness” to victimize the laity. They do not take language, or their words, very seriously, and so they empty them to deceive.

What Chaucer believed about English that the Lollards did not was that it did not have to be an academic language to gain authority. In fact, he frequently made fun of academic pretension. Chaucer loved the quotidian—the dialects, the anger, the curses, even the farts—which made English a vernacular, and he used all of these aspects of language to lend linguistic authority to his characters. These forms of speech are not academic, but malleable, ephemeral, and often downright disrespectful. One key aspect of vernacularity is that it defies the linguistic stability which universities and other institutions need to survive. The problem for Chaucer is that these institutional forms become fossilized, emptied of meaning, and need the pressure of new forms to revivify them. This process can be rebellious, but the vernacular does not necessarily foment outright violence. Instead, the constant, creative upwelling of new linguistic forms, and of new (or at least the perception of new) images and ideas, always puts pressure on older linguistic forms, bending or forcing them to accommodate new meaning.

Satire is one way in which this pressure can be exerted, and Chaucer and Lollard writers were at times bitterly satiric. Satire is not composed just in the vernacular, of course, but if vernacularity implies resistance, this includes a mockery of what is resisted. Nor does this necessarily imply a fundamental disagreement with the object of satire, since it is also often accompanied by a sense of the object’s absurdity, or humor. And this indicates an instructive aspect of Chaucer’s work: his humor implies an ironic distance from a subject, even as he loves the subject. With Chaucerian satire, this perspective is always vital.

---

3 Janette Richardson, “Friar and Summoner, the Art of Balance,” The Chaucer Review 9,3 (1975): 231.