



## Notes to the Prologue to Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas

1. This prologue is interesting, for the picture which it gives of Chaucer himself; riding apart from and indifferent to the rest of the pilgrims, with eyes fixed on the ground, and an "elvish", morose, or rather self-absorbed air; portly, if not actually stout, in body; and evidently a man out of the common, as the closing words of the Host imply.

2. Referring to the poet's corpulency.

### THE TALE <1>

The First Fit\*

\*part

Listen, lordings, in good intent,  
And I will tell you verrament\*  
Of mirth and of solas,\*  
All of a knight was fair and gent,\*  
In battle and in tournament,  
His name was Sir Thopas.

\*truly  
\*delight, solace  
\*gentle

Y-born he was in far country,  
In Flanders, all beyond the sea,  
At Popering <2> in the place;  
His father was a man full free,  
And lord he was of that country,  
As it was Godde's grace. <3>

Sir Thopas was a doughty swain,  
White was his face as paindemain, <4>  
His lippes red as rose.  
His rode\* is like scarlet in grain,  
And I you tell in good certain  
He had a seemly nose.

\*complexion

His hair, his beard, was like saffron,  
That to his girdle reach'd adown,  
His shoes of cordewane:<5>  
Of Bruges were his hosen brown;  
His robe was of ciclatoun,<6>  
That coste many a jane.<7>

He coulde hunt at the wild deer,  
And ride on hawking \*for rivere\*  
With gray goshawk on hand: <8>  
Thereto he was a good archere,  
Of wrestling was there none his peer,  
Where any ram <9> should stand.

\*by the river\*

Full many a maiden bright in bow'r  
They mourned for him par amour,  
When them were better sleep;  
But he was chaste, and no lechour,  
And sweet as is the bramble flow'r  
That beareth the red heep.\*

\*hip

And so it fell upon a day,  
For sooth as I you telle may,  
Sir Thopas would out ride;  
He worth\* upon his steede gray,  
And in his hand a launcegay,\*  
A long sword by his side.

\*mounted  
\*spear <10>

He pricked through a fair forest,  
Wherein is many a wilde beast,  
Yea, bothe buck and hare;  
And as he pricked north and east,  
I tell it you, him had almost  
Betid\* a sorry care.

\*almost  
\*befallen

There sprange herbes great and small,  
The liquorice and the setewall,\*  
And many a clove-gilofre, <12>  
And nutemeg to put in ale,  
Whether it be moist\* or stale,

\*valerian

\*new

Or for to lay in coffer.

The birdes sang, it is no nay,  
The sperhawk\* and the popinjay,\*\*  
That joy it was to hear;  
The throstle-cock made eke his lay,  
The woode-dove upon the spray  
She sang full loud and clear.

\*sparrowhawk \*\*parrot <13>

Sir Thopas fell in love-longing  
All when he heard the throstle sing,  
And \*prick'd as he were wood;\*  
His faire steed in his pricking  
So sweated, that men might him wring,  
His sides were all blood.

\*rode as if he  
were mad\*

Sir Thopas eke so weary was  
For pricking on the softe grass,  
So fierce was his corage,\*  
That down he laid him in that place,  
To make his steed some solace,  
And gave him good forage.

\*inclination, spirit

"Ah, Saint Mary, ben'dicite,  
What aileth thilke\* love at me  
To binde me so sore?  
Me dreamed all this night, pardie,  
An elf-queen shall my leman\* be,  
And sleep under my gore.\*

\*this

\*mistress  
\*shirt

An elf-queen will I love, y-wis,\*  
For in this world no woman is  
Worthy to be my make\*  
In town;  
All other women I forsake,  
And to an elf-queen I me take  
By dale and eke by down." <14>

\*assuredly

\*mate

Into his saddle he clomb anon,  
And pricked over stile and stone



For now I will you rown,\*  
How Sir Thopas, with sides smale,\*  
Pricking over hill and dale,  
Is come again to town.

\*whisper  
\*small <18>

His merry men commanded he  
To make him both game and glee;  
For needs must he fight  
With a giant with heades three,  
For paramour and jollity  
Of one that shone full bright.

"\*Do come,\*" he saide, "my minstrales  
And gestours\* for to telle tales.  
Anon in mine arming,  
Of romances that be royales, <19>  
Of popes and of cardinales,  
And eke of love-longing."

\*summon\*  
\*story-tellers

They fetch'd him first the sweete wine,  
And mead eke in a maseline,\*  
And royal spicery;  
Of ginger-bread that was full fine,  
And liquorice and eke cumin,  
With sugar that is trie.\*

\*drinking-bowl  
of maple wood <20>

\*refined

He didde,\* next his white lere,\*\*  
Of cloth of lake\* fine and clear,  
A breech and eke a shirt;  
And next his shirt an haketon,\*  
And over that an habergeon,\*  
For piercing of his heart;

\*put on \*\*skin  
\*fine linen

\*cassock  
\*coat of mail

And over that a fine hauberk,\*  
Was all y-wrought of Jewes'\* werk,  
Full strong it was of plate;  
And over that his coat-armour,\*  
As white as is the lily flow'r, <21>  
In which he would debate.\*

\*plate-armour  
\*magicians'

\*knight's surcoat

\*fight

His shield was all of gold so red  
And therein was a boare's head,  
A charbuncle\* beside;  
And there he swore on ale and bread,  
How that the giant should be dead,  
Betide whatso betide.

\*carbuncle <22>

His jambeaux\* were of cuirbouly, <23>  
His sworde's sheath of ivory,  
His helm of latoun\* bright,  
His saddle was of rewel <24> bone,  
His bridle as the sunne shone,  
Or as the moonelight.

\*boots

\*brass

His speare was of fine cypress,  
That bodeth war, and nothing peace;  
The head full sharp y-ground.  
His steede was all dapple gray,  
It went an amble in the way  
Full softely and round  
In land.

Lo, Lordes mine, here is a fytt;  
If ye will any more of it,  
To tell it will I fand.\*

\*try

## The Second Fit

Now hold your mouth for charity,  
Bothe knight and lady free,  
And hearken to my spell;\*  
Of battle and of chivalry,  
Of ladies' love and druerie,\*  
Anon I will you tell.

\*tale <25>

\*gallantry

Men speak of romances of price\*  
Of Horn Child, and of Ipotis,  
Of Bevis, and Sir Guy, <26>

\* worth, esteem

Of Sir Libeux, <27> and Pleindamour,  
But Sir Thopas, he bears the flow'r  
Of royal chivalry.

His goode steed he all bestrode,  
And forth upon his way he glode,\*  
As sparkle out of brand;\*  
Upon his crest he bare a tow'r,  
And therein stick'd a lily flow'r; <28>  
God shield his corse\* from shand!\*\*

\*shone  
\*torch  
  
\*body \*\*harm

And, for he was a knight auntrous,\*  
He woulde sleepen in none house,  
But liggen\* in his hood,  
His brighte helm was his wanger,\*  
And by him baited\* his destrer\*\*  
Of herbes fine and good.

\*adventurous  
  
\*lie  
\*pillow <29>  
\*fed \*\*horse <30>

Himself drank water of the well,  
As did the knight Sir Percivel, <31>  
So worthy under weed;  
Till on a day - . . .

## Notes to Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas

1. "The Rhyme of Sir Thopas," as it is generally called, is introduced by Chaucer as a satire on the dull, pompous, and prolix metrical romances then in vogue. It is full of phrases taken from the popular rhymesters in the vein which he holds up to ridicule; if, indeed -- though of that there is no evidence -- it be not actually part of an old romance which Chaucer selected and reproduced to point his assault on the prevailing taste in literature.

Transcriber's note: The Tale is full of incongruities of every kind, which Purves does not refer to; I point some of them out in the notes which follow - marked TN.

2. Poppering, or Poppeling, a parish in the marches of Calais of

which the famous antiquary Leland was once Rector. TN: The inhabitants of Popering had a reputation for stupidity.

3. TN: The lord of Popering was the abbot of the local monastery - who could, of course, have no legitimate children.

4. Paindemain: Either "pain de matin," morning bread, or "pain de Maine," because it was made best in that province; a kind of fine white bread.

5. Cordewane: Cordovan; fine Spanish leather, so called from the name of the city where it was prepared

6. Ciclatoun: A rich Oriental stuff of silk and gold, of which was made the circular robe of state called a "ciclaton," from the Latin, "cyclas." The word is French.

7. Jane: a Genoese coin, of small value; in our old statutes called "gallihalpens," or galley half-pence.

8. TN: In Mediaeval falconry the goshawk was not regarded as a fit bird for a knight. It was the yeoman's bird.

9. A ram was the usual prize of wrestling contests. TN: Wrestling and archery were sports of the common people, not knightly accomplishments.

10. Launcegay: spear; "azagay" is the name of a Moorish weapon, and the identity of termination is singular.

12. Clove-gilofre: clove-gilliflower; "Caryophyllus hortensis."

13. TN: The sparrowhawk and parrot can only squawk unpleasantly.

14. TN: The sudden and pointless changes in the stanza form are of course part of Chaucer's parody.

15. Sir Oliphant: literally, "Sir Elephant;" Sir John Mandeville calls those animals "Olyfautes."

16. Termagaunt: A pagan or Saracen deity, otherwise named Tervagan, and often mentioned in Middle Age literature. His name has passed into our language, to denote a ranter or blusterer, as he was represented to be.
17. TN: His "fair bearing" would not have been much defence against a sling-stone.
18. TN: "Sides small": a conventional description for a woman, not a man.
19. Romances that be royal: so called because they related to Charlemagne and his family.
20. TN: A knight would be expected to have a gold or silver drinking vessel.
21. TN: The coat-armor or coat of arms should have had his heraldic emblems on it, not been pure white
22. Charboucle: Carbuncle; French, "escarboucle;" a heraldic device resembling a jewel.
23. Cuirbouly: "Cuir boulli," French, boiled or prepared leather; also used to cover shields, &c.
24. Rewel bone: No satisfactory explanation has been furnished of this word, used to describe some material from which rich saddles were made. TN: The OED defines it as narwhal ivory.
25. Spell: Tale, discourse, from Anglo-Saxon, "spellian," to declare, tell a story.
26. Sir Bevis of Hampton, and Sir Guy of Warwick, two knights of great renown.
27. Libeux: One of Arthur's knights, called "Ly beau desconus," "the fair unknown."

28. TN: The crest was a small emblem worn on top of a knight's helmet. A tower with a lily stuck in it would have been unwieldy and absurd.

29. Wanger: pillow; from Anglo-Saxon, "wangere," because the "wanges;" or cheeks, rested on it.

30. Destrer: "destrier," French, a war-horse; in Latin, "dextrarius," as if led by the right hand.

31. Sir Percival de Galois, whose adventures were written in more than 60,000 verses by Chretien de Troyes, one of the oldest and best French romancers, in 1191.