Incongruities in the *Tale of Thopas*:
The Poet's Motivation for the Pilgrim's "Drasty rymyng"

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ABSTRACT

Interpreting Chaucer's motivation in composing the Tale of *Thopas*, a parody of the Middle English romance, presents readers with many difficulties. A major difficulty is for readers to surpass the Host's estimation of the tale as "drasty rymyng" and to see the tale as an intentional parody of the Middle English romance, specifically the subcategory of adventure romance. After I clarify the characteristics of the adventure romance, readers will understand the reason for Harry Bailey's disappointment with Tale of *Thopas*. A close examination of the incongruities between the tale and other adventure romances suggests that Chaucer's motivation in producing this parody was not to criticize the adventure romances, since many of the incongruities draw attention away from the form or content of the romances and place the readers' gaze upon the Pilgrim who tells the tale. While there may be some criticism of the adventure romance implied in the parody, the incongruities between the tale and other adventure romances, between the tale and other Canterbury Tales, and between Chaucer the Pilgrim and Chaucer the Poet suggest that Chaucer's primary motivations are to cast the Pilgrim as an inept poet within the Canterbuy Tales and to preserve his reputation as an accomplished poet outside the context of the Tales.

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While the Twentieth Century ended with the author dead and safely snuggled in his grave, the century was marked throughout by the incantations and spells of readers who sought to bring those dead authors back to life. Occasionally, a reader would disobey the "do not resuscitate" order and try to give life to the corpse left wrapped in leaves of text. But as time has passed some of those graves have grown into hills while the skeletons beneath them have turned to dust and not even the most skillful conjurer can give life to the dead. Even before the author was pronounced dead, it became clear that no magician would be able to use his remaining words to bring back to life the author of *Beowulf*, though the century had been full of futile attempts. But the passage of time has left other graves less covered, almost as if the author's skeleton is even now reaching through, finger bones teasing the reader to see who the author was, to clear away the dirt and to perform some ghastly experiment, giving new flesh and breathing new life into dead bones.

With every new poem and every rediscovered letter the reader is enticed to revive the author, even though the reader knows that what is brought to life will be imperfect, maybe a zombie rather than the hoped for author, or maybe only a reflection of the reader himself. But sometimes the temptation, the glimpse of skeleton, is too much and the reader is drawn to find what little life remains in the dead bones. A greater temptation than normal is found in the *Canterbury Tales* where Geoffrey Chaucer writes himself into the tales as a pilgrim who is even named Chaucer. Imagine if Shakespeare had named Hamlet or Mercutio **after** himself instead; or imagine if Henry Fielding, the character, were found in *Tom Jones.* The temptation would be immense and with the fervor of Dr.

Frankenstein, readers would flock to resurrect these authors, regardless if in the end they had only created a grotesque assemblage of themselves, their culture, and the text.

For the most part, Chaucer seems to be having fun with his use of Chaucer the Pilgrim as narrator and recorder of the *Tales* and there seems to be little chance of making any great discoveries about Chaucer the Poet from Chaucer the Pilgrim. While the Pilgrim simple-mindedly describes most of the other pilgrims as "worthy" in the General Prologue (GP), the Poet is more aware of the characters' flaws. When the Pilgrim apologizes that his "wit is short," it is more likely that Chaucer is indirectly praising himself than humbly apologizing for any lack of accuracy (GP 746). Because the Pilgrim knows that some of the tales the other pilgrims tell will reflect poorly upon their character, he warns that as recorder of the tales "he may nat spare, although he were his brother / He moot as wel seye o word as another" (737-8). But the Poet seems to enjoy putting churls' tales in the pilgrims' mouths. And although his audience might have been clamoring for raunchy content, it is Chaucer who is responsible for several of the characters telling their ribald tales. The Pilgrim on the other hand has a moral squeamishness, regretting that he has to repeat their tales; he suggests that if any reader "list it nat yheere / Turne over the leef and chese another tale / For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale / Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse" (Monk's Tale 3176-80). Chaucer actually could have been warning his readers with this PG-13 rating, but it is more likely that he was enticing them to read on. While a reading of the Pilgrim as a device through which Chaucer the Poet humbles himself and apologizes cannot be discounted, it is definitely, if not primarily, a humorous device, made funny by the incongruity between Poet and Pilgrim.

In our attempt to resurrect Chaucer the author, we have little hope of finding him in this presentation of the Pilgrim. Yet our expectations of putting flesh on Chaucer's bones revive as the host Harry Bailly turns his attention to the Pilgrim, who up till now has ridden quietly along, attentively recording and remembering the words of the other pilgrims. After the sobering miracle of the Prioress ' Tale, the Host is looking for a way to cheer up the other pilgrims and finds that chance in the Pilgrim. Almost predicting our own questions about Chaucer the Poet, the Host asks Chaucer the Pilgrim "What man artow?" (Tale of Thopas 695). He provokes the Pilgrim by commenting on his always staring at the ground, his wide waist, his "elvyssh...countenance," and his not being sociable (699-703). Whether this description paints a perfect picture of Chaucer or describes the complete opposite of how Chaucer looked and acted, you can imagine the fun that those who knew Chaucer had with this information; yet for modern readers, it does little good in revealing what type of man Chaucer was. Are we to take this as evidence he was shy and wide? Or in following the previous pattern of the Pilgrim being the opposite of the Poet, should we understand the Poet to be slender and outgoing, fitting instead our stereotype of a court minstrel?

We can only hope the tale the Pilgrim tells will be a more concrete portrayal of the Poet than the Host's description. In response to the Host's request for a "tale of myrthe" (706), the Pilgrim offers to tell a "rym I lerned longe agoo" (709). Sharing the Host's excitement, we get ready to "heere / Som deyntee [excellent] thing," if not from the mouth of the Pilgrim, then surely from the mouth of the Poet (710-1). The lone tale of mirth which the Pilgrim tells is the Tale of Thopas (Th). But in a continuance of the portrayal of the Pilgrim as a serious, moral recorder, the tale is a complete disaster, not

one which the Pilgrim is well suited to tell. Before it is finished the Host ends the *Tale of Thopas*, interrupting Chaucer the Pilgrim with his "Namoore of this, for Goddes dignite … myn eres aken of thy drasty speeche" (Th 919-923). Again, in response to the Pilgrim's wondering why he cannot finish his tale while the other pilgrims could, the host says, "thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!" (930). The Host cannot even stand to hear the Pilgrim continue with his tale. Mercifully, the Host gives the Pilgrim a chance to tell another tale; this time the Pilgrim chooses one he is more suited for, the *Tale of Melibee*. While the tale (really a moral treatise) is terribly long, at least the Pilgrim gets to finish this one!

Our expectations for finding some brilliant discovery about Chaucer the Poet through the Pilgrim seem to have vanished. Rather than the great poet, we have found a scarecrow, a disappointing imitation of what we hope the *real* Chaucer is like. When the moment was just perfect for Chaucer to reveal himself through the Pilgrim, Chaucer instead continues in the Pilgrim's "evlyssh" ways and hides behind a terrible tale, the *Tale of Thopas*. We cannot help but be disappointed with the tale as we are left with little other response than that given by the Host, who marvels at its true badness. However much we were teased by the possibility of reconstructing Chaucer from the Pilgrim and his tale, there seems to be little chance left for such a resurrection.

But other readers have not been so quick to disband their search for Chaucer the Poet as his Pilgrim tells the *Tale of Thopas*. They argue that this tale is **a** parody of the Middle English romance and that through this parody Chaucer is criticizing the genre. And since we see Chaucer criticizing bad verse, they hold that the tale then becomes important as a guide for what he considered to be good poetry. Other readers argue that

the Poet has redeemed himself from the Pilgrim's foolishness by making the *Tale of Thopas* an artistically brilliant tale. A more extravagant reading suggests that the tale can be seen as Chaucer's views on the rising Flemish bourgeoisie. Other readers expand their focus and combine the *Tale of Thopas* with the *Tale of Melibee* and get from the two very different tales, an anti-war tract, a feminist appeal, or a description of the change from orality to written language. All of these readers claim that their arguments have more validity than arguments which try to resurrect Chaucer from other *Canterbury Tales* because of the correlation between Pilgrim and Poet. They believe that the *Tale of Thopas* has special significance as presenting what Chaucer would have liked to say about himself; they argue we can hear Chaucer more clearly through the voice of the Pilgrim. Similar to our eagerness at first finding that Chaucer names a pilgrim after himself and our expectation of discovering something about the Poet, readers assume that Chaucer would have seen the potential of the Pilgrim as a vehicle especially suited for revealing his own intentions.

But are such assumptions valid? If the *Tale of Thopas* reveals *any* intentions of Chaucer the Poet, which reading of those intentions is the most reasonable? What is the function of the *Tale of Thopas* and what does the tale suggest about the Poet? After reading the tale for the first time, the reader recognizes how different this tale is from anything else in the *Canterbury Tales* and is probably left wondering why Chaucer would have the Pilgrim tell a tale which is so bad. But it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where there is a correlation between what we see as bad about the tale and what the Host saw as bad. Yet that distinction needs to be made before we can attempt to discover whether this tale is a parody criticizing the Middle English romance and, if it is, what Chaucer could

have hoped to achieve by making that parody. To understand Chaucer's possible

intentions, we must examine and define the romance genre, with special attention to the

adventure romances, particularly those mentioned by name at the end of the tale. By then

comparing the *Tale of Thopas* to these adventure romances, we can best determine which

features of these romances are parodied in the *Tale of Thopas* and better understand what

response Chaucer was striving for by writing the tale and matching it to this Pilgrim. It is

only by placing the tale in the literary context surrounding it that we can make sense of it;

for us that requires examining the *Tale of Thopas* not only in the context of other

adventure romances but also examining it in context as one of many tales in the

Canterbury Tales and one of two told by the Pilgrim. By placing it in context, we will see

its function, both in parodying the adventure romances but also in developing the

character of the Pilgrim.

2. The Terribleness of Thopas

Perhaps the most obvious thing about the *Tale of Thopas* is how terrible a tale it is. As we read it for the first time (and maybe even after that), although we know in our minds we are to praise the Father of English Poetry, we cannot help but feel along with the pugnacious Harry Bailly, that we are doing "noght elles but despend[ing] tyme" (931). For where exactly is the worth in a tale in which nothing happens? Sure, our hero (we'll use that term loosely) Sir Thopas sets off an adventure, but even before anything happens, he is so worn out from his vigorous riding that he has to take a nap. And even if we could forgive that nap, we next find him waking up in love with a fairy queen he has dreamed about, a fairy queen whom he never meets. And even if we could overlook that false lead, his running away from the giant Olifaunt because he had forgotten his armor pushes the reader too far. By now the reader has had enough, and Chaucer the Pilgrim, sensing our unrest begs, "Yet listeth, lordes, to my tale" (833). But when the Pilgrim does not tell of bloody battles and tells instead of Sir Thopas' feasting upon desserts and his subsequent arming, the audience again starts to grumble at the lack of plot progression; the Pilgrim finds himself reprimanding them again, more forcefully this time, saying "Now holde youre mouth, *par charitee*" (891). Finally, when Harry Bailly chimes in, we find ourselves for once even appreciating the bluntness of the Host and are likewise relieved that we don't have to listen to the tale any longer, whether or not we have offended either manifestation of Chaucer, Pilgrim or Poet.

Yet the incongruity between what the reader expects from a tale about a knight and the *Tale of Thopas* exists not only at the level of plot. Armed with a simple glossary, the reader can pick out other alarmingly bad details. The reader can ask himself what

kind of "fer contree … Flaundres" is (718-9) or how this "doghty swayn" (724) or young

gentleman came to have a "berd...that to his girdle raughte adoun" (729-30). And how

come if this knight "was chaast and no lechour" (745) is he so anxious to have this "elf-

queene...sleep under my gore" or cloak (788-9)? Even more questionable is why he

reveals these dubious desires in a prayer to the Virgin Mary! And a close reader will

notice that the single-headed giant from which Sir Thopas flees is later described "with

hevedes three" (842) apparently sprouting two heads in the excitement of chase. And it

doesn't take a medievalist to guess that "gyngebreed...and lycorys...with sugre"

(854-6) doesn't make for a feast for a mighty hero or that any arming sequence is a little

embarrassing which begins with the knight in his "white leere" or flesh (857)!

But it is not only plot or these off-beat details which make the tale so unbearably

long. While with many of the Canterbury Tales it may be difficult for modern readers to

recognize Chaucer's artistry rather than praise his prolificness, since his prosody is so

different from ours, this tale especially challenges the reader's appreciation of the poet.

Not only is the tale unrewarding as a story, it is also unpleasant to listen to. For the tale is

written not in the iambic pentameter of most of the other Canterbury Tales but in a form

called the tail-rhyme stanza. The change to the tail-rhyme stanza is even more jarring due

to the fact that the prologue to the tale carries over the stately rhyme royal of the previous

Prioress' Tale, so that when the Pilgrim begins the Tale of *Thopas*, the reader is shocked

not only by the strange content but by the different rhyme form. The tail-rhyme stanza

normally consists of twelve lines; the basic unit is a "three-line group--a tetrameter

couplet followed by a trimeter" (French and Hale 16). The normal rhyme scheme is

aabccbddbeeb. Since it is sounds so different from other verse forms used by Chaucer, a

change to this traditional tail-rhyme stanza would have been shocking enough to readers.

But Chaucer makes the tail-rhyme stanza of the *Tale of Thopas* stand out even more,

particularly for his contemporary readers, with an abbreviation of the stanza to six lines,

with a rhyme scheme of *aabaab:*

> Listeth, lordes, in good entent,
>
> And I wol telle verrayment
>
> Of myrth and of solas
>
> Al of a knyght was fair and gent
>
> In bataille and in tourneyment;
>
> His name was sire Thopas. (712-717)

As stanza follows stanza, the reader is almost put to sleep by this scheme reminiscent of a

bad pop song. Chaucer follows this stanza in eighteen of the thirty-one stanzas. But in

eight of the stanzas, the rhyme scheme is changed to *aabccb.* And if the reader is not

awakened by these variations, more dynamic improvisations occur elsewhere. In five

stanzas, Chaucer throws in an occasional two beats at the end of some lines, such as "in

towne" in the following stanza:

> An elf-queene wol I love, ywis,
>
> For in this world no womman is
>
> Worthy to be my make
>
>   In towne;
>
> Alle othere wornmen I forsake,
>
> And to an elf-queene I me take
>
> By dale and eek by downe! (790-796)

The bob lines, like "in towne," "so wilde," and "with mace," consist of "two or three syllables, with the stress on the last" (Holman and Harmon 59). The bob lines sound discordant enough but Chaucer subverts the stanza form even more as each of the five stanzas utilizing the bob has a different rhyme scheme. The readers are subjected to a strange rhythm, which at times lulls them to sleep but at other times jars them out of their slumber; at least we modern readers of the tale have the comfort of being able to count the number of pages and look forward to the coming end, a comfort not afforded to those listening to the tale, either the other pilgrims such as the Host or those of Chaucer's initial audience, some of whom probably had the tale read to them. To hear out loud, the form has an obvious and unpleasant rhythm which exists not as the backdrop or simply as the vehicle for poetry but which becomes imminent in the reader's awareness, like a metronome that occasionally skips a beat, like Chinese water torture when the drop comes a fraction of a second too late. While the sufferer may be glad for a break in the pounding rhythm, there is an uneasiness also accompanied by not knowing when to expect the next drop.

If the terrible plot and unnerving rhythm are not enough, the manuscripts themselves add to the horribleness of the tale. In many of the early manuscripts, as if Chaucer wanted the difference in the tale to not only be heard but seen, the presentation of the tale on the page emphasizes the strange rhyme scheme. Although it is impossible to tell if the strange format was Chaucer's doing or the scribe's, the presentation of the tale on the page is unique among the *Canterbury* Tales:
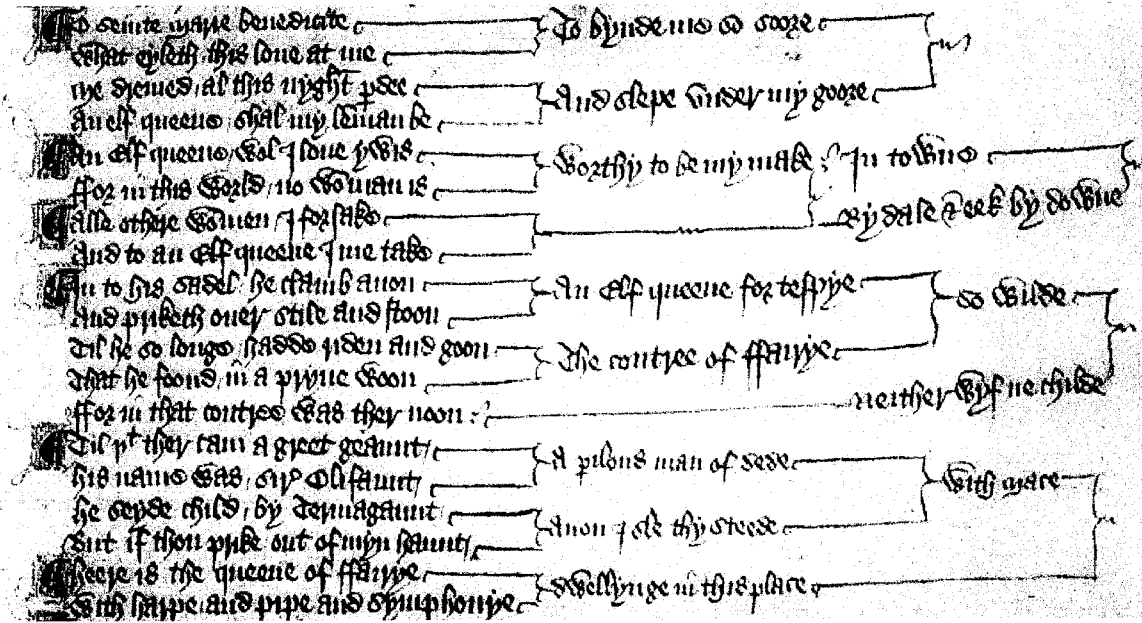
fol. 152ʳ (Woodward and Stevens)

Of the fifty-three manuscripts which preserve the *Tale of Thopas*, twenty-nine use some form of bracket to set off the rhymes; of these twenty-nine, twenty have a separate column for the tail lines. The bracketing of the tail lines, the two lines ending in *b* of an *aabaab* stanza, creates a non-sense couplet, paralleling the *aa* couplets on their left. **A** further fifteen mark in another column the strange two-beat bob lines. Four of these fifteen include *Hengwrt, Ellesmere, Cambridge Dd.4.24* and *Cambridge Gg.4.2*7, "landmark manuscripts because of their early date and authoritativeness" (Tschann 2). Judith Tschann claims that the complex bracketing found in these authoritative manuscripts suggests that their scribes had a better understanding of the rhyme scheme of the tale than those scribes who ignored the bracketing or who only extended it to one column. She argues that the scribes "called attention to the drastiness of the rhyme through the presentation of the tale" to emphasize the tale as a "masterful display of incompetence and an excellent joke all around" (7).

With the staggered presentation on the manuscript page, the rhyme of the Tale of *Thopas* becomes difficult not only to sit through, but also to read through, as the reader attempts to understand the brackets and discover exactly when to switch from the inside column to the middle column and finally to the outer column. Bad enough is the tale in our modern edited version; how much worse is it when it requires directions on exactly how to read it? Imagine listening to the tale being read from one of these manuscripts, as the reader struggles to follow the strange bracketing system, but is not even able to reproduce the nursery-rhyme rhythm of the more "regular" sections of the tale. While these brackets and columns added to emphasize rhyme wouldn't have been completely unfamiliar to Chaucer's audience, the manuscript evidence suggests that they would have been rare enough that the reader wouldn't have had much practice in reading them. The terribleness of the tale cannot only be heard but also seen, thanks to the careful craft of scribes (and maybe Chaucer, too).

The silly content, the unusual rhyme scheme, and the layout on the page all make the Tale of *Thopas*, while the shortest of the *Canterbury* Tales, uncomfortably and unrewardingly long. Yet a certain fog veils our reading, a fog caused by six hundred years' distance from the author. Unfortunately, Harry Bailly does nothing but increase the confusion about the tale with his comments. (Not that we could really expect this Host to give any valuable insight.) With his comments, we find little reason to question our first impressions of the tale (except, maybe that we agree with the often confused host). When the Host criticizes the Pilgrim's "lewedness" or unskillfulness, we are hard-pressed to disagree. And when he says his "eres aken of thy drasty speche," again we grudgingly agree that our ears are also tired of the pounding discordant rhythm, especially those

infrequent but strange two-beats added at the end of some of the lines (Th 923). And while we might cringe at the Host's crudeness when he says "thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord" (930), do we really find ourselves disagreeing, even if we desire to come to the defense of the Father of English Poetry? After our early hopes of finding the Poet lurking behind the mask of the Pilgrim, we are relieved that just because Chaucer the Pilgrim has the same name as Chaucer the Poet, there doesn't need to be any further likeness between the two tellers!

3. Narrowing our Focus: the Middle English Romances

One of the reasons discussed above as to why even a modern reader sees the Tale of *Thopas* as bad is the content. We expect more from knights, even a knight with a silly name like Sir Thopas (pronounced like the gem topaz). While we do expect knights to go on quests and we may even tolerate a knight falling in love with a fairy queen, we expect the knight to act in a certain manner. We understand from our childhood experience with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table that knights are suppose to go on quests with their armor already on; even when we were children, we would scoff at a knight who would run away from a challenge. And although feasts and arming scenes are found in lots of romances, we most of all expect things to happen, for adventure to be piled upon adventure. It is because of these expectations that the Tale of *Thopas* strikes us as so obviously bad.

Our expectations for a knight's tale have not changed that much from the expectations of Chaucer's first audience, who like us were also raised on these tales, most often referred to as romances. Some of these Middle English Romances are even mentioned specifically in the Tale of *Thopas*, as the "romances of prys, / of Horn child and of Ypotys, / of Beves and sir Gy, / of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour" (897-900). All except the last have survived in manuscripts. Chaucer's mentioning of these tales helps limit the definition of "Middle English Romance" as it applies to the Tale of *Thopas*. While many of Chaucer's tales are referred to as "romances," such as the Knight's Tale, the Wife of Bath*'s* Tale, the Squire's Tale and the Franklyn*'s* Tale, they have little in common with the Tale of *Thopas*, except some broad features such as the presence of knights and the supernatural. Other romances like Morte Arthure, Sir Gawain and the

Green Knight and chansons de geste (such as the French Song of Roland), all somewhat familiar to modern audiences, are similarly grouped together under the broad category of romances, but likewise have little do with the Tale of *Thopas*.

By examining the romances which Chaucer refers to and seeing the similarities between the Tale of *Thopas* and these romances, we can best begin to understand what Chaucer's readers were expecting from this "rym ... lerned longe agoon" (709). In his essay, "Definition of Middle English Romance," John Finlayson has done much of this work for us by classifying this type of romance as "romances of adventure." He defines these adventure romances by contrasting them with the chansons de geste and then with "courtly romances." The chansons de geste and the adventure romances have a number of things in common such as focusing on an aristocratic warrior and "the qualities of the warrior class, such as courage, skill in arms [and] loyalty" demonstrated "through the medium of combat" (437). But they differ in that the hero of a chanson de geste "displays great, sometimes immoderate valour in the cause of his king or overlord, who is usually portrayed as the supreme champion of Christianity," while the hero of an adventure romance is portrayed primarily as an "individual, not as essentially a representative of his society" (438). In addition, the combats of the adventure romance knights "rarely have any direct relation to nation or church" (438). While the hero of the chanson de geste operates as a representative for and advances the glory of king or God, the hero of the adventure romance similarly stays true to his ideals but, in contrast to the heroes of the chansons de geste, does so alone.

Yet those ideals are different from the types which we often associate with romances, ideals which have trickled down from Chrétien de Troyes and the courtly

romance. Finlayson describes the courtly romance as taking the basic pattern of the adventure romance and developing it "not by changing the form but by giving the elements values" (441). While the adventure romance is a series of loosely linked adventures which occur randomly one after another, the knight in a courtly romance goes through a series of adventures as determined by fate and for the purpose of perfecting moral progress; the episodes of the adventure romance do not result in a similar development of the knight. These courtly romances are far more educational than the adventure romances. The knight displays not only feats of valor but also virtues which are to be modeled by the aristocrats who made up the audience for these courtly ⁻ romances.

Through comparison with the characteristics of other romances, we begin to see a clearer picture of the type of romance that Chaucer was referring to in the list mentioned near the end of the Tale of *Thopas,* none of which Finlayson describes as either chansons de geste nor courtly romances. It is actually difficult to paint these romances as morally valuable, unlike the way we remember the romances we heard as children. For without the motivation of king or God afforded by the chansons de geste or the moral tests and sense of purpose given by the courtly romance, the adventure romance lacks many of the elements we remember included in our schemas for romance, such as the loyalty of Roland or the moral tests of King Arthur and Lancelot. Contrasted to these tales, the adventure romances, such as *Sir* Guy and Beves of Hamptoun, are driven only by the audience's love for excitement and battle. While there may be a frame for these adventures, like Beves' quest to regain his throne, there is no more logical connection

between his adventures than there is between issues of Superman or episodes of Lone Ranger.

Limiting our definition of romance helps us better understand what Harry Bailly criticizes in the Tale of *Thopas*. Although modern readers may be troubled by the absence of high ideals, character development, and unifying plot, Harry Bailly does not criticize the Pilgrim's rhyming because of these missing elements. For although we as modern readers might find it stimulating to compare the two knights Sir Thopas and Theseus, the wise warrior king of the Knight's Tale, Harry Bailly does not find the tale "drasty rymyng" because Sir Thopas lacked the courtly virtues that Theseus possessed. To discover what Harry Bailly was so disgusted by requires our trampling through the blood of countless battles, as we get our feet wet in the adventure romances.

4. Battlefields for Comparison: *Horn Childe, Libeaus Desconsus, Sir Beves of Hamptoun,* and *Guy of Warwick*

The modem reader who seeks to understand what was so awful about the *Tale of Thopas* has much to gain by even a quick overview of the adventure romances that Chaucer catalogues at the end of the tale. Since Chaucer is obviously having the Pilgrim tell a romance which fails, it seems that the tale's failure would best be demonstrated by contrasting the *Tale of Thopas* with the best of the adventure romances, making the poorness of the tale even easier to see. But what is particularly interesting about the romances catalogued in the end of the tale is that three of these four, according to romance scholar Dieter Mehl, are examples of not the best, as would be expected in such a catalogue, but the worst of the Middle English romances.

One of these low-quality romances is marked by Chaucer's reference to "Horn child." Although King Horn's story gets told in two tales, *King Horn* and *Horn Childe,* the second is probably the tale to which Chaucer the Pilgrim is referring. *Horn Childe* is one of the earliest romances to use the tail-rhyme stanza, the same form which Chaucer the Pilgrim simulates when he tells the *Tale of Thopas*. While both *King Horn* and *Horn Childe* are romances telling the history of an English king, they primarily act as tales of adventure in which "courtly elements are not very prominent ... least of all in the description of the love story" *(50)*. Mehl highlights the badness of *Horn Childe* by contrasting it to the "freshness and simplicity of *King Horn;*" he goes on to say that while it is "in many ways inferior to *King Horn* … it is more typical of the English romances" *(52)*. He criticizes *Horn Childe* for some of the same concerns we have about *Tale of Thopas*: "it is full of apparently irrelevant detail and shows more interest in the extraordinary events than in the person of the prince." While *King Horn* is more

concerned with the character of the king, Horne Childe is more concerned with the events, events often **confused** by the author so as to "give the impression that the author had not quite understood" the source from which the tale is taken (54). This is similar to the case with the Pilgrim, who simply tells the Tale of *Thopas*, never really knowing that this a terrible tale about a knight who runs away from a challenge; if he does not understand the French source, the author of Horn Childe at least understands the conventions of the genre. Since the Tale of *Thopas* fails the standard set by even a poorly told romance such as Horn Childe, Chaucer may be pointing to the Pilgrim as an incompetent teller of tales by comparing the Pilgrim with not the best romance author but one of the worst.

Not only does Mehl criticize a lack of sophistication in content but also in the manner in which Horn Childe is told. He comments that "everything is told in the same, rather pedestrian, manner which leads to a certain monotony and to an absence of any climax in the narration" (55). While the Tale of *Thopas* cannot be criticized for monotony, with its interpolation of bobs, it certainly is without climax. Of the tail-rhyme stanza of Horn Childe, Mehl says that the structure of tail-rhyme, when not used by a skilled poet, leads to a "garrulous narrative style," with the tail lines, the third and sixth lines, often not advancing the plot, but instead existing as "meaningless cliches... [that] act as a brake on the dramatic movement" (55). The author of Horn Childe also fails to vary the rhymes at the end of the other four lines but instead "uses the same colourless tags again and again" (55).

Libeaus Desconsu, mentioned at the end of the Tale of *Thopas* as "Sir Lybeux," follows Horn Childe as an example of another poorly told romance. Libeaus Desconsus,

or the Fair Unknown, is criticized by Mehl; in comparing it to the French source Le *Bel Inconnu,* he describes the Fair Unnkown as a "tale that does not describe a complex process of maturing and of initiation, like the French poem, but in comparison, a rather more primitive series of adventures illustrating the prowess of the hero" (72). In the French poem the revelation of the knight's illegitimate birth as son of Gawain is an important climax while in the English version his lineage is revealed in the beginning of the tale; the author forsakes an opportunity to develop character in order to proceed to the action. Similarly, in the French version, the knight starts off as Unknown and seeks to gain the respect of the king; in the English poem, he begins his adventure already Known. To make the hero more outstanding and less "average," the English author exaggerates his prowess, "increasing the number of his enemies and the fierceness of the fights" (74). Although the tail-rhyme stanza is more artfully used than in Horn Childe, the story lacks a sense of purpose as the number of fights and episodes in the poem seem "quite arbitrary and could easily be altered without any serious damage to the whole structure of the poem" (75). If these faults can be seen when the Fair Unknown is held up for comparison to its French source, the Tale of *Thopas* becomes even farther removed not just from its roots in the "decent" English romances but also from their superior French sources; the developmentally challenged Tale of *Thopas* is an inbred relative of these French romances, comparatively bankrupt in character development.

If the short Libeaus Desconus is seen as lacking structure, how much more so does the much longer Beves of Hamptoun, which battles only Guy of *Warwick* as the best-selling of the Middle English romances? Beves is similar to Horn Childe in its basic story of a child who is deprived of his inheritance as king and who is then motivated by a

strong mixture of love and revenge as he seeks to regain his throne. Similar to Libeaus Desconsus, the poem finds its unity not in a developed plot but in the character of the hero who "by his natural valour alone overcomes all obstacles and all resistance" (217). Again, Mehl states that the episodic structure of the poem which primarily focuses on one bloody adventure after another leaves the reader with no doubt that this is not "about the maturing and the chivalric education of the king" (218). Rather the poem is a series of unbelievable adventures, which include the young Beves killing his father's murderer at the age of seven, battling with a dragon, escaping from a Saracen prison after toppling a Muslim idol, defeating a number of giants (one of which becomes his sidekick), and finally regaining his throne (after many other adventures and countless deaths).

Modem readers who forget that gratuitous violence is not a product of Twentieth Century may be shocked by the thousands of violent deaths; similar to scores of "action flicks," there is little connection between episodes as violent scene and daring escape are added one upon another, only interrupted by the hero's brave but predictable banter. What is even more surprising than the violence is the superficial Christian backdrop which allows Sir Beves empowerment from God to defeat dragon and Saracen alike; in return, Beves renders to God faithfulness and chastity. This Christian element chimes in occasionally like a word from the sponsor, a commercial time-out, interrupting the regularly scheduled blood-fest.

But the Christian element is more integral to the Guy of *Warwick*, which from manuscript evidence appears to be the most popular of the Middle English romances. While basically being an adventure romance, in that "episodes are linked by the figure of the hero and some continuous threads in the plot but [episodes] do not … logically arise

one from the other or add up to an organic whole," *Guy of Warwick* has elements both of courtly love and of a saint's life (Mehl 222). In the beginning of the poem, Guy seeks to prove himself to Felice, who will not have him as husband till he has demonstrated his worthiness as knight, a common theme in courtly romances. As a knight he is motivated by pity and is consistently seeking to help the oppressed. The second part of the poem begins not by Guy seeking his own glory or proving his worthiness but by his praying to God and apologizing for his many fights and explaining that he is not concerned about worldly gains (224). By the end of the poem, Guy is practically turned into a saint with an angel announcing his death and miracles occurring after it. Mehl believes that this poem enjoyed lasting popularity because of its combination of these diverse elements.

These romances have a number of things in common which may suggest their particular importance in being added to the catalogue at the end of the *Tale of Thopas*. For the first part, they were very popular tales, as suggested by the number of manuscripts in which they exist. It is thus reasonable that Chaucer would mention these tales to refer to the genre as a whole. The tales are also linked by their use of the tail-rhyme stanza (used with varying success). *Horn Childe* and *Libeaus Desconsus* are written entirely in tail-rhyme; *Beves of Hamptoun* begins in tail-rhyme for the first four hundred lines and then breaks off into rhyming couplets; in some manuscripts, the same change occurs with *Guy of Warwick*, while other manuscripts preserve the tale entirely in tail-rhyme. They are also linked in content in that they are all adventure romances which focus on what happens rather than motivation, morals, or characterization. For the most part this holds true with *Guy of Warwick* although there is more attention to courtly love and to his being supported by God; yet, Guy remains a static character and the tale still

focuses on his feats of prowess. The four romances are all also tales of young knights, as is Sir Thopas (even if some of the tales have the chance to continue until the hero's death). The young age of the hero may suggest Chaucer's reasoning for mentioning Ypotys, a tale about "a pious child...[who] instructs emperor Hadrian in the Christian faith" (Burrows, Notes *922)*. Besides the hero being a child, this poem has little in common with the other tales. It is also interesting that Chaucer mentions *Horn Childe, Beves of Hamptoun, Guy of Wanvick* and *Ypotys* because they all are included in the *Auchinleck* MS, long believed to have been compiled and produced by a London bookstore. It also seems possible that the author of *Libeaus Desconsus* knew of the *Auchinleck* version of *Guy of Wanvick* because of the similarities between the two (Mehl 72). We will later look at the importance of the *Auchinleck* manuscript as a source for the *Tale of Thopas*, but even here it becomes obvious that it (or a very similar collection of tales which may have also included *Libeaus Desconsus)* may have been read or owned by Chaucer and was obviously in mind when he composed the *Tale of Thopas*.

Placing the *Tale of Thopas* within the context of the same adventure romances which Chaucer mentions at the end of the tale helps clarify what outraged Harry Bailly. The adventure romances did not demand much from the teller; plot was of minimal importance and the author simply had to keep the adventures coming. Although the knight would have had to give at least some glory to God, the readers delighted most of all in the knight's prowess. The audience for these romances was not interested in seeing dynamic characters who battled with moral dilemmas; dragons, giants and Saracens made better enemies. Neither would the audience have tired of the tail-rhyme stanza, which sounds so halting to modern ears. But even with his audience expecting so little, the

Pilgrim blunders the telling of the tale and cannot even meet these apparently simple requirements. It is no wonder the Host was so disappointed!

5. Chaucer's Fancy for Details

Until now, a definition of adventure romance has been limited to an exploration of plot and a brief look at the tail-rhyme stanza. From this overview, little more can be said about the Tale of *Thopas* except that this is a rambling tale complete with a rambling, spineless knight. Even the verse form seems to ramble away from the normal path. But is this all there is to the tale? If we look only at the most obvious features of adventure romance, the tale remains obviously bad. And if our examination of romance remained at this level, we would have no choice but to throw up our hands, agreeing with Harry Bailly that the Pilgrim's "drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!" (930). But we have the advantage of being not only concerned with plot and rhyme, but with other elements of the romance as well. While the plot leaves the tale a failure, Chaucer's attention to these other elements forces readers to question Harry Bailly's evaluation and to form their own conclusions about Chaucer's intention.

After the most common elements of adventure romance were satisfied, such as the knight going on his quest and proving his prowess, the author had relative freedom as to which other elements to add to the basic story. While these elements are characteristic of the adventure romance as a genre, they were implemented in the individual romances with varying frequency. But the presence of these assorted characteristics of the adventure romance is so complete in the Tale of *Thopas* that authors concerned with defining romances point to the tale because all these characteristics occur in such a short space, a little over thirty stanzas. In Middle English Literature, J. A. W. Bennett says of the tale that "it compresses into small compass all the most obvious, and recurrent, features of romance" (126). One such common theme is that Sir Thopas is a knight who

is also a mighty hunter. Chaucer incorporates this detail but corrupts it so that while Thopas should be hunting wild boars, the wild beasts of the story are instead "both bukke and hare," male and female rabbits (Th 756); less obvious is that Chaucer's hunting hawk is a "grey goshauk on honde," not a hawk of prestige which would have been characteristic of a knight (738). Chaucer pays attention to the details but perverts them to his own end. Other details which Bennett mentions as characteristic of romances are Thopas' "ride through a forest, filled with love-longing;" the threat of a giant; and the fairie element (Bennett 126). Again all are elements corrupted by Chaucer in the tale: his fierce ride in the forest ends in a nap; as Chaucer parodies David and Goliath, the giant throws stones at the young Thopas who runs away; and Thopas does fall in love with an elf queen, but unfortunately for him, one he has only seen in his dream.

As another element of romances, A.C. Gibbs points to the abundance of exotic settings where the supernatural is almost taken as "matter of fact" (8). M. Dominica Legge points to *Beves of Hamptoun* and *Guy of Warwick* which "involve the wanderings over sea, with mention of exotic places, their fauna, and other details" (qtd. in Gibbs 19). These facets of romance are distorted by Chaucer also in the *Tale of Thopas* where the "fer contree" is "Flaunder, al biyonde the see"(718-719). The exotic plants are complete with "herbes grete and smale / the lycorys and the cetewale / and many a clowe-gylofre" (760-762). With these exotic plants, the incongruity between adventure romances and Chaucer's tale is questionable; it is impossible to know if these elements are meant to be taken as ridiculous, in the same way that Flanders being a far country is. If they are, it is unlikely that Chaucer's readers would been aware of his intention. In L. H. Loomis' impressive section on the *Tale of Thopas* in *Sources und Analogues,* she mentions several

tales which have similar descriptions of these same spices; one such is in the *Romaunt of the Rose:*

> Ther was eke wexyng many a spice,
>
> As Clowe-Gelofre, and lycorice,
>
> Gyngevre, and greyn de Parys,
>
> Canell and setawale of prys (554)

The difficulty in determining what was seen as ridiculous by Chaucer's audience is obvious; even more complicated is determining what Chaucer thought about these spices! Since the overall plot is ridiculous, the temptation is to take every detail as absurd. Another example where it seems that Chaucer is distorting the details is the listing of a "papejay" as a beautiful sounding bird; again this parrot is often listed in romances as a melodious bird, even if our modem sensibilities and pet-store experience have alerted us to their cacophony.

Other romance details present in the *Tale of Thopas* attested to by Loomis are the arming scene, where it is again difficult to find whether specific details are incongruous or not; the hero's vow, definitely inappropriately swom on "ale and breed" (872); references to "mynstrales and geestours" who tell uncharacteristically "of popes and cardinals" (845-49); lists of heroes, similar to what we looked at when defining adventure romances; and the feast scene, where we correctly guess that the knight wrongly feeds on dessert rather than "off cranes, swannes, and venysoun / partryhches, plouers, and heroun / off larkes, and small volatyle" as in *Richard Coeur de Lion* (Loomis 553). The overall effect of these details is confusing as the reader seeks to discover which details are incongruous and which are simply typical of romances. But what becomes impressive

during the reader's effort to distinguish parody from imitation, is the amount of attention given by Chaucer in the incorporation of *all* these elements in the *Tale of Thopas,* particularly because of its short length, as compared to the 10,000-line *Guy of Warwick*!

In the above examples, Chaucer's close adherence to the elements of romance leads us to notice his attention also to the language of the romance. Almost every phrase in the romance can be found in some source, well noted by Loomis' close attention in *Sources and Analogues.* Helen Cooper breaks into categories some of these phrases including "doublets such as 'fair and gent'; alliterating phrases such as 'rede as rose', 'bright in bour', 'worly under wede' [and] minstrel tags that serve for nothing but to fill up a line and provide a rhyme, 'as I yow telle may', 'it is no nay'"(306). Chaucer even brings in vocabulary typical of the romance which he uses nowhere else, such as "verrayment," "listeth," "downe," "launcegay," "auntrous," and "worly." Chaucer's attention to the language of romance is not limited to vocabulary and phrase but includes whole lines; notice the similarity of such minstrel devices as the plea to his audience to listen. In Thopas, he says: "Yet listeth, lordes, to my tale / Murier than the nyghtyngale / For now I wol yow rowne" (Th 833-35). Compare with the similar lines in *Beves of Hamptoun:* "Lordinges, herkneth to me tale! / Is merrier than the nightingale / that y schel singe / of a knight ich wile you roune" (Loomis 498).

Many of Loomis' sources for the *Tale of Thopas* are found in the *Auchinleck* MS, increasing the likelihood of its use by Chaucer (or of some similar manuscript). Other details found in that manuscript are the bob line, which is rare in metrical romances but is used in *Sir Tristrem;* in another romance included in the *Auchinleck MS* is a giant named Olifaunt, bearing the same name as Chaucer's giant, and a knight is named Child

Amoraunt: amoraunt is an alternative spelling of emerald, suggesting an inspiration for the name of Sir Thopas. While it is exciting that we may have a document actually handled by Chaucer, whether Chaucer used the *Auchinleck* MS is irrelevant; what is important is the attention which Chaucer paid to the details of the adventure romance.

The reason for Harry Bailly's disgust seems more obvious the more that is learned about the popular romances; but Chaucer's intentional incorporation of all these details, from word choice to the lists of birds, plants, and food, tease the reader into wondering if Chaucer is not using this tale to accomplish more than simply getting from the *Prioress' Tale* to the *Tale of Melibee*. The *Tale of Thopas* has all the ingredients for the perfect romance and a chef who obviously cares enough to know the recipe, but why is the *Tale of Thopas* a thoroughly mixed batter if it is only meant to be half-baked? Why pay such close attention to the directions when the tale gets pulled out of the oven too soon, interrupted by an innkeeper who comes bumbling into the kitchen?

But is the tale half-baked? Is it really interrupted by Harry Bailly? The tale is divided into three fits or parts; each fit begins with a plea from the Pilgrim to the audience to pay attention and listen to the tale. While there is an obvious connection between the Pilgrim having to beg for the audience's attention and the poorness of the tale, there is a less obvious pattern in the length of the three fits. The first fit consists of eighteen stanzas, the second consists of nine and the last, left unfinished, consists of four and half, creating a ratio of 4:2:1. While the discoverer of this oddity, J. A. Burrow, could be accused of having too much time on his hands, the proportion of the ratio becomes important when paired with an understanding of medieval prosody. Burrow suggests that "the basic ration 2:1 is one of those singled out…as being productive of harmony"

(Agony 57). Its "octave proportion" was believed to produce a "harmonious effect in poetry." How grand would Chaucer's joke be if he intentionally played with this method of creating harmony in this tale of such chaos! It seems unlikely that the fits would just fall there, particularly with the third fit ending at exactly four and a half lines. If his close attention to the details of romance had not been enough to force readers to re-examine this tale and question Bailly's critique of it as "drasty ryrnyng," the structure of the tale suggests that Chaucer saw this tale as having an alternative function, a function important enough for him to make the tale perfect.

6. The Parody of the *Tale of Thopas*

In her book *Parody//Meta-fiction*, Margaret **A.** Rose describes the ideal condition for the reception of a parody as the "existence of a reader conversant with the work being parodied, and sensitive to the function of the discrepancy between it and the parodist's text" (41). While an ideal condition for the reception of the Tale of *Thopas* expired along with the popularity of the adventure romances, better readers for Chaucer's tale are made as they become more "conversant" with the adventure romances, the source for Chaucer's parody. The second characteristic of an ideal condition for reception is a reader who not only recognizes the similarities between the object of parody and the parody but also recognizes the incongruities between the two. That these first two conditions are not sufficient for an ideal reception is demonstrated by the response of Harry Bailly. With the immense popularity of the adventure romances, the host Harry Bailly definitely would have been part of their audience and would have been familiar with all the genre features. His awareness of the incongruities is demonstrated by his cursing of the Pilgrim's tale and his declaration that the tale is "drasty speche" and "nat worth a toord" (Th 923,930). But Harry Bailly doesn't satisfy Rose's third condition: a "reader sensitive to the function of the discrepancy." The Host has no appreciation for the tale as parody.

Upon the first reading of the Tale of *Thopas*, modem readers may find themselves responding much like the Host. Because the adventure romance is so distanced from the modem reader, the reader cannot recognize similarities, much less incongruities, and thus has no reason to appreciate the tale as parody. But after an introduction and examination of some of the features of the adventure romance, the modem reader is quick to see beyond the Host's response and wonder at Chaucer's carefulness in simulating the

adventure romance, even while getting it so wrong. Yet parody depends on the successful reproduction of the object of parody; for Chaucer to be successful, he had to pay close attention to the details. For us to appreciate the parody we have to pay close attention to the incongruities.

In his English Language in Medieval Literature, N. F. Blake speaks of the difficulty in parodying medieval styles since medieval texts are so imitative of one another. To successfully parody a style, the characteristic features need to be exaggerated to the point that they become ridiculous. But the readers "have to realize that the stylistic excesses represent ridicule rather than the development of that particular style" (117). Modern readers of poetry, with our low tolerance for poetic diction, do not have to be pushed far to realize when poetry is being parodied; but as can be seen from the popularity of the adventure romances, the audience for these tales had an increased patience for over-exaggeration and minstrel tags. When the features which are imitated seem absurd already, incongruities appear everywhere, and we are quick to believe Chaucer is parodying every feature of the adventure romances.

The most obvious incongruities are seen between the plots of the Tale of *Thopas* and other adventure romances. Much attention has already been given to the knight's falling in love with an elf-queen only dreamt of, his running away from battle, and the absence of even a single death; yet the general plot is similar in that it has a knight who rides off to find adventure and love. It is more difficult to find which specific features of adventure romances are parodied. The spices describing the exotic settings of the tale are too similar to the normal flora of the adventure romances to be taken as parody; yet the "wild beste … bothe bukke and hare" are incongruous (not even the adventure romances

would descend to such absurdity as to find foes in rabbits, even really large ones!) (Th 755-6). We would like to take the description of Sir Thopas' "semely nose" as an obvious discrepancy but to our chagrin, it is a description appropriate for the knights of adventure romances (729); on the other hand, archery and wrestling may seem worthy traits to us, but even Harry Bailly would recognize that these were traits better belonging to yeomen than to knights (739-40). All the genre characteristics such as arming or feasts or exotic setting or oaths contain enough incongruities that it would be impossible to say that one is more the object of Chaucer's parody than another, since he seems to equally corrupt all. The very fact that the tale contains all the features of the adventure romances-in only thirty-one stanzas suggests that the whole genre is the object of parody. Compared to other adventure romances, Chaucer authoritatively collects the features in the Tale of *Thopas* ensuring that the tale is interpreted as a parody of not just one tale or author but the entire genre.

The discrepancies in form are as jarring as those of content. At its most common manifestation the tail-rhyme stanza consists of twelve lines in the rhyme scheme aabccbddbeeb. Chaucer never uses this twelve-line stanza but substitutes a six-line stanza of the rhyme scheme aabaab, the most frequent of the eight different stanza variations in the tale (Stanley 417). More than half of the stanzas contain that rhyme scheme, with the second most frequent being aabccb (Burrows, Agony 57). While the stanza retains enough of the features of the typical tail-rhyme to be recognized, such variations in prosody are enough to shock both Chaucer's current and modem readers. The form gets really marred when in stanza fourteen Chaucer throws in the first bob line, "in towne" (Th 793). While there are a few existing examples of the bob lines being used in metrical

romances (interestingly one of these is *Sir Tristrem* in the *Auchinleck MS*), the manuscript evidence does not suggest that the bob was characteristic of the adventure romances. Out of the remaining forty poems that contain bob lines, only three are romances (Stanley 426). In the last four stanzas of the First Fit of the tale, Chaucer continues absurdly throwing in the bob lines; there is one more whimsical occurrence of the bob in the last stanza of the Second Fit. If their mere presence were not enough to arouse the reader's awareness of the difference between the Pilgrim's version of the tail-rhyme and the more traditional, the stanzas containing bob lines especially demonstrate Chaucer's feigned incompetence since the bob line occurs either at a different place in each stanza or ends with a different sound! With amazing improvisation, each stanza has a different rhyme scheme:

790-796   aab c bbc

797-806   aabaab c aac

807-816   aabccb c ddc

817-826   aabccb d ccd

881-890   aabccb d eed (Stanley 426)

E. G. Stanley comments that though the bob lines in other works never really added much to the content of the poem and may even had been "shouted in recitation," the examples in the *Tale of Thopas* are particularly characterized by both "bathos and vapidity" (Stanley 418,421).

The parody in the *Tale of Thopas* is also marked by the ridiculous use of conventions other than the stanza. While tail-rhyme romances often had appeals to the reader to listen to the tale, Chaucer parodies the form by having three appeals in only

thirty-one stanzas! Except for the frequency of their occurrence, the appeals are typical of the adventure romances, even if each does sound more forceful than the last. Chaucer also uses repetition to make the diction characteristic of the adventure romances the object of parody. Because the diction of the romances is so different from Chaucer's normal usage, it is tempting to say that the inclusion of such words as "verrayment," "listeth," "launcegay," "auntrous," "worly," and "downe" suggests parody in itself (Cooper 306). While they are incongruous with what we find in other works of Chaucer, they accurately simulate the romances. It is much better to look to the obvious overuse of certain words for examples of Chaucer parodying the diction. As an example, J. A. Burrow points to the repetition of the word "fyn" (Agony 54). In six stanzas, the Pilgrim says that Sir Thopas' "gyngebreed...was ful fyn" (Th 854); his trousers were of "cloth of lake fyn and cleere" (857); over his chain-mail shirt he wore "a fyn hawberk" (863); and "his spere was of fyn ciprees" (881). Another example is Chaucer's use of the word "prikynge." Describing Thopas' mad ride, Chaucer says that he:

> … *pryked* as he were wood.
>
> His faire steede in his *prikynge*
>
> So swatte that men myghte hym wrynge
>
> His sides were al blood.
>
> Sire Thopas eek so wery was
>
> For *prikyng* on the softe gras (774-779)

The repetition and overuse of "prikyng" does not reflect Chaucer's normal diction; obviously, he is having fun highlighting the vocabulary of the adventure romances in

such a way that his audience would not only recognize the similarities to the adventure romances but also the incongruities.

If the Tale of *Thopas* existed apart from the Canterbury Tales, the combination of misdirected plot, varying rhyme form and poor use of alliterative phrases, doublets, minstrel tags, and anticlimactic tail lines would set the tale apart as a parody. But the tale's placement within the context of the Canterbury Tales makes the parody more complex, complicating the ways in which the tale may be taken as parody. There is not only an incongruity between what the reader expects from the adventure romances, but also what the reader expects from the Pilgrim.

By the time the Pilgrim gets to tell the tale, the reader's expectations could not have been higher. After the sobering Prioress' Tale, readers and pilgrims alike are looking for something to cheer them up. Chaucer carries his audience quickly and purposefully to the next tale with his continuation of the stately rhyme royal from the Prioress' Tale into the Prologue of the Tale of *Thopas*. (This continuation of rhyme form suggests that Chaucer specifically intended *Thopas* to follow the Prioress' Tale and to be told by the Pilgrim.) Unfortunately the force of many of the jokes made by the Host at the Pilgrim's expense are lost to us, but it seems likely that Chaucer's audience would still be expecting an artfully told tale, even if his persona had suffered some jabs from the Host. But from the first stanza's appeal for his audience's attention, the awkward and untypical rhyme, and a knight named after a gem, the audience's expectations are shattered. Chaucer treats them to a parody of the romances, completely unlike anything they had ever heard from the Poet. Looking for the grandness they found in the Poet, they instead find the bumbling poetics of the Pilgrim. By playing upon the reader's expectations for a

great tale, Chaucer parodies his own role as poet by having his character tell the tale most unlike anything else that has survived in Chaucer's works. The parody upon the Pilgrim is complete as even the Host criticizes and curses the helpless Pilgrim. Chaucer defeats the reader's expectation, subjecting himself to the ridicule of even Harry Bailly in an unexpected twist in which the character criticizes his creator.

7. Criticism, Comedy and Character Development: Functions of the *Tale of Thopas*

Knowing something about the object of parody, recognizing the incongruities between the object and the parody, and appreciating the existence of parody fulfills Margaret A. Rose's definition of an ideal reader. Since we have already surpassed the critical ineptness of Harry Bailly, the next question to answer is not whether the tale is parody or not but what Chaucer was attempting through the *Tale of Thopas*. Perhaps the most obvious answer is that the parody was written to be funny and that Chaucer was trying to get a chuckle from his audience. Although this sounds like an intentional fallacy--because the tale is funny, the poet's purpose was to be funny--Margaret Rose explains that the intentional fallacy "does not mean we must exclude the comic 'effect' from our definition of parody" (21). She argues that comic effect is clearly described in classical criticism as a feature of parody. Interestingly, parody works similar to humor. Following Kant, she explains that the essence of humor is in "raising the expectation for X and giving Y" (23). Similarly, parody works by raising the expectation for the object of parody and giving incongruities instead. When Chaucer has his pilgrim tell the tale, he both successfully parodies his own role as poet and also creates the potential for humor through the audience's reception of an unexpected tale. When he raises the reader's expectations for an adventure romance and gives the *Tale of Thopas* instead, he again both creates parody and humor when the audience recognizes the incongruity between romance and his tale as intentional. Just because a situation has the potential for humor does not mean that the audience will appreciate the incongruity as funny. Someone fond of the tail-rhyme romances may not see the parody as funny and would be perhaps

offended because they interpret Chaucer's parody to be criticism of the romances; nor would somebody like the Host who sees the discrepancies and counts them as marks of poor prosody find the tale funny. But the reader who notices the discrepancies as intentional will at least also appreciate them if not as side-splittingly hilarious, at least as comic.

In his book on parody, Joseph Dane demonstrates that early critical appreciations of the tale focused on its being a humorous version of the adventure romances. In 1523, John Skelton refers to the tale: "But hyde the, sir Thopias, / Nowe into the castell of Bas, / And lurke there, like an as" (198). In 1542, Thomas Wyatt says of the tale: "I am not he that kan Praise syr Topas for a noble tale / And scorne the story that the knight tolde." Edmund Spenser borrows freely from the tale and John Lyly uses a character named Sir Tophas in his work *Endymion.* Dane argues that the early comments about the poem and the patterning of characters upon Sir Thopas suggests that the tale was not taken as commenting upon the faults of the adventure romance; instead "each of these writers sees *Sir Thopas* as silly, but none sees it as meta-romance" (199).

According to Dane, the reception of the *Tale of Thopas* changes in the eighteenth century due to a combination of increased "recent access to the supposed targets of Chaucer's parody" and a "new critical vocabulary, borrowed largely from the French--the critical terms 'parody,' 'burlesque,' 'travesty'" (187). In *History of English Poetry,* Warton says "genuine humor...consists in discerning improprieties in books as well as characters. We therefore must remark under this class another tale of Chaucer … the Rime of Sir Thopas" (qtd. in Dane 186). Of the tale, Hurd, in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance,* says that Chaucer "discerned the absurdity of the old romances, but has even

ridiculed them with incomparable spirit" (qtd. in Dane 186). Similarly, Thomas Percy

says that Chaucer's "rhyme of Sir Thopas was evidently written to ridicule and burlesque

[the adventure romances]" (qtd. in Dane 195). Joseph Dane argues that after the influence

on English criticism by French ideas such as burlesque and parody, works which had

previously been exalted for their humor were now taken to be parody, while works

exalted for their style were taken to be non-parodic. For these critics, parody did not

retain the classical characteristic of having 'comic effect;' any humor that occurred was

the result of the parodist and reader joining together in scoffing at the features of the

object of parody. Dane believes that these critics mistakenly project their standards for

good poetry onto Chaucer. Because they saw Chaucer's brilliance as an author, they

believed that he must have shared their attitude toward the impoverished form of the tail-

rhyme stanza; the same characteristics which are so "obviously" absurd to them would

have had to been absurd to Chaucer too.

Whether Dane's reasons for the change are accurate or not, he importantly

highlights the dramatic change in interpreting the tale. Where before the middle of the

eighteenth century the tale was understood as a humorous version of the adventure

romances, afterwards it was glorified as Chaucer's brilliant criticism of that genre. In

Sources and Analogues, L. H. Loomis continues this critical tradition with her

interpretation that the tale was a criticism of the adventure romance's "worn devices of

minstrel style, the same stereotyped diction, with reiterated common place rhyme and

phrases" (491). Loomis believes it was his observation of these blemishes in "large

collections of contemporary English verse, that aroused Chaucer's derisive wit of

parody" (492). In his article, "Chaucer's Sir *Thopas* and La Prise de Nuevile," J. A.

Burrow similarly says that Chaucer's "imitation of the English romance manner ... shows a marked bias, which all scholars have recognized, towards features which Chaucer certainly did regard as ugly or absurd" (55). Alan T. Gaylord summarizes this most traditional interpretation of Chaucer's purpose in writing the tale: "Chaucer's idea would not appear to be much more than 'this won't do!' in recoiling from a body of popular literature he found ridiculous" (Moment 314).

But not "all scholars have recognized," as Burrow claims, Chaucer's attack on the adventure romances. While most critics do see the tale as some type of criticism, the direction of that criticism varies. There are those, like the authors mentioned above, who see the direction of the criticism to be the object of parody, the adventure romances. But parody does not always demonstrate that the author's attitude is one of disregard for the genre that he is parodying. Parody may also be used as a way to mock a feature outside the text, such as society. For example, Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" parodies a humanitarian attempt to prevent children of the poor from being a burden but is used by the author to satirize society's greed. John Manly is one critic who takes the *Tale of Thopas* as an attack on a part of society; he holds that Chaucer was mocking "the efforts of the Flemish bourgeoisie to ape the manners of the English and French aristocracy, and with their new-found wealth to compete in dress, in manners, and in exploits on the battlefield with the ancient chivalry of France and England" (Manly 59-60).

Manly's interpretation of the tale as social criticism is attacked by J.A. Burrow through his contrasting of the *Tale of Thopas* with a similar French source, *La Prise de Nuevile,* a comic poem written in the style of the French chansons de geste. *La Prise de Nuevile* tells of an army of Flemings who have assembled to attack the castle of Nueville

(Sir *Thopas* 45). Burrow lists a number of interesting similarities between the two tales: both "describe the unheroic doings of Flemish townsfolk in a meter and manner associated ... with heroism and adventure;" both begin with appeals from minstrels; both have a catalogue of heroes and preliminaries of battle such as vows and armings; and "both end abruptly and inconclusively, before the promised battle has been reached" (47). But even though the tales are similar, Burrow argues that while it is perhaps easiest to follow other critics and say that the tales are criticizing both form and society at the same time, it is clear that La Prise de *Nuevile*'s direction is outward and that it functions as a criticism of society while the Tale of *Thopas*' direction is inward and that it functions as a criticism of the adventure romances.

The direction of criticism in La Prise de Nuevile remains constant throughout the poem. Burrow compares the poem with other chansons de geste to demonstrate that it is well-written aside from the continually distorted and "dreadful French" (similar to that of a Flemish person speaking French) and the infringement of Flemish words; "the imitation of features from the chansons de geste seem in general quite straightforward (barring, of course, the application of them to low subjects)" (Sir *Thopas* 49). Because the language and details are so similar to the chansons de geste, Burrow believes that the criticism in the tale has to be found in the story of the Flemish would-be knights. These Flemish are fond of Flemish cheese, wear clogs instead of spurs, have low aspirations for the battle, mount their horses wrong and have to be tied on to their horses to stay seated; their attempts to "enter the heroic world of the chansons de geste are continually frustrated" (Sir *Thopas* 51-52). Even if the chansons de geste were to come under the same critical attack that the adventure romances have, there is no question that La Prise de Nuevile is

not directed toward an impoverished form but towards the Flemish and their attempt to become part of high culture.

Burrow battles the idea raised by Manly that the *Tale of Thopas* is also a parody which criticizes the rising Flemish bourgeoisie. While Thopas does come from the Flemish town of Poperyng and buys his hose at Brugge, the commercial center of Flanders, in the "rest of *Sir Thopas*, we find not a single specifically Flemish feature of any sort" *(Sir Thopas 52)*. When Chaucer describes Thopas as good at wrestling and archery, historically yeoman activities, are we to then take this as a parody of the lower class, too? Or because he is a knight who goes on foolish quests are we to see this as a parody of knights? Burrow is looking for salient evidence as to the direction of criticism in the *Tale of Thopas*; it cannot be found in Flanders and thus he sees the direction towards the genre.

But just because Chaucer has gone "out of his way to imitate the diction and style of such romances [as Guy and *Beves],"* does not immediately mean that he is criticizing the genre, as Burrow assumes *(Sir Thopas 54)*. *A.* McI. Trounce presents a third direction for the criticism of the Tale. In his defense of the tail-rhyme romance's potential for both good and bad poetry, Trounce mourns that a rejection of the tail-rhyme romances has been "founded on something other than a reading of the poems; for it is almost always bound up with the supposed criticism of the tail-rhyme romances made by Chaucer in *Sir Thopas*" (89). Trounce argues that while Chaucer's use of the diction, form, and expression of the tail-rhyme stanzas reminds the reader of the romances, their use "cannot constitute a definitive criticism of the poems unless the effect gained is something similar" (91). By comparing actual stanzas of tail-rhyme romances to the poetry of the

Tale of Thopas, he argues that the Pilgrim's tale is such a bad romance and so dissimilar to other adventure romances that it cannot possibly be a criticism of the object of parody. But Trounce does not reject the tale's having *any* critical function. Rather he sees the tale as a criticism not of conventions, since Middle English poetry was by definition based upon imitation, but the misuse of those conventions; the *Tale of Thopas* is a warning because "highly conventional art is in constant danger of becoming an empty art, in which phrases take the place of meaning" (Trounce 92).

 While Trounce could be criticized for being too fond of the tail-rhyme romances to be an unbiased observer, other critics have followed his warning and have been skeptical of interpretations which take the tale to be an attack on the romances. Alan Gaylord claims that the true matter of the tales is the English poet rather than the minstrel romances (Moment 312). He compares an example of a tail rhyme stanza from *Guy of Warwick* where the conventions are used adeptly to an inferior sample from *Lybeaus Desconsus* to show that the Pilgrim's tale is so distinctively different from the two that it hardly qualifies as "either an imitation, or a parody in the usual sense" (Moment 316-319). Rather, he calls it an "approximation of the tail-rhyme stanza." Helen Cooper also chooses to see the tale as not an outright attack of the adventure romances but "a brilliant parody of everything that can go wrong with them" (Moment 301). She sees the tale as demonstrating the danger of conventional poetry: "the parody damns its own and others' abuses; it does not deny that the metrical romances can make fine efforts, though those are not what he chooses to imitate" (Moment 308).

 It is impossible to be certain that the tale is not Chaucer's attack on the adventure romances. If all adventure romances were not categorically bad, the worse examples of

the romances, with their wandering plots and empty use of conventions (such as those romances that Chaucer draws attention to at the end of the tale) were definitely left open for criticism. The fact that Chaucer encyclopedically included all the features of the genre also suggests that he was purposefully setting up his tale as the ultimate adventure romance, only to tear it down, and thus ridicule the whole genre. Another indication that he was attacking the adventure romances is Chaucer's close attention to the language of the romances in order to best produce both a "true" romance and also one which authoritatively exemplified the weaknesses of the genre. Yet Chaucer must have had some familiarity with these tales beyond looking for something to poke fun at. His knowledge of the adventure romances' diction, conventions, and stanza forms; the skillful playing with those details; and the humorous tone all indicate an affection for the genre rather than an evaluation of them as "absurd." Maybe Chaucer really is representing rhymes he learned long ago, to paraphrase the Pilgrim. Perhaps, the tale is not an attack on the adventure romances but expresses an ambivalent attitude toward the form, one recognizing both merit and weaknesses.

Or maybe, as Trounce argues, it is not a criticism of the adventure romance at all but of bad prosody and of the improper use of conventions. Perhaps that is the best way to make sense of Chaucer's strange approximation of the tail-rhyme stanza. If Chaucer's purpose is to criticize or even show affection for the tail-rhyme romances, it is hard to imagine how this is accomplished by the alterations to the rhyme form. It seems that a better way to draw attention to the form would be to corrupt the most typical twelve-line stanza by putting it to ridiculous ends. But Chaucer has created something different with his most common aabaab stanza; clearly the Pilgrim has an idea of how the stanza

sounds, but cannot remember enough of the form to get it right. When after thirteen stanzas, the Pilgrim can keep up the charade no longer, he changes his form to stanzas containing bob lines! But he can't get the slippery bob lines right either and throws them in at a variety of places, ending them with different rhymes. Not only are bob lines rare in adventure romances, so are such changes in form. How can these stanzas be considered an attack on the traditional adventure romance? The author is obviously not parodying the genre with these unusual forms but demonstrating instead the incompetence of the poetaster.

One response to this argument could be that Chaucer varies the rhyme internally because the adventure romances were not all written in the most common twelve-line stanza; the examples from the *Auchinleck* MS particularly vary in form, including one which has bob lines. But for Chaucer to criticize a genre for varying its style would be an odd hypocrisy since the *Canterbury Tales* represent a wide array of rhyme forms. It would also seem more likely that if Chaucer was intentionally parodying the variety of rhyme forms he would have copied the actual forms used in the same way that he incorporates other genre features into his parody. Instead, he only approximates the form.

Rather than the strange stanza form being a criticism of the adventure romances, it could have the opposite effect on the audience who now might be relieved to hear a *normal* tail-rhyme romance. When the tale is finally interrupted, the pilgrims are so tired of hearing the Pilgrim's "drasty speche" that the Host would even be willing to hear a tale told in "geeste," an alliterative form of poetry unpopular in the south of England (Th **933).** Or if the Pilgrim can only tell terrible verse, the Host asks for prose instead. If Chaucer's goal is the criticism of the tail-rhyme romances, he has overshot his goal.

Neither the pilgrims nor the audience come away enlightened about what good poetry should be but have instead given up hope that the Pilgrim can produce anything worth hearing.

In the same way that the rhyme in the Tale of *Thopas* enforces the pilgrims' desire for decent poetry, the thwarted plot may also increase reader's expectations for what should happen in an adventure romance. By showing a cowardly knight as a bad thing, the ideal that knights should be brave is strengthened. In the same way, having the knight run away from the giant, while playing off of the expectation that the knight should be brave and defeat the giant, could also enforce the reader's expectations for future romances where knights are brave (and well-armored) giant slayers. Perhaps the ridiculousness of the fairie love makes all the more enjoyable an idealistic love with supernatural princesses (the effect it seems to have had on Edmund Spenser, who was positively influenced by the Tale of *Thopas*). And the next time that Chaucer's audience hears of a feast of venison and partridges they would remember Thopas' sweet tooth and ache from the cavity all the desserts left. The plot of the Tale of *Thopas* is such a deviation from the norm that it is just as likely that hearing the tale would leave the audience enjoyably reminiscing about the romances as it would leave them criticizing their wandering nature. The misapplications of these plot elements may actually enforce the reader's expectations for the adventure romances.

But there is of course a difference between how the host Harry Bailly responds to the tale and how Chaucer's audience would have responded. Even from the crash course in adventure romances, we can see Chaucer's brilliance in parodying the genre. He pays close attention to the details of the genre, sometimes corrupting them to his own

advantage and sometimes completely deviating from the norm. Chaucer has intentionally

placed himself in an interesting position by having his Pilgrim tell the tale; it would be

brazen of him to have the Pilgrim tell the most obvious choice for winning the contest.

But he also has the responsibility of "saving face" by demonstrating his poetic prowess:

after creating so many well-written tales, anything inferior would take away from the

accomplishment of the whole. He keeps the balance by giving his readers, both those

inside the text (the pilgrims) and those outside the text (his audience) a terrible poem.

Chaucer's audience has the advantage of noticing the incongruity between the poem and

Chaucer's other works and thus interprets the tale as a great joke and a silly tale, an

example of intentional ineptness.

The Host's response is similar to our initial response: what a waste of time! But

whereas modern readers are handicapped by their lack of knowledge of the adventure

romances, our appreciation of Chaucer's craft elsewhere warns us that there must be

something more than just "despending tyme" (Th 931). Similarly the Host is handicapped

by not knowing Chaucer the Poet but only this manifestation of him, Chaucer the

Pilgrim; he has no warning that the Pilgrim is capable of anything better and thus

compares the tale to what it most closely resembled, an adventure romance. Inside the

context of the Canterbury Tales, the Host does not give the wrong response but the right

one. There is enough here to suggest that the tale is "drasty rymyng;" it is devoid both of

plot and a recognizable stanza form (Th 930). Helen Cooper highlights how the rhymes

and word choice also highlight the Pilgrim's poor prosody:

> Word forms are similarly mistreated for the rhyme's sake: slaw as dialect from of
>
> 'slain' (826), *entent* for entente (712), gras alongside grace to rhyme with *Thopas*

(830, cf. 723), *plas* alongside place to rhyme with gras, 'grass' (799-81, cf. 720).

Gent, rode ('face'), love-longynge, and lemman are used elsewhere by Chaucer in

strictly demotic contexts. (306)

By having the host recognize that the Pilgrim's prosody is "not woorth a toord" Chaucer

has the most fun possible with the Host's response (Th 930). He further degrades his

persona since even the Host, not known for his critical mind, is able to recognize the

poorness of the tale, while the Pilgrim claims it "is the best rym I kan" (Th 928). In fact

the Host's recognition of the tale's degraded artistry encourages a reading of the poem as

an example of the misuse of conventions rather than a parody criticizing the adventure

romances. If Chaucer's intention was to criticize these tail-rhyme romances, he would

have also implicitly criticized their audience, most definitely including the Host. Chaucer

missed a golden opportunity then by not having the Host love the Tale of *Thopas*; if the

form was worthy of mockery, then he should not have the un-enlightened audience

appreciate the tale as much they appreciate the other romances! But instead the Host is

uncharacteristically astute, acknowledging the destituteness not of the romances but of

the Pilgrim's Tale.

Yet Chaucer the Poet still has the upper hand. His audience would recognize the

object of parody and the incongruities not only between the Tale of *Thopas* and the

adventure romances but also between good poetry and this example of bad poetry,

between Pilgrim and Poet. In the end, while the Pilgrim receives scorn for his bad poetry,

Chaucer receives praise for his poetry which is so perfectly bad that it can be seen both as

a model which typifies the adventure romance and also a model which warns against

everything that can go wrong when craft is replaced by convention.

There are strong arguments for reading the tale both as a criticism of the adventure romances and as a criticism of a more general misuse of conventions particularly exemplified by the Pilgrim's bastardization of the convention-heavy tail-rhyme romances. But these two views are not exclusive. Both are justified by examining the context of the tales. The adventure romances surely had features worthy of criticizing but the Pilgrim's tale focuses attention on more than just the romances; after his constipated display, even the regularity of the adventure romances would be a relief. But both his attention to details in the tale and his inability as poet help characterize the Pilgrim.

Earlier in the Tales, Chaucer has demonstrated the Pilgrim's propensity to be concerned with details and getting the wording of the other pilgrims right. In the General Prologue, the Pilgrim says that:

> Whoso shall telle a tale after a man,
>
> He moot reherce an ny as evere he kan
>
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
>
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
>
> Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe (GP 731-735)

Even if the Pilgrim does not want to tell a tale so rudeliche and large (crudely and freely), he is under a responsibility to repeat the tale in the form and words of the original teller. Whatever his personal feelings about the adventure romance, the Pilgrim carries over into the Tale of *Thopas* this same concern for accurately imitating what he has heard from other tellers; thus we find so many verbal parallels between this tale and other romances. This also explains the presence of every genre feature in such a short space.

For the Pilgrim, a good tale is one which has the same diction and features of the model. His mind is better suited for memory (demonstrated by his long recitation of the numerous proverbs in the *Tale of Melibee)* than for good poetics. With his forced rhymes and constant pleas for his audience's patience, the Pilgrim is presented as not a skilled poet but someone who is so concerned with getting the words right and getting through all the features, such as feasts and arming, that prosody and plot are abandoned.

And the amazing thing is that he thinks he has done a fine job! He wonders at the Host's rudeness at the "beste rym I kan" (Th *928).* For the Pilgrim, a good tale is one that gets all the ingredients right. He finds his audience being difficult instead of discerning and when he restarts with a tale written in prose, he warns the audience that it is "somtyme told in sondry wyse / Of sondry folk, as I shal yow devyse" (Th *941-942).* In his defense, he gives the example of how different *Gospels* have the same meaning although they are told in different ways. He warns his audience that if his version of the *Tale of Melibee,* a popular moral treatise on discerning wise counsel and choosing peace before war, has "nat the same wordes seye / As ye han herd [before], yet to yow alle I preye / Blameth me nat" (Th *959-961).* The Pilgrim places fault on the audience for being too picky about the incongruities; he still does not recognize the difference between the *Tale of Thopas* and other adventure romances. Ironically, the *Tale of Melibee* is so close to the French source from which Chaucer translated the tale that the warning is completely unneeded.

The Pilgrim is much more suited to tell the *Tale of Melibee* than a lighter tale. Both in the *General Prologue* and the *Miller's Tale,* the Pilgrim speaks of his uneasiness at repeating the bawdy tales of the other pilgrims. But because he has bound himself to

faithfully repeating their words, he does so. And though the Tale of Thopas is not bawdy, it is pure "myrthe;" the moral Pilgrim must have found much more worth in moral treatises like *Melibee* than those tales he "lerned longe agoon" (Th 709). Why then does he not simply choose to tell the *Tale of Melibee?* The Pilgrim is also characterized as being quick to please and thus, after the soberness of the *Prioress' Tale,* he quickly acknowledges the Host's quest for a tale of mirth. Little did the Host know what he was asking for and what "drasty rhyming" he would get in response.

Chaucer the Poet reveals himself by making the Pilgrim his opposite. The Poet is a master of prosody, equally adept at telling any type of tale, either moral or bawdy, of mirth or of meaning. While recognizing those classes above him, the Poet feels free to criticize any below him. He adeptly translates and retells, hardly ever sticking to the words of the original. The Pilgrim, on the other hand, is always quick to please, prefers repetition to invention, and has no delight in what is not moral. While the Poet and Pilgrim are negative reflections of each other, the *Tale of Thopas* is the synthesis of both Poet and Pilgrim. Within the pilgrimage to Canterbury, the tale reveals a Pilgrim who is a poor poet, capable of imitating other poets but whose inventions are mistakes. Within the context of the Canterbury Tales, the *Tale of Thopas* reveals a Poet conscious of imitation, wary of convention, and reveling in invention.

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