

# Canterbury Tales

## Sir Thopas

*Geoffrey Chaucer*

*late-fourteenth century Middle English verse*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose**  
by

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This 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

Geoffrey Chaucer

*from The Canterbury Tales, late fourteenth century*

**L**isteth, lordes, in good entent · And I wol telle verrayment · Of mirthe and of solas – Listen, everybody, listen with an open mind and I shall provide both light entertainment and solace. It is the finest tale I know, and it is about a knight named 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, with the ludicrous good looks of an Irish mythical hero; his lips were red, his face was white, 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 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. Like the Breton knight Guigemar, he remained unable to fall in love. But one day, urged on by a dream to find the woman **he truly sought, a queen 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, suicidally through the trees**, swerving past overhanging branches that threatened his life at every turn, past thickets harbouring 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 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.

*This tale of Sir Thopas is one of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the one he first chooses as his own tale, before the host stops him in mid-flow. It is widely taken to be a parody of the style of romance found in Sir Tryamour, Sir Eglamour of Artois and Sir Perceval of Galles. But could this be Geoffrey betraying a deeper knowledge than he is willing to admit to? After all, he chooses it as his own tale on the road to Canterbury for the reason that, in his own words: 'it is the best rym I can.' Could its outward parody be a double bluff? After all, a knight who cannot fall in love is an allusion not to a crude Middle English romance but to Marie de France's Guigemar.*

*Given that his House of Fame, Book of the Duchess, Parliament of Fowls and some of his other Canterbury tales hint at an underlying religious paradigm that is shared (it is proposed) with the romances and with this tale of Sir Thopas itself, then perhaps, although he did not like the style of romance, with its giants, dragons, heroes who feel obliged to conceal their identity for no apparent reason, and often general crudity, he is telling the truth when he says that its underlying idea is the one he most wants to share. If this is the case, then Chaucer is perfectly able to say that it is the best rhyme he knows, whilst going out of his way, perhaps for his own safety, to imply the opposite.*

*The pink highlighting corresponds to words that Hannah herself has underlined in the manuscript, as though trying to work out in her own mind an underlying subtext.*



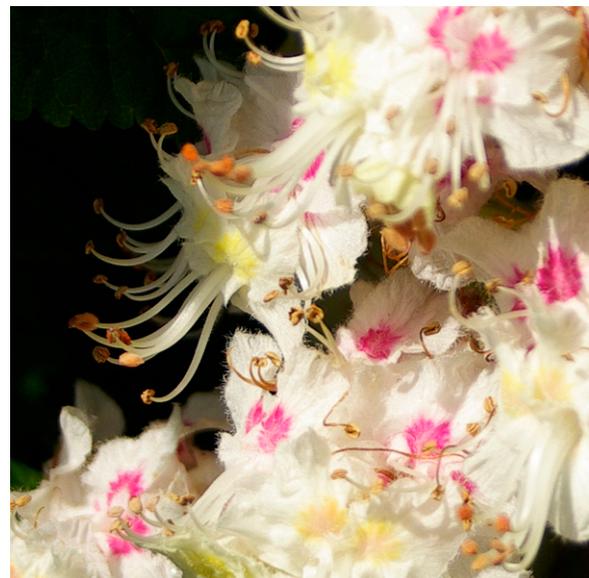
At last, Sir Thopas was so weary that **he lay upon the ground**, and his horse wandered off, riderless, to graze. ‘Oh, Mary!’ cried Sir Thopas, ‘I am consumed with love! I dreamed last night that I lay with an elf-queen. There is no woman in this whole Earthly world, in any town or city, that I can love – I reject them all and shall 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 **who 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 and 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, and soon he arrived back in 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...'



‘No more of this, for God’s sake!’ interrupted our host. ‘It hurts my ears to have to listen to such crap! The devil take your story!’

‘Why?’ said Geoffrey. ‘Why stop me so quickly when it is the best story I know and since you’ve let all the others drone on for much longer?’

‘Because such rubbish is not worth a turd! You waste our time.’