Canterbury Tales

Sir Thopas

Geoffrey Chaucer
late-fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by

Richard Scott-Robinson


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richardsr@hotmail.co.uk
Listeth, 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.
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.’