

The Tale of Sir Thopas¹*The Introduction*

Whan said was al this miracle,² every man
 As sobre was that wonder was to see,
 Til that oure Hoste jopen^o he bigan, *joke*
 And thanne at erst^o he looked upon me, *for the first time*
 5 And saide thus, "What man artou?"^o quod he. *art thou*
 "Thou lookest as thou woldest finde an hare,
 For evere upon the ground I see thee stare.

Approche neer and looke up merily.
 Now ware you, sires, and lat this man have place:
 10 He in the wast is shape as wel as I—
 This were a popet^o in an arm t' embrace, *doll*
 For any womman, smal and fair of face;
 He seemeth elvish^o by his countenance, *elfin*
 For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.^o *makes conversation*
 15 Say now somewhat, sin^o other folk han said. *since*
 Tel us a tale of mirthe, and that anoon."
 "Hoste," quod I, "ne beeth nat yvele apaid,³
 For other tale, certes, can^o I noon, *know*
 But of a rym I lerned longe agoon."
 20 "Ye, that is good," quod he. "Now shul we heere
 Som daintee^o thing, me thinketh by his cheere."^o *delightful / face*

The Tale

Listeth,^o lordes, in good entent, *listen*
 And I wil telle verrayment^o *truly*

1. The Tale of Sir Thopas is a burlesque of popular romances. These were stripped-down, cliché-ridden versions of French chivalric romances, composed and recited by minstrels for unsophisticated English audiences with little or no French and no taste for the stylistic refinements and psychological subtleties that appealed to more courtly audiences in both France and England. The emphasis was on plenty of action—love and adventure; the slaying of giants, dragons, and wicked knights; the rescue of fair maidens. Chaucer doubtless enjoyed such medieval horse operas for their very absurdities, and his satire shows a connoisseur's eye for hackneyed and inane detail. His hero Sir Thopas, in ancestry, personal appearance, costume, sports, love-longing, horsemanship, oaths, and encounter with a three-headed giant, lampoons such popular derring-do heroes as Bevis of Hampton and Guy of Warwick. Sir Thopas's birthplace in Flanders would mark him to the English as ultra-bourgeois; his exaggeratedly white complexion and rosy lips link him to the heroines of the romances.

Chaucer burlesques not only the plot but also the style of such performances. Oral delivery demanded first of all a dogtrot rhythm, and, secondly, a handy store of formulas to fit all occasions, especially those occasions when the poet was stuck for a rhyme. Chaucer's imitation is an

exercise in brilliant monotony and witty banality.

But within the frame story of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's parody turns into a truly Olympian jest about the nature of art and artists. The Introduction to the tale brings onstage again the narrator who described his fellow pilgrims with such wide-eyed enthusiasm in the General Prologue and apologized for the fact that a strict adherence to truth obliged him to relate every word spoken on the pilgrimage, no matter how vulgar and offensive. Here the Host draws a portrait of this pilgrim, inviting him to tell a tale, and the pilgrim apologizes once again—the only story he knows is a rhyme he learned long ago. Thus on the literal level of the frame story the creator of the entire pilgrimage knows only one tale, and that one so wretched that he is not allowed to finish it. The supreme irony of the Tale of Sir Thopas may be the author's humble acknowledgment, within the frame of his fiction, that he, too, is a member of the tribe of versifiers who strove according to their greatly varying talents to provide the best rhymes and entertainment that they could.

2. The Prioress has just completed a moving tale of a child martyr. The verse form of the Introduction, the only link between tales not in couplets, is the rhyme royal stanza of the Prioress's Tale and other religious stories in the *Canterbury Tales*.

3. Ill-pleased.

- Of mirthe and of solas:^o
 25 Al of a knight was fair and gent^o *delight*
 In bataile and in tournament— *noble, pretty*
 His name was Sir Thopas.
- Yborn he was in fer^o contree, *far*
 In Flandres al biyonde the see—
 30 At Popering in the place.⁴
 His fader was a man ful free,^o *noble*
 And lord he was of that contree,
 As it was Goddes grace.
- Sir Thopas wax^o a doughty swain:^o *grew into / youth*
 35 Whit was his face as paindemain,^o *fine white bread*
 His lippes rede as rose;
 His rode^o is lik scarlet in grain,^o *complexion / deep-dyed*
 And I you telle in good certain⁵
 He hadde a semely nose.
- 40 His heer, his beerd, was lik saffroun,⁶
 That to his girdel raughte adown,
 His shoon of cordewane;⁷
 Of Brugges were his hosen brown,⁸
 His robe was of siklatoun,^o *cloth of gold*
 45 That coste many a jane.^o *small coin, cent*
- He coude hunte at wilde deer,
 And ride an-hawking for river,⁹
 With grey goshawk on honde.
 Therto he was a good archer,
 50 Of wrastling was ther noon his peer,^o *peer, equal*
 Ther any ram shal stonde.¹
- Ful many a maide bright in bowr²
 They moorne^o for him paramour,^o *mourn / in love*
 Whan hem were bet^o to sleepe. *better*
 55 But he was chast, and no lechour,
 And sweete as is the brambel flour
 That bereth the rede hepe.^o *roseberry*
- And so bifel upon a day—
 Forsoothe as I you telle may—
 60 Sir Thopas wolde out ride:
 He worth^o upon his steede grey, *mounted*
 And in his hand a launcegay,^o *lance*
 A long swerd by his side.

4. Poperinghe, a Flemish town. "In the place": formula used for the sake of rhyme.

5. For sure. Another example of line-filling formulas to make a rhyme.

6. Saffron, an orange-red spice.

7. His shoes of Cordovan leather. "To his girdel raughte": reached to his belt.

8. His stockings came from Bruges, a town in

Flanders.

9. Hawking was generally practiced near a river where game birds were plentiful.

1. Where a ram was put up as prize. See General Prologue, line 550. Both archery and wrestling were "lower-class" sports.

2. Bright in bower, i.e. "pretty in chamber." Such alliterative formulas abound in the romances.

- He priketh^o thurgh a fair forest— *rides*
 65 Therinne is many a wilde beest:
 Ye, bothe bukke and hare;
 And as he priketh north and eest,
 I telle it you, him hadde almeest^o *almost*
 Bitid a sory care.
- 70 There springen herbes grete and smale—
 The licoris and setewale,³
 And many a clowe-gilofre.^o *clove*
 And notemuge^o to putte in ale, *nutmeg*
 Wheither it be moiste or stale,
 75 Or for to laye in cofre.^o *chest*
- The briddes singe, it is no nay,
 The sperhawk^o and the popinjay,^o *sparrowhawk / parrot*
 That joye it was to heere;
 The thrustelcok^o made eek his lay,^o *male thrush / song*
 80 The wodedouwe^o upon the spray, *wood dove*
 She soong ful loude and clere.
- Sir Thopas fil in love-longinge,
 Al whan he herde the thrustel singe,
 And priked^o as he were wood.^o *spurred / insane*
 85 His faire steede in his prikinge
 So swatte^o that men mighte him wringe— *sweated*
 His sides were al blood.
- Sir Thopas eek so verry was
 For priking on the softe gras—
 90 So fiers was his corage^o— *spirit*
 That down he laide him in the plas,^o *place*
 To make his steede som solas,^o *rest*
 And yaf him good forage.
- “O Sainte Marye, bencite,^o *bless me*
 95 What aileth this love at me⁴
 To binde me so sore?
 Me dremed al this night, pardee,^o *by God*
 An elf-queene shal my lemman be,⁵
 And sleepe under my gore.^o *skirt*
- 100 And elf-queene wol I have, ywis,
 For in this world no womman is
 Worthy to be my make^o *mate*
 In towne:⁶
 Alle othere women I forsake,

3. Setwall, a spice. Here follow catalogues of spices and of songbirds found in chivalric romances.

4. What cause of dissatisfaction has love with me?

5. The queen of the fairies shall be my mistress. Elf-queens seek out knights in romance (as in the

Wife of Bath's Tale), but it would be futile and presumptuous for a knight to seek an elf-queen as his mistress.

6. An example of tail-rhyme, a phrase stuck on strictly for the sake of rhyme.

- 105 And to an elf-queene I me take,⁷
By dale and eek by downe.”
- Into his sadel he clomb^o anon,
And priketh over stile and stoon,⁸
And elf-queene for t'espys;
- 110 Til he so longe hath riden and goon,
That he foonde in a privee woon⁹
The contree of fairye,^o *Fairyland*
So wild-e:
- For in that contree was ther noon
115 That to him dorste ride or goon—
Neither wif ne child-e.
- Til that ther cam a greet geaunt—
His name was sire Oliphant,^o *Elephant*
A perilous^o man of deede. *dangerous*
- 120 He saide, “Child, by Termagaunt,¹
But if thou prike out of myn haunt,²
Anoon I slee^o thy steede *slay*
With mace.
- Here is the Queene of Fairye,
125 With harpe and pipe and symphonie,^o *orchestral music*
Dwelling in this place.”
- The child saide, “Also mote I thee,³
Tomorwe wil I meete thee,
Whan I have myn amouré.
- 130 And yit I hope, par ma fay,⁴
That thou shalt with this launcegay
Abyen it^o ful sowre:⁵
- Thy mawe^o *belly*
- Shal I percen if I may,
135 Er it be fully prime^o of day, *9 A.M.*
For here shaltou been slawe.”^o *slain*
- Sire Thopas drew^o abak ful faste— *drew*
This geaunt at him stonys caste
Out of a fel staf-slinge.⁶
- 140 But faire escapeth child Thopas,
And al it was thurgh Goddes gras,^o *grace*
And thurgh his fair beringe.^o *conduct*
- Yit listeth, lordes, to my tale,
Merier than the nightingale,
145 For now I wol you roune^o *whisper, inform*
How Sire Thopas with sides smale,⁷

7. Devote myself.

8. Alliterative formula. A stile is a set of steps over a fence or wall.

9. Found in a secret abode.

1. Oath by a heathen idol such as frequently sworn by romance villains. “Child” was a common appellation for a knight.

2. Unless you spur out of my territory.

3. So may I thrive.

4. By my faith.

5. Pay for it very bitterly.

6. Dreadful slingshot.

7. Dainty waist, a feature of romance heroines.

- Priking over hil and dale,
Is come again to towne.
- His merye men comanded he
150 To make him bothe game and glee,⁸
For needes moste he fighte
With a geaunt with hevedes^o three— *heads*
For paramour^o and jolitee^o *true love / pleasure*
Of oon that shoon ful brighte.
- 155 “Do come,” he saide, “my minstrales⁹
And geestours^o for to tellen tales, *tale-tellers*
Anoon in myn arminge,
Of romances that been royales—
Of popes and of cardinales,
160 And eek of love-likinge.”^o *love pleasures*
- They fette^o him first the sweete win, *fetched*
And meede eek in a maselin,^o *wooden bowl*
And royal spicerye,^o *variety of spices*
And gingebreed that was ful fin,
165 And licoris and eek comin,^o *cumin, a spice*
With sugre that is trye.^o *good*
- He dide^o next his white leer,^o *donned / flanks*
Of cloth of lake^o fin and cleer,^o *linen / bright*
A breech^o and eek a sherte;^o *pair of pants / shirt*
170 And next his sherte an aketoun,^o *undertunic*
And over that an haubergeoun,^o *shirt of mail*
For^o percing of his herte; *to prevent*
- And over that a fin hauberk^o— *coat of mail*
Was al ywrought of Jewes werk—¹
175 Ful strong it was of plate;
And over that his cote-armour,²
As whit as is a lilye flour,
In which he wol debate.^o *fight*
- His sheeld was al of gold so reed,
180 And therinne was a bores heed,
A charbocle by his side.
And there he swoor^o on ale and breed *swore*
How that the geaunt shal be deed^o— *dead*
Bitide what bitide.
- 185 His jambeaux^o were of quirboily,^o *leg-armor / shaped leather*
His swerdes sheethe of ivory,
His helm of laton^o bright; *brassy metal*
His sadel was of rewel boon,³

8. Entertainment and music—a formula.

9. “Have my minstrels come,” he said.

1. Jews had a reputation as makers of fine armor.

2. Coat of arms, i.e., the cloth jacket on which the knight’s heraldic bearings were usually woven: Sir

Thopas’s was on his shield only: a boar’s head and a “charbocle,” carbuncle, a ruby shooting forth large rays.

3. Ivory.

His bridel as the sonne shoon—
 190 Or as the moone light.

 His spere was of fin cypres,
 That bodeth werre and nothing pees⁴—
 The heed ful sharpe ygrounde;
 His steede was al dappel grey—
 195 It gooth an ambel^o in the way, *amble, easy pace*
 Ful softly and rounde,^o *in a circle*
 In londe.
 Lo, lordes mine, here is a fit:^o *division of a poem*
 If ye wol any more of it,
 200 To telle it wol I fonde.^o *try*

THE SECOND FIT

Now holde youre mouth, par charitee,
 Bothe knight and lady free,^o *noble*
 And herkneth to my spelle:^o *song, tale*
 Of bataile, and of chivalry,
 205 And of ladies love-drury,^o *love-making*
 Anoon I wol you telle.

Men speken of romances of pris,^o *reputation*
 Of Horn Child and of Ypotis,
 Of Beves and Sir Gy,
 210 Of Sir Libeux and Pleindamour—⁵
 But sire Thopas, he bereth the flowr
 Of royal chivalry.

His goode steede al he bistrood,
 And forth upon his way he glood,^o *glided*
 215 As sparcle out of the bronde.⁶
 Upon his creest^o he bar^o a towr— *crest / bore*
 And therinne stiked a lilye flowr—
 God shilde his cors fro shonde!⁷

And for^o he was a knight auntrous,^o *because / adventurous*
 220 He nolde sleepen in noon hous,
 But ligen^o in his hooede; *lie*
 His brighte helm was his wonger,^o *pillow*
 And by him baiteth his dextrer,⁸
 Of herbes fine and goode.

225 Himself drank water of the wel,
 As dide the knight Sire Percivel,⁹
 So worly under weede;¹
 Til on a day—

4. Which bodes war and peace not at all.

5. *Horn Child*, *Bevis of Southampton*, *Guy of Warwick*, and *The Fair Unknown* (*Li Beux Descomus*), as well as *Sir Percival of Wales* (line 226) were romances popular in Chaucer's time; *Pleindamour* (the "love-filled") has not survived if it ever existed,and the only known *Ypotis* is a theological debate.

6. Like a spark from a brand.

7. God defend his body from harm.

8. And beside him grazes his horse.

9. Percival lived by a spring in the woods.

1. Worthy under clothing—a formula.

[THE HOST INTERRUPTS]

- “Namore of this, for Goddes dignitee!”
 230 Quod oure Hoste, “for thou makest me
 So wery of thy verray lewednesse,^o *ignorance*
 That also wisly God my soule blesse,²
 Mine eres^o aken of thy drasty^o speche. *ears / rubbishy*
 Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!^o *commit to*
 235 This may wel be rym dogerel,” quod he.
 “Why so?” quod I. “Why wiltou lette^o me *hinder*
 More of my tale than another man,
 Sin that it is the beste rym I can?”
 “By God,” quod he, “for plainly, at oo^o word, *one*
 240 Thy drasty ryming is nat worth a tord!^o *turd*
 Thou doost nought elles but dispendest time:
 Sire, at oo word, thou shalt no lenger ryme.
 Lat see wher thou canst tellen ought in geeste,³
 Or tel in prose somewhat at the leeste,
 245 In which ther be som mirthe or som doctrine.”
 “Gladly,” quod I, “by Goddes sweete pine,^o *suffering*
 I wol you telle a litel thing in prose,
 That oughte like^o you, as I suppose; *please*
 Or elles, certes, ye be too daungerous:^o *hard to please*
 250 It is a moral tale vertuouus,
 Al be it told sometime in sondry wise,
 Of sondry folk, as I shal you devise.⁴

2. As surely as God bless my soul.

3. Perhaps “in couplets as opposed to tail rhyme” or “in alliterative verse.”

4. Chaucer’s second effort is the Tale of Melibee, a long prose moral allegory, which draws a much more favorable response from the Host.