

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 "gallihalspens," 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 he 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 righthand.
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.