

# PARODY IN CHAUCER'S "THE TALE OF SIR THOPAS"

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Parody is a problem: even contemporaries sometimes miss the fact that something is parodic – witness the articles in the *Onion* that are taken seriously. How, then, can someone at any historical distance hope to distinguish parody from perfectly serious works? Would we know, for example, that “The Tale of Sir Thopas” is a parody, if it were not enclosed in the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* – or would we think it was just a terrible, hack-job of a romance? In this essay, Tessa Cernik tackles this problem head on. How do we distinguish “Sir Thopas” from other presumably serious romances such as *Guy of Warwick* or *Bevis of Hampton*, which use many of the same conventions, tropes, and patterns? Conversely, what parodic elements might there be in those “serious” romances, which heretofore scholars have taken straightforwardly? Cernik’s astute analysis is relevant not just to medievalists, but to all literary scholars who face not only the problems of genre classification, but also the wanton abuse of the tools of classification by contemporary writers who refuse to be serious.

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**B**efore there was “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” there was Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. And before there was brave,

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brave Sir Robin, bravely running away, there was Sir Thopas, who, instead of fighting his foe for the hand of a fairy queen, also bravely runs away. Chaucer masterfully manipulates his readers’ expectations by overturning common literary conventions of the fourteenth century in his *Canterbury Tales*, but more specifically in “The Tale of Sir Thopas.” “The Tale of Sir Thopas” is undoubtedly a terrible romance – particularly in comparison to some of its respected contemporaries: *Guy of Warwick*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Bevis of Hampton*, and *King Horn* – yet it is found within Chaucer’s highly respected *Canterbury Tales*. It is for precisely this reason that attentive readers view this terrible romance as a terribly funny parody of its genre; Chaucer is evidently taking great pleasure in exaggerating and overturning its romance tropes. By reading “Sir Thopas” as a successful parody, rather than as a failed romance, we are better able to appreciate Chaucer’s skill as a writer and his knowledge of the literary culture of his time; “Sir Thopas” provides one of many examples within the *Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer’s ability to manipulate genres in order to manipulate his audience.

The *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories told within a framework narrative. It tells the story of thirty pilgrims who engage in a storytelling competition on their

pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. “The Tale of Sir Thopas” is the tale attributed to Chaucer the pilgrim, one of the characters travelling to Canterbury. It tells the story of a knight who rides out to seek adventure, falls in love with an elf queen, and seeks to rescue her from a giant. Sir Thopas fails to actually accomplish anything before the tale is interrupted by the Host of the pilgrimage party, claiming that Chaucer the pilgrim’s “drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord! [worthless rhyming is not worth a turd!]” (Chaucer 930).

For the purposes of this essay, I will place “Sir Thopas” alongside four analogous romances: *Sir Orfeo* (a Breton lay, a subgenre of romance), *Guy of Warwick* (a popular romance with French origins), *Bevis of Hampton* (a second popular romance with Anglo-Norman roots), and *King Horn* (one of the oldest Middle English romances). These four romances were evidently popular during Chaucer’s life: all four of these romances appear, in some form, in the Auchinleck Manuscript, a manuscript of Middle English stories produced circa 1331, and all except *Sir Orfeo* are mentioned by name by the narrator of “Sir Thopas.” Laura Hibbard Loomis suggests that Chaucer must have read the Auchinleck manuscript because, “from the evidence of Thopas alone, it appears that Chaucer

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made use of the unique Auchinleck *Horn Child*, of the Auchinleck text of *Beves of Hamtoun*, and . . . of *Guy of Warwick*” (128). Even if Loomis’s convincing argument is untrue and Chaucer never saw the Auchinleck manuscript, he was nevertheless familiar enough with the popular romances that he could cite them in “Sir Thopas” and emulate their characteristics in the tale.

Middle English romances, like any genre, are identifiable by typical markers, called tropes. “Sir Thopas” could easily satisfy any checklist of the important tropes in the romance genre. The tale begins thus:

Listeth, lords, in good entent,  
And I wol telle, verrayment,  
Of myrthe and of solas,  
Al of a knight was fair and gent  
In bataille and in tourneyment.  
His name was sire Thopas.  
[Listen, lords, with good attention,  
And I will tell, truthfully,  
Of mirth and of enjoyment,  
All about a knight who was fair and noble  
In battle and in tournament.  
His name was Sir Thopas.] (Chaucer 712-17)

Chaucer the pilgrim is calling to his audience, identifying the subject of his story as Sir Thopas, and praising the knight’s qualities and abilities. In Alison Wiggins’s notes on her edition of *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, she lists these

three “traditional elements” of romance as present in *Guy* as well (23A). The narrator of *Guy* begins his telling by addressing the audience: “Herken to mi romance rede / Al of a gentil knight . . . His name was hoten Sir Gii / of Warwicke wise and wight [Listen to the romance I read / All about a noble knight . . . His name was Sir Guy / of Warwick, wise and valiant]” (2-13). Already, there are striking similarities between these two romances: both narrators call for their audience’s attention, name their knights as “gent” or “gentil,” and state the names of their knights in the last lines of the opening stanza. The narrator of *Bevis of Hampton* also makes use of this trope:

Lordinges, herkneth to me tale!  
 Is merier than the nightingale,  
 That I schel singe;  
 Of a knight ich wile yow rounne,  
 Beves a highte of Hamtounne,  
 Withoutten lesing.  
 [Lords, listen to my tale!  
 What I shall sing is  
 Merrier than the nightingale;  
 I will sing to you of a knight,  
 Bevis he was called, of Hampton,  
 Without lying.] (1-6)

These initial parallels between Chaucer’s “Sir Thopas” and other popular romances immediately confirm that Chaucer’s tale belongs to the same genre. But, even though

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“Sir Thopas” may initially appear to be a straightforward romance, it becomes more and more ridiculous and over-the-top as the tale progresses.

As Chaucer begins packing romance tropes into his short, thirty-two stanza story and using them very poorly, it becomes clear that “Sir Thopas” is not a straight romance. This misuse of romance tropes is seen first in the description of Sir Thopas’s appearance. The knight is described as having a face as white as “payndemayn,” or white bread, “lippes rede as rose [lips red as rose],” a complexion “lyk scarlet in grayn [like scarlet in grain]” (i.e., a cloth dyed a deep red), and hair “lyk saffroun [like saffron]” (Chaucer 725-30). A description that consists of these elements is conventional in romances; however, the qualities of red lips, white skin, and yellow hair are usually reserved for the romance heroine, as Geoffrey of Vinsauf explains in his guidelines for an *effictio*, or physical description, in medieval poetics. The first interpretation of Chaucer’s use of the female *effictio* for Sir Thopas is to view Chaucer as undercutting the integrity of the knight by connoting feminine qualities in him, which suggests that Chaucer is undermining the seriousness and respectability of the romance genre by deliberately misusing the *effictio*

trope and exploiting it for satirical effect. *King Horn*, however, also employs a similar *effictio* to describe Horn:

Fairer nis non than he was;  
 He was bright so the glas;  
 He was whit so the flur;  
 Rose red was his colur.  
 [There were none fairer than he was:  
 He was as bright as glass;  
 He was as white as the flower;  
 Rose red was his colour.] (13-16)

Carol Parrish Jamison explains that “the description of Horn is a traditional one for heroes,” and so it is not entirely strange for Chaucer to describe his hero in the same way (54). But Chaucer is clearly poking fun at Sir Thopas by describing him as having a face like white bread and a complexion the colour of dyed cloth. Chaucer’s parody of the *effictio* trope is, therefore, revealed by his mock-heroic description of Sir Thopas in comparison with these unremarkable objects. And in a close reading of Chaucer’s text, nowhere does it describe Sir Thopas as the “best” or the “greatest”; it is said only that he has the good qualities of a knight. The use of superlatives to describe the hero of a romance is yet another flag for the genre, so for Chaucer to exclude superlatives in his description of Sir Thopas infers the knight’s mediocrity and confirms Chaucer’s tale as a deliberately satirical romance.

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Another trope misused and parodied by Chaucer is the "taking the journey" trope, or the knight's adventure trope. Sir Thopas "wolde out ride [would ride out]," "priketh thurgh a fair forest . . . priketh north and est [priketh through a fair forest . . . priketh north and east]," and "priketh" almost everywhere imaginable (Chaucer 750, 754, 757). ("Priketh" here translates to "gallops around on a horse.") This tale is not the solitary, purposeful adventure of a knight in a true romance; Sir Thopas is "prikng" wherever it pleases him, without direction or purpose. It is also interesting that Chaucer chooses this suggestive word for "galloping," as it can have a sexual connotation. Chauncy Wood suggests that "the humour of the situation [the overuse of the word 'priketh'] . . . [is] in using it often and with enthusiasm, all the while permitting its overtones to ring hollow, for there is no 'prikng' [in the tale] . . . other than the equestrian sense" (400). Caroline Strong, in her comparison of Sir Thopas and Sir Guy, also identifies the importance of this word: "Over forty times in *Sir Guy* a knight comes 'prikng.' It is surely not by accident that Chaucer repeats the word eight times in eighty-four lines" in "Sir Thopas" (II 103). In contrast, *Bevis of Hampton* mentions the knight 'prikng' only seven times in its 4621 lines. For the purposes of the parody, Thopas's habit of



riding out in the hope of finding adventure - travelling everywhere, but with no particular path - undermines the trope of the knight seeking out adventure for the purpose of winning a lady or padding his reputation with feats of valour. Strong suggests that, “like Sir Thopas, Guy rides out for adventure through more than one ‘fair forest’ where he meets at least one ‘wild beast,’” and that Chaucer has Sir Thopas riding around all the time in order to parody Guy’s state of “constantly riding or about to ride” (I 76). Sir Orfeo also “takes the journey” after the capture of his wife gives him a purpose for adventure - while it appears that Sir Thopas is looking for adventure solely because he is a knight in a romance who must fulfill this trope.

Chaucer refers to other romance tropes in “Sir Thopas,” specifically, the “May morning” trope, in which “the brides syng [the birds sing]” for the knight, consequently filling Thopas with “love-longynge [love-longing],” which is known as the “love sickness” trope (Chaucer 766, 772). Both these tropes are also present in *Sir Orfeo*, as the story begins “in the comessing of May [at the coming of May]” when the “floures sprede and spring [flowers bud and bloom]” and “the foules sing [the birds sing]” (56, 67, 68). When he discovers his wife has been kidnapped, Sir Orfeo “swooned upon the ston, / And

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made swiche diol and swiche mon / That neighe his liif  
was y-spent [swooned, falling to the ground, / And made  
such laments and such moans / That his life was almost  
ended],” proving the romance hero’s absolute devotion to  
his love with an unabashed expression of his emotions in  
his lovesick state (196-99).

“Sir Thopas” also incorporates hints of mystical,  
supernatural elements that parallel *Sir Orfeo*. A dream  
encourages Thopas to proclaim that “an elf queene shal  
[his] lemman be [an elf queen shall be his lover],” and he  
rides into the “contree of Fairye [country of Fairye]” to find  
his beloved and encounters a “greet geaunt [great giant],”  
protector of “the queen of Fairye” (Chaucer 788, 802, 807,  
814). Yet Sir Thopas has never seen an elf queen, except  
in his dreams, revealing the absurdity of his seeking one  
out so that he can fall in love like a proper romance hero.  
*Sir Orfeo* provides an example of how to properly  
incorporate these same elements of wonder into romance.  
Orfeo’s wife “was snatched away” by the king of Fairy,  
forcing the knight to go on an adventure to find and rescue  
her (192) - a much more suitable sequence of events for a  
romance than that of “Sir Thopas.”

After this long explication of how terrible Chaucer’s  
romance is because of his consistent misuse of such

recognizable and widely used tropes, why is it that readers still enjoy “The Tale of Sir Thopas” as a parody and do not simply dismiss it as a bad romance? In order to answer this question, the labelling of “Sir Thopas” as a parody must first be put into context. Joseph Dane offers, in his article synthesizing eighteenth century Chaucerian criticism, that “the first references to *Sir Thopas* as a ‘parody’ occur not in the eighteenth century, but in the nineteenth century,” while “the word used of *Sir Thopas* in the eighteenth century is ‘burlesque’” (349). The term “burlesque” means “of the nature of derisive imitation,” characterizing something as “ironically bombastic, mock-heroic or mock-pathetic” (“Burlesque,” def. adj. and n. 2a). Clearly, the terminology for the satirical nature of Chaucer’s tale has been debated over the centuries, with “parody” being a newer label. Yet Dane does not deny that the tale “conforms to standard definitions of ‘parody’ or ‘burlesque,’” which is the reason current scholars qualify it as such (350). However, he says, “before the canonization of the genre of burlesque, the notion that *Sir Thopas* was a species of criticism is not to be found” and, therefore, critics writing before the eighteenth century “considered [*Sir Thopas*] to be the same kind of work as those we now consider to be its targets” (354-55). It then stands to reason

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that, before parody was an accepted genre, “Sir Thopas” was regarded as a badly written romance by an otherwise very good author.

If parody was not “invented” until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is it possible that Chaucer’s contemporary audience perceived “Sir Thopas” as merely a terrible romance? I do not mean to suggest that the Middle Ages did not have a concept of parody, even if they did not use the word. In Kathy Cawsey’s exploration of Chaucerian criticism and the audience, she notes that Chaucer’s writing challenges the straightforward concept of the “medieval audience” upheld by many scholars, such as C. S. Lewis, because “these assumptions about medieval audience seem to preclude several readings of Chaucer’s works – readings of him as ironic, irreverent, or bawdy – and almost prevent entirely a reading of the *Canterbury Tales*” (56). It seems impossible that Chaucer’s audience would not pick up on the exaggerated use and misuse of romance tropes in “Sir Thopas.” Thomas Garbáty supports this claim, reaffirming that “parody and mockery of courtly love themes appear throughout the *Canterbury Tales*,” as romances were “standard noble fare which proved to be grist for Chaucer’s satiric mill” (92). It seems careless to assume that Chaucer’s medieval audience would

have been oblivious to the satirical tone of this tale, especially when his “Knight’s Tale” has already proven that he can write an excellent romance. Because of the prolific nature of romances, it is unimaginable that readers of the *Canterbury Tales*, both in Chaucer’s time and the present day, would not be able to spot Chaucer’s genre-play throughout the collection of tales, and especially in “Sir Thopas.” Cawsey agrees, stating that “the audience, fully aware of Chaucer’s skill and talent, would have had no trouble perceiving *Sir Thopas* as parody” (81). However, it is important to stress the fact that “Sir Thopas” is part of the *Canterbury Tales* and not a stand-alone piece of writing; because of the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, readers, especially modern ones with an understanding of parody, can enjoy Chaucer’s terrible romance poking fun at a popular genre. But it is uncertain that, if “Sir Thopas” were taken out of the *Tales*, it would not be dismissed as a failed attempt at a romance, especially by modern readers unfamiliar with romance tropes of Chaucer’s period, and thus unable to discern their misuse.

Garbáty writes, “Sir Thopas is a thoroughly delightful piece . . . Nothing is sacred in this piece, neither romance style, nor action, nor hero” (93). This statement expresses the pure enjoyment of reading “Sir Thopas,” as the reader

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takes pleasure in how ridiculous Chaucer has made the knight's story. Chaucer has effectively written a tale that displays his knowledge of the literary culture of his time; in parodying a romance, Chaucer manipulates the genre and his audience's expectations. Garbáty insists that "Chaucer also leaves his own earnest age behind when he discovered his genius for parody of literary styles, combined with burlesque of social conventions" (82). This praise supports the claim that Chaucer is a writer who far exceeds the confines and expectations of his time, as he masterfully employs "genre manipulation" throughout the *Canterbury Tales* - and particularly in "Sir Thopas."

Chaucer's brilliance is, therefore, confirmed by "The Tale of Sir Thopas," his monumentally bad romance. Strong suggests that the tale "parodies a certain type of romance abundant and popular. To appreciate its point and brilliant humour, one must be very familiar with this type" (II 104), while Loomis agrees that "specific details and concepts are manipulated by a master wit to produce an effect at once so like and yet so different in *Thopas*" (119). It is useful to compare "Sir Thopas" to romances such as *Guy of Warwick*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Bevis of Hampton*, *King Horn*, and others because a close reading of these texts reveals how extensively Chaucer has mutilated the

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conventional tropes of the romance genre in his own tale. The misused tropes are apparent to readers of Chaucer from all time periods as humorous plays on his contemporary literary culture - *not* as examples of bad writing. Within the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, readers of Chaucer can recognize his skilful writing and his genre manipulation throughout the tales and, consequently, view “Sir Thopas” as an outstanding example of both.

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