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# Chaucer's "Sir Thopas": Meter, Rhyme, and Contrast

A. Wigfall Green

CHAUCER'S "Sir Thopas," as Skeat points out,<sup>1</sup> appears in the edition of Thomas Tyrwhitt and in the black-letter editions as "The ryme of Sir Thopas." The title is apt, for Chaucer was quite conscious of the meter and rhyme of his tale.

The prologue of "Sir Thopas" immediately follows "The Prioresses Tale," a tender story of martyrdom befittingly told in rhyme royal. The prologue, also in rhyme royal but consisting of only three stanzas, has a tenderness too, but a humorous tenderness. Chaucer agrees, with pretended modesty, to tell the only tale he knows, "a rym I lerned longe agoon."<sup>2</sup> The host then announces that Chaucer will tell some "deyntee thyng," and the dainty thing becomes so highly attenuated that it is easily broken off by the host.

After the host interrupts Chaucer and says that his ears ache because "of thy drasty speche," the word *rym* or variant is used five times in nine verses. The host commits such rhyme to the devil and calls it "rym dogerel." Chaucer feigning injury, says that it is the best rhyme that he knows. The host then contemptuously calls "Sir Thopas" "drasty rymyng" and commands that Chaucer "no lenger ryme."<sup>3</sup> This intimidation of Chaucer appears appropriately in heroic couplets, as does the rest of the epilogue to "Sir Thopas."

Sir Thopas is such a transparent precious stone that his name is taken from the topaz, just as the pearl becomes a simile for Sir

Gawain.<sup>4</sup> Although Sir Thopas is said ironically to be a "doghty swayn," a hard rider and a hard hunter, he is a marionette, fastidious in dress, fragile in appearance, and diminutive in size. Michael Drayton, more than any other author, shows a sensitive understanding of Sir Thopas in his "Nimphidia The Covrt of Fayrie," inspired by "OLDE CHAVCER" and his "Topas." In "Nimphidia," for example, the walls of the royal palace are made of spiders' legs and the windows of the eyes of cats; the royal chariot, a snail shell, is drawn by "Foure nimble Gnats."

In the prologue Chaucer adroitly prepares for the entrance of Sir Thopas by projecting his own consciousness into that of Sir Thopas. Except for his belly, as large as that of the host and impossible of reduction, Chaucer<sup>5</sup> diminishes himself to a pygmy. The host says that he is a "popet" (OF *poupette*), a puppet or a dolly worthy to be embraced by "any womman, smal and fair of face." There is also something "elvyssh," or fay-like, in his countenance.<sup>6</sup> When later<sup>7</sup> Sir Thopas seeks an "elf-queene" to love, the reader accepts readily the coalescence of the image of Chaucer and that of Sir Thopas in the preternatural mirror.

The persiflage of "Sir Thopas" has long been recognized. Richard Hurd calls it "*a manifest banter*," and Thomas Percy says that it was written "in ridicule" of the romance.<sup>8</sup> Skeat and Robinson accept the poem as burlesque.

The narrative method is obviously satirical: the story is halted in the first fit to introduce animals of the forest in stanza eight, herbs in nine, birds in ten, and drink in twenty-two. Chaucer names romances of the type that he is burlesquing in the second stanza of the second fit; verse 848 of the first fit also satirizes the romance. Chaucer is aware of the pun in *fit* although it is a common name for a group of stanzas in the romance. He is, of course, jesting in his description of the appearance of Sir Thopas in stanza three of the first fit and of the dress and accouterments in stanzas four and twenty-three through twenty-seven. Badinage also appears in the "queene of Fayrye" and the "geaunt with hevdes three" in Chaucer's Lilliput.

In the same spirit Sir Thopas is made horsy: *steede* is used six times, and *berynge* and *dextier* appear as synonyms; *ride(n)* is used

four times, and *ambil*, *sadel*, and *brydel* once. The tempo of the poem is made furiously swift through the hard-riding of Sir Thopas: *prike* or variant appears eight times in the first fit, and in the second fit, third stanza, Sir Thopas "glood / As sparcle out of the bronde."

Many of the rhymes are studied burlesque: in stanza eleven humor is achieved through contrast: Sir Thopas pauses to hear the thrush *sing*; his steed is so sweaty that men can *wring* the blood from his sides. In stanza sixteen, kindred monsters, Olifaunt and Termagaunt, create amusing rhyme.

Although Chaucer makes the host refer to "Sir Thopas" as "rym dogerel," or burlesque verse of irregular meter, John Matthews Manly says that the eight types of stanza are but variations of one basic type, the whole poem being a "*tour de force* of high spirits."<sup>9</sup>

Granting that Chaucer was burlesquing meter and rhyme in "Sir Thopas," it is not improbable that he was demonstrating his virtuosity and even experimenting in verse forms. Chaucer speaks of the variety of his poems and of his meter and rhyme in *The Legend of Good Women*:

And many an ympne for your halydayes,  
That highten balades, roundels, virelayes; (F, 422-423)  
He hath maad many a lay and many a thing. (F, 430)

In the same poem Love speaks to Chaucer:

Make the metres of hem as the lest. (F, 562)  
I wot wel that thou maist nat al yt ryme. (F, 570)

The meter and rhyme<sup>10</sup> of the "deyntee thyng" called "Sir Thopas" are so complex that they can be indicated best in outline form:

Stanza(s)	Number of Verses in Each Stanza	Rhyme Scheme	Number of Feet in Each Verse (All Iambic)
PROLOGUE			
1-3	7	ababbcc (rhyme royal)	5
THE FIRST FIT			
1-13	6	aab/aab	443/443
14	7	aab/c/bbc	443/1/443
15	10	aab/aab/c/aac	443/443/1/443
16	10	aab/aab/c/ddc	443/443/1/443
17	10	aab/ccb/d/ccd	443/443/1/443

CHAUCER'S "SIR THOPAS"

<i>Stanza(s)</i>	<i>Number of Verses in Each Stanza</i>	<i>Rhyme Scheme</i>	<i>Number of Feet in Each Verse (All Iambic)</i>
18	6	aab/ccb	443/443
19-22		The same as 1-13	
23-24		The same as 18	
25		The same as 1-13 and 19-22	
26		The same as 18 and 23-24	
27	10	aab/ccb/d/eed	443/443/1/443
		THE SECOND FIT	
1-5		(No. 5 has only three and one-half verses)	
		The same as 18, 23-24, and 26	
		Repeated rhyme is as follows: <sup>11</sup>	

*Other Stanza(s)*

PROLOGUE

1-3 None within prologue

THE FIRST FIT

1	<i>solas-Thopas</i>	12 <i>was-gras-plas-solas</i> 18 <i>Thopas-gras</i>
2	<i>contree-see-free-contree</i>	13 <i>benedicite-me-pardee-be</i> 17 <i>thee-thee</i> 20 <i>he-gee-three-jolitee</i> 1 (second fit) <i>charitee-free</i>
4	<i>place-grace</i> <i>saffroun-adoun-broun-syklatoun</i>	16 <i>mace-place</i> 23 <i>aketoun-haubergeoun</i>
5	<i>honde-stonde</i>  <i>deer-river-archeer-peer</i>	27 <i>londe-fonde</i> 3 (second fit) <i>bronde-shonde</i> 4 (second fit) <i>wonger-dextrer</i> (proximate)
6	<i>bour-paramour-lechour-flour</i>	24 <i>cote-armour-flour</i> 2 (second fit) <i>Pleyndamour-flour</i> 3 (second fit) <i>tour-flour</i>
7	<i>day-may-gray-launcegay</i>  <i>ride-side</i>	10 <i>nay-papejay-lay-spray</i> 17 <i>fay-launcegay-may-day</i> 27 <i>gray-way</i> 25 <i>bisyde-bitide</i>
9	<i>smale-cetewale-ale-stale</i>	19 <i>tale-nightyngale-smale-dale</i>
10	<i>heere-cleere</i>	23 <i>leere-cleere</i>
11	<i>longynge-synge-prikyng-wrynge</i>  <i>wood-blood</i>	18 <i>slyng-berynge</i> 21 <i>armynge-likynge</i> 3 (second fit) <i>bistood-glood</i>
15	<i>t'espys-Fairy</i>	16 <i>Fayerye-symphonye</i>

Stanza	Rhyme	Other Stanza(s)
		22 <i>spicerye-trye</i>
	<i>anon-stoon-goon-woon-noon-goon</i>	26 <i>boon-shoon</i>
16 <i>dede-steede</i>		5 (second fit) <i>wede</i>
THE SECOND FIT		
1 <i>chivalry-love-drury</i>		2 (second fit) <i>Gy-chivalry</i>
EPILOGUE		
<i>Verses</i>		<i>Other Verses</i>
2109-2110 <i>dignitee-me</i>		2115-2116 <i>he-me</i>
2111-2112 <i>lewednesse-blesse</i>		2139-2140 <i>lesse-expresse</i>
2113-2114 <i>speche-biteche</i>		2143-2144 <i>biseche-speche</i>
2137-2138 <i>sentence-difference</i>		2151-2152 <i>sentence-difference</i>
2149-2150 <i>seye-preye</i>		2155-2156 <i>seye-preye</i>

From the preceding analysis, it appears that, in addition to the rhyme royal of the prologue and the decasyllabic verse, or heroic couplet, of the epilogue, only seven varieties of rhyme are used in "Sir Thopas" proper. Although Chaucerian pronunciation does not admit of rhyme between *thee-thee* and *fay-launcegay* in stanza 17 of the first fit, if it did, this stanza would have a rhyme scheme similar to that of stanza fifteen and there would be but six varieties of rhyme. In this connection, *solas-Thopas* of stanza one of the first fit do not rhyme with *place-grace* of stanza two, accepted by Manly as rhymes in his paper previously cited. The various types of rhyme are

1. 6-verse stanza rhyming aab/aab or aab/ccb
2. 7-verse stanza rhyming aab/c/bbc, obviously a variant of the second type of 6-verse stanza
3. 10-verse stanza rhyming aaa/aab/c/aac, aab/aab/c/ddc, aab/ccb/d/ccd, or aab/ccb/d/eed; the two middle types are but variants of each other.

More successive rhymes appear in the second fit than in the first: the first and second stanzas are linked by *chivalry-love-drury* and *Gy-chivalry*, and the second and third by *Pleyndamour-flour* and *tour-flour*. The second fit also contains more near-rhyme: *spelle-telle* of the first stanza approximate *well-Percyvell* of the fifth, and *bistrood-glood* of the third stanza *hoode-goode* of the fourth.

Stanzas are linked through repetition. Sometimes the narrative linking is remote and suspense is created: "a greet geaunt" appears in stanza sixteen; he reappears in eighteen; but it is only in twenty that

we learn how awesome he is; he disappears, while Thopas drinks and dresses lavishly, until twenty-five, when Thopas swears anticlimactically, "the geaunt shal be deed, Bityde what bityde!" The giant is used to link stanzas medially and terminally; the elf-queen is used with more subtlety to link stanzas: she appears internally four times in stanzas thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. Litotes is used skillfully in delicate situations: love has bound Thopas "so soore" in thirteen that he dreams of "An elf-queene." An intentional pun appears when, in the land of "the queene of Fayerye," Thopas indulges in a fay-like oath, "*par ma fay.*"

The number of feet in each stanza is handled with charm and consistency: the six-verse stanza has the pattern 443/443; the seven-verse stanza is also perfectly symmetrical, 443/1/443; the ten-verse stanza is consistent with the seven-verse stanza, but it introduces three verses at the beginning which create variety within a symmetrical pattern, 443/443/1/443. The introduction of the verse of one foot required great poetic skill; an apparent artlessness is achieved only through great art.

Much of the humor of the tale is created through rhyme. Time, setting, and major character are introduced in stanza seven with a flourish of rhyme: "upon a day," "as I yow telle may," Sir Thopas is on his "steede gray," in his hand "a launcegay"; subsequent stanzas continue the rhyme: "it is no nay" that "the papejay" sang and the "thrustelcok made eek his lay" and the "wodedowve" was "upon the spray"; "Also moote I thee," said Thopas to the giant, "I meete with thee," and "*par ma fay,*" "with this launcegay," thy maw shall I pierce "if I may" ere "pryme of day"; Thopas on his steed "al dappull gray" ambles "in the way." An eerie atmosphere is also achieved through rhyme within a given stanza, as in sixteen: "a greet geaunt" named "Olifaunt," swearing "by Termagaunt!" orders Thopas out of his "haunt." Many a maiden, in six, "bright in bour," mourns for Thopas "paramour," but he is "no lechour" but sweet as "the brembul flour"; symbolic of his purity, in twenty-four, is his "cote-armour," "whit as is a lilye flour"; in two of the second fit, he knows the romances like "Pleyndamour," but of royal chivalry Thopas "bereth the flour."

Today the comparison of Sir Thomas Wyatt in "Of the Courtiers

life written to John Poins," Satire III,

I am not he that can . . .

Praise syr Topas for a noble tale,

And scorne the story that the knight tolde

seems unnatural because of a different conception of the purpose of Chaucer in creating the Knight and his tale and Sir Thopas and his tale. Yet the method of Chaucer is comparable but antithetic: the Knight is a very human crusader, although idealized, who has fought in specific places; the tale, although having a hierarchy of gods, planets, kings and queens, and knights, is localized in the Athens area and develops as a narrative. Sir Thopas is a subhuman-superhuman knight with human qualities; although he was born in Flanders, he wanders all over the "contree of Fairye" and, like the tale, arrives nowhere. Even in the creation of a serious character like the Knight, there is a genial play of comedy in description: after Chaucer expends twenty-five verses in enumerating the glorious accomplishments of the hardy soldier, he says in the General Prologue, 69, "And of his port as meeke as is a mayde." And surely the comic spirit is mildly glowing when, toward the end of "The Knight's Tale," 2808-2810, Arcite dies with the words, "Mercy, Emelye!" on his lips and his "spirit chaunged house" and went where "I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher"; when the mourning Palamon appears, 2883-2884, with "fлотery berd and ruggy, asschy heeres," in "clothes blake, ydropped al with teeres"; and when the wake-games are held, 2960-2962, and Chaucer asserts his inability to tell who "wrastleth best naked with oille enoynt."

The flights of tragedy lightened by flashes of subtle comedy in "The Knight's Tale" become flights of humor in "Sir Thopas." The opening of the poem gives the hope of seeing a valiant knight in action; but Chaucer's pictorial characterization of Sir Thopas soon becomes the reverse of what was expected; the descent to weakness is rapid, but equally swift is the ascent to chivalric elegance; and it is soon discovered that Chaucer is using the method of opposites in flashing his wit upon the reader. The weakness and strength of Sir Thopas become the weakness and strength of the reader, who oscillates between scorn and sympathy for Thopas as for himself.

Contrast, or irony, begins with the prologue to "Sir Thopas":



because of the sombreness of "The Prioresses Tale," every man is sober, and the Host begins to jest. This contrast appears also in the sex drive of Thopas: he was "chaast and no lechour," but he dreamed of an elf-queen who should "slepe under my goore"; he then set off posthaste to find an elf-queen to be his mate. The dream is like that in *The Romaunt of the Rose*, 2569-2572, in which the image of the maiden comes to the man, who has her "Naked bitwene thyne armes there." That Thopas should forsake all other women in the flesh, those of the town and "Ful many a mayde" who mourned for "hym paramour" and seek a nebulous elf is in the spirit of contrast and not unlike "many a wight" in *Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 164-165, who has "loved thyng he nevere saigh his lyve." In accordance with the courtly tradition of love, the knight must be in love with the idea of love more than with the figure of woman, even though the figure may be in the mind of the man. The maiden must always be unattainable in the body, for, as in *The Romaunt of the Rose*, 5053-5056, man should value little "hir, that wole hir body selle." The great duke Theseus, of "The Knight's Tale," surprisingly enough conquers "al the regne of Femenye" and wins and weds "The queene Ypolita"; in reverse, it is surprising and pleasing that in the land of elves and giants of "Sir Thopas," where even the giant Olifaunt swears "by Termagaunt!" Thopas never meets, never woos, and never wins the elf-queen. Marriage by Thopas would have ended in the spoliation of the chastity of Thopas and of the tale.

Dissimilitude appears also in the person of Thopas. He is a knight "fair and gent" in "bataille and in tourneyment" and a "doghty swayn," but his face is white "as payndemayn." In rhyme, vocabulary, and juxtaposition of conflicting images, Chaucer has lifted mere burlesque to the realm of high comedy. Chaucer seems to be contemptuous of the Frere when he makes his "nekke whit" as "the flour-de-lys" (General Prologue, *The Canterbury Tales*, 238), but he is here smiling good-humoredly at, and with, Thopas. His complexion is "lyk scarlet," his "lippes rede as rose," and he "hadde a semely nose." So the third stanza ends with delightful anticlimax. He is not unlike the "grete Emetreus," of "The Knight's Tale," 2168, with "lippes rounde" and "colour . . . sangwyn." Carroll Camden, Jr.,

makes the point that Chaucer was an excellent physiognomist,<sup>12</sup> but he was also an expert in the use of extremes. It is more appropriate that Thopas, the mediaeval Tom Thumb, have a "semely nose" than that, like the miller in "The Reeve's Tale," 3934, his nose should be "camus" or, like the Miller of the General Prologue, 554-557, his nose should be adorned with a wart on which "stood a toft of herys" as red as the bristles "of a sowes erys." His hair and his beard are "lyk saffroun," somewhat darker than that of Emetreus ("The Knight's Tale," 2167), whose hair "was yelow, and glytered as the sonne." But Chaucer was not content to say only that the beard of Thopas was "lyk saffroun"; he heightens his comedy by adding that the beard "to his girdel raughte adoun." The diminutive Thopas would naturally have "sydes smale," not unlike the Clerk, (General Prologue 288-289), who "nas nat right fat," but "looked holwe."

To the costuming and equipage of Sir Thopas, Chaucer devotes the greater part of six stanzas. Symbolic of his purity, Thopas stuck a "lilie flour" in the tower of his crest, and his "cote-armour" is "whit as is a lilye flour." Chaucer's apprenticeship in costuming was served in his translation of *The Romaunt of the Rose*. In this work (2251-2261) "queynt array" or "fresh array" or "fair clothynge" is "nothyng proud," and garments should be styled by "hym that kan best do." In the *Romaunt* also (2263-2284) the gentleman is told all about points and sleeves, shoes and boots, gloves and purses for alms, and hats "of flours as fresh as May" with chaplet "of roses of Whitsonday." In the *Romaunt* the gentleman must also "hondis wash," "teeth make white," and quickly clean "nailes blak." The costuming of Thopas is but pleasantly humorous as compared to the bravura passages of "The Knight's Tale," (2129-2178), in which Lygurge comes forth resplendent in rubies and diamonds and Emetreus in pearls and rubies, like the carbuncle in Sir Thopas' shield.

In drink also Chaucer, son and grandson of a vintner, is an epicure. Had Thopas "vernysshed his heed" or the "joly whistle wel ywet," as did the miller and his wife of "The Reeve's Tale" (4149 and 4155), he would have been very indelicate. The *bon vivant* Sir Thopas is fetched "sweete wyn" and "mede," but he drinks only "water of the

well." Chaucer says in *The Romaunt of the Rose* (5709-5710) that he receives "a gret peyne" who "undirtakith to drynke up Seyne."

Sir Thopas is a great sportsman. Like Chaucer's monk, whose greatest pleasure (General Prologue 191) is "huntyng for the hare," Sir Thopas rides hard "thurgh a fair forest," in which "is many a wilde best." He also hunts "wilde deer" and goes "an haukyng for river." Like the Yeoman, he is "a good archeer," and at "wrastlyng was ther noon his peer"; like the Miller, he always won the ram as prize. *Vis-a-vis* Sir Thopas, armed with lance and long sword, is the triple-headed "greet geaunt" named Olifaunt, armed not with spiked mace but slingshot.

Contrast is woven also into the stageset of Chaucer's tale. Thopas was born "in fer contree," or Flanders, and he wears the fine hose of that country; he is now in mediaeval England, but this has been metamorphosed into the "contree of Fairye," ruled by "the queene of Fayerye." A nebulous town exists, in which there are women, but none, Sir Thopas says elegantly, "Worthy to be my make." There are also shadowy maidens in bowers who mourn for him, but he will court only the elf-queen. Although no "wyf ne childe" dare ride or walk toward him, even these are obscured by the ancient, wild forests through which Thopas rides. Sire Olifaunt, the giant, appears and threatens to slay not the miniature Thopas, but Thopas' horse, the most realistic character in the tale. Herbs and trees are painted on the backdrop. A chorus of birds sings lustily, sparrowhawk, popinjay, throstle cock, wood-dove, and thrush. Despite the detail, Thopas' Utopia is a vacuum.

Contrast appears also in the tempo of the work: the lingering effect of stanza twenty-three, in which Thopas begins to dress, is markedly different from the leaping of Thopas in fifteen "over stile and stoon." Thopas, conceived as a midge, perfectly formed but diminutive in size, is something of a phenomenon: since he is a child in size, one would expect him to be juvenile in manner. But Chaucer again uses antithesis and makes Thopas heroic in attitude. He dares, as in stanza seven, to ride through the forest, where there is "many a wilde best." Immediately thereafter, as if by contraremonstrance, Chaucer adds, "Ye, bothe bukke and hare," and each "wilde best" is counterpassant, as on

a mediaeval escutcheon, emblematic of the two techniques of Chaucer and the two natures of Thopas.

As a man, Sir Thopas is, indeed, a gem; as a tale, "Sir Thopas" is one of great "myrthe and of solas."

<sup>1</sup>*The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer . . . Notes to the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1924), p. 183.

<sup>2</sup>*The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Fred N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), p. 164, v. 709. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this work.

<sup>3</sup>Robinson, p. 167, vv. 924-932.

<sup>4</sup>"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," v. 2364.

<sup>5</sup>Chaucer is "rounde of shap" in v. 31, "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan." See Thomas A. Knott, "A Bit of Chaucer Mythology," *MP*, VIII (1910), 135-139.

<sup>6</sup>Vv. 700-703, prologue.

<sup>7</sup>The First Fit, vv. 788, 790, 795, and 799.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted by Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion 1357-1900* (Cambridge, 1925), I, 422 and 427.

<sup>9</sup>"The Stanza-forms of Sir Thopas," *MP*, VIII (1910), 141-144.

<sup>10</sup>Henry Cromie includes "Sir Thopas" in his *Ryme-index* (London, 1875), but his method does not admit of assembly of rhymes in that work.

<sup>11</sup>Stanza numbers are those of the first fit unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>12</sup>"The Physiognomy of Thopas," *RES*, XI (1935), 326-330.