

The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas

Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* is a parody of popular Middle English romances, particularly those written in tail-rhyme stanzas (rhyming couplets bound together by shorter lines ending in a single repeated rhyme). Almost every feature of *Thopas*—its metrics, its conventional diction, its scenes of the hero's questing, arming, encountering a giant, and falling in love—can be found in one or another of the many romances that it sports with. As an example of this genre, we print a very small portion of a very long poem, *Guy of Warwick*, alluded to in line 899 of Chaucer's tale. Guy's military and amorous successes represent the typical exploits of romance heroes and thus suggest a norm against which to consider how Thopas conducts himself in battle and in love.

From *Guy of Warwick* †

God graunt hem heven blis to mede^o
That herken to mi romaunce rede,^o

Al of a gentil^o knight.

The best bodi^o he was at nede^o

5 That ever might bistriden stede,^o

And freest^o founde in fight.

The word of him ful wide it ran.

Over al this warld the priis he wan^o

As man most^o of might.

10 Balder bern^o was non in bi.^o

His name was hoten sir Gii^o

Of Warwick, wise and wight.^o

Wight he was, for sothe to say,^o

And holden for priis^o in everi play^o

15 As knight of gret bounte.^o

Out of this lond he went his way

heaven's bliss as a reward
Who listen to my tale readily
noble

person / in (times of) need
sit on a horse
most valorous

he took the prize
greatest
A bolder man / in any place (lit., in town)
called Sir Guy
valiant

to tell the truth
considered worthy / i.e., activity
goodness

† Text adapted from *The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS e.s. 49 (London, 1887; rpt. 1966), pp. 384–88, 394–96. Reprinted with permission of the Council of the Early English Text Society. There are various Middle English versions of this thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman historical romance. We print a passage from the tail-rhyme portion of the version in the Auchinleck manuscript, written in the 1350s in London and conceivably read by Chaucer. This passage occurs in the second half of the poem; Guy is returning to England after many displays of heroism in adventures overseas, thus proving his worthiness to marry the woman he loves, Felice, daughter of the Earl of Warwick.

Thurch° mani divers cuntray°

That was biyond the see.°

Sethen° he com into Ingland

20 And Athelston° the king he fond,°

That was bothe hende° and fre.°

For his love, ich° understond,

He slough° a dragoun in Northumberlond,

Ful fer in the north cuntre.°

25 He and Herhaud,¹ for sothe to say,

To Wallingforth° toke the way,

That was his faders toun.°

Than was his fader, sothe to say,

Ded and bird° in the clay.

30 His air was sir Gioun.°

Alle that held° him lond or fe°

Deden him omage° and feute°

And com to his somoun.°

He tok alle his faders lond

35 And yaf it hende Herhaud in hond°

Right to his warisoun.°

And alle that hadde in his servise be°

He yaf hem gold and riche fe°

Ful hendeliche° on hond.°

40 And sethen° he went with his meyne°

To th'Erl Rohaud° that was so fre.°

At Warwike° he him fond.

Alle than were thai glad and blithe

And thonked God a thousand sithe°

45 That Gii was comen° to lond.

Sethe on hunting thai gun ride°

With knightes fele° and miche pride

As ye may understond.

On a day Sir Gii gan fond,

50 And feir Felice he tok bi hond

And seyde to that bird° so blithe:°

"Ichave,² he seyde, "thurch Godes sond°

Won the priis° in mani lond

Of° knightes strong and stithe.°

55 And me is boden gret anour°

Kinges douhter and emperour°

To have to mi wive.°

Ac,° swete Felice," he seyde than,

"Y no schal never spouse wiman°

60 Whiles thou art olive."³

Through / countries

sea

Afterward

Athelstan / sought

courteous / generous

I

slaw, killed

region

Wallingford (in south-central England)

father's town

buried

Sir Guy was his heir

received from / payment for service

Gave him homage / fealty (feudal loyalty)

came (to court) at his summons

gave it to courteous Herhaud to control

As a proper reward (for Herhaud's service)

been

splendid payment

courteously

afterward / retinue

Earl Rohaud (Guy's feudal lord) / noble

Warwick

times

had returned

did ride

many

decided to act

lady / glad, merry

I have / gift

Taken the honors

From / valiant, stalwart

great honor has been offered me

emperor's

take as my wife

But / then

I shall never marry (any other) woman

alive

Than answerd that swete wight°

And seyde ogain° to him ful right:°

"Bi him that schope mankinne,°

Icham° desired day and night

65 Of° erl, baroun, and mani a knight,

For nothing wil thai blinne.°

Ac Gii," sche seyde, "hende and fire,

Al mi love is layd on the;°

Our love schal never twinne.°

70 And bot ich have the to make°

Other lord nil y non take,°

For al this warld to winne."

Anon to hir than answerd Gii,

To fair Felice that sat him bi,°

75 That semly was of sight.°

"Leman,² he seyde, "gramerci."³

With joie and with melodi

He kist° that swete wight.

Than was he bothe glad and bliithe.°

80 His joie couthe he noman kithe

For that bird so bright.°

He no was never therbiforn°

Half so blithe sethe° he was born,

For nought that man him hight.°

* * *

85 When he hadde spoused° that swete wight,

The fest° lasted a fourtennight,°

That frely° folk in fere°

With erl, baroun, and mani a knight,

And mani a levedy° fair and bright,

90 The best in lond that were.

Ther wer giftes for the nones,°

Gold and silver and precious stones

And druries° riche and dere.°

Ther was mirthe and melody

95 And al maner menstracie°

As ye may fortheward here:°

Ther was trumpe° and tabour,

Fithel, croude, and harpoun,

Her craftes for to kithe,³

100 Organisters° and gode stivours,°

Minstrels of mouthe° and mani dysour°

To glade tho bernes bliithe.°

person

in reply / directly

created mankind

I am

By

They will not cease for anything

given to thee

be parted

unless I have thee as my mate

I will accept no other lord

sat by him

Who was pleasing to look upon

Lover / thank you

kissed

merry

He had never before been

since

For anything anyone had promised him

married

feast / fortnight (two weeks)

noble / together

lady

for the occasion

treasures / valuable

every sort of minstrelsy (i.e., entertainment)

hear next

trumpets / drum

Organ players / bagpipers

I.e., singers / storytellers

To gladden those merry folk

2. He knew no way of expressing to anyone the joy he took in such a beautiful lady.

3. Fiddle, crowd (a stringed instrument played with a bow), and harper, (all) showing their skill.

105
 Ther nis no tong^o may telle in tale
 The joi^e that was at that bridale^o
 With mense^o and mirthe to mithe,^o
 For ther was al maner of gle^o
 That hert might thinke other eyghe se,^o
 As ye may list and lithe.^o

110
 Heris,^o barouns hende and fre
 That ther war gadred^o of mani cuntre,
 That worthliche were in wede,^o
 Robes riche, gold, and fe.^o
 Her giftes were nought gneded.^o
 115 On the fifteen^o day, ful yare,^o
 Thai toke her leve for to fare^o
 And thonked hem her gode dede.^o
 Than hadde Gii, that gentil knight,
 Felis^o to his wil day and night,
 120 In gest also we rede.^o

tongue
wedding party (lit., bride-ale)
courtesy / to be seen
music, entertainment
or the eye see
As it may please and soothe you

Earls
Who were gathered there
Who were nobly dressed
They gave to the entertainers
fee (payment)
stingy
fifteenth / fully prepared
journey
i.e., for their hospitality
Felice
As we read in the story

The Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale

Beast fables were popular throughout the Middle Ages. The preface to William Caxton's translation of Aesop's fables provides a summary of conventional views about the genre and its purposes. Sometime around 1200 Marie de France wrote a collection of fables in Anglo-Norman; one of them, "The Cock and the Fox," tells the story that is the nucleus of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. For the expansion of fable into beast-epic, Chaucer knew of the tales of Reynard the Fox, which circulated widely in France and elsewhere. Robert A. Pratt has argued that the confrontation of Reynard and Chanteclere in branch 2 of the *Roman de Renart* is one of Chaucer's direct sources. The learned and mock-heroic inflations of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* derive from many places; we include Macrobius's authoritative chapter on dreams and Geoffrey of Vinsauf's rhetorical lament on the death of King Richard I. The courtly elements of Chaucer's story may even have been suggested by the encyclopedic tradition, as may be seen in a portion of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's description of the cock, here printed in John of Trevisa's fourteenth-century English translation.

WILLIAM CAXTON

From *Aesop's Fables*†

[Book I]

Here begyneth the preface or prologue of the fyrst book of Esope.

I, Romulus, son of Thybere¹ of the cyte of Atyque,^o gretyng. Esope, man of Grece, subtyll and ingenyous, techeth in his fables how men ought to kepe and rewle them^o well. And to th'ende that he shold shewe the lyf and customes of al maner of men, he induceth^o the byrdes, the trees and the beestes spekyng, to th'ende that the men may knowe wherfore the fables were found.^o In the whiche he hath wretton the malyce

Attica
themselves
introduces
invented

† Text based on Caxton's 1484 edition as printed in *The Fables of Aesop*, ed. Joseph Jacobs, 2 vols. (London: David Nutt, 1889), 2, 3.

1. Tiberius. The "Romulus" version of Aesop's fables circulated widely in the Middle Ages; the author is unknown, but it was certainly not the Roman emperor's son.