

READING GENRE PLAY BETWEEN THE SHIPMAN'S TALE
AND THE TALE OF SIR THOPAS

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Perhaps the most ingenious thing about Sir Thopas is its elusiveness; no matter what we say about the tale, it never sounds quite right. One strand of criticism explains the parody in purely stylistic terms, examining a mere Chaucerian romp through the tropes of the tail-rhyme romance. Another strand very nearly approaches the other extreme, finding in the parody's lack of overt *sentence* a sort of rhetorical silence—what the tale fails to do in accordance with its style provides us with a sense of what *ought* to be said. These polarized attitudes have often forced the critical response into two problematic camps—one that dismisses Sir Thopas as a pleasant diversion and another that sees Chaucer making detailed statements on any number of aesthetic or political questions.

The problem may be a by-product of the very playfulness of Thopas. With the danger of overanalyzing a good joke hovering constantly in the background, we are forced either to denounce the joke as an empty one or else to make an exceptionally compelling case for deeper meaning. The best remedy for this problem lies in looking at the relationship of this tale to the other tales, thereby eliminating, or at least deferring, the need to judge the aesthetic merits of the fragmentary poem so that we can instead observe the function of the tale within the broader structure of the *Canterbury Tales*. Of course, this remedy has been tried occasionally, especially in efforts to connect the Thopas to the Melibee and the Prioress's Tale. Though I will step briefly into those waters, this article will broaden the examination of Fragment VII by reading the Thopas against the Shipman's Tale. Ultimately, Chaucer shows us that the endless cycle of money, sex, and greed in the Shipman's Tale causes chivalric ideals to collapse; the bourgeois Sir Thopas rises from that collapse, a strange progeny of two incompatible world views. The resultant effect makes the Tale of Sir Thopas an unstable center to the early part of Fragment VII. Its play with multiple themes found in other tales amplifies the effects of the "Chaucerian irony" directed at medieval society. But the oft-noted rhetorical emptiness of the tale allows a potentially serious debate on the problems of mercantile culture to slide easily off our backs, destabilizing the potential for polemic throughout the tales.¹

Chaucer achieves this effect through generic manipulation, infusing the familiar format of the metrical romance with stylized content from the fairly common "lover's-gift-regained" fabliaux. Thomas Bee-

bee refers to such interaction across literary formats as evidence of what he calls generic instability, stating that “the truly vital meanings of a text are often contained not in any specific genre category into which the text may be placed, but rather in the play of differences between its genres.”² This play between the genres creates a fleeting coherence in the structural and thematic integrity of the first part of the B² fragment of *The Canterbury Tales*, from the Shipman’s Tale to the rigid Melibee treatise, which has been for the most part ignored by critics.³ More to the point of this article, Chaucer places the “realities” of the Shipman’s world side-by-side with the world of romance to create the hybrid Sir Thopas, built of fourteenth-century mercantilism and ancient chivalry. With the vigor of all such creations, Sir Thopas can then set about realizing its unstable role within the fragment, both challenging and affirming the morality asserted in its companion tales.

A review of the oft-noted commercialism of the Shipman’s Tale provides the first window into the structure and purpose of the hybrid Thopas. The fabliaux base of the Shipman’s Tale belongs to a class generally referred to as the “lover’s gift regained,” which follows this general pattern: “[A] lady’s favors can be won only through a gift, which the lover regains from her through a trick.”⁴ In Boccaccio’s version of the format in the *Decameron*, the work most often postulated as the source for Chaucer’s version,⁵ the lover borrows two hundred florins from the jealous husband and uses them to procure favors from the man’s wife. He pays the wife in the presence of a servant, then tells the husband he repaid the debt via the wife. Thus, the lover gets the wife’s favors free of charge. Chaucer importantly changes some aspects of this basic fabliaux type; he allows the wife no witness to the payment, makes the lover a monk, and does not punish the wife for her misdeed, making the merchant a cuckold.

Analysis of the value system of the Shipman’s Tale and of how Thopas incorporates that value system into its parody clarifies how the latter tale brings together the early part of Fragment VII. Commercial values obviously play a large role in the way the Shipman’s Tale unfolds as the monk goes about his plan to gain the favors of the merchant’s wife.⁶ The monk of the Shipman’s Tale abuses his sacred office for secular purposes and abuses his vows of chastity for sexual ones, desecrating his holy office. This aspect of the Shipman’s world asserts itself more clearly in light of the Prologue’s words about the Monk, who is obviously a close cousin to Don John: “Therefore he was a prikasour aright. / Grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight. / Of priking and of hunting for the hare / Was al his lust”(GP189–92).⁷ That monk owns a stable full of horses and possesses an adventurous nature contrary to the ascetic val-

ues he should hold. In many ways, he is a born knight converted into a monk by Chaucer's ornery pen. Furthermore, John endears himself to his childhood friend the merchant, borrows money from him to ingratiate himself with the man's wife, and then uses his position to cuckold the merchant, who remains unaware of the betrayal. Obviously, rather than living the life of monks, who "serve God and sanctify their souls apart from the life of the world,"⁸ John's special outrider position, similar to that of the Prologue's monk, allows him to indulge his lusty and conniving ability to manipulate exchange. He is, in a sense, also a born merchant posing as a monk.

John's initial discussion with the wife mocks the format of a confession as she rips apart the character of her merchant husband while the monk fails to offer even a minimal defense. "As helpe me God," she cries, "he is noght worth at all the value of a flye" (ShT 170-71). Don John also makes the financial deal for one hundred francs to close the session which "parodies the alms customarily given to a confessor."⁹ This kind of stylistic detail moves the monk's portrayal beyond the standard "anti-clericalism of the fabliaux"¹⁰ into a more general abuse of the monastic office in Chaucer's version. No longer do we have a mockery of one bad monk, but a more general erosion of the sacred by lust and greed.

If the monk's guilt stems from his turning the sacred into the vulgar, then the Merchant's problems come from converting the secular to the sacred. While on the face of things we may be encouraged to sympathize with the merchant—after all, he works hard and offers a loan freely to his friend the monk—Chaucer calls attention to his distinct over-enthusiasm for money:

Ful riche was his tresor and his hord,
For which fulfaste his counter-dore he shette;
And eek he nolde that no man sholde hym lette
Of his acountes for the meene tyme;
And thus he sittil it was passed pryme. (ShT 84-88)

He spends his time in silent, solitary contemplation of his wealth, and Chaucer's use of the liturgical hour suggests that where the monk is remiss to his duty, the merchant is all too zealous in his devotion to the "frank." Normally at prime, a good Christian should have been saying a devotional psalm to consecrate his coming day of work, perhaps even considering what Christ would have been doing at the particular time of day.¹¹ Of course, this may be asking a bit much of the poor merchant, but Chaucer *is* careful to develop that tension. Adams's reading of this

section as a "solemn self-inventory" before his serious journey to Bruges points toward a misplacement of priorities (94); the merchant contemplates his coin stacks far more than his spirituality. Rather than celebrate Christ, he bemoans the value of his currency.

The scene occurs in parallel with the seduction scene between Don John and the merchant's wife in the garden, an interesting device borrowed from romance,¹² amplifying the misplaced priorities of both monk and merchant. Such misplacement culminates in the figure of the wife, whose infidelity marks the consequences of this incessant confusion between what is sacred and what is worldly. On the surface, she seems to come through the tale's various exchanges in fine shape, leading many critics to see her as a clever heroine of sorts:

The wife, herself victimized, easily and cleverly turns her defeat into victory and makes the husband the real victim, for he becomes a cuckold, loses his money and ends up ridiculously accepting his own wife's favors as compensation. (Silverman 33)

This may, indeed, lead us to decide that the tale is "hostile to even the humbler retributive platitudes of natural morality that often animate, and excuse, fabliaux" (Adams 87). Chaucer, however, is too careful an artist simply to leave the tale in a state of unredeemed, chaotic immorality. His portrayal of the wife contains a hidden edge of criticism in that he hints to the reader that we should view her in a more revered light, perhaps even as a Diana figure, associated with virtue and chastity. While at first glance there may be nothing divine about the wife—her desire for more sex and her obsession with money and clothing alone seem to preclude such a reading—Chaucer's carefully styled entry lends her the air of the three-faced Diana:

This goode wyf cam walkynge pryvely
Into the gardyn there he walketh softe,
And hym saleweth as she hath doon ofte.
A mayde child cam in hire compaignye
Which as hir list she may govern and gye
For yet under the yerde was the mayde. (ShT 92-97)

First, we can note the fact of the garden itself, which hints at Proserpina, the goddess of gardens and "lordship and signification on earth."¹³ The "mayde," though, who makes this sole appearance, tells us much more. The commentaries to *Chess of Love* offer as historical

explanation for Diana that “she was also so much given to keeping busy and fleeing idleness that she was accompanied by several young and honest maidens, who all wanted to live chastely” (384). The maiden, under the merchant wife’s guidance, identifies the wife rather directly with the protectress of virgins.¹⁴ The monk also asks, “But deere nece, why be ye so pale?” (106)—“cold complexion” being another quality of Diana. These correspondences, while not an overwhelming part of the scene’s iconography, linger troublingly in the tale, forcing the reader to question the easy way the monk leads her to bed. Even without an iconographic analysis, the presence of the child indicates that the wife is not being treated in a way consistent with her status as matron of the house.

With the whiff of tainted virtue in the air, her unpunished ending and the payment of her “debt” to her husband by tale’s end loses its happy-ending luster. By the end of the tale, the merchant and his wife “both have been borrowed, sold at profit, and derived from this fiscal/sexual exchange an equanimity that enlivens the last scene” (Woods 140). Woods apparently approves of the balance and salvages the wife’s dignity as an “apprentice” to the merchant. However, when we consider the wife as a distorted image of Diana/Proserpina, the events amount to a degradation of the divine. The bourgeois, capital-driven values of the tale drive out all hope for a just ending and instead leave us with the unsettling triple pun—money, sex, and story—on the Shipman’s word “taillynge” (ShT 433–34). The scene has been “enlivened,” as has society, but at what cost?

The problem is equally pronounced for the merchant since “beyond the act of exchange (which he prepares for so rigorously in the counting-house), endlessly repeated, there is little in the merchant’s world that will sustain life or even suggest a purpose for living” (Woods 140). As we have seen, Chaucer goes to great lengths to portray the merchant as completely absorbed in the process of making money. As a result, although he is an affable friend to the monk and lacks the jealous qualities shown by many *fabliau* husbands, he lives in his own world. His wife complains to the monk that he never has sex with her and “yet me greveth most his nigardye” (ShT 172). His desire for money therefore interferes with his marital relationship. He cannot satisfy her needs—sexual, material or otherwise—so she makes a cuckold of him. His homage to coin and his love for the commerce-driven world within which he immerses himself render him spiritually and physically barren. By the end of the tale, however humorous we may find its ending, all three of its main players have fallen victim to the vices of mercantile culture.

This corruption, displayed so overtly in the Shipman’s Tale, becomes the same corruption which eats away at the chivalric fabric of

Chaucer's romance parody. The Shipman's fabliau value system draws a mustache on the romance genre's Mona Lisa, creating the Tale of Sir Thopas, a study of how imperfect values affect a genre based on the chivalric ideals of innocence, virtue and justice. Through this overlay, Sir Thopas embodies qualities of both the monk and the merchant, while his goal to sleep with an elf-queen echoes the prostitution of the merchant's wife.

To understand *how* Chaucer manipulates the romance form, it is useful to explore some of the conventions a medieval reader or listener would have expected. Wim Tigges's definition, found in his essay "Romance and Parody," offers a concise basis for examining this manipulation:

Few readers, I suppose, will quarrel with me in defining the medieval (Middle English) romance as a narrative genre, which can be succinctly characterised as the story of a single hero of aristocratic birth or aspiration and chivalric nurture (usually a knight), who undertakes an adventure (in the form of one or more tests and/or quests), the successful achievement of which leads to the favour of the hero's feudal lord, his lady, and/or his God.¹⁵

Helaine Newstead offers some focus as to the morality of the narratives, suggesting that almost always "Innocence is vindicated, virtue is rewarded and wickedness punished or cast out by repentance." And, she notes, "[T]he story is presented, even for bourgeois audiences in terms of chivalric life."¹⁶ John Stevens's brief list of common romance motifs is enlightening as well: "the mysterious challenge or call; the first sight of the beloved; the lonely journey through a hostile land; the fight with the enemy, often a monstrous creature."¹⁷ Chaucer parodies almost every aspect of these conventions noted by Tigges, Newstead, and Stevens.¹⁸ Sir Thopas is neither aristocratic nor chivalric. His story goes mostly untold, cut off as it is by Harry Bailey, but even in our short glimpse we see him seek out an elf-queen rather than the favor of his Lady, his "hostile land" is a Flemish countryside filled with vicious hares, and he flees from the only legitimate threat of the tale, the giant "Sire Olifaunt."

Chaucer endows Sir Thopas with a striking number of the same qualities as his monks. He also "priketh thurgh a fair forest" filled with "bukke and hare" (Th 754–56). More significantly, he also ignores the high calling of his office:

The offyce of a knyght is to mayntene and deffende the holy

feyth catholyque by whiche god the fader sente his sone in to
the world to take flesshe humayne in the gloryous vyrgyn oure
lady saynt Mary.¹⁹

Like the lusty monk, Thopas completely ignores the calling of his order to protect the faith. He instead goes tramping into the woods to seduce an elf queen. In fact, he even beseeches the “glorious vyrgyn” to help him ease his obsession (by letting him satisfy himself, of course), saying, “O Seint Marie, benedicite, / What eyleth this love at me / To bynde me so soore?” (Th 784–86). The comic effect and the social critique both come from the way Thopas unwittingly abandons his job of defending the faith by asking the Virgin Mary to help him abandon her. As with the earlier lustiness of the monk and his abuse of the confessional office, Chaucer demonstrates the ludicrous positions such hypocrisies create. In this way, Thopas and John quit their sworn duties for lust but neither pays for the transgression. In fact, the monk manages to pay back his merchant friend with the same hundred francs he borrows, and the Tale of Sir Thopas is cut off by the host before it can be played out. However, the *Ordres* states that “Whan Charyte / Loyaulte / Trouthe Iustyce and veryte fayllen in the world / thenne begynneth cruelte / Iniurye / desloyalte and falsenes” (Lull 14). Certainly that describes the condition of both tales and explains the absence of retribution and punishment. Any just retributions would be inconsistent with the picture of topsy-turvy morality Chaucer portrays. The tale’s conclusion remains open-ended, fragmentary, an invitation to either reject or embrace this world. We do either at our peril.

The merchant blends with Sir Thopas in a more complicated, but no less profound way. In fact, the character of Thopas reverberates constantly with hints of the merchant, most obviously in his origins as a Fleming from Popering (Th 719–20).²⁰ Flanders as a whole underwent considerable change in Chaucer’s lifetime because of a civil war, as political control of the country fell to the textile industry, *not* the warrior class. Popering is an especially interesting choice of birthplace for a chivalric knight. Almost two-thirds of the small village (about 3600 people) worked in the textile-weaving industry during Chaucer’s day and the town was often violently suppressed by nearby Ypres, one of Flanders’s three great cities (the other two being Ghent and Bruges) for producing luxury cloth of a counterfeited nature.²¹ As such, it is ludicrous that anyone, much less Thopas’s father, could meet the description, “lord he was of that contree.” Moreover, Popering’s status as producer of inferior quality, counterfeit cloth makes a fitting homeland for Thopas, the counterfeit knight.²² Thopas, the aristocratic quester of lit-

erary convention, is not nobly born and the jump to placing him, as a Fleming, in the merchant class is a short one.

The Flemings lived in a land that by their own leaders' admission was "a sterile country, infertile in itself, completely founded on the fact and course of merchandise. . . ." ²³ That barrenness must have been part of the Flemish character that appears in the merchant's travels, which take him to Bruges, the most sophisticated banking center in the world outside Italy. There he makes a thousand franks, apparently by borrowing money in Paris and taking advantage of uneven exchange rates. ²⁴ During his stay, "He neither pleyeth at the dees ne daunceth, / But as a marchaunt, shortly for to telle, / he let his lyf" (ShT 304-06). In Thopas's homeland, the merchant can feed his desire for money without even handling merchandise; goods are unnecessary. As we noted before, these activities take away his virility and leave him in a chaste state appropriate to sterile Flanders. Meanwhile, he should be sexually active with his wife, a fact she complains bitterly about: "In al the reawme of France is ther no wyf / That lasse lust hath to that sory play" (ShT 116-17). He can make money multiply, but not much else.

This aspect of the merchant appears in the self-satisfied attitude of Thopas and his refusal to make love to any of his own village's maidens. Even before he dreams of the fairy, he is "chaste and no lechour," and after his dream he makes this assessment: "For in this world no womman is / Worthy to be my make / In towne." (791-93) He loses sight of the value of local women because he targets the elf-queen, an act as inappropriate for a knight as worshipping money at prime is for a merchant, or paying for sex is for a monk. Whereas Thopas should, according to convention, be out seeking grails or performing honorable deeds in the name of his lady at court, he is instead out with the narrow goal of sexual satisfaction. Like wealth for the merchant, who seeks sex with his wife only after his desire for money has been met, the knight's sexual obsession causes him, rather ironically, to lose desire for earthly women. And also like the merchant, the knight lacks any sort of normal sexuality; the grid of bourgeois materialism, placed over the normally sensual romance hero, destroys and mocks the essential character of romance love. This union of mock-chivalric knight with merchant and monk in the figure of Thopas brings together the three medieval estates in one figure. ²⁵ Chaucer bundles clergy, knights, and commons all into one, effectively ascribing to all of fourteenth-century English culture a value system based on greed, injustice, lechery, and dishonor. No one stratum of medieval society could claim itself excluded from Chaucer's parodic teasing.

The elf queen of Chaucer's tale is, of course, another personification of the Diana/Proserpina who appears, for example, in the Merchant's

Tale as the Queen of Fairy (MerT 2227–29).²⁶ Much like the merchant's wife, her potentially divine qualities are ignored by the male protagonist so that he can pursue her as an object of sexual desire. No small part of Thopas's bathos is his incessant wish to deflower the personification of chastity, to have sex with Virginité incarnate. "An elf-queene shal my lemman be," he says, "And slepe under my goore" (788–89). This also adds irony to his request for help from the Virgin Mary in his search. Chaucer is here translating the degradation of the Merchant's wife into Thopas by perverting the way fairy seduction occurs in the tale. Instead of the fairy seeking out the virtuous knight, as in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* (a contemporary breton lai of the same form that Chaucer mimics),²⁷ and bestowing him with numerous means of assistance, Thopas finds the elf queen imprisoned by Olifaunt, "a perilous man of dede." Rather than virtue assisting the knight, the knight must help virtue. As an analogue to both the monk and the merchant, he naturally turns tail and runs away, vowing rather hollowly to fight again later. This funny-serious result lampoons the declining worth of virtue in a world infested with bourgeois knights, lusty monks, and barren merchants. Paradoxically, Thopas takes on the lustiness of the monk, pursuing a dream of supernatural sex, even as he also exhibits the egocentric sterility of the merchant.

I have discussed how both the monetary and sexual aspects of the "taillynge" pun play out in the Thopas, but Chaucer also fills his knightly satire with lots of "tale" in the story-telling sentence. He first creates the surface level of the story—the romantic knight spurring himself over hill and dale seeking noble adventure. Then, as I have noted, he inserts the secondary tale, in some ways a retelling of the shipman's story, which performs the burlesque function of societal critique. Within this double tale, Chaucer embeds a number of other stories; Thopas asks the minstrels to tell romances about popes and cardinals (another irreverent alteration to romance convention) and right before he is cut off, Chaucer invokes a long catalog of romance heroes, ranging from Sir Guy to Percival. In barely two hundred lines Chaucer invents a rich amount of tale-telling and referral to other stories. The sheer abundance of "tale" in such a short space suggests that Chaucer wanted to be sure that his listener/readers had plenty of "taillynge" after the Shipman's blessing.

When we come to the tale's abrupt and inglorious end, we should not be too amazed. Larry Sklute perhaps best summarizes much of the critical drift: "Meaninglessness is its reason for being, and the purposeful interruption at the beginning of the Third Fit is as good a place as any, for a poem without a meaning cannot have a natural conclusion."²⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, given my attempts to tack the Shipman's Tale's value

structures onto the Thopas, I think this statement makes sense. "Inconclusiveness," to use Sklute's terminology, allows other meanings in. By not closing up the tale, by allowing it status as an empty space, he leaves the door open for the thematic-generic interplay we have examined so far.

The Host's criticism of Chaucer opens up that space even farther: "[T]hou makest me / So wery of thy verray lewednesse / That, also wisly God my soule blesse, / Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche" (Mel 920–23). Bailey cannot appreciate the joke because he is at the center of it. As a businessman doubling as the judge of Chaucer's aesthetic, he cannot possibly get the joke of Thopas because his status in the middle of society makes him insensitive to the charges. Chaucer inserts his own persona here to backlight the position of the host and the company, to make the Tale of Sir Thopas a joke on the company's values as well as a parody of the romance form. Rather than poking fun at his own poetic persona in the tale, as some critics have suggested, Chaucer to some degree gives himself special status as the one who, along with the reader, can get the joke.²⁹

Similarly, the banter in the links on each side of Thopas, while not expressly alluding to the Shipman's Tale, also obliquely offers a comment on mercantile society. Chaucer goes to great lengths in establishing the parody as his own in the "murye words of the Hoost to Chaucer." After Harry Bailey interrupts and tells him to stop with his "dogerel," Chaucer replies in indignation:

"Why so?" quod I, "why wiltow lette me
Moore of my tale than any other man,
Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?" (Mel 926–28)

Obviously, the author of the *Canterbury Tales* can write better than a parody of the breton lai. However, Thopas, with its constant subversion of romance convention is quite literally the best he can do considering the materials with which he is working: the corrupt values of the Shipman's (and hence his own) world and the sing-song tail rhyme of the breton lai. The two do not mix.

That bad mix also crops up in the Prioress's Tale, the tale between the Shipman's Tale and the Thopas, in the form of the Jews and their "foul usure and lucre of vileynye" (491). Like the Flemings, the Jews of her tale, following standard medieval bigotry, are an incarnation of mercantilism's evils and, fulfilling the role of the merchant and monk's bourgeois values, they wreak havoc upon virtue and innocence, embodied here by the "litel clergeon." Not accidentally, the Prioress's praise

for the Virgin Mary (VII. 467–87) immediately precedes Thopas's attempts to deflower her, armored in "jewes-werk." Thus, the moral of the tale reaches deeper than the vulgar anti-Semitism on its surface.³⁰ Instead, the Prioress plays on the theme of money-as-corrupter started by the Shipman and continued in Thopas, a theme that Chaucer as narrator sees even though the Prioress may not.

The parallels and play between the tales should force a revision of the way we view Thopas's position in the collection. Rather than being just a masterful parody or a change of pace,³¹ Chaucer's burlesque of bourgeois values and corruption causes readers who can get the joke (unlike the Host) to consider their position in society even as they laugh at themselves. This, of course, is a complex position for any reader to occupy and, as a result, we get a bit of double vision as we head into the *Melibee*. The temptation is, indeed, to find the Thopas all "solaas" and the *Melibee* all "sentence."³² As Paul Olson notes,

In the *Melibee*, Chaucer, like others in his period, turns from romance to serious political-philosophic and juris-prudential statement, from a fictive knight's pursuit of the elf queen and fleshy Oliphant to a quest for Sophia, the daughter of Prudence.³³

In fact, however, the connections we have explored here spin naturally into Chaucer's "litel thyng in prose" as a corrective to the Shipman's world. Prudence provides her husband, *Melibee*, with page after page of sound advice on restraint and good counsel. "For Solomon seith that he that is nat pacient shal have greet harm," Prudence quotes from Proverbs. That just might be the dominant lesson Chaucer forges in the generic instability between the Shipman's fabliaux and his parody of romance. When lust and greed supplant patience, chivalry changes to ribaldry and self-gratification. The Tale of Sir Thopas serves to remind us of this before we turn our eyes inward to embrace the virtues of Prudence. It bundles up the Shipman's and Prioress's Tales and moves along to the next "litel thyng" with a wink, perhaps a wince, and finally a chuckle. The tale, by carefully turning a medieval romance into a critique of commerce, delightfully captures and controls many of the strands which twirl through the web of Fragment VII, connecting and reiterating the theme of a world corrupted by exchange while leaving open the opportunity for laughter at, and perhaps even participation in, that same world.³⁴

¹ Jacques Derrida's discussion of structure and center still has relevance here: "By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. . . Nevertheless the center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible" ("Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle [Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986] 83, cited from the anthology for ease of access. Originally published in *The Structuralist Controversy* [1970]).

² Thomas O. Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre: A Comparative Study of Generic Instability* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994) 249–50.

³ Those who have attempted to create a unity in the fragment have mostly done so, in fact, by emphasizing the differences among the tales. Emerson Brown for instance, after characterizing the tales of Fragment VII as seeming "deliberately, perversely, weak," claims they explore the tendency to extremism in 14th-century society ("Fragment VII of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the 'Mental Climate of the Fourteenth Century,'" *Traditions and Innovations*, ed. David G. Allen and Robert A. White [Newark: U of Delaware P, 1990] 52). Jerome Mandel finds a chiasmic relationship, which ultimately links Thopas only to its usual partner the Tale of Melibee, but finds "no single principle which describes the sequential order" of the fragment (*Geoffrey Chaucer: Building the Fragments of the "Canterbury Tales"* [Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1992] 172). Alan T. Gaylord, the only critic who has written both often and convincingly on Sir Thopas, makes the only plausible suggestion for a unity in his often-adopted dubbing of this fragment as the "Literature Group" ("Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor," *PMLA* 82 [1967], 226–35).

⁴ John Webster Spargo, quoted in *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971) 275.

⁵ Benson and Andersson note, however, that all theories of source for this tale have problems, especially since it is uncertain whether Chaucer had access to the *Decameron* (275–78). They also point out the original

ity of the tale in its domestic focus and lack of punishment for the wife.

⁶ Albert H. Silverman, in "Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 32 (1953): 329–36, offers a rich exploration of this aspect of the tale.

⁷ Line numbers from *The Canterbury Tales* are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. John H. Fisher, 2nd ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1989).

⁸ David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, 2nd ed. (London: Cambridge UP, 1976) 3.

⁹ Robert Adams explores this in "The Concept of Debt in the *Shipman's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 6 (1984): 85–102.

¹⁰ Raymond Eichman, introduction, *Cuckolds, Clerics, and Countrymen*, trans. John DuVal (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1982) 1–12. Many of Chaucer's analogues contain lecherous priests.

¹¹ Of prime, Hugh of St. Victor notes, "Horae autem Primae officium merito celebramus, quia mulieribus venientibus, orto jam sole, ad monumentum, angeli annuntiaverunt Christum surrexisse" (*Speculum Ecclesiae*, ed. Migne, *PL* 77: 343–44).

¹² As noted by William F. Woods, "Professional Thyng: The Wife as Merchant's Apprentice in the *Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 24 (1989): 142.

¹³ J. M. Jones, trans., "Chess of Love: Commentaries," thesis, U of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1968, 383.

¹⁴ In the Knight's Tale a similar correspondence is made, as Emelye prays to Diana, the "Queene of the regne of Pluto derk and lowe, / Goddess of maydens" (2298–99). Fulgentius also discusses "the moon itself to be Proserpina in the lower world" and "Diana, the moon, to rule over the woodlands" (*Fulgentius the Mythographer*, trans. Leslie George Whitbread [Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1971] 81. The Vatican Mythographers also note this correspondence: "Ipsa est enim Luna in celo, Diana in terra, Proserpina in erebo" (*Mythographi Vaticani I et II*, Series Latina, ed. Peter Kulescar [Turnhout: Brepols, 1987] 11).

¹⁵ "Romance and Parody," *Companion to Middle English Romance*, ed. Henk Aertsen and Alasdair MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University P, 1990) 129.

¹⁶ "Fascicule I: *Romances*," *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, ed. J. B. Severs (New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967) 11.

¹⁷ John Stevens, *Medieval Romances: Themes and Approaches*, (London: Hutchison, 1973) 15–28.

¹⁸ See in particular John M. Manly, "Sir Thopas: A Satire," *Essays and Studies* 13 (1928): 52–73.

¹⁹ Ramon Lull, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, trans. William Caxton, ed. Alfred T. P. Byles (London: Oxford UP, 1926) 24.

²⁰ Manly notes how every detail of Sir Thopas's description, from his inept horsemanship to his love for wrestling, makes him a hopelessly bourgeois knight. He also points toward documents indicating that the people of Popering were considered exceptionally stupid, even among their countrymen (65).

²¹ David Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (New York: Longman, 1992), 278–85.

²² For a defense of Popering and more detailed description of this conflict see John H. Munro, "Industrial Transformations in the North-West European Textile Trades, c. 1290–c. 1340: Economic Progress or Economic Crisis," *Textiles, Towns and Trade: Essays in the Economic History of Late-Medieval England and the Low Countries* (Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1994), 114–16.

²³ The Four Members of Flanders, qtd. and trans. Nicholas 284.

²⁴ Gerhard Joseph's look at the merchant's business trip is enlightening. He suggests that the merchant must also have done some regular trading to have made so large a profit, but verifies the likelihood that the merchant simply manipulated currency rates ("Chaucer's Coinage: Foreign Exchange and the Puns of the *Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 17 [1983]: 341–57). A similar analysis of the merchant's "dry exchange," emerging from the surprising detail Chaucer provides us of his transac-

tions, is found in Thomas Hahn, "Money, Sexuality, Wordplay and Context in the *Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer in the Eighties* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986): 235–49. Sylvia Thrupp's *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1962) also provides a useful look at the general character of merchant methods in Chaucer's day.

²⁵ Nor is this the only place in Chaucer where such unity occurs. Robert Haller notes a similar attempt by the Wife of Bath in her conquest of husbands from all three estates ("The Wife of Bath and the Three Estates," *Annuaire Medievale* 6 [1965]: 47–64).

²⁶ See Isabel E. Rathborne's *The Meaning of Spenser's Fairyland* (New York: Columbia UP, 1937) 162, for a discussion of this figure's development from Diana and the early continental romances through Spenser's Gloriana. Especially noted is Aurelius's prayer in the Franklin's Tale to "Lucina the sheene, / That of the see is chief goddesse and queene" (1045) as an example of the medieval and, in Rathborne's case, Renaissance tendency to identify together maiden goddesses and maiden queens.

²⁷ Thomas Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, *Medieval English Literature*, ed. Thomas J. Garbaty (Lexington, MA.: Heath, 1984).

²⁸ Larry Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1984) 133.

²⁹ See Gaylord, "Sentence and Solaas," for in-depth discussion of Harry's foibles as an incompetent contest director.

³⁰ For an account of this anti-Semitism and how critics have variously construed it, see Florence H. Ridley, *The Prioress and the Critics* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1965).

³¹ The idea that Sir Thopas is merely inserted for variety has enjoyed surprising popularity. Certainly, I would respect the idea that "something different" has happened here, as Mary Hamel delightfully proposes ("And Now for Something Completely Different: The Relationship Between the *Prioress's Tale* and the *Rime of Sir Thopas*," *Chaucer Review* 14 [1980]: 251–59). The idea can, though, cause us to amputate the tale from its context, perhaps closing us off from some of the possibilities hinted at by much of the Melibee-Thopas criticism, which offers intriguing hints that different forms may carry the same *sententia*. See especially Glending Olson's discussion of Geoffrey of Vinsauf's concep-

tion of *interpretatio* in "A Reading of the *Thopas-Melibee* Link," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975): 148.

³² See Gaylord, "Sentence and Solaas," and C. David Benson, who asserts that the two tales Chaucer assigns to himself "are extreme examples of the stylistic experiment throughout the work that explore the possibilities of Christian art" ("Their Telling Difference: Chaucer the Pilgrim and His Two Contrasting Tales," *Chaucer Review* 18 [1983]: 61-76, 71).

³³ Paul Olson, *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986) 113-14.

³⁴ See Helen Cooper's *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Duckworth, 1983) 69, for discussion of the tendency of the *Canterbury Tales* to touch a theme, leave it, then circle back to it, forming a "cobweb" of meaning.