

Canterbury Tales

Chaucer's tale of Sir Thopas

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This Canterbury tale has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912, reprinted 1973. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference to The Riverside Chaucer, 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

Copyright © Richard Scott-Robinson, 2000, 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. The download of a single copy for personal use, or for teaching purposes, does not require permission.

richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



Sir Thopas

Bihold the murye wordes of the Host to Chaucer

When seyde was al this miracle, every man as sobre was, that wonder was to see, til that our hoste jape the bigan – When the account of this miracle was finished, everyone looked very sober and thoughtful, remarkably so, until our host began to joke a little and at length, he looked at me and said:

‘What kind of man are you? You stare down at the ground all the time as though you are looking for a hare! Ride up to me and raise your eyes. Give him room, everybody, let him approach. He has the same waist as I do! Here is a jolly fellow for any pretty woman to cuddle. He looks like a gnome! He certainly doesn’t joke or talk to anybody. But it’s your turn to speak, since many others have, so tell us a funny story, go on!’

‘Host,’ I replied, ‘don’t hold it against me, but the only tale I know is one that I learned a long time ago.’

‘That sounds good enough to me,’ he replied. ‘Now we’ll all hear something of value, I’m sure. I can see by the look on his face.’

Here biginneth Chaucers Tale of Thopas

Listeth lordes in good entent · And I wol telle verrayment · Of mirthe and of solas · Al of a knyght was fair and gent · In bataille and in tourneyment · His name was Sir Thopas – Listen, everybody, listen with an open mind and I shall provide both light entertainment and solace as I tell this tale as accurately as I can; it’s about a courageous and very accomplished knight called Sir Thopas.

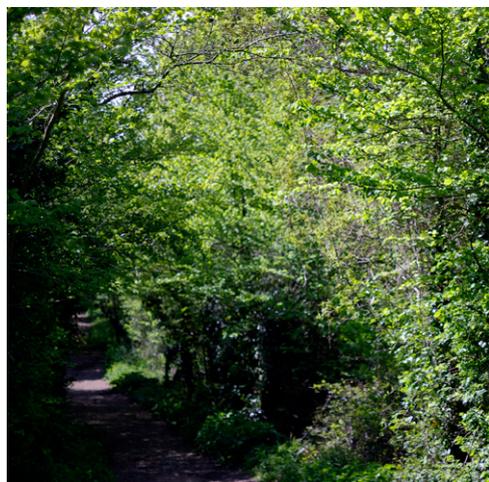
Sir Thopas was born beyond the sea, in Flanders, and by God’s grace his father was the lord of all that land. He grew to be a very strong young man, his lips were rose red, his face was as white as flour, his cheeks were bright scarlet and he had a very handsome nose! His hair and beard were saffron yellow and hung down to his waist, his shoes were of the finest Spanish leather and his clothes were worth a fortune. He could stalk a deer, go hunting by the river with a grey goshawk, and was a very good archer as well. But above

Widely regarded as a parody of the romance literature of his day, Chaucer’s own tale of Sir Thopas is a dreadful rendition that is interrupted and stopped by Harry Bailly before Chaucer can get very far with it. The hero is about to fight with a giant, whom he had encountered shortly before in an enchanted part of a forest, where, like Sir Orfeo – whom Chaucer may have read about in the Auchinleck Manuscript – Sir Thopas seems to have wandered into an Other-world. Like the knight Guigemar, in Marie de France’s twelfth century Breton lai, Sir Thopas cannot fall in love. Then he declares that he is in love with an elf-queen. Riding through the forest like a maniac, searching for her, he encounters this giant, who is there to protect the elf-queen. Sir Thopas later describes the giant as having three heads, like the dog Cerberus who guards the gates of the Underworld in classical mythology. Geoffrey is obviously joking when he says that this is the best tale he knows. But does he understand more than he is letting on?

This tale follows the tale from the Prioress in all existing medieval manuscripts and is another of Geoffrey’s Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket’s shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

all, he excelled at wrestling and could throw anybody to the ground. There was no one his equal.

Many damsels tossed and turned at night thinking of him, but he had developed no interest in love at all and preferred to remain celibate. But one day, urged on by a dream to



find the woman he truly sought, a lady of the Otherworld, Sir Thopas rode out on his grey steed, a lance in his hand and a bright sword by his side. Galloping through the forest, swerving past overhanging branches that threatened his life at every turn, and past thickets harbouring dangerous wild beasts, I tell you, he very nearly came to grief!

On the forest floor were many plants used in medicine, and nutmegs to put in ale, or to lay in a chest or a coffin.

The birds were singing, thrushes and jays, and wood pigeons calling high above in the oaks. Sir Thopas heard these sounds and, fired with love, he spurred his steed onwards as though he was mad. His horse was so bathed in sweat that men might wring the animal dry, and its sides were bloody from the spurs.

At last, Sir Thopas was so weary that he lay upon the ground, and his horse wandered off, riderless, to graze. ‘Oh, Mary!’ cried Sir Thopas, ‘I am consumed with love! I dreamed last night that I lay with an elf-queen. There is no woman in this whole Earthly world, in any town or city, that I could love. I must reject them all and search far and wide for my elf-queen.’

Sir Thopas climbed back into the saddle, and before long he had ridden so far that he found himself in a hidden part of the forest that no women or child ever dared to enter – it was a secret and deserted place, the very gates of the Otherworld.

Soon he was approached by a giant, whose name was Sir Oliphant, an old soldier who had been led in chains to the western isles of Scotland in the days of King Edward II. A dead soldier. He said: ‘Child, by Termagaunt, unless you take yourself out of my haunt, I will kill your horse with my iron mace, for the queen of the Otherworld lives hereabouts, with all manner of sweet music to soothe and entertain her.’

The child replied: ‘I defy you! We shall meet again tomorrow when I have my armour, and I will strike you so hard in the mouth with the point of my lance that you will be killed.’

Sir Thopas made his retreat; the giant threw stones at him with a sling but he managed to escape unscathed, through God’s grace, and through his own excellent horsemanship he arrived back into his own city. Listen, everybody, to this tale! It is more comforting than the song of the nightingale! Sir Thopas commanded his men to prepare him for battle.

‘I must fight a giant with three heads,’ he declared, ‘in order to reach the love and bliss of a shining queen. Come minstrels, come jesters and tell tales of romance and of love while I arm myself. Tell of Popes and of cardinals.’

Wine was fetched, and gingerbread, mead and liquorice, while Sir Thopas put on a linen shirt and pants, a tunic to wear beneath his chain mail, a double layer of body armour, both of mail and of steel plate, and above this, a surcoat with his own coat-of-arms emblazoned upon it. His shield was of gold, with the emblem of a boar’s head and a diamond at the centre. Sir Thopas swore that whatever happened, the giant was a dead man! His legs were protected with thick leather and upon his head was set a shining helmet. His scabbard was of ivory, his saddle of whalebone, and his bridle shone like the moon. His lance was sharpened for war, not for jousting, and his horse, a dapple grey, carried Sir Thopas magnificently! My lords, shall I tell you what happened next?

Silence, then, for charity! Listen to my tale of love, of battle and of chivalry. Men sing the tales of many fine knights, but Sir Thopas bears the flower of royal chivalry! He mounted his horse and shot off like the spark from a coal. His heraldic emblem was a tower surmounted by a lily, may God keep him from harm! And like a true knight errant, he shunned the comforts of castles but slept in the open air, using his helmet as a pillow. He drank water from the forest spring, like the worthy Sir Perceval. And one day...

Here the Host stinteth Chaucer of his Tale of Thopas

‘**N**o more of this, for goddes dignitee,’ quod oure hoste, ‘for thou makest me so wery – ‘No more of this, for God’s sake!’ exclaimed our host. ‘It hurts my ears to have to listen to such crap! The devil take your story!’