

A MERRY JEST HOW A SERGEANT WOULD LEARN TO BE A FRIAR.¹

-Written by Master Thomas More in his youth²

Wise men always,
Affirm and say,
That best is for a man:
Diligently,
For to apply, 5
The business that he can³
And in no wise,⁴
To enterprise,⁵
Another faculty,
For he that will, 10
And can no skill,
Is never like to thee.⁶
He that hath left,
The hosiers⁷ craft,
And falleth to making shone,⁸ 15
The smith that shall,
To painting fall,
His thrift is well nigh done.
A black draper,⁹
With white paper, 20
To go to writing school,
An old butler,
Become a cutler,¹⁰
I wene¹¹ shall prove a fool.
And an old trot,¹² 25
That can God wot,¹³
Nothing but kiss the cup,

¹ "Friar" for the obsolete form, "frere." In the Roman Catholic Church, a friar was "a brother or member of one of the certain religious orders founded in the 13th century and afterwards, of which the chief were the four mendicant orders: the Franciscans; the Augustinians; the Dominicans; and the Carmelites" (*OED*). Annotations and editing are by Travis Curtright.

² Source text for our modernization comes from *The English Works of Thomas More*, editors W.E. Campbell, A.W. Reed, R.W. Chambers, and W.A.G. Doyle-Davidson, vol. 1 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, 1931). Cited as "Campbell and Reed" hereafter. We have modernized font and some spelling here, but left many archaic word forms in the text in order to maintain the original rhyme and meter.

³ Campbell and Reed suggest "knows" for "can."

⁴ Wise: "Manner, mode, fashion, style" (*OED*).

⁵ "Enterprise": "To take in hand (a work), take upon oneself (a condition), attempt our undertake (a war, an expedition, etc.), run the risk of or venture upon (danger)" (*OED*).

⁶ Campbell and Reed suggest "thrive" for "thee."

⁷ Hosier: "One who makes or deals in hose (stockings and socks) and frame—knitted or woven underclothing generally. Also used more generally for a man's outfitter or haberdasher" (*OED*).

⁸ Shone: "Obsolete plural of shoe" (*OED*).

⁹ Draper: "Originally, one who made (wollen) cloth. Subsequently, a dealer in cloth, and now by extension, in other articles of textile manufacture: often qualified as wollen, linen draper" (*OED*).

¹⁰ Cutler: "One who makes, deals in, or repairs knives and similar cutting utensils" (*OED*).

¹¹ Wene: Variant of "ween": In regard to what is present or past: To think, surmise, suppose, conceive, believe, consider" (*OED*).

¹² A "trot" is "an old woman; usually disparaging: an old beldame, a hag" (*OED*).

¹³ Know for "wot."

With her physic,¹⁴
 Will keep one sick,
 Till she have soused¹⁵ him up. 30
 A man of law,
 That never saw,
 The ways to buy and sell,
 Wenyng to rise,
 By merchandise, 35
 I pray God speed him well.
 A merchant eke,¹⁶
 That will go seek,
 By all the means he may,
 To fall in suit, 40
 Till he dispute,
 His money clean away.
 Pleading¹⁷ the law,
 For every straw,
 Shall prove a thrifty man, 45
 With bate¹⁸ and strife,
 But by my life,
 I cannot tell you when.
 When an hatter¹⁹
 Will go smatter,²⁰ 50
 In philosophy,
 Or a peddler,
 Wax a meddler,²¹
 In theology,
 All that ensues, 55
 Such crafts new,
 They drive so far a cast,²²
 That evermore,
 They do therefore,
 Beshrew²³ themselves at last. 60
 This thing was tried
 And verified,
 Here by a sergeant late,
 That thriftly²⁴ was,
 Or he could pass, 65
 Wrapped²⁵ about the pate,²⁶

¹⁴ Physic: "The knowledge of the human body; especially, the theory of diseases and their treatment; medical science, medicine" (*OED*).

¹⁵ This line the *OED* uses as its example for "soused," which means "to bring to extremities."

¹⁶ "Eke" means "also."

¹⁷ Campbell and Reed suggest "pleading" for the archaic "pletyng."

¹⁸ Bate: "Contention, strife, discord" (*OED*).

¹⁹ Hatter: "A maker or dealer in hats" (*OED*).

²⁰ "Smatter" means "to talk ignorantly or superficially, to prate or chatter, of something" (*OED*).

²¹ Wax a meddler: Become or grow a meddler in theological matters.

²² That is, they throw so far off the mark.

²³ "Beshrew" probably means one of the following: "treat evilly, use ill, abuse," or "to wish all that is bad," or as an "imprecatory expression" (a curse) such as "evil befall thee" (*OED*).

²⁴ Thriftly: "In a becoming or seemly manner, properly . . ." (*OED*).

²⁵ "Wrapped" for the original "rapped."

For every whyt,³⁵
 By his own wit,
 And toke³⁶ an other way:
 First fair and well, 110
 Thereof much dele,³⁷
 He digged³⁸ it in a pot,
 But then him thought,³⁹
 That way was nought,⁴⁰
 And there he left it not. 115
 So was he fain,⁴¹
 From thence again,
 To put it in a cup,
 And by and by,
 Covetously, 120
 He supped it fair up.⁴²
 In his own breast,
 He thought it best,
 His money to enclose,
 Then wist⁴³ he well, 125
 Whatever fell,
 He could it never lose.
 He borrowed then,
 Of other men,
 Money and merchandise 130
 Never paid it,
 Up he laid it,
 In like manner wise.
 Yet on the gere,⁴⁴
 That he would were, 135
 He rought⁴⁵ not what he spent,
 So it were nice,
 As for the price,
 Could him not miscontent.⁴⁶
 With lusty⁴⁷ sport, 140
 And with resort,⁴⁸
 Of jolly company,
 In mirth and play,

³⁵ Whyt: Probably a form of “wight,” which means “person” (*OED*).

³⁶ Toke: obsolete past tense of take (*OED*).

³⁷ Dele: Obsolete variant of “deal” which appears “with other, and comparative words, as more, most, less, better, and the like, distinguishing one of two parts, or part from the remainder” (*OED*). “Much dele” refers to the amount of money that was placed into a pot.

³⁸ Campbell and Reed suggest “put” for “digged”.

³⁹ But then him thought: that is, but then he thought, or a thought occurred to him.

⁴⁰ Campbell and Reed suggest “useless” for “nought.”

⁴¹ Fain: “To be delighted or glad, rejoice” (*OED*).

⁴² He supped it fair up: A figurative use of “supped” wherein the inherited riches are swallowed up or consumed.

⁴³ Wist: knew.

⁴⁴ Campbell and Reed suggest “dress” for “gere.”

⁴⁵ Campbell and Reed suggest “cared” for “rought.”

⁴⁶ Miscontent: discontent, which means “Not content; discontented, dissatisfied; ill-pleased” (*OED*).

⁴⁷ Lusty: “Of persons and their attributes: Joyful, merry, jocund; cheerful, lively” (*OED*).

⁴⁸ Resort: “That which one has recourse for aid or assistance, or in order to accomplish some end” (*OED*).

Full many a day, He lived merely. ⁴⁹	145
And men had sworn, Some man is born, To have a lucky hour, And so was he, For such degree,	150
He gat ⁵⁰ and such honor, That without doubt, When he went out, A sergeant well and fair, Was ready straight,	155
On him to wait, As soon as on the mayor. But he doubtless, Of his meekness, Hated such pomp and pride,	160
And would not go, Companied so, But drew himself a side, To saint Katherine, Straight as a line,	165
He gate him at a tide, ⁵¹ For devotion, Or promotion, There would he needs abide. There spent he fast, ⁵²	170
Till all was past, And to him came there many, To ask their debt, But none could get, The valor ⁵³ of a penny.	175
With visage ⁵⁴ stout, ⁵⁵ He bare ⁵⁶ it out, Even unto the hard hedge, ⁵⁷ A month or twain, ⁵⁸	180
Till he was fain, To lay his gown to pledge. Then was he there, In greater fear, Than ere that he came thither,	185
And would as fain,	

⁴⁹ Campbell and Reed suggest “merrily” for “merely.”

⁵⁰ Gat: past tense of get (*OED*).

⁵¹ Tide: “time” (*OED*).

⁵² Fast: “With firm grasp, attachment, or adhesion; so as not to permit of escape or detachment; tightly, securely” (*OED*).

⁵³ “Valor” means “the amount in money, etc., that a thing is worth; = VALUE” (*OED*).

⁵⁴ Visage: “The face or features as expressive of feeling or temperament; the countenance” (*OED*).

⁵⁵ Stout: “Proud, haughty, arrogant” (*OED*).

⁵⁶ Bare: bore.

⁵⁷ Campbell and Reed suggest “very limit” for “hedge.”

⁵⁸ Twain: “two” (*OED*).

Depart again,
 But that he wist not whither.
 Then after this,
 To a friend of his,
 He went and there abode,⁵⁹ 190
 Where as he lay,
 So sick alway,
 He might not come abrode.⁶⁰

It happed then,
 A merchant man, 195
 That he ought⁶¹ money to,
 Of an officer,
 Then gan inquire,⁶²
 What him was best to do.
 And he answered, 200
 Be not aferde,⁶³
 Take an action therefore,
 I you behest,⁶⁴
 I shall him rest,⁶⁵
 And then care for no more. 205

I fear quod⁶⁶ he,
 It will not be,
 For he will not come out.
 The sergeant said,
 Be not afraid, 210
 It shall be brought about.
 In many a game,
 Like to the same,
 Have I been well in ure,⁶⁷
 And for your sake, 215
 Let me be bake,⁶⁸
 But if I do this cure.

Thus part they both,
 And forth then goth,⁶⁹
 A pace this officer, 220

⁵⁹ Abode: past tense of abide (*OED*).

⁶⁰ "Abrode" is probably an archaic spelling for "abroad," which means "out of one's house or abode; out of doors; out in the open air" (*OED*).

⁶¹ Campbell and Reed suggest "owed" for "ought."

⁶² "Inquire" for the original "enquire."

⁶³ Aferde: afeard, which means "affected with fear or terror; frightened, afraid" (*OED*).

⁶⁴ "Behest" is a transitive verb that means "to vow, promise" (*OED*). *I promise you* is the line's meaning.

⁶⁵ Rest: "arrest" (*OED*).

⁶⁶ Quod: said.

⁶⁷ Campbell and Reed suggest "well used to."

⁶⁸ A figurative use of "bake," meaning "to prepare, make ready" (*OED*). In context, the sergeant will concoct a plan.

⁶⁹ Goth: goeth.

And for a day,
 All his array,
 He changed with a friar.
 So was he dight⁷⁰
 That no man might, 225
 Him for a friar deny,
 He dopped and dooked,⁷¹
 He spoke and looked,
 So religiously.
 Yet in a glass,⁷² 230
 Or he would pass,
 He toted⁷³ and he peered,
 His heart for pride,
 Leapt in his side,
 To see how well he friared.⁷⁴ 235
 Then forth a pace,
 Unto the place,
 He goeth in God's name,⁷⁵
 To do this deed,
 But now take heed, 240
 For here beginneth the game.
 He drew him nigh,
 And softly,
 Straight at the door he knocked:
 And a damsel, 245
 That heard him well,
 There came and it unlocked.
 The friar said,
 God speed⁷⁶ fair maid,
 Here lodgeth such a man, 250
 It is told me:
 Well sir quod she,
 And if he do what then?
 Quod he mistress,
 No harm doubtless: 255
 It longeth⁷⁷ for our order,⁷⁸
 To hurt no man,
 But as we can,
 Every wight to forder.⁷⁹
 With him truly, 260

⁷⁰ Campbell and Reed suggest "dressed" for "dight."

⁷¹ Campell and Reed suggest "ducked" and "curtsied" for "dopped" and "dooked."

⁷² Glass: that is, in a mirror.

⁷³ Campbell and Reed suggest "looked" for "toted."

⁷⁴ "Friared" replaces "freered." More turns "friar" into a verb—friared—that puns upon "fared." Fare means "to 'go on,' behave, conduct oneself, act. To 'go'; to happen; to turn out." (*OED*).

⁷⁵ The humor lies in the ambiguity of going forth in the name of God. Dressed as a friar—that is, in disguise—the sergeant goes in the name of God.

⁷⁶ God speed: "To further or assist (a person); to cause to succeed or prosper" (*OED*).

⁷⁷ It longeth: it belongs.

⁷⁸ For our order: that is, the religious order in which he feigns membership.

⁷⁹ Forder: further, which means: "To help forward, assist (usually things; less frequently persons); to promote, favor (an action or movement)" (*OED*).

Fain speak would I.
 Sir quod she by my fay,⁸⁰
 He is so sick,⁸¹
 Ye be not like,⁸²
 To speak with him today. 265
 Quod he fare may,⁸³
 Yet I you pray,
 This much at my desire,
 Vouchsafe⁸⁴ to do,
 As go him to, 270
 And say an austen⁸⁵ friar.
 Would with him speak,
 And matters break,
 For his avayle⁸⁶ certain.
 Quod she I will, 275
 Stand ye here still,
 Till I come down again.
 Up is she go,
 And told him so,
 As she was bode⁸⁷ to say. 280
 He mistrusting,
 No maner thing,
 Said maiden go thy way,
 And fetch him hyder,⁸⁸
 That we togyder,⁸⁹ 285
 May talk. Adown she goeth,
 Up she him brought,
 No harm she thought,
 But it made some folk wrothe.⁹⁰
 This officer, 290
 This feigned friar,
 When he was come aloft,
 He dopped then,
 And greet this man,
 Religiously and oft. 295
 And he again,
 Right glad and fain,
 Took him there by the hand,
 The friar then said.
 Ye be dismayed, 300
 With trouble I understand.

⁸⁰ Fay: "Religious belief," or "Faith" (*OED*).

⁸¹ "Sick" replaces the original "sike."

⁸² Like: likely.

⁸³ Campbell and Reed suggest "maiden" for "may." "Fare may" is the sergeant's version of "fair maiden."

⁸⁴ Vouchsafe: "to confer or bestow (some thing, favor, or benefit) on a person" (*OED*).

⁸⁵ Austen: "variant of Austin, Augustinian" (*OED*). Here the poem reveals what kind of friar the sergeant dresses up as.

⁸⁶ "Avayle" could be a variant of "avail", which means "benefit" or "advantage" (*OED*).

⁸⁷ Bode: "command, order, behest" (*OED*).

⁸⁸ Hyder: "Obsolete form of "hither" (*OED*).

⁸⁹ Togyder: together.

⁹⁰ Wrothe: wrathful.

Indeed quod he,
 It hath with me,
 Been better than it is.
 Sir quod the friar, 305
 Be of good cheer,
 Yet shall it after this.
 For Christ's sake,
 Look that you take,
 No thought within your breast: 310
 God may tourne⁹¹ all,
 And so he shall,
 I trust unto the best.
 But I would now,
 Comen⁹² with you, 315
 In counsel if you please,
 Or else nat⁹³
 Of matters that,
 Shall set your heart at ease.
 Down went the maid, 320
 The merchant said,
 Now say on gentle friar,
 Of this tiding,
 That ye me bring,
 I long full sore to hear. 325
 When there was none,
 But they alone,
 The friar with evil grace,⁹⁴
 Said, I rest the,⁹⁵
 Come on with me, 330
 And out he took his mace:⁹⁶
 Thou shalt obey,
 Come on thy way,
 I have thee in my clouche,⁹⁷
 Thou goest not hence, 335
 For all the pence,⁹⁸
 The mayor hath in his pouch.⁹⁹
 This merchant there,
 For wrath and fear,
 He waxing welnygh¹⁰⁰ wood,¹⁰¹ 340
 Said whoreson¹⁰² thief,

⁹¹ Tourne: Obsolete form of turn (*OED*).

⁹² Campbell and Reed suggest "talk" for "comen."

⁹³ Nat: Obsolete form of not (*OED*).

⁹⁴ "Evil grace" is an oxymoron that captures some of More's humor in the poem.

⁹⁵ I rest the: I arrest thee.

⁹⁶ Mace: "A heavy staff or club, either entirely of metal or having a metal head, often spiked: formerly a regular weapon of war. In early use, a club of any kind" (*OED*).

⁹⁷ Clouche: Obsolete form of "clutch" (*OED*); hence, "clutches."

⁹⁸ Pence: A collective plural of penny (*OED*).

⁹⁹ Pouch: "A bag, sack, or receptacle of small or moderate size, used for various purposes, esp. for carrying small articles; a pocket as a distinct receptacle worn outside the dress" (*OED*).

¹⁰⁰ "Welnygh" probably means "well nigh," or "well near."

¹⁰¹ Campbell and Reed suggest "mad" for "wood." In context, the line may read, "He was growing well near mad."

With a mischief, Who hath taught thee thy good. And with his fist, Upon the list, ¹⁰³	345
He gave him such a blow, That backward down, Almost in sowne, ¹⁰⁴ The friar is overthrow. Yet was this man, Well fearder ¹⁰⁵ then,	350
Lest he the friar had slain, Till with good raps, And heavy claps, He dawde ¹⁰⁶ him up again. The friar took heart, And up he start, And well he laid about, And so there goeth, Between them both,	355
Many a lusty ¹⁰⁷ clout. ¹⁰⁸ They rent and tear, Each other's hair, And clave ¹⁰⁹ together fast, Till with lugging, And with tugging,	360
They fell down both at last. Then on the ground, Together round, With many a sad stroke, They roll and rumble, They turn and tumble, As pigs ¹¹⁰ do in a poke. ¹¹¹ So long above, They heve ¹¹² and shove,	365
Together that at last, The maid and wife, To break the strife, Hyed ¹¹³ them upward fast. And when they spy,	370
	375
	380

¹⁰² "Whoreson" replaces "horson."

¹⁰³ Campbell and Reed suggest "ear" for "list."

¹⁰⁴ Campbell and Reed suggest "swoon" for "swone."

¹⁰⁵ Fearder: "Affected with fear, frightened, afraid, timid" (*OED*).

¹⁰⁶ Campbell and Reed suggest "roused" for "dawde."

¹⁰⁷ Lusty: "Full of healthy vigor" (*OED*).

¹⁰⁸ Clout: "A small piece or shred produced by tearing or rending; in later use chiefly a shred of cloth, a rag" (*OED*).

¹⁰⁹ "Clave" is the "past tense of cleave" (*OED*).

¹¹⁰ "Pigs" for "pygges."

¹¹¹ Poke: "A bag; a small sack: applied to a bag of any material or description, but usually smaller than a sack" (*OED*).

¹¹² Heve: Obsolete form of heave (*OED*).

¹¹³ Perhaps "hyed" means "tied."

The captains lie,
 Both waltrin¹¹⁴ on the place,
 The friar's hood,
 They pulled a good,
 Adown about his face. 385
 While he was blind
 The wench behind,
 Lent him laid¹¹⁵ on the floor,
 Many a joule,¹¹⁶
 About the noule,¹¹⁷ 390
 With a great batyldore.¹¹⁸
 The wife came yet
 And with her feet,
 She holpe¹¹⁹ to keep him down,
 And with her rock, 395
 Many a knock,
 She gave him on the crown.
 They laid his mace,
 About¹²⁰ his face,
 That he was wood for pain: 400
 The friar frappe,
 Gate¹²¹ many a swappe,¹²²
 Till he was full nigh slain.
 Up they him lift,
 And with ill thrift, 405
 Headling¹²³ along the stair.
 Down they him threw,
 And said adieu,
 Command¹²⁴ us to the mayor.
 The friar arose, 410
 But I suppose,
 Amazed¹²⁵ was his head,
 He shook his ears,

¹¹⁴ Campbell and Reed suggest “rolling” for “waltrin.”

¹¹⁵ Laid is a past participle of lay, which may mean: “To bring or cast down from an erect position (in Old English often, to strike down, slay)” (*OED*).

¹¹⁶ “Joule” is an obsolete form of “jowl,” which means “a bump; a blow, especially on the head; a knock, a stroke” (*OED*).

¹¹⁷ “Noule” is probably an obsolete form of “noll,” which means “the top or crown of the head; the head generally; the noddle” (*OED*).

¹¹⁸ “Batyldore” is probably a variant of “battledore,” which was “a beetle or wooden ‘bat’ used in washing, also (when made cylindrical) for smoothing out or ‘mangling’ linen clothes; hence also applied to similarly shaped instruments, e.g. the paddle of a canoe, a utensil for inserting loaves into an oven, or a glass-ware into the kiln, etc.” (*OED*).

¹¹⁹ Holpe: past tense and past participle of ‘help’ (*OED*).

¹²⁰ “About” is an adverb modifying “laid,” which describes position: “On the outside, on the outer surface of; on every side of; all around; around, surrounding” (*OED*). More simply means they strike the “friar” on the head.

¹²¹ Gate: “variant of ‘got,’ which means “acquired” (*OED*).

¹²² “Swappe” is probably a variant of “swap”: “An act of swapping or striking; a stroke, a blow” (*OED*).

¹²³ Headling: “With the head foremost; headlong” (*OED*).

¹²⁴ “Command” is probably a variant of “commend”: “To give in trust or charge, deliver to one’s care or keeping; to commit, entrust” (*OED*). The word is used with sarcasm here.

¹²⁵ Amazed: “driven stupid; stunned or stupefied, as by a blow; out of one’s wits;” or “bewildered, confounded, confused, perplexed” (*OED*).

And from great fears,
 He thought him well a fled. 415
 Quod he now lost,
 Is all this cost,
 We be never the near.
 I'll mote¹²⁶ he the,¹²⁷
 That caused me, 420
 To make myself a friar.
 Now masters all,
 Here now I shall,
 End there as I began,
 In any wise, 425
 I would avyse,¹²⁸
 And counsel every man,
 His own craft use,
 All new refuse,
 And lightly let them gone: 430
 Play not the friar,
 Now make good chere,¹²⁹
 And welcome every chone.¹³⁰

 Finis.

¹²⁶ "Mote" means "expressing permission or possibility" (*OED*).

¹²⁷ Campbell and Reed suggest "thrive" for "the." Hence, the friar says in reference to his lost prisoner, "I'll bet he thrives."

¹²⁸ Avyse: "Obsolete form of advice, or advise" (*OED*).

¹²⁹ Chere: cheer.

¹³⁰ Every chone: every one.