



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### 'He is ane Haly Freir'

The Freiris of Berwik, The Summoner's Tale, and The Tradition of Anti-Fraternal Satire

**Citation for published version:**

Salter, D 2013, 'He is ane Haly Freir': The Freiris of Berwik, The Summoner's Tale, and The Tradition of Anti-Fraternal Satire', *Scottish Literary Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 23-40.  
<[http://staging01.muse.jhu.edu/journals/scottish\\_literary\\_review/toc/slr.5.2.html](http://staging01.muse.jhu.edu/journals/scottish_literary_review/toc/slr.5.2.html)>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Scottish Literary Review

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Salter, D. (2013). 'He is ane Haly Freir': The Freiris of Berwik, The Summoner's Tale, and The Tradition of Anti-Fraternal Satire. *Scottish Literary Review* [formerly *Scottish Studies Review*], 5(2), 23-40.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.





PROJECT MUSE®

---

## 'He is ane Haly Freir': The Freiris of Berwik, The Summoner's Tale, and the Tradition of Anti-Fraternal Satire

David Salter

Scottish Literary Review, Volume 5, Number 2, Autumn/Winter 2013,  
pp. 23-40 (Article)

Published by Association for Scottish Literary Studies



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/slr/summary/v005/5.2.salter.html>

DAVID SALTER

---

**‘He is ane Haly Freir’: *The Freiris of Berwik, The Summoner’s Tale*, and the Tradition of Anti-Fraternal Satire**

---

**Abstract**

This essay explores the relationship of the fifteenth-century Scottish fabliau, *The Freiris of Berwik*, to the tradition of anti-fraternal satire. The tale’s depiction of the sinfulness of friars, the central motor of the plot, and the principle source of its comedy, might suggest that the narrative belongs to this literary tradition which from the middle of the thirteenth century pilloried the orders of friars for their supposed moral laxity. The essay compares *The Freiris of Berwik* to Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale*, which seamlessly brings together fabliau and anti-fraternal satire, using broad fabliau comedy not only to ridicule and disparage the corruption of friars, but to provoke feelings of indignation at their conduct. In the light of this comparison, the treatment of friars in the Scottish tale emerges as more ironic than satirical, suggesting that *The Freiris of Berwik* is concerned with eliciting laughter as an end in itself, rather than deploying this laughter to advance an anti-clerical, or more specifically an anti-fraternal, agenda.

INTRODUCTION: FABLIAU VS. ANTI-FRATERNAL SATIRE

The anonymous fifteenth-century comic tale, *The Freiris of Berwik*, opens with a fairly lengthy description of Berwick itself; an account which praises the town for its impressive array of battlements and fortifications, a set of defences which – according to the poet – are rendered all the more impregnable by their dramatic geographical and topographical location at the mouth of the river Tweed.<sup>1</sup> This evocation of place is given still further specificity with a list of Berwick’s more notable public landmarks and religious buildings: in addition to mentioning the walls and the castle, there

are references to the ‘grit croce kirk’ (the Trinitarian church of the Holy Cross) and the ‘Masone Dew’ (the Maison Dieu, the Dominican almshouse-hospital), as well as to the houses of all four orders of friars.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, this emphasis on the town’s physical defences, public spaces, and religious institutions might seem to be thematically out of keeping with the comic subject matter of the tale. After all, *The Freiris of Berwik* is a fabliau and, as we might expect from an example of the genre, the tale confines itself almost exclusively to a bourgeois, domestic location; in this case, the household of Symon Lawrear, which is actually situated outside the town’s walls.<sup>3</sup> R. D. S. Jack, however, has argued that this opening description of Berwick can be understood as integral to the tale’s comic agenda.<sup>4</sup> Jack sees the detailed specificity of the Berwick setting as part of a much broader Chaucerian influence on the poem: in this instance, a deliberate gesture to the strong sense of place found in Chaucer’s fabliaux. In Jack’s view, the unknown Scottish author uses his description of Berwick as a way of nodding to the ‘Oxenford’ of *The Miller’s Tale*, the ‘Trumpyngtoun’ of *The Reeve’s Tale*, and the ‘Holdernesse’ of *The Summoner’s Tale*, and in so doing to alert his audience – or at least that element of his audience familiar with Chaucer’s work – to the kind of comic, fabliau tale it might expect.<sup>5</sup>

But as well as a possible marker of Chaucer’s influence, the poem’s location in Berwick, as Jack further notes, offers a number of more immediately tangible comedic and narrative benefits. In the first place, the fact that Berwick has a defensive wall is given as the reason for Freir Robert and Freir Allane’s nocturnal presence at Symon Lawrear’s house: a circumstance which is essential to the unfolding comic action. It is because the two friars are travelling outside the walls late in the day, and fearing they will be barred entry to the town on account of their delayed return, that they ask Alesone, Symon’s wife, for shelter for the night (45-50; 75-81). Moreover, the impression of solidity and impregnability created by the opening description of the town’s fortifications provides, in Jack’s words, ‘an ironic counterpoint’ not only to the poor domestic defences of Symon’s household (which conspicuously fail to keep out the lecherous Freir Johine), but also to the many sexually suggestive images of porous thresholds and gateways found in the poem. And finally, and most significantly from the point of view of the present discussion, Berwick was the only Scottish town to contain the houses of all four fraternal orders – the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and Carmelites – so it offered the obvious setting for a tale

which both depended on, and sought to exploit for comic effect, the stereotype of the carnal, morally disreputable friar so familiar in contemporary literature.<sup>6</sup>

The location of the poem in Berwick, and the strong sense of particularity with which the poet invests this setting, can therefore be seen to serve a number of different purposes, whether comic, literary, or more broadly topical. What interests me is how the poem's location lends itself to the elements of fabliau within the tale, as well as to the closely related yet distinct source of comedy derived from its treatment of friars, not only as individuals, but also as representatives of a corporate or institutional body. One of the questions I will consider in this essay is whether the poet's comical treatment of friars can be said to be deliberately and self-consciously anti-clerical in nature, and how comedy, and fabliau comedy in particular, relate to and inform the poem's overarching understanding of the fraternal orders. In other words, I will be examining whether the poet's deployment of comedy can be said to serve a particular theological or ecclesiastical agenda. Does it carry satirical weight or import? Is comedy used to attack, even to condemn, the orders of friars; or is laughter treated as an end in itself, with the friars in the tale serving no further purpose than that of offering the audience a source of comic pleasure, to be enjoyed for its own sake?

This essay will thus examine the anonymous poet's representation of the three friars – Freir Johine, Freir Robert, and Freir Allane – and will explore to what extent the tale can be said to belong to the European-wide tradition of anti-fraternal satire, which pilloried members of the four orders of friars for their moral shortcomings and hypocrisy. The emergence of anti-fraternal satire can be dated very precisely to the middle of the thirteenth century (just half a century after the founding of the first two orders: the Franciscans and Dominicans), and the comically disparaging image of the friar which it perpetuated proved to be extremely durable and long-standing.<sup>7</sup> The genre of fabliau would seem to provide the poet of *The Freiris of Berwik* with the ideal medium for attacking the fraternal orders. The vices ascribed to friars in satirical writing, such as lechery, avarice, pride, wrath, and hypocrisy, are the very same characteristics we see attached to the flawed anti-heroes of fabliaux, and the unfolding of the typical fabliau plot could, therefore, not only be said to create a fictional space in which to expose, humiliate, and punish the wrongdoing of an individual friar, but also generate feelings of opprobrium and indignation against the corruption

and moral laxity of the fraternal institutions more generally. This is what we see in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*, for instance, which deftly brings together fabliau and anti-fraternal satire to produce these twin elements: the comic humiliation of an individual, Friar John, and the broader condemnation of the religious order to which he belongs. For various reasons, however, the alignment of fabliau and anti-fraternal satire is, as we shall see, less straightforward in *The Freiris of Berwik*. I will explore the ways in which Chaucer synthesises the elements of fabliau and anti-fraternal satire in *The Summoner's Tale* to examine how he uses the broad, physical comedy of fabliau as a vehicle for ridiculing not just one particular friar, but the ecclesiastical function and duties of friars in general: what the Summoner refers to as the friar's 'office'.<sup>8</sup> And the example of Chaucer's comic tale will provide a useful perspective from which to view *The Freiris of Berwik*, helping to highlight how, and perhaps also why, the Scottish tale diverges from Chaucer's pattern, offering instead a narrative in which it is less easy to discern a straightforwardly satirical attack on the friars.

#### CHAUCER'S *SUMMONER'S TALE*: ECCLESIASTICAL SATIRE OR SELF-CONSCIOUS LITERARY EXPERIMENT?

At the end of *The Wife of Bath's* lengthy, prolix, and confessional prologue to her tale, an ill-tempered dispute suddenly breaks out between two of the other Canterbury pilgrims: the Friar and the Summoner. The Friar's initial interruption of the Wife – offering somewhat patronising, even sarcastic praise for the 'long preamble' to her tale – provokes a furious reaction from the Summoner, who accuses his fellow pilgrim of meddling in other people's affairs: a mode of behaviour which he sees as typical of friars.<sup>9</sup> This eruption of animosity between the Friar and the Summoner, an animosity rooted in professional rivalry, sets the literary agenda for their two tales, with each promising to recount a narrative at his antagonist's expense, using what we would now think of as the negative stereotypes associated with the other's occupation as a form of personal invective. And this is, indeed, what subsequently ensues. After the Wife completes her tale, which despite its remote setting 'In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour' (857), is still able to find room for a sly allusion to the lechery of friars (874-81), the Friar tells a tale about a summoner who is dragged off to Hell by a devil he has fool-

ishly befriended. This tale-telling round of adversarial tit-for-tat is then brought to a triumphant literary conclusion by the Summoner, whose tale recounts the humiliation of a certain Friar John, who, when soliciting a bequest from a dying man, receives from him the gift of a fart, which he is told he must distribute equally amongst his confreres.

In both of these tales, what is striking is the way in which the protagonists’ private selves are wholly subsumed by a sense of their public, professional personae. The identity of the Summoner in *The Friar’s Tale* is entirely constituted by the fact of his occupation: he has no given name (he is simply referred to as the ‘Somonour’ throughout), and his vices and motivations stem from his role as a functionary of the ecclesiastical courts. His entire being consists of his attempts corruptly to exploit his professional position through a combination of blackmail and intimidation: there is no hint of a personality beyond this life of predatory malfesance. Similarly, Friar John in *The Summoner’s Tale* is an entirely representative figure who embodies the typical vices ascribed to the fraternal orders by their critics. Again, Friar John has no hinterland, no life outwith his role as a friar. And it is this clear and unequivocal identification of the protagonists of the two tales with their professions which helps to account for the effectiveness of the narratives as satire. In neither case is there any ambiguity about the target of the satirical attack: the Friar uses his tale to expose the corruption of summoners while the Summoner lays bare the moral failings of friars in general through his narrative of Friar John’s greed and subsequent humiliation. The literary framework of *The Canterbury Tales* – the conceit of a contest in which pilgrims tell tales while travelling on a pilgrimage to Canterbury – thus enables Chaucer to explore the motivations of his narrators, and (in the terms of modern literary criticism) to invest the tales, at least on the level of the fictional pilgrimage, with authorial intent. The anti-fraternal agenda of *The Summoner’s Tale* is therefore announced in advance of its telling: its satirical drive is written into the overarching literary structure of *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>10</sup>

This elaborate and highly self-conscious literary framework allows not just for the tellers of the tales to respond to one another, but also for the tales themselves to develop, to modify, to subvert, and to satirise the narratives which precede them, and we see this in the prologue to *The Summoner’s Tale*, which takes up the very theme of hell and damnation with which *The Friar’s Tale* concluded. (*The Friar’s Tale* ends with the corrupt Summoner

dragged into hell by the devil with whom he had earlier sworn an oath of brotherhood.) Trembling ‘lyk an aspen leef’ with ‘ire’<sup>11</sup> at this professional calumny, the Summoner responds with a prologue which describes a friar’s visionary journey through Hell in the company of an angelic guide. Struck by the apparent absence of friars from the infernal regions, the friar’s initial joy at what would appear to be his confreres’ special grace turns to horror and dread when the angel shows him the actual place preserved for them for all eternity. Leading the friar towards the gargantuan figure of Satan, the angel commands the Devil to hold up his enormous ‘tayl’ (1689), and ‘Shewe forth’ his ‘ers’ (1690). There then emerges out of Satan’s anus – like a swarm of bees – ‘Twenty thousand freres on a route’ (1695). The prologue concludes with the Summoner recounting how the friar trembles with fear on awaking, and he then issues a final parting shot at his rival by blessing his fellow pilgrims, exempting only ‘this cursed Frere’ (1707) from his general benediction.

In many ways, the prologue to *The Summoner’s Tale* functions like a miniature version of the tale which it introduces. Following the narrative trajectory of fabliau, the prologue skilfully sets its protagonist up for a humiliating fall: the friar’s fleeting sense of self-satisfaction at what he believes to be the high esteem in which his order is held in the eyes of God swiftly turns to grief and fear when he understands the divinely ordained punishment which is its special due. The scatological theme obviously prefigures the fart which is gifted to Friar John in the tale itself, and in both prologue and tale the association of the friars with human waste (whether in the form of faeces or flatus), is clearly designed to be shaming.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this sense of shame is part of a broader strategy to deploy laughter as a means of stigmatising friars and isolating them from the broader community to which they ostensibly belong. The comedy is therefore socially divisive in character: its intention is to create an audience united in its shared hostility towards, and feeling of contemptuous derision for, friars, which is, of course, reflected in the deliberate omission of the Friar from the Summoner’s blessing at the end of his prologue. (We will see an analogous act of social exclusion occurring within the tale itself.) And finally, the crudeness and vulgarity of the prologue masks an artfulness and allusiveness in both its conception and execution. The dream of ‘the nest of freres’ (1691) concealed in ‘the develes ers’ (1694) is a learned, parodic allusion to a vision of the Virgin recounted by the thirteenth-century German Cis-

tercian, Caesarius of Heisterbach. In his *Dialogus Miraculorum*, or *Dialogue on Miracles*, Caesarius tells how a certain Cistercian monk is granted a vision of Heaven, but is initially distressed to see no member of his own order enjoying divine rapture. Telling the Virgin of his disappointment, she responds by opening her mantle, revealing a multitude of Cistercians, and saying: 'Those of the Cistercian Order are so dear to me, and so beloved, that I cherish them in my bosom.'<sup>13</sup> The Summoner's scurrilous vision can therefore be seen to be conversant with, and dependent, on the 'high' religious discourse which it wittily inverts. (A defence of the Cistercians becomes an attack on friars by cleverly shifting the locus of the vision from the Virgin Mary's bosom to the Devil's arse.) As recent criticism has frequently noted, throughout his fabliaux, Chaucer engages in a playful dialogue with the very same elite cultural forms his comic tales seek to satirise and subvert.<sup>14</sup>

Turning to *The Summoner's Tale* itself, broadly speaking it can be divided into two parts. In the first part, Friar John attempts to promote himself – or as he would have it, the interests of his order – by soliciting gifts from a congregation during a sermon, and then from a certain Thomas, whom he visits on his sickbed at home. Part of the humour, here, lies in the ironic mismatch between Friar John's projected image of himself as holy, humble, and self-denying, and the figure we actually see which is mercenary, grasping, and self-serving. Seeing through the façade, indeed, rendered irate by the friar's 'false dissymulacioun' (2123), Thomas promises Friar John a gift, but only on condition he share it equally amongst the members of his convent. Having sworn his assent, Friar John is told to put his hand down Thomas's back, and, in Thomas's words, to

[. . .] grope wel bihynde.  
Byneth my buttoke there shaltow fynde  
A thyng that I have hyd in pryvetee.  
(2141-43)

As Friar John is groping around Thomas's 'tuwel' (2148), or anus, Thomas 'leet the frere a fart' (2149), the sound of which not even a horse drawing a cart could have produced. Friar John is then chased away by members of Thomas's household, and the second part of the tale follows a furious Friar John to the house of the local lord, whose help he seeks to enlist in his

search for revenge. While the lord's wife phlegmatically suggests that Friar John should dismiss the whole affair by putting it down to the churlish deed of a churlish man – 'I seye a cherl hath doon a cherles dede' (2206) – her husband becomes fixated by the problem of how to divide both the sound and the smell of a fart equally amongst a convent of friars. An ingenious solution to the problem is eventually provided by the lord's squire, Jankyn. Seeing that a convent of friars consists of thirteen members, Jankyn proposes that each friar should be made to sit round a cartwheel with twelve spokes, with Friar John sitting in the place of honour at the centre of the wheel, with his nose turned upwards. If Thomas were then to sit at the centre of the wheel, his fart would be equally divided between the brothers, excepting the fact that Friar John, befitting his 'greet honour' (2276) would get the principle share of both sound and smell. All present, except the friar, agree that Jankyn has spoken as wisely as either Euclid or Ptolemy, and they further maintain that far from being a fool or possessed by a demon, Thomas must be a man of acute intelligence.

Despite the broad comedy of the tale which centres on the humiliation of Friar John, both as the recipient of Thomas's fart and as the target of the derisive laughter of the lord's household, there is an underlying artfulness in the arrangement and orchestration of the plot, and in the dense, allusive accumulation of detail in relation to Friar John's actions and character. This adds a subtlety, one could almost say, a piquancy, to the narrative's attack on friars. For instance, Friar John deploys a markedly different vocal and linguistic register in his dealings first with Thomas and his wife, and then with the lord. In relation to Thomas's household, Friar John includes occasional smatterings of court French in his dialogue: "'O Thomas, *je vous dy*, Thomas, Thomas!"' (1832), and "'Now, dame," quod he, "now *je vous dy sanz doute*"' (1838); an affectation which reveals both his pretentiousness and his condescending attitude to those he considers his social inferiors. However, he drops this pompous and self-important mode of address in discussion with the lord, adopting instead a craven, unctuous form of speech.<sup>15</sup> So when he is addressed by the lord as master, a title befitting his university education, he rejects this honour (while at the same time acknowledging his right to claim it), suggesting instead, in a show of false humility, that his role is not that of a master, but of a servant:

'Now, maister,' quod this lord, 'I yow biseke —'  
'No maister, sire,' quod he, 'but servitour,  
Thogh I have had in scole that honour.  
God liketh nat that "Raby" [i.e. Rabbi] men us calle,  
Neither in market ne in youre large halle.'  
(2184-88)

The hypocrisy of Friar John's assertion is rendered all the more apparent by the fact that he has already been addressed three times as 'maister' by Thomas and his wife (1781, 1800, 1836), but on none of these occasions does he protest.

On one level, then, Friar John's shifting linguistic quirks and mannerisms hint at a fascinating portrait of a man caught up in social contortions, seeking both to project a kind of cachet and prestige in his dealings with those belonging to the plebeian classes below, while at the same time attempting to ingratiate himself into the elite, aristocratic society above. As a character sketch of an ecclesiast, this is, of course, extremely unflattering, but there is more to its satirical edge than self-serving hypocrisy and snobbery. The reference to 'maister' and 'rabi' are among the many biblical allusions in the tale which were frequently invoked and fiercely contested in the conflicts between the friars and their critics.<sup>16</sup> The allusion is to Christ's condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:

[The Scribes and the Pharisees] love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men Rabbi, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your master, even Christ; and all ye are bretheren. [. . .] Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.  
(Matthew 23: 6-8; 10-12)

The references in the tale to master and rabbi are therefore extremely pointed, and carry the full weight of biblical authority. Friar John is sensitive to the charge of religious hypocrisy which can be levelled against him,

and he seeks to counter this accusation by practising false humility. That it is *false* humility is apparent from the numerous examples of his spiritual pride to which we are witness: for insistence, in his claim that his prayers, and the prayers of his co-religionists, are more powerful – ‘moore effectueel’ (1870) – than those offered by lay folk, on account of the poverty of his order: a poverty which is, of course, entirely spurious. As we have seen, the irony of all of this is not lost on the tale’s protagonists. Thomas’s fart can be understood as a form of protest at, or an act of corporeal dissent from, Friar John’s self-serving claims to holiness. In addition, Jankyn’s solution to the problem of the equal distribution of the fart involves positioning Friar John in the place of honour at the centre of the wheel, where he will be served first, receiving the ‘firste fruyt’ (2277) of the fart’s sound and smell. In the light of Christ’s attack on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Scribes for their love of ‘the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues’, Jankyn’s place setting would seem to carry an obvious satirical barb, further ridiculing Friar John’s claim to humility. Indeed, Jankyn subsequently makes this point even more explicit by asserting that the friars practice the exact opposite of what Christ preached: ‘The noble usage of freres yet is this, / The worthy men of hem shul first be served’ (2278-79).<sup>17</sup>

Through its tissue of biblical allusions and references, then, what emerges from *The Summoner’s Tale* is a portrait of Friar John as a self-serving religious hypocrite: a latter-day Pharisee whose claims to spiritual authenticity and divine favour are a mere mask designed to dupe the gullible. And this portrait is entirely consistent with the ways in which the tradition of anti-fraternal satire framed its attack on the fraternal orders. Indeed, Friar John is almost a distillation of the figure of the corrupt and worldly friar which this tradition disseminated. In their way of life, the friars claimed to have re-created the *vita apostolica*: the mode of living to which Christ committed himself and his apostles in the Gospels. This claim was contested by the secular clergy and members of other religious orders for obvious reasons, both because so many friars fell short of the ideal they professed, and because the friars’ claims to spiritual perfection carried an implied criticism of the practice – and the way of life – of other ecclesiasts and religious communities.<sup>18</sup> As we can see from *The Summoner’s Tale*, the friars’ assertions that their life was based on the Gospels was parodied and subverted by their critics: far from being apostles, the friars, according to this view, were

Pharisees: false apostles who were in the service not of God, but of the Devil, in whose arse (as the Summoner colourfully contends in his prologue) they were destined to suffer for all eternity.

On one level, Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale* represents a comprehensive attack on friars in which fabliau is systematically deployed not only to humiliate and isolate the fraternal orders (to establish a community united in its derisive laughter against them), but also to parody and invert their claims to divine favour. Of course, whether we can ascribe these anti-fraternal sentiments to Chaucer himself is a different matter. *The Summoner's Tale* can be seen as part of Chaucer's more extended exploration of, and experimentation with, fabliau as a form. It shares many of the thematic concerns of his other comic tales, such as social satire (broadly understood), the aggressive use of laughter to demean and marginalise, and the juxtaposition and collision of high idioms and base motives. Moreover, even in such a carefully targeted assault on the friars, the Summoner himself does not escape censure. His belligerent and hostile presence hovers over the tale, and the splenetic nature of his attack does him no credit, so that he himself becomes an inadvertent subject of his own satire. *The Summoner's Tale* can thus be said to gesture beyond itself to reflect upon the wider religious and literary contexts which gave rise to antifraternality in the first place, and which invested it with such currency. Like so many of *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Summoner's Tale* works on different levels, and speaks to different audiences. It is a brilliant example of a satire on the friars which at the same time invites its more alert readers to reflect critically on the nature of the satirical attack which it undertakes.

#### IRONY AND SATIRE IN *THE FREIRIS OF BERWIK*

The discussion of the relationship between fabliau and satire in *The Summoner's Tale* offers a useful vantage point from which to approach the same question in *The Freiris of Berwik*. As has already been noted, the tale itself is actually set outside the walls of Berwick. Two Jacobin (i.e. Dominican) friars, the youthful Freir Robert and the elderly Freir Allane, are travelling in the countryside beyond the town's defensive walls. Because of the lateness of the hour, and fearing that they will be refused entry into the town once its gates are closed, the friars seek shelter in the house of the

‘gude hostillar’ (51), or innkeeper, Symon Lawrear. Symon is away from home, and his ‘dynk and dengerous’ (55) wife, Alesone, initially refuses them refuge, saying she fears her husband’s response if he hears that she has given harbour to two friars in his absence. However, she is eventually prevailed upon to put them up for the night, but only on condition that they sleep in a loft, remote from the rest of the household.

Having reluctantly provided for her unexpected guests, Alesone then prepares for the arrival of her lover, a certain Freir Johine, who is said to be ‘ane blak freir’ (i.e. Dominican) of ‘grit renown’ (126),<sup>19</sup> and whose name suggests a possible allusion to *The Summoner’s Tale*.<sup>20</sup> Freir Johine duly arrives and the couple begin a sumptuous meal, although they are unaware that their every move is followed by Freir Robert, who has excavated a small hole in the floor of the loft and so can observe proceedings in the room below. As one might expect from a fabliau, Alesone’s dalliance with her lover is interrupted by the untimely return of her husband who seeks admittance at the door. In a panic, Alesone and her maid conceal all traces of the feast, storing the food and wine in a cupboard. Freir Johine is hidden away in a ‘troich’ (206) or trough, used to store meal, and Alesone heads off to bed.

Pretending that she has just been woken, Alesone lets in her husband, and serves him a meagre repast, but when he learns of Freir Robert and Freir Allane’s presence in the house, he generously invites the two to share his humble fare. Seeing the opportunity to enjoy the fine food and drink which Alesone had prepared for herself and her lover, Freir Robert claims to have acquired a knowledge of magic while studying in Paris, an art which he says gives him the power to conjure up the most splendid meal. Feigning the performance of a magical spell with a show of dramatic gestures and exotic incantations, Freir Robert then instructs Alesone to go to the very same ‘almerie’ (348) or cupboard where she had earlier concealed the food, to reveal the many fine things which he claims his art has produced. Understanding that Robert is privy to her secret, and fearing that he will reveal her adultery, Alesone makes a great show of amazement, exclaiming in supposed wonder that Robert ‘is ane haly freir’ (368).

The tale then concludes in as farcical and highly-choreographed a manner as one would expect from a well-crafted fabliau. Having enjoyed a meal of fine food and drink, Freir Robert offers to show Symon the infernal servant whom he commands with his magical powers. However, he

cautions that he cannot reveal him in his true, devilish form, which would be too 'fowll and ugly' (445) for mortal sight to withstand, and so offers to transform or 'translait' (450) the devil into the 'liknes of a freir' (458). After feigning the performance of another magical spell, Freir Robert releases Freir Johine from the meal trough. Symon then attacks the figure he believes to be a devil with a cudgel, but he loses his balance in the process, and falls over, cutting open his head. Meanwhile Freir Johine, staggering from the assault and desperate to escape detection, falls into a mire and is covered in filth.

The fabliau elements of *The Freiris of Berwik* are immediately apparent even from a mere plot description. Not only has it a bourgeois milieu, and an urban (or perhaps more accurately, a suburban) setting, typical of the form, but its principal cast of characters are singularly motivated by the desire to satisfy their bodily appetites (whether sexual, in the case of Alesone and Freir Johine, or the desire for fine food and drink, which Aleson and Freir Johine share with Freir Robert). The exception to this base view of human motivation; the figure whose actions are not wholly determined by the assertive demands of his bodily nature, is Symon, who reveals an open-hearted generosity in offering to share with his guests what little food he has. However, there is no room for such charity and liberality – for such selflessness – in the self-seeking fabliau world of the tale. Symon is ridiculed and humiliated not simply as a cuckold who naively trusts his wife's fidelity, but for his stupidity as well: for credulously accepting Freir Robert's claim to supernatural powers.<sup>21</sup> And this highlights two further features characteristic of fabliau: its lack of sentimentality, and its disregard for conventional morality. Hence, the punishment of the decent yet gullible Symon contrasts markedly with the treatment of the morally suspect Freir Robert, whose witty inventiveness and guileful cunning are admired and celebrated in the tale.

Finally, the tale is characterised by its sustained deployment of irony, another trait which is typical of fabliau.<sup>22</sup> There is dramatic irony in the constant opening up of new vistas and perspectives onto the action. Freir Robert obviously has the most complete understanding of what is going on (his is a near-comprehensive vision which corresponds almost completely to that of the reader), and Aleson soon infers that Robert has managed to observe her dalliance with Freir Johine. Symon's simple and unquestioning outlook, however, means that he remains hopelessly out of his depth, entirely ignorant of

what is really taking place. Furthermore, there are also instances of verbal irony in the tale, such as Aleson's assertion that Freir Robert 'is ane haly freir' (368). This utterance has two intended recipients, and it carries distinct meanings for each one. She wishes her husband to believe that she shares his sense of wonder at Freir Robert's mastery of the magical arts. However, she uses these same words to communicate a radically different message to Freir Robert himself: signalling both her acknowledgement of the power he has to expose her philandering, and her acquiescence to his trick.

The evident irony underlying Aleson's characterisation of Freir Robert as holy raises the question of the extent to which the tale's more general treatment of friars can be said to be satirical. At first glance, it would seem that *The Freiris of Berwik* – like *The Summoner's Tale* – is pointedly anti-fraternal in character. For instance, at the beginning of the tale, when Freir Robert and Freir Allane are initially introduced, we are told that they are particularly pleasing to women: 'Rycht wondir weill plesit thai all wyffis' (35). This could, of course, be a perfectly innocent observation of their charitable ministrations to women, but within the fabliau context of the tale it feels much more like a Chaucerian insinuation of lechery. (Chaucer's Friar in *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* is similarly solicitous to ladies, while in *The Summoner's Tale*, Friar John is perhaps a little too attentive to Thomas's wife.<sup>23</sup>) Furthermore, Aleson's response to the friars' request to be given shelter for the night again hints at satire: she claims to be concerned at what her husband will think if he discovers she has harboured two friars in his absence (82-89). We subsequently discover, in what is perhaps the supreme irony of the tale, that she has an ulterior motive for initially refusing their request – she wants to keep the coast clear for her friar-lover – but the tenor of her response implies that as a respectable wife (the epithet 'gudewyfe' is used repeatedly), she has much to fear from itinerant friars. Finally, there is nothing implicit or cryptic about the lechery of Freir Johine, and the brief description of him flirting with Aleson, eagerly anticipating the evening's pleasures (both culinary and sexual), is a textbook display of fraternal sinfulness:

Scho callit him baith 'hert', 'lemmane', and 'luve'.  
Lord God, gif than his curage wes aboif,  
So prelat-lyk sat he in to the chyre!

(181-3)

In addition to lust and gluttony, the sin of pride can also be added to the litany of Freir Johine’s transgressions. For the image of him sitting prelate-like suggests feelings of ecclesiastical self-importance and self-satisfaction which might be said to gesture to the kind of pharisaical conceit which – as we have seen – is such a feature of anti-fraternal writing. (Although it is not absolutely clear-cut, this could be a glancing allusion to Christ’s condemnation of the Pharisees, and their love of the chief seats in the synagogues, from Mathew 23: the very same passage which is alluded to in *The Summoner’s Tale*.)<sup>24</sup>

In its representation of friars, then, and in particular in their sinful dealings with women, the tale draws on a repertoire of images and allusions familiar from the tradition of anti-fraternal satire. But while its depictions of Freir Robert and Freir Johine are certainly ironic, the tale holds back from the kind of satirical attack on friars in general which we see in *The Summoner’s Tale*. For although Freir Johine suffers a humiliation which is comparable to that experienced by his namesake in *The Summoner’s Tale*, the crucial difference between the two figures is that the Scottish Freir Johine’s punishment is devised and orchestrated not by a member of the laity or, in the case of the Summoner himself, by a functionary of the ecclesiastical courts, but by a fellow friar. The fact that friars occupy the opposing roles of instigator and victim of the comic action inevitably blunts the tale’s satirical effect, because Freir Robert, Freir Johine’s comic nemesis, necessarily becomes a focus of admiration for his inventive wit. So while one of the functions of comic laughter in *The Summoner’s Tale* is to marginalise and demean friars (to establish a community united in laughter from which they are excluded), it cannot perform the same role in *The Freiris of Berwik* for the simple reason that the tale’s hero, its source of emotional identification, is himself a friar. While the two friars belong to the same order (the Dominicans) in the version of the tale found in the Bannatyne manuscript, in the Maitland manuscript (the other extant source of the text), Freir Johine is identified as a Franciscan. However, although this identification directs the comic laughter away from the Dominicans and towards the Franciscans, it does not nullify my fundamental point: the Maitland version of the tale remains every bit as ambivalent – simultaneously both admiring and derisory – in its overarching treatment of friars. Although it might be tempting to view this version of the poem as a product of the rivalry between the two orders (as an attack on the Franciscans by the Dominicans), this is un-

likely, as the representative Dominican, Freir Robert, is hardly a figure of which the order would be proud.

This might suggest that rather than employing fabliau as a means of satirising friars, the tale finds in its two protagonists – by turns crafty and sly, and lecherous and foolish – ideal figures to populate a fabliau. Rather than an example of anti-fraternal satire, *The Freiris of Berwik* can therefore be seen as a fabliau which deftly draws on anti-fraternal stereotypes to provide itself with a cast of sufficiently disreputable and unscrupulous comic characters. The comedy of *The Freiris of Berwik* elicits laughter as an end in itself, rather than seeking to provoke feelings of outrage and indignation. The tale plays on its audience's familiarity with the stereotypes and formulae of the anti-fraternal literary tradition, but it deploys them in the interests not of satire, but of comedy.

---

## Notes

---

- 1 All references to *The Freiris of Berwik* are to R. D. S. Jack and P. A. T. Rozendaal's edition of the poem in *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature 1375-1707* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2000), pp.152-65 (line references are given parenthetically in the essay). I have also consulted two other editions: one edited by Melissa M. Furrow which is anthologised in *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems* (New York: Garland, 1985), pp.313-92, and the other undertaken by Edward-David E. Ruiz as part of the work for his unpublished Ph.D thesis. See Edward-David E. Ruiz, 'The Freiris of Berwik: A Critical Edition', unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Rhode Island, 1997. The tale survives in two sixteenth-century manuscript versions: the Bannatyne Manuscript, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 1.1.6, and the Maitland Folio Manuscript, Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2553. Jack and Rozendaal's edition is based on the Bannatyne Manuscript. Although it has been widely admired, the tale has not received a great deal of critical attention. For a survey of its reception and critical history, see Ruiz, 'The Freiris of Berwik', pp.47-105. The opening description of Berwick takes up the first 27 lines of the poem in Jack and Rozendaal's edition.
- 2 The references to Berwick's ecclesiastical buildings, as well as to religious orders and their houses, can be found at lines 21-6.
- 3 John Hines, *The Fabliau in English* (London: Longman, 1993), pp.1-42, examines the urban, bourgeois settings of the genre, and also the question of its audience, and the social values and mores the form can be thought to endorse or uphold.
- 4 R. D. S. Jack, 'The Freiris of Berwik and Chaucerian Fabliau', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 17 (1982), 145-52.
- 5 Jack, 'The Freiris of Berwik', pp.145-6.
- 6 *ibid*, p.146.

- 7 There is a vast critical literature on anti-fraternal satire. For a very helpful introduction to the form, which explores its origins and dissemination up until the end of the fourteenth century, see Penn R. Szittyta, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). See also John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp.123-139 and 339-49; C. H. Lawrence, *The Friars* (London: Longman, 1994), pp.152-65; and Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Class and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp.37-54. Wendy Scase presents a revisionist account of much of this material, arguing that the anti-fraternal tradition in late fourteenth-century England developed a much more radically anti-clerical character under the influence of the writings of Richard FitzRalph and John Wyclif. See Wendy Scase, *Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 8 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Friar's Prologue and Tale* (1297), in Larry D. Benson et al. eds, *The Riverside Chaucer* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- 9 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* (831 and 833-39), in *The Riverside Chaucer*.
- 10 For further discussion of the anti-fraternalism of *The Summoner's Tale*, see John V. Fleming, 'The Antifraternalism of *The Summoner's Tale*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 65 (1966): 688-700; John V. Fleming, 'The Summoner's Prologue: An Iconographic Adjustment', *The Chaucer Review*, 2 (1967): 95-107, and Szittyta, *Antifraternal Tradition*, pp.231-46. Chaucer's engagement with this tradition more widely, particularly in *The General Prologue*, is examined in Arnold Williams, 'Chaucer and the Friars', *Speculum*, 28 (1953): 499-513; Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, pp.37-54; Nicholas Haveley, 'Chaucer's Friar and Merchant', *Chaucer Review*, 13 (1979): 337-45; Nicholas Haveley, 'Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Friars', in *Chaucer in the Italian Trecento*, ed. by Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.249-68; and Hines, *The Fabliau in English*, pp.164-76.
- 11 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Summoner's Prologue and Tale* (1667), in *The Riverside Chaucer*.
- 12 For a discussion of scatology in *The Summoner's Tale*, see Peter J. Smith, *Between Two Stools: Scatology and its Representation in English Literature, Chaucer to Swift* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp.37-52.
- 13 Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles*, Volume 1, trans. H. von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1929), p.546. See also Fleming, 'The Summoner's Prologue' for an extended analysis of Chaucer's parodic inversion of the vision reported by Caesarius.
- 14 For an account of this current in recent criticism of Chaucer, see S. H. Rigby, *Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory, and Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp.42-53.
- 15 This point has been made by Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales: Oxford Guides to Chaucer* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.182.
- 16 See both Fleming, 'The Antifraternalism of *The Summoner's Tale*', and Szittyta, *Antifraternal Tradition*, pp.231-46, for more extended discussion of these biblical allusions, and the ways in which they shape the tale's overarching attack on the friars.
- 17 The biblical resonances of Jankyn's solution to the question of the equal distribution of the fart go still further. His arrangement of the friars around the cartwheel can be seen as a parody of Pentecost, in which false apostles, the friars of John's convent, are substituted for the true Apostles of the biblical account, and in which Thomas's fart stands

as an ironic and blasphemous surrogate for the 'mighty wind' (Acts of the Apostles 2: 2) which signalled the descent of the Holy Ghost from Heaven. See Szittyá, *Anti-fraternal Tradition*, pp.221-36. See also Bernard Levy, 'Biblical Parody in *The Summoner's Tale*', *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 11 (1966): 45-60; Alan Levitan, 'The Parody of Pentecost in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 40 (1971): 236-46; and Smith, pp.37-52.

- 18 See, for example, Lawrence, pp.152-165, and Szittyá, pp.11-61.
- 19 The version of the tale found in the Maitland MS identifies Freir Johine as 'Ane gray freyr': a Franciscan. See Melissa Furrow's comments (*Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems*, pp.324-25) on the possible reasons for the inconsistencies between the manuscripts in their identification of the order to which Freir Johine belongs.
- 20 Jack, '*The Freiris of Berwik*', p.146.
- 21 *ibid*, pp.147-8; Jack draws attention to the striking parallel with the figure of John the Carpenter in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*.
- 22 Hines, pp.11-13.
- 23 For the portrait of The Friar, see *The General Prologue* (208-69), in *The Riverside Chaucer*. For Friar John's 'courteous' embrace of Thomas's wife, see *The Summoner's Tale* (1802-9).
- 24 A further biblical allusion here could be to a passage from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, which was also frequently invoked by critics of the friars: 'This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come, For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy . . . for of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with diverse lusts' (2 Timothy 3: 1-2; 6). In a move which both condemned them for their lechery, and which gestured to their escatological role as agents of the apocalypse ('in the last days'), the friars were identified by their critics with these men who 'creep into houses' [Vulgate: '*qui penetrans domos*']. In the apocalyptic final passus of the B Text of *Piers Plowman* (Passus 20) William Langland famously draws on this identification by naming his friar, Sire *Penetrans Domos* (341). See William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd edition (London: J. M. Dent, 1995). See also Szittyá, *Anti-fraternal Tradition*, pp.3-10.

*University of Edinburgh*