CHAUCER'S TALE OF SIR THOPAS.

THE PROLOGUE.<1>

WHEN said was this miracle, every man
As sober* was, that wonder was to see, *serious
Till that our Host to japen* he began, *talk lightly
And then *at erst* he looked upon me, *for the first time*
And saide thus; "What man art thou?" quoth he;
"Thou lookest as thou wouldest find an hare,
For ever on the ground I see thee stare.
"Approache near, and look up merrily.
Now ware you, Sirs, and let this man have place.
He in the waist is shapen as well as I; <2>
This were a puppet in an arm t'embrace
For any woman small and fair of face.
He seemeth elvish* by his countenance, *surly, morose
For unto no wight doth he dalliance.
"Say now somewhat, since other folk have said;
Tell us a tale of mirth, and that anon."
"Hoste," quoth I, "be not evil apaid,* *dissatisfied
For other tale certes can* I none, *know
Eut of a rhyme I learned yore* agone." *long
"Yea, that is good," quoth he; "now shall we hear
Some dainty thing, me thinketh by thy cheer."* *expression, mien

Notes to the Prologue to Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas

1. This prologue is interesting, for the picture which it gives of Chaucer himself; riding apart from and indifferent to the rest of the pilgrims, with eyes fixed on the ground, and an "elvish", morose, or rather self-absorbed air; portly, if not actually stout, in body; and evidently a man out of the common, as the closing words of the Host imply.

2. Referring to the poet's corpulency.

THE TALE <1>

The First Fit* *part

Listen, lordings, in good intent,
And I will tell you verrament* *truly
Of mirth and of solas,* *delight, solace
All of a knight was fair and gent,* *gentle
In battle and in tournament,
His name was Sir Thopas.
Y-born he was in far country,

In Flanders, all beyond the sea,
At Popering <2> in the place;
His father was a man full free,
And lord he was of that country,
As it was Godde's grace. <3>
Sir Thopas was a doughty swain,
White was his face as paindemain, <4>
His lippes red as rose.
His rode* is like scarlet in grain, *complexion
And I you tell in good certain
He had a seemly nose.
His hair, his beard, was like saffroun,
That to his girdle reach'd adown,
His shoes of cordewane:<5>
Of Bruges were his hosen brown;
His robe was of ciclatoun,<6>
That coste many a jane.<7>
He coulde hunt at the wild deer,
And ride on hawking *for rivere* *by the river*
With gray goshawk on hand: <8>
Thereto he was a good archere,
Of wrestling was there none his peer,
Where any ram <9> should stand.
Full many a maiden bright in bow'r
They mourned for him par amour,
When them were better sleep;
But he was chaste, and no lechour,
And sweet as is the bramble flow'r
That beareth the red heep.* *hip
And so it fell upon a day,
For sooth as I you telle may,
Sir Thopas would out ride;
He worth* upon his steede gray, *mounted
And in his hand a launcegay,* *spear <10>
A long sword by his side.
He pricked through a fair forest,
Wherein is many a wilde beast,
Yea, bothe buck and hare;
And as he pricked north and east,
I tell it you, him had almest *almost
Betid* a sorry care. *befallen
There sprange herbes great and small,
The liquorice and the setewall,* *valerian
And many a clove-gilofre, <12>

And nutemeg to put in ale,
Whether it be moist* or stale, *new
Or for to lay in coffer.
The birdes sang, it is no nay,
The sperhawk* and the popinjay,** *sparrowhawk **parrot <13>
That joy it was to hear;
The throstle-cock made eke his lay,
The woode-dove upon the spray
She sang full loud and clear.
Sir Thopas fell in love-longing
All when he heard the throstle sing,
And *prick'd as he were wood;* *rode as if he
His faire steed in his pricking were mad*
So sweated, that men might him wring,
His sides were all blood.
Sir Thopas eke so weary was
For pricking on the softe grass,
So fierce was his corage,* *inclination, spirit
That down he laid him in that place,
To make his steed some solace,
And gave him good forage.
"Ah, Saint Mary, ben'dicite,
What aileth thilke* love at me *this
To binde me so sore?
Me dreamed all this night, pardie,
An elf-queen shall my leman* be, *mistress
And sleep under my gore.* *shirt
An elf-queen will I love, y-wis,* *assuredly
For in this world no woman is
Worthy to be my make* *mate
In town;
All other women I forsake,
And to an elf-queen I me take
By dale and eke by down." <14>
Into his saddle he clomb anon,
And pricked over stile and stone
An elf-queen for to spy,
Till he so long had ridden and gone,
That he found in a privy wonne* *haunt
The country of Faery,
So wild;
For in that country was there none
That to him durste ride or gon,
Neither wife nor child.

Till that there came a great giaunt,
His name was Sir Oliphaunt,<15>
A perilous man of deed;
He saide, "Child,* by Termagaunt, <16> *young man
But if thou prick out of mine haunt, *unless
Anon I slay thy steed
With mace.
Here is the Queen of Faery,
With harp, and pipe, and symphony,
Dwelling in this place."
The Child said, "All so may I the,* *thrive
To-morrow will I meete thee,
When I have mine armor;
And yet I hope, *par ma fay,* *by my faith*
That thou shalt with this launcegay
Abyen* it full sore; *suffer for
Thy maw* *belly
Shall I pierce, if I may,
Ere it be fully prime of day,
For here thou shalt be slaw."* *slain
Sir Thopas drew aback full fast;
This giant at him stones cast
Out of a fell staff sling:
But fair escaped Child Thopas,
And all it was through Godde's grace,
And through his fair bearing. <17>
Yet listen, lordings, to my tale,
Merrier than the nightingale,
For now I will you rown,* *whisper
How Sir Thopas, with sides smale,* *small <18>
Pricking over hill and dale,
Is come again to town.
His merry men commanded he
To make him both game and glee;
For needes must he fight
With a giant with heades three,
For paramour and jollity
Of one that shone full bright.
"*Do come,*" he saide, "my minstrales *summon*
And gestours* for to telle tales. *story-tellers
Anon in mine arming,
Of romances that be royales, <19>
Of popes and of cardinales,
And eke of love-longing."

They fetch'd him first the sweete wine,
And mead eke in a maseline,* *drinking-bowl
And royal spicery; of maple wood <20>
Of ginger-bread that was full fine,
And liquorice and eke cumin,
With sugar that is trie.* *refined
He didde,* next his white lere,** *put on **skin
Of cloth of lake* fine and clear, *fine linen
A breech and eke a shirt;
And next his shirt an haketon,* *cassock
And over that an habergeon,* *coat of mail
For piercing of his heart;
And over that a fine hauberk,* *plate-armour
Was all y-wrought of Jewes'* werk, *magicians'
Full strong it was of plate;
And over that his coat-armour,* *knight's surcoat
As white as is the lily flow'r, <21>
In which he would debate.* *fight
His shield was all of gold so red
And therein was a boare's head,
A charboucle* beside; *carbuncle <22>
And there he swore on ale and bread,
How that the giant should be dead,
Betide whatso betide.
His jambeaux* were of cuirbouly, <23> *boots
His sworde's sheath of ivory,
His helm of latoun* bright, *brass
His saddle was of rewel <24> bone,
His bridle as the sunne shone,
Or as the moonelight.
His speare was of fine cypress,
That bodeth war, and nothing peace;
The head full sharp y-ground.
His steede was all dapple gray,
It went an amble in the way
Full softely and round
In land.
Lo, Lordes mine, here is a fytt;
If ye will any more of it,
To tell it will I fand.* *try
The Second Fit
Now hold your mouth for charity,
Bothe knight and lady free,
And hearken to my spell;* *tale <25>

Of battle and of chivalry,
Of ladies' love and druerie,* *gallantry
Anon I will you tell.
Men speak of romances of price* * worth, esteem
Of Horn Child, and of Ipotis,
Of Bevis, and Sir Guy, <26>
Of Sir Libeux, <27> and Pleindamour,
But Sir Thopas, he bears the flow'r
Of royal chivalry.
His goode steed he all bestrode,
And forth upon his way he glode,* *shone
As sparkle out of brand;* *torch
Upon his crest he bare a tow'r,
And therein stick'd a lily flow'r; <28>
God shield his corse* from shand!** *body **harm
And, for he was a knight auntrous,* *adventurous
He woulde sleepen in none house,
But liggen* in his hood, *lie
His brighte helm was his wanger,* *pillow <29>
And by him baited* his destrer** *fed **horse <30>
Of herbes fine and good.
Himself drank water of the well,
As did the knight Sir Percivel, <31>
So worthy under weed;
Till on a day - . . .

Notes to Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas

1. "The Rhyme of Sir Thopas," as it is generally called, is introduced by Chaucer as a satire on the dull, pompous, and prolix metrical romances then in vogue. It is full of phrases taken from the popular rhymesters in the vein which he holds up to ridicule; if, indeed — though of that there is no evidence — it be not actually part of an old romance which Chaucer selected and reproduced to point his assault on the prevailing taste in literature. Transcriber's note: The Tale is full of incongruities of every kind, which Purves does not refer to; I point some of them out in the notes which follow - marked TN.

2. Poppering, or Poppeling, a parish in the marches of Calais of which the famous antiquary Leland was once Rector. TN: The inhabitants of Popering had a reputation for stupidity.

3. TN: The lord of Popering was the abbot of the local monastery - who could, of course, have no legitimate children.

4. Paindemain: Either "pain de matin," morning bread, or "pain de Maine," because it was made best in that province; a kind of fine white bread.

5. Cordewane: Cordovan; fine Spanish leather, so called from the name of the city where it was prepared

6. Ciclatoun: A rich Oriental stuff of silk and gold, of which was made the circular robe

of state called a "ciclaton," from the Latin, "cyclas." The word is French.
7. Jane: a Genoese coin, of small value; in our old statutes called "gallihalpens," or galley half-pence.
8. TN: In Mediaeval falconry the goshawk was not regarded as a fit bird for a knight. It was the yeoman's bird.
9. A ram was the usual prize of wrestling contests. TN: Wrestling and archery were sports of the common people, not knightly accomplishments.
10. Launcegay: spear; "azagay" is the name of a Moorish weapon, and the identity of termination is singular.
12. Clove-gilofre: clove-gilliflower; "Caryophyllus hortensis."
13. TN: The sparrowhawk and parrot can only squawk unpleasantly.
14. TN: The sudden and pointless changes in the stanza form are of course part of Chaucer's parody.
15. Sir Oliphaunt: literally, "Sir Elephant;" Sir John Mandeville calls those animals "Olyfauntes."
16. Termagaunt: A pagan or Saracen deity, otherwise named Tervagan, and often mentioned in Middle Age literature. His name has passed into our language, to denote a ranter or blusterer, as be was represented to be.
17. TN: His "fair bearing" would not have been much defence against a sling-stone.
18. TN: "Sides small": a conventional description for a woman, not a man.
19. Romances that be royal: so called because they related to Charlemagne and his family.
20. TN: A knight would be expected to have a gold or silver drinking vessel.
21. TN: The coat-armour or coat of arms should have had his heraldic emblems on it, not been pure white
22. Charboucle: Carbuncle; French, "escarboucle;" a heraldic device resembling a jewel.
23. Cuirbouly: "Cuir boulli," French, boiled or prepared leather; also used to cover shields, &c.
24. Rewel bone: No satisfactory explanation has been furnished of this word, used to describe some material from which rich saddles were made. TN: The OED defines it as narwhal ivory.
25. Spell: Tale, discourse, from Anglo-Saxon, "spellian," to declare, tell a story.
26. Sir Bevis of Hampton, and Sir Guy of Warwick, two knights of great renown.
27. Libeux: One of Arthur's knights, called "Ly beau desconus," "the fair unknown."
28. TN: The crest was a small emblem worn on top of a knight's helmet. A tower with a lily stuck in it would have been unwieldy and absurd.
29. Wanger: pillow; from Anglo-Saxon, "wangere," because the "wanges;" or cheeks, rested on it.
30. Destrer: "destrier," French, a war-horse; in Latin, "dextrarius," as if led by the right hand.
31. Sir Percival de Galois, whose adventures were written in more than 60,000 verses by Chretien de Troyes, one of the oldest and best French romancers, in 1191.