

**Is Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* a Rape Narrative?
Reading Thopas in light of the 1382 Statute of Rapes**

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Considering the tale's placement between two narratives of violence—the Prioress's Tale and the Tale of Melibee—it is surprising that the Tale of Sir Thopas has not merited more discussion of the potential for violence against feminine bodies. I argue that Chaucer the author introduces significant changes to the typical medieval romance, with the result that Thopas's actions in the name of "love" conceal a rape narrative that engages late fourteenth-century debates as to what exactly constituted rape. As the transfer of property was a significant portion of such discussions, the 1382 Statute of Rapes prompted concerns about the ability of men and women to manipulate rape and abduction laws to select their marriage partners, and I argue that the Tale of Sir Thopas reflects these concerns. Sir Olifaunt is a protective warden rather than a destructive rapist, and Thopas, despite his seemingly non-threatening demeanor, is the true threat.

The Prioress has just concluded her tale of young Hugh of Lincoln's death, and in an attempt to lighten the mood, the host Harry Bailey turns to a slightly plump pilgrim, demanding a tale of mirth. This pilgrim immediately embarks on a daring narrative of fairy queens, giants, and heroic deeds, as an unknown knight sets out to find an unknown beloved, facing unknown dangers. This is Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, and as the pilgrims listen to the narrator's tale, they cannot help but notice verbal echoes of romances, despite their lack of familiarity with Thopas himself. But after the dignified rhyme royal of the *Prioress's Tale*, the pilgrims find it difficult to concentrate on the narrator's story due to its jarring tail-rhyme, and finally Harry Bailey bursts out, "Namooore of this, for Goddes dignitee, / . . . / Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!"¹

Considering the tale's placement between two narratives of violence—the *Prioress's Tale* and Chaucer the Pilgrim's *Tale of Melibee*—it is surprising that the *Tale of Sir Thopas* has not merited

1 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 919-29.

more discussion of the potential for violence against bodies, particularly feminine ones. This may be in part due to the naïveté of the pilgrim who delivers the tale, best displayed in the *General Prologue*, when he smiles approvingly at the pilgrim Monk's rejection of Augustinian rule but fails to comprehend the latter's neglect of his spiritual duties. As Ben Kimpel suggests, the persona which Chaucer the author creates and baptizes with his own name is "humble and rather stupid but well-meaning."² Clearly Chaucer the pilgrim is not intentionally weaving a rape narrative around a character described by Elaine Tuttle Hansen as "sweet young Sir Thopas."³ Nonetheless, I hesitate to dismiss Sir Thopas as an innocuous failure of a knight, for underlying the tale's parody of medieval romance is a disturbing thread of the potential for violence against female bodies.

In the wake of Christopher Cannon's careful exploration of the medieval sense of the word *raptus* in his 1993 article, scholars have delved into Chaucer's corpus, seeking reflections of rape that might elucidate Cecily Chaumpaigne's deed of release concerning Chaucer in 1380.⁴ At the same time, scholars have found the tales themselves to be valuable reflections of fourteenth-century attitudes and legal practices towards gender.⁵ Although Evelyn Birge Vitz

2 Kimpel, "The Narrator of the *Canterbury Tales*," 84. R. M. Lumiansky (313-20) suggests that Chaucer the pilgrim reveals a mischievous personality, particularly since Harry Bailey describes him as "elvyssh" (fragment 7, line 703) in the prologue to *Sir Thopas*, and that he adopts a mock humility as he indirectly ridicules the Host's literary sensibilities. Lumiansky's argument is compelling, but I tend to lean toward Kimbel's assessment that the tale is less funny if the narrator is intentionally funny. Kimbel, "The Narrator," 84. Ann S. Haskell follows a similar interpretation, arguing that the pilgrim Chaucer is merely a puppet of Chaucer the author, and the Host indirectly reinforces this idea when, in fragment 7, line 701, he describes Chaucer the pilgrim as "a popet in an arm." "Sir Thopas: The Puppet's Puppet." *Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 253-261.

3 Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 17.

4 Cannon, "Raptus in the Chaumpaigne Release," 74-94. Ever since F. J. Furnivall's 1873 description of Cecily Chaumpaigne's deed of release concerning Geoffrey Chaucer in 1380, the topic of rape in Chaucer's literary corpus has enjoyed a presence in literary criticism. Most come to a conclusion similar to that of Allman and Hanks, who note that "little has been made critically of the conflict with Chaumpaigne because little can." "Rough Love," 37.

5 For example, William A. Quinn observes that "[a]fter 1380, . . . Chaucer more often than not does refer to rape quite literally, and even his more oblique references to rape seem more graphic, more negative and much more personally relevant" in "The Rapes of Chaucer," 4. A more recent study of the interaction between legal practice and Chaucer's tales can be found in Edwards's "The Rhetoric of Rape," 3-26.

complains that scholars erroneously label “every act by which a male dominates or possesses a woman, erotically or in other ways” as “an act of rape,”⁶ due to the pervasive presence of rape and rape themes throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, I believe we do the text a disservice by too quickly dismissing *Thopas*’s threat of violence against the fairy queen, especially given the legal debates arising in England concerning rape and their connection to the transmission of property. *Thopas*’s encroachment on the elf-queen’s lands and on her image is, I argue, an attempt to control a powerful, independent female.

The 1382 Statute of Rapes reveals that there were debates during the late fourteenth century as to what exactly constituted rape, and the transfer of property was a significant portion of such discussions. While the specific word *raptus* meant “forced coitus” in fourteenth-century English law,⁷ there remained concern about the ability of women to manipulate rape and abduction laws to select their marriage partners.⁸ That is, if a woman’s parent or guardian disapproved of the man that she desired to marry, she could arrange an abduction, marry her sexual violator, and later “consent” to the act, thereby forcing the parents or guardians to accept the match. Prior to 1382, as J. B. Post notes, it was the responsibility of the wronged woman to report the crime in timely fashion, offering evidence of torn clothing and her bleeding body.⁹

Although the proscribed punishments for successfully prosecuted rape cases were severe—blinding and castration—few were actually convicted, and often only a fine was applied. Subsequent amendments to thirteenth-century rape laws, as Suzanne Edwards

6 Vitz, “Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature,” 288. As William Quinn notes, “Under investigation, the issue of *raptus* proves to be surprisingly salient throughout the *Canterbury Tales*” (12). Christine M. Rose (49) argues, “Rape is regularly encoded by Chaucer as part of a larger system of the control of women’s bodies.” Rachel Warburton (270) also argues for a broader interpretation of rape in Chaucer.

7 Cannon, “*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release,” 92.

8 Cannon, “*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release,” 81.

9 Post, “Sir Thomas West,” 24.

has argued, were “designed to protect families’ interests in women’s marriage value.”¹⁰ That is, whereas the thirteenth-century laws emphasize the role of the victim’s consent, a century later, such consent is rendered secondary to family approval. As Kim Phillips notes, the end effect of the 1382 Statute was to trivialize or dismiss completely the need for consent on the part of the female; instead, rape and ravishment became a crime of property.¹¹ Many cases leading up to and following the enactment of the 1382 Statute dealt with families fighting to deny dowries or otherwise prevent the transmission of property to men who acquired their daughters in such a manner. However, what happens in the case of an independently wealthy woman, such as Thopas’s fairy queen, when there is no family to protest? Chaucer the narrator, through his account of Thopas’s adventure to gain a fairy queen as his bride, reveals a loophole in the laws surrounding rape, one which made independent women sexually vulnerable. Thopas may come across as a silly failure of a knight, but even the most demure of men, the tale suggests, may be transformed into a sexual threat. A man who might be seen as “a popet in an arm t’ embrace / For any womman” contains the potential to reverse the power hierarchy, embracing instead the desired female.¹²

Although the opening description of Thopas suggests that he is not threatening to women—“he was chaast and no lechour”—the extreme reversal that he undergoes when he “fil in love-lonyng” is conspicuous.¹³ Both “chaast” and “no lechour” evoke the prologue

10 Edwards, “The Rhetoric of Rape,” 4. Specifically, the Statutes of Winchester, 1275 and 1285 allowed for rape to “induce a woman’s consent to a marriage that neither she nor her family would otherwise have chosen” (6). For more information on these Statutes see Post, “Ravishment of Women.” Post notes that “[b]y interpretation and extension, therefore, the Statutes of Westminster turned the law of rape into a law of elopement and abduction, which inhibited the purposes of the woman herself . . . and fostered the interests of those who wanted material recompense for the material disparagement wrought by self-willed womenfolk and suitors” (160). In “Sir Thomas West and the Statute of Rapes, 1382,” Post summarizes the changes enacted by this new statute: “The emphasis of the law of rape was thus drawn away from the actual or potential plight of the victim of a sexual assault, and placed upon the unacceptability of an accomplished elopement, or an abduction to which the victim became reconciled” (25).

11 Phillips, “Written on the Body,” 141–44.

12 Chaucer, “Prologue to Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 701–02.

13 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 745, 772.

of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, where variations of both words appear. For example, Alison refers to one of her husbands as "'Sire olde lechour'" while accusing him of paying too much attention to other women; at the same time, she also announces that "For sothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al."¹⁴

Yet despite these opening lines which seem to suggest that Thopas is the opposite of the lecherous Wife of Bath, his sudden violence against his horse suggests rather that the two tales share more similarities than differences. The verb *priketh* first seems to occur innocuously as Thopas enters into the forest: "He priketh thurgh a fair forest."¹⁵ I would argue, as do Allman and Hanks, that the larger connotation suggests that Thopas's actions are sexualized, particularly as this verb is repeated in close proximity; in fact, three lines later, we are told of Thopas that "he priketh north and est."¹⁶ What is significant about the repetition of this verb is the expansion of Thopas's actions; that is, in the first instance, his actions take him in a direct line "thurgh a fair forest"; however, his movements become more erratic, perhaps even frenzied, in the second occurrence as he moves in two different directions simultaneously. The third usage occurs after Thopas "fil in love-longynge" upon hearing birdsong, and his behavior becomes violent: he "pryked as he were wood," and his "prikyng" causes his horse to bleed.¹⁷ Angela Jane Weisl takes the sexual nature of Thopas's violence a step further: "while his horse is not a woman, per se, its position under him (literally and figuratively) in this sexual metaphor puts it in her place. This violent sexuality is the same as that which is overtly expressed by the rape in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*."¹⁸ Yet this is not the only evidence that for Thopas, sex and violence are intertwined. We might initially

14 Chaucer, "Prologue, Wife of Bath's Tale," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 3, lines 242, 46.

15 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, line 754.

16 Allman and Hanks, "Rough Love," 44. Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, line 757.

17 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 772, 774, 775.

18 Weisl, "'Quiting' Eve," 123.

gloss over the minor detail that Thopas carries a “launcegay” in his hand as he rides out,¹⁹ but if we consider John Gower’s use of this word in Book VIII of his *Confessio Amantis*, where it is used to denote the love-dart of Cupid, it becomes clear that Thopas sets out in quest of an amatory experience that is far different from what is typically encountered in medieval romance. Thopas carries the love-dart, rather than Cupid, because he intends to create his own romantic encounter.

Thopas’s behavior, then, is a far cry from that of one who is “chaast and no lechour,” particularly since the first adjective suggests a continent demeanor. In fact, his actions link him closely to Jankyn of *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*. When Thopas becomes maddened by the birdsong, the term that Chaucer uses to describe his state of mind is “wood.”²⁰ Although this word denoting a type of madness is frequent in both Chaucer’s corpus and in romance as a whole, it appears in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, where it is used to describe Jankyn’s behavior moments before he delivers the deafening blow to Alison.²¹ In both cases, this word signals that these men are out of control, reduced to primal and bestial behavior. In fact, Chaucer’s description of Thopas once he has expended his energy upon his horse is “So fiers was his corage.”²² Although *fiers* may have positive denotations of bravery and nobility, it can also mean “ferocious, savage.”²³ *Corage* is often translated as “heart,” but it can also denote “sexual desire” or “lust.”²⁴ In light of the increasing violence of Thopas’s actions, as well as the word choice of *wood*, these secondary definitions of *fiers* and *corage* seem more appropriate. Further-

19 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, line 752.

20 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, line 774.

21 Chaucer, “Prologue the Wife of Bath’s Tale,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 3, line 794.

22 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, line 780.

23 *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “fers,” def. 2b, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED15750> (accessed 19 October 2014).

24 *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “corage,” def. 2b, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED9682> (accessed 19 October 2014).

more, the catalyst for the frenzy of both Jankyn and Thopas is their desire for possessions. In the case of Jankyn, his marriage to Alison of Bath has resulted in a meteoric rise in social position, for while he “som tyme was a clerk of Oxenford,” Alison grants him possession of her substantial material wealth.²⁵ The conflict that arises between Alison and Jankyn results from Jankyn’s desire for complete control over Alison’s body and activities. Thopas desires a similar control over the elf-queen, for when he wakes from dreaming of her, he expresses his desire to redefine “[a]n elf-queene” as “my lemman” who will “slepe under my goore,” or under his direct influence.²⁶ The use of possessive pronouns here is striking, particularly in the shift from the indefinite “an” applied to the fairy woman to the emphasis of Thopas’s possession in the repeated use of “my.”

Thopas’s overall lack of self-restraint as well as a lack of respect for the boundaries of others is also marked by his behavior once he sets out in quest of the elf-queen. That is, Thopas does not travel by established roads; rather, he “priketh over stile and stoon.”²⁷ The movement over stiles indicates that he is crossing artificial borders with no concern that he is potentially trespassing. Furthermore, when he arrives at the country of Fairy, it is described as “a pryve woon.”²⁸ While *pryve* is often translated as “secret,” it can also indicate personal possession.²⁹ While it may be that Thopas just happens across this place as part of his quest, at the same time, his behavior towards his horse and his trailblazing of paths suggest rather that he is willfully and thoughtlessly intruding upon the property of others. Yet another detail that helps to establish Thopas’s behavior as such is the appearance and speech of the giant, to which I turn next.

25 Chaucer, “PrologueWife of Bath’s Tale,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 3, lines 527, 630.

26 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 788-89.

27 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, line 798.

28 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, line 801.

29 *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “prive,” def. 2a, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED34713> (accessed 20 October 2014).

As Middle English romances often depict giants as rapists, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests in his study of medieval giants that the *Tale of Thopas* is indeed a rape narrative due to the tale's invocation of the giant as abductor.³⁰ Cohen is, of course, focused on establishing the ways in which the tale evokes conventions of medieval romance as they pertain to giants, with the ultimate goal of arguing that Sir Thopas's masculinity is "diminished" as a result of the encounter with the giant. Reading the episode against other abductions such as that found in the Mont St. Michel episode of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Cohen repeatedly notes that the fairy queen has been abducted and therefore in need of rescue from the monstrous giant: "Both [giants] abduct a woman and keep her against her will . . . That Olifaunt has abducted the elf-queen and holds her in his lair suggests that he is the traditional giant of romance."³¹ I would counter Cohen's argument however, for I neither view Sir Olifaunt as a rapist giant nor would I argue that the elf-queen has been abducted. Chaucer's giant differs significantly from the giant rapists who appear throughout romances such as *Libeaus Desconus*, *Sir Percyvall de Galles*, and *Guy of Warwick*. Likewise, the presentation of Chaucer's elf-queen has been distorted from its usual function in medieval romance.

At first glance, the giant which Thopas encounters during his search for the elf queen seems to be the typical monster of medieval romance: "Til that ther cam a greet geaunt, / His name was sire Olifaunt, / A perilous man of dede."³² As Laura Hibbard Loomis has noted, a similar giant appears in one of the "romances of prys" which Chaucer the pilgrim lists at the end of his tale: *Lybeaus Desconus*.³³

30 Cohen, *Of Giants*, 103.

31 Cohen, *Of Giants*, 109. Cohen consistently describes Sir Olifaunt as a rapist and suggests a connection with the Chaumpaigne case (111, 116).

32 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 807-09.

33 Loomis, "Sir Thopas," 516. Joanne A. Charbonneau (682) lists several Middle English romances in which giants appear to test the worth of the hero, including *Guy of Warwick*, *Bevis*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, and *Sir Eglamour*. As she notes, *Guy* and *Lybeaus* contain the most parallels to *Thopas* in regards to the giant episode.

In this story, the giant haunting the Il d'Or warns Guinglain, like the character of Thopas, to turn back: "Torne home ayene tite, / For thyne owne prophite, / Yf thow lovyst thy prow." When Guinglain refuses to do so, the giant "levyd on Turmagaunte" and kills Guinglain's horse.³⁴ Chaucer's giant warns Thopas in a similar fashion, for he uses the same oath and threatens danger to the knight's steed: "Child, by Termagaunt, / But if thou prike out of myn haunt, / Anon I sle thy steede."³⁵

However, significant differences exist between *Libeaus* and *Sir Thopas* as regards the episode of the giant. Specifically, in Chaucer's tale, the appearance of the giant is not particularly grotesque: the elf queen is not in danger. In other Middle English romances, the giant's monstrosity is reflected visually through unusual skin color. For example, in *Lybeaus*, while the hero makes his way to rescue the Lady of Synadoun, the accompanying maiden's dwarf sees a fire in the distance. As the group draws nearer, they find two giants: one is "rede and lothelych, / That oper black as eny pyche." Later, the giant Maugys, who is besieging the castle of Yle d'Or, is described in similar terms: "He is as blacke as pyche."³⁶ In *Guy of Warwick*, another major source of Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the giant Amoraunt whom the hero encounters is also hideous to behold:

Michel and griselich was that gome
With ani god man to duelle.
He is so michel and unread
Of his sight a man may drede
With tong as Y thee telle;
As blac he is as brodes brend,
He semes as it were a fende
That comen were out of helle.³⁷

34 *Lybeaus Desconus*, lines 1344-46, 1363.

35 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 810-12. Loomis also connects Chaucer's giant to *Guy of Warwick*, particularly since in both *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Guy of Warwick*, the giant swears "by Termagaunt." "Sir Thopas," 535.

36 *Lybeaus Desconus*, lines 604-05, 1299.

37 *Guy of Warwick*, lines 737-44.

Chaucer's giant, on the other hand, is described only as "greet" and "A perilous man of dede."³⁸ There is no indication that he is monstrous in appearance, only that he is large in size. After all, *geaunt* can simply refer to a "man of extraordinary size or strength."³⁹ What further supports this reading of Olifaunt as a large man is the fact that, unlike the giants of *Lybeaus*, he is granted a title: "sire Olifaunt."⁴⁰ Although "sire" can be used contemptuously, typically it is "applied to one of the order of knighthood."⁴¹ These subtle differences suggest that Chaucer the author is purposefully deviating from the traditional giant trope of medieval romance.

In the typical Middle English romance, such loathly giants are often accompanied by extremely outspoken damsels in distress. In *Lybeaus*, the maiden trapped by the red and black giants begins crying noisily once Guinglain comes into view of the giants: "Wayle-a-waye! / . . . / Helppe me, Mary mylde, / For love of thine childe, / That J [sic] be nought for-yett!"⁴² Even though the maiden is not aware that any potential rescuers are in the vicinity, she is still loud, raising her cries to implore the intervention of the Virgin Mary. Later in the text, we are told that the Lady of the Il d'Or is under siege by the giant Maugys; she too is vocal: "Her hap be-leyde abowte."⁴³ In both of these situations, the hero is made explicitly aware of the danger posed by the giants to these women. Yet no indication is given that the elf-queen of Chaucer's tale is in need of rescue. She has not been abducted from her homeland, for Thopas has entered the "coun-tree of Fairye," and when he sets out on his quest, he makes it clear that he does not intend rescue, for he seeks only to "t'espys."⁴³

38 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 807, 809.

39 *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "geaunt," def. 1a, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?size=First+100&type=orths&q1=geaunt&rgxp=constrained> (accessed 19 October 2014).

40 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 808.

41 *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "sire," def. 1a, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED40511> (accessed 19 October 2014).

42 *Lybeaus Desconus*, lines 616-21, 1248.

43 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 802, 800.

Although Sir Olifaunt haunts her surroundings, he does not appear to be her captor or her persecutor. When he speaks to Thopas, Olifaunt offers no threat to the person of the elf-queen, which is contrary to what typically occurs in medieval romances. In *Ywain and Gawain*, for example, the main character finds lodging at a castle whose inhabitants continuously shift from joy to sorry. When he inquires as to the reason for their shifts in mood, he is told that ““A geant wons here-nere-bysyde, / Pat es a devil of mekil pride; / His name hat Harpyns of Mowtain””;⁴⁴ this same giant has laid waste to the surrounding lands and now demands the lord’s daughter so that he might defile her body. In Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*, however, there is no cry for help; no one comes to the main court seeking a champion, and Thopas encounters no one on his journey who requests his aid. Although Sir Olifaunt threatens Thopas with violence if he does not depart the land of faery, there is no indication that the giant has laid siege to the land, the faery queen’s residence, or the faery queen’s own person. When he returns to town, Thopas boasts of his upcoming fight; however, he makes no mention of a damsel in distress. Instead, he speaks of his plans to fight “For paramour and jolitee / Of oon that shoon ful brighte.”⁴⁵ There is nothing at stake (aside from his own life) should he fail to defeat Sir Olifaunt.

In addition, the means by which Thopas’s elf-queen enters the narrative is unorthodox, signaling a significant departure from the romance convention, for in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the hero knight wanders aimlessly through the countryside, and when he stops to rest in a meadow, we are told that he “dremed al this nyght, pardee, / An elf-queene shal my lemman be.”⁴⁶ As Lee Patterson notes, it is rare to fall in love with a fairy lover in a dream.⁴⁷ Rather,

44 *Ywain and Gawain*, lines 2249-51.

45 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 843-44.

46 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 787-88.

47 Patterson, ““What Man Artow?”” 127. As Laura Hibbard Loomis (516) observes, only two other Middle English romances deal explicitly with female fairy love: *Sir Launfal* and *Thomas of Erceldoune*. A similar scene appears in *Thomas of Erceldoune*, for as Thomas lays under an apple tree in the month of May, he witnesses a beautiful woman riding by. Entranced, he leaps to his feet and chases after her, and when she allows him to catch up to her, she reveals that she is a queen “of ane oþer countree” (Thomas has mistaken her for the Queen of Heaven) and personally leads him into her land.

as Anne Rooney has shown, romances make explicit use of what she calls a “meeting-motif” in forests, and “[i]n no instance is the hunter actively seeking a sexual encounter, and in all cases the woman presents herself to him and tells him what he must do.”⁴⁸ Chaucer’s own work indicates familiarity with the romance convention of the fairy mistress, for in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, we see both aspects of the “meeting-motif” play out. Thopas follows the first component of the motif with his initial aimless searching; he violates the second aspect because he actively quests after the lady—simply because of a dream—and he stumbles upon Fairyland by accident—neither destiny nor the desires of the elf queen instruct his movements.⁴⁹

Furthermore, we are told that the elf-queen is ““With harpe and pipe and symphonie, / Dwellynge in this place.””⁵⁰ The description of this setting echoes that of Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, where the elf-queen dances with her company.⁵¹ Although dancing is not mentioned in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, nonetheless we are given the impression that the elf-queen lives in comfort rather than constraint, and the present participle “dwellynge” suggests a place of permanence, typically associated with the home.⁵² Of course, provided that the prisoner is of high rank, such captivity may not be a hardship; after all, Meleagant in Chrétien’s twelfth-century *Chevalier de la Charrette* provides the abducted queen with comfortable lodgings. However, in Chrétien’s romance, Guinevere clearly desires to be rescued. The elf-queen neither appears (except in Thopas’s dream) nor speaks—she gives no indication of needing to be rescued, and no

48 Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature*, 61.

49 Whether or not Chaucer knew either *Thomas of Erceldoune* or *Sir Launfal*, we cannot know, despite the extensive source work undertaken by previous scholars regarding the many verbal echoes and parallel motifs. Loomis makes the compelling point that the Manuscript Cotton Caligula A II includes *Lybeaus*, *Ypotis*, and the unique text of *Launfal*, so if this is the manuscript in which Chaucer read *Lybeaus Desconus* (rather than the Auchinleck MS), it is possible that he was exposed to *Sir Launfal* as well. “Sir Thopas,” 489.

50 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 811-16.

51 Chaucer, “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 3, lines 859-61.

52 In addition, as Burrow (920 n.815) notes, the home of the fairy mistress found in *Thomas of Erceldoune* is also filled with music.

messengers are sent from her with cries of distress. In addition, the fight between the hero knight and the menacing giant nearly always takes place within view of the besieged lady. This allows a narrative heightening of fear, for the audience is able to see the reactions of the onlookers when the villain seems to have the upper hand; at the same time, the knight, as is the case with Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*, draws strength from the lady's presence, and the lady is witness to the knight's prowess. There is no immediate audience present when Thopas encounters the giant, however, and the giant gives no indication that he will meet Thopas the next day, much less bring the elf-queen with him. While Oliphant's use of the demonstrative pronoun "Heere" indicates that she is indeed nearby and within auditory range, her silence indicates that no rescue is needed and that Thopas's intrusive presence is not desired.⁵³

We also know from *The Wife of Bath's Tale* that an elf-queen can quickly disappear if threatened, for when the bachelor knight comes across the elf-queen and her ladies dancing in the forest, immediately "Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where."⁵⁴ In their place sits the notorious loathly lady, whom others have identified as a fairy.⁵⁵ Thus, Thopas's fairy woman, per the rules established earlier in *The Canterbury Tales* by the Wife of Bath, is in no danger from Sir Olifaunt. This giant more likely fulfills the function of the Otherworldly guide, for not all club-wielding giants are malicious. In *Ywain and Gawain*, for example, Sir Colgreuance encounters a monstrously foul churl: "a lathly creature, / For fowl he was out of mesure; / A wonder mace in hand he hade." He too is large, "wele more than geant."⁵⁶ As is typical in medieval romance upon encountering such a creature, the hero's first reaction is to prepare to fight until Colgreuance recognizes the churl not as an enemy who poses a threat to females, but as a guide to adventure. Therefore,

53 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, line 814.

54 Chaucer, "Wife of Bath's Tale," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 3, line 996.

55 See Quinn, "Chaucer's Arthurian Romance," 215.

56 *Ywain and Gawain*, lines 247-49, 258.

Colgreuance “frayned him if he wolde fight.” However, the churl gives no response until Colgreuance alters his approach, calling the churl “belamy.” He then asks the loathly man, “I the pray of thi kownsayle / Thou teche me to sum mervayle.”⁵⁷

This meeting is instrumental for the success of the romance, for it is this churl who instructs the knights in the adventure of the golden basin. Although Sir Colgreuance fails, he relays the pertinent information to Ywain, who in turn succeeds. A similar guide appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for the Green Knight who enters Arthur’s hall is “On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe.” The members of the court immediately recognize his Otherworldly origins, “Forþi for fantoum and fayryze þe folk þere hit demed,” and by the end of the poem, we learn that the Green Knight’s Otherworldly appearance has been crafted by the “myzt of Morgne la Faye, . . . / And koyntyse of clergy.”⁵⁸ Morgan’s appellation of “la Faye” marks her Otherworldly nature, and Bertilak’s confession of her magic confirms it. Thus we see that not all large and ugly sentient creatures are malevolent in nature, but can also serve at the whim of elf queens such as Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the fairy queen of *Sir Thopas*. The discrepancy between Chaucer’s fairy queen and women abducted by giants suggests, therefore, that Oliphant is a guardian rather than an aggressor. I would also point out a further connection between Thopas’s giant, who is given the name Sir Olifaunt, and the churl of *Ywain and Gawain*, for the churl of the latter text has “eres als ane olyfant.”⁵⁹

What, then, does Thopas’s interaction with the giant reveal about his own character? Typically, the reaction of the hero to creatures such as Oliphant reflects the hero’s worth. That is, Colgreuance recognizes the Otherworldly guide and treats him with courtesy, which is then returned with information regarding further adventures. Gawain, too, always approaches such a situation calmly,

57 *Ywain and Gawain*, lines 272, 278, 317-18.

58 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 137, 240, 2446-47.

59 *Ywain and Gawain*, line 257.

carefully considering the motivations of his opponent before acting hastily, in both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*. But in Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, when the giant attempts (albeit brusquely) to guide Thopas, telling him "But if thou prike out of myn haunt, / Anon I sle thy steede / With mace," the knight's response reveals his lack of merit, for fighting is the only option that he considers possible.⁶⁰

Yet although he determines to fight the giant, at the present moment, Thopas lacks his armor. Upon escaping "sire Olifaunt," Thopas imagines that he fights on behalf of his beloved, the fairy queen, for as he tells his men, "nedes moste he fighte / With a geaunt with hevedes three, / For paramour..."⁶¹ Suddenly the giant (who earlier is described merely as tall) has grown two extra heads, and the fairy queen herself has become the stake—but it is all in Thopas's imagination. Thus Thopas's response to the giant indicates his inability to read correctly the situations in which he finds himself, for he sees the giant only as a threat (even though he is not) and wants only to fight him, whereas other knights know to treat such a character courteously. In other words, the giant tries to prevent this medieval Actaeon from spying upon the bathing Artemis, for Sir Thopas, unlike Gawain, Perceval, and other well-established knights of the Round Table, has not earned the right to be in the elf-queen's presence. Had he proved himself worthy, she would have come to him.

If Thopas were anything like Sir Gawain in terms of his martial ability, he would meet with a number of women clamoring for his aid; after all, any time that Gawain sets out on a quest, he typically encounters at least one female character seeking his help along the way. Thopas's magnetism appears to be merely in name, for he encounters only men on his quest: "in that contree was ther noon / That to him durste ride or goon, / Neither wyf ne childe."⁶² and as

60 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 812-13.

61 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 841-43.

62 Chaucer, "Tale of Sir Thopas," *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 804-06.

mentioned earlier, even the fairy queen, who surely is aware of his approach, does not seek him out, a detail which suggests that his dream is not a vision sent by the fairy queen, but rather simply a male fantasy. In fact, the closest that Thopas comes to interacting with the fair sex is only in his dreams. Yet from this point on, Thopas determines that he will have her, “For in this world no woman is / Worthy to be my make / In towne; / Alle othere wommen I forsake.”⁶³ Surely Thopas must be a doughty knight indeed if he can aim so high as a fairy mistress! Yet does a knight such as Thopas deserve such a lofty prize? As Cohen and others have noted, Thopas is rather passive; Chaucer’s verb choices reflect this inactivity. Within the first forty lines of the tale, Thopas performs only one action, and it is one without purpose, for “so bifel upon a day, / . . . / Sire Thopas wold out ride.”⁶⁴ No destination is given, for Thopas is going nowhere.

The absence of both monstrous detail and danger to the female suggests a distance between Middle English romances and Chaucer’s parodic *Thopas*. Not surprisingly, criticism on the *Thopas* tale tends to strip Thopas of agency and therefore malicious intent. For example, Cohen writes that “The male body is diminished in ‘Thopas’ to keep it safe from the possibility of sex.”⁶⁵ Susan Crane comes to a similar conclusion, via Lee Patterson, who notes “that Geoffrey and Thopas are sexualized ‘children with a difference’ due to the ‘powerfully erotic valence’ of ‘elvyssh’ figures and the perpetual ‘prikyng’ that is the physical manifestation of Thopas’s love-longing.”⁶⁶ However, the differences between the typical encounters with giants and Thopas’s own foray into Fairyland problematize

63 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 791-94.

64 Chaucer, “Tale of Sir Thopas,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 748-50. That is, the majority of the verbs associated with Thopas are forms of the copula, merely renaming their subject: “Yborn he was”; “His fader was a man ful free”; “he was a good archeer”, “he was chaast” (fragment 7, lines 718, 721, 739, 745). A slight variation occurs with “He koude hunte at wilde deer, / And ride an haukyng for river” (fragment 7, lines 736-37), but even here the voice is subjunctive rather than indicative; in other words, there is the possibility that Thopas is capable of these things, but he is not actively doing them.

65 Cohen, *Of Giants*, 100.

66 Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 114.

Thopas's quest. Although there is not an actual rape, there remains the potential for rape, with Thopas himself as the culprit rather than the giant. What becomes prominent in the Flemish knight's pursuit of the elf-queen in light of the historical 1382 Statute of Rapes is the absence of family; there is no patriarchal guardian from whom to obtain consent--or, *ex post facto*, to object. In contrast, the late fourteenth-century *Sir Launfal* emphasizes the fairy's familial connection twice in three lines when the fairy mistress is first introduced:

He fond yn the pavyloun
The kynges doughter of Olyroun,
Dame Tryamour that hyghte;
Her fadyr was Kyng of Fayrye . . .⁶⁷

Of course, unlike the elf-queen of *Thopas*, Dame Tryamour makes her consent explicit. In addition, it is the style of the *Tale of Sir Thopas*—not the content—to which Harry Bailey objects, suggesting an indifference to the vulnerability of female bodies when no familial concerns are apparent.

The following tale, *The Tale of Melibee*, which is delivered by Chaucer the pilgrim, also addresses the susceptibility of female bodies as established in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* when a masculine guardian is absent. When the character of Melibee spends the afternoon away from his household, his enemies enter and attack only the females present: “Thre of his olde foes . . . betten his wyf, and wounded his doghter with fyve mortal woundes in fyve sondry places.”⁶⁸ There is no mention of any damage to his inanimate possessions. Although Melibee considers waging war against his enemies in reaction to this attack, his wife persuades him to grant mercy instead. What is striking, though, is the emphasis throughout the tale on the physical state of the daughter—the marriageable female property. On three separate occasions, Melibee is reassured that his daughter will recover, and both the surgeons and Dame Prudence even use nearly identical language. The surgeons assure Me-

67 *Sir Launfal*, lines 277-80.

68 Chaucer, “Tale of Melibee,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 970-71.

libee that “she shal be hool and sound as soone as is possible,” and Dame Prudence tells her husband that she “shal restoore yow youre doghter hool and sound.”⁶⁹ While the daughter has not sustained a rape, nonetheless, the repeated emphasis on her body is striking in light of the 1382 Statute of Rapes. The primary driving force behind the establishment of the 1382 law was the specific case of Sir Thomas West who disapproved of the abduction of his daughter Eleanor by Nicholas Clifton—that is, Clifton was landless and had no desirable prospects.⁷⁰ In contrast, in Chaucer’s tale, Melibee grants mercy to his foes instead of prosecuting them because he retains control over his property—his daughter—and while she has been temporarily damaged, he can still control her marriageable future without any current diminishment of his wealth.

As Corinne Saunders notes, medieval romances dealing with *raptus* blend a “concern to defend the virgin from corruption against her will” with “interest in protecting or gaining the woman as property, irrespective of her consent.”⁷¹ As medieval romance has implied, knights with fairy lovers are rewarded and esteemed; thus, unaccomplished “knights” such as Thopas are compelled to seek out rich and independent women in order to subjugate them in their quests to establish their reputations. The chivalric codes within medieval romance, such as the Pentecostal Oath in Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur*, as well as conduct literature, repeatedly present women as needing protection; a woman without a guardian therefore becomes a woman in need of a guardian. Thus through the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Chaucer reveals the subversive side of Middle English romance.

69 Chaucer, “Tale of Melibee,” *Canterbury Tales*, fragment 7, lines 1015, 1110.

70 Post, “Ravishment of Women,” 25-26.

71 Saunders, “Middle English Romance,” 106.

It is one thing to tilt at windmills, as Miguel de Cervantes will have his Don Quixote do a few centuries later, but it is quite another to target an independent woman, turning her into an unwilling damsel in distress. Even though the tale is framed by more positive portrayals of gender power relations, Thopas's story remains with its nefarious promise of a fairy damsel besieged by a three-headed giant. Should Thopas fail (and there is little doubt in my mind that he would have), another more virile man will take his place. And in the real world, the desired woman possesses no magic by which she may escape.

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*Chaucer as a Pilgrim
from the Ellesmere Manuscript, late 1400s*