The Tale of Sir Thopas

The Introduction

Whan said was al this miracle, every man
As sobre was that wonder was to see,
Til that oure Hoste japen he bigan,
And thanne at erst he looked upon me,
And saide thus, “What man artou?” quod he.
“For 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:
He in the wast is shape as wel as I—
This were a popet in an arm t’ enbrace,
For any womman, smal and fair of face;
He seemeth elvissh by his countenaunce,
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.

Say now somwhat, sin other folk han said.
Tel us a tale of mirthe, and that anoon.”

“Hoste,” quod I, “ne beeth nat yvele apaid,
But of a rym I lerned longe agoon.”

“You, that is good,” quod he. “Now shul we heere
Som daintee thing, me thinketh by his cheere.”

The Tale

Listeth, lords, in good entent,
And I wil telle verrayment 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. A knight was fair and gent
In bataile and in tournemente—
His name was Sir Thopas.

Yborn he was in fer contree,
In Flandres al biyonde the see—
At Popering in the place.4
His fader was a man ful free,
And lord he was of that contree,
As it was Goddes grace.

Sir Thopas wax a doughty swain:
Whit was his face as paindeman,9
His lippes rede as rose;
His rode is lik scarlet in grain,6
And I you telle in good certain5
He hadde a semely nose.

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,6 cloth of gold
That coste many a jane.9

He coude hunte at wilde deer,
And ride an-hawking for river,9
With grey goshawk on honde.
Therto he was a good archer,
Of wrastling was ther noon his peer,9 peer, equal
Ther any ram shal stonde.1

Ful many a maide bright in bowr2
They moorne0 for him paramour,0
Whan hem were bet0 to sleepe.
But he was chast, and no lechour,
And sweete as is the Brambel flowr
That bereth the rede hepe.0

And so bifel upon a day—
Forsoothe as I you telle may—
Sir Thopas wolde out ride:
He worth upon his steede grey, mounted
And in his hand a launcegay,0
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.
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He priketh\textsuperscript{o} thurgh a fair forest—
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\textsuperscript{o}
Bitid a sory care.

There springen herbes grete and smale—
The licoris and setewale,\textsuperscript{3}
And many a close-gilofre.\textsuperscript{o}
And notemuge\textsuperscript{o} to putte in ale,
Wether it be moiste or stale,
Or for to laye in cofre.\textsuperscript{o}

The briddes singe, it is no nay,
The sperhawk\textsuperscript{o} and the popinjay.\textsuperscript{o}
That joye it was to heere;
The thrustelcok\textsuperscript{o} made eek his lay,\textsuperscript{o}
The wodedouve\textsuperscript{o} upon the spray,
She soong ful loude and clere.

Sir Thopas fil in love-longinge,
Al whan he herde the thrustel singe,
And priked\textsuperscript{o} as he were wood.\textsuperscript{o}
His faire steede in his prikinge
So swatte\textsuperscript{o} that men mighte him wringe—
His sides were al blood.

Sir Thopas eek so wery was
For priking on the softe gras—
So fiers was his corage—
That down he laide him in the plas,\textsuperscript{o}
To make his steede som solas,\textsuperscript{o}
And yaf him good forage.

"O Sainte Marye, bencite,\textsuperscript{o}
What aileth this love at me\textsuperscript{4}
To binde me so sore?
Me dremed al this night, pardee,\textsuperscript{o}
An elf-queene shal my lemmman be,\textsuperscript{5}
And sleepe under my gore.\textsuperscript{o}

And elf-queene wol I have, ywis,
For in this world no womman is
Worthy to be my make\textsuperscript{o}
In towne:\textsuperscript{6}
Alle othere wommen 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.
6. An example of tail-rhyme, a phrase stuck on strictly for the sake of rhyme.
And to an elf-queene I me take,\(^7\)
By dale and eek by downe.”

Into his sadel he clomb\(^o\) anoon,
And priketh over stile and stoon,\(^8\)
And elf-queene for t’espye;

Til he so longe hath riden and goon,
That he fouond in a privee woon\(^9\)
The contree of fairye,\(^o\)
So wild-e:
For in that contree was ther noon
That to him dorste ride or goon—
Neither wif ne child-e.

Til that ther cam a greet geaunt—
His name was sire Oliphaunt,\(^5\)
A perilous\(^o\) man of deede.

He saide, “Child, by Termagaunt,\(^1\)
But if thou prike out of myn haunt,\(^2\)
Anoon I slee\(^o\) thy steede
With mace.
Here is the Queene of Fairye,
With harpe and pipe and symphonye,\(^o\)
Dwelling in this place.”

The child saide, “Also mote I thee,\(^3\)
Tomorwe wil I meete thee,
When I have myn armoure.

And yit I hope, par ma fay,\(^4\)
That thou shalt with this launcegay
Abyen it\(^o\) ful sowre:\(^5\)
Thy mawe\(^o\)
Shal I percen if I may,
Er it be fully prime\(^o\) of day,
For here shaltou been slawe.”\(^o\)

Sire Thopas drow\(^o\) abak ful faste—
This geaunt at him stones caste
Out of a fel staf-slinge.\(^6\)

But faire escapeth child Thopas,
And al it was thurgh Goddes gras,\(^o\)
And thurgh his fair beringe.\(^o\)

Yit listeth, lordes, to my tale,
Merier than the nightingale,
For now I wol you roune\(^o\)
How Sire Thopas with sides smale,\(^7\)

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7. Devote myself.
8. Alliterative formula. A stile is a set of steps over a fence or wall.
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
To make him bothe game and glee,8
For needes moste he fighte
With a geaunt with hevedes9 three—
For paramour9 and jolitee9
Of oon that shoon ful brighte.

“Do come,” he saide, “my minstrales9
And geestours9 for to tellen tales,
Anoon in myn arminge,
Of romances that been royales—
Of popes and of cardinales,
And eek of love-likeinge.”10

They fette9 him first the sweete win,
And meede eek in a maselin,9
And royal spicerye,9
And gingebreed that was ful fin,

And eek in a maselin,

And licoris and eek comin,9
With sugre that is trye.

He dide9 next his white leer,9
Of cloth of lake9 fin and cleer,9
A breech9 and eek a sherte;9
And next his sherte an aketoun,9
And over that an haubergeoun,9
For9 percing of his herte;
And over that a fin hauberk9—
Was al ywrought of Jewes werk—1

Ful strong it was of plate;
And over that his cote-armour,2
As whit as is a lilye flowr,
In which he wol debate.

His sheeld was al of gold so reed,
And therinne was a bores heed,
A charbocle by his side.
And there he swoor9 on ale and breed
How that the geaunt shal be deed9—

Bitide what bitide.

His jambeaux9 were of quirboily,9
His swerdes sheethe of ivory,
His helm of laton9 bright;
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
3. Ivory.
His bridel as the sonne shoon—
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—
It gooth an ambel° in the way,
Ful softly and rounde,°
In londe.
Lo, lorde mine, here is a fit:°
If ye wol any more of it,
To telle it wol I fonde.°

THE SECOND FIT

Now holde youre mouth, par charitee,
Bothe knight and lady free,°
And herkneth to my spelle:°
Of hataile, and of chivalry,
And of ladies love-drury,°
Anoon I wol you telle.

Men spoken of romances of pris,°
Of Horn Child and of Ypotis,
Of Beves and Sir Gy,
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,°
As sparcle out of the bronde.°
Upon his creest° he bar° a towr—
And therinne stiked a lilye flowr—
God shilde his cors fro shonde!°

And for° he was a knight auntrous,°
He nolde sleepen in noon hous,
But liggen° in his hoode;
His brighte helm was his wonger,
And by him baiteth his dextrer,°
Of herbes fine and goode.

Himself drank water of the wel,
As dide the knight Sire Percivel,°
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 Desconus), 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.
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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.