JUSTIN SINGER

Pawn Captures Knighthood: The Tale of Sir Thopas as a Commentary on the Rise of Peasants to Knighthood and the Deterioration of Chivalry

ABSTRACT

The Tale of Sir Thopas, one of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, contains many details which are inversions of the traditional portrayal of knights in chansons de geste. The reason for these inversions must be determined by interpreting the various details of the portrayal of the protagonist, Sir Thopas, within the historical context of England during the late fourteenth century. During this time period in England, the Black Death had precipitated dramatic changes in social hierarchy. The drastic decline in population led many members of the established nobility to fall into economic distress as a result of labour shortages, and the rise in the value of labour meant that individuals of common birth were no longer as ubiquitous and expendable as they had previously been. Newly wealthy non-nobles were thereby able to rise to the rank of knighthood. This paper shall examine the symbolic details in the Tale of Sir Thopas in relation to their historical context of Medieval England in the years following the plague, and thereby demonstrate that the Tale of Sir Thopas is a commentary on the rise of common born knights and the resulting decline of chivalric values.

In *The Tale of Sir Thopas,* a *Canterbury Tale,* one of Chaucer's Pilgrims recites an asinine poem which mocks the traditional *Chansons de Geste* in both metre and content. *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is about an effeminate Flemish knight who must slay a three-headed giant in order to marry an elf queen. Sir Thopas is in many qualities antithetical to legendary knightly heroes such as Roland and Guillaume of Orange. Whereas these knights represent the military ideal of chivalry, driven by valour and a sense of Christian duty, Sir Thopas is effete and delicate. He travels unarmoured, and initially flees when confronted with the giant Sir Oliphaunt, a cowardly and unseemly act for a man of knightly status. Chaucer's intention, however, extends beyond a simple desire to satirize the literary traditions of chivalric epic. Rather, through the use of symbolic details, such as those which are displayed in Sir Thopas' behaviour, clothing, and armament, Chaucer demonstrates Sir Thopas' non-noble, mercantile heritage, as well as the knight's resulting failure to embody traditional chivalric ideals. Chaucer's portrayal of a man of common birth having risen to the rank of knighthood is closely connected to the increase in social mobility which occurred in England in the wake of the Black Death. Chaucer's use of farce in *the Tale of Sir Thopas* is therefore an expression of the subversion of the chivalric values that occurred in fourteenth-century England as a result of the ascension of wealthy peasants to the rank of knighthood.

Scholars have conceived several hypotheses regarding the significance of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* within the context of the cultural and socioeconomic environment of Europe in the late fourteenth century. One literary scholar, Lillian Winstanley, draws a parallel between Sir Thopas and

the Flemish knight Philip van Artevelde, who, like Sir Thopas, came from bourgeois origins, and was involved in battle against a French army, which, Winstanley says, is represented by the three-headed giant Sir Oliphaunt.[1] It is critical to note, however, that the task of placing the *the Tale of Sir Thopas* into its historical context is one outside of Winstanley's field of specialty. Winstanley would therefore not necessarily be in an ideal position to decipher certain elements of the tale, such as details of Sir Thopas' armament and heraldry. Nearly every detail in the poem is vital to the tale's symbolic implications, and in order for these implications to be understood, it is vital to determine the correct interpretations of these components within the context of their own time period.

The suggestion, moreover, that *The Tale of Sir Thopas* was intended to satirize a specific individual does not seem particularly probable. One of the most crucial elements of chivalric romance during the Middle Ages was the illustration of an archetype or ideal. Specific knightly characters, such as the Spanish knight El Cid, were represented directly rather than symbolically. If Chaucer intended to represent Philip van Artevelde within *The Tale of Sir Thopas,* he would likely have done so overtly. *The Tale of Sir Thopas* may also have lost a measure of its socio-political significance if the character of Sir Thopas was representative of an individual rather than a concept. In the analysis of *The Tale of Sir Thopas,* it is not sufficient to analyze its literary construction alone, or to attempt to associate it with particular individuals and events, as both approaches fail to account for the poem's true allegorical significance. In order to determine Chaucer's true intentions, it is necessary to examine the details of symbolism and literary device within the tale and connect them to their implications within their historical context.

The description given of Sir Thopas at the outset of the poem is an inversion of the typical portrayal of knights within the context of chivalric epic. Whereas other knights in the classic *Chansons de Geste*, such as Roland or El Cid, are praised for such qualities as bravery, loyal vassalage, or piety, the primary quality which Chaucer attributes to Sir Thopas is the knight's physical beauty. Chaucer thus describes Sir Thopas:

> Sire Thopas wax a doughty swain;
> Whit was his face as pandemain,
> His lippes as rede as rose.
> His rode is lik scarlet in grain,
> And I yow telle in good certain
> He hadde a semely nose.[2]

The mere fact that Chaucer portrays Sir Thopas largely in terms of appearance rather than character adds a feminine quality to the knight, as women in medieval literature are portrayed by way of elaboration on their

---

[1] Lillian Winstanley, ed. Introduction to *The Prioress's Tale and the Tale of Sir Thopas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922).
[2] Geoffrey Chaucer, "Sir Thopas," lines 724-729, in *The Canterbury Tales,* ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005), 501.

physical appearance more often than men are so described.[3] Furthermore, the delicacy of Sir Thopas' features, as well as the pallor of his skin, are traits which would be more readily associated with a woman or a child rather than with an adult male.[4] These qualities present Sir Thopas to be a somewhat less than admirable example of knighthood, for the perspectives of a particular work on chivalry, the *Lorde de Chevalerie,* indicate vanity and concern for fashion to be feminine traits unsuitable for a knight.[5] Knights so preoccupied might easily become distracted from their responsibilities as vassals as well as their role as defenders of the Church. They might also become self-absorbed as a result of their own pride.

The ascension, however, of low-born yet wealthy men to the rank of knighthood in England during Chaucer's lifetime created a new form of knight by whom status and sumptuousness were valued above chivalric virtue. The institution of knighthood in the England that Chaucer knew was not as exclusive as it had been in ages past. Knights did not necessarily have to be of noble blood. They were not even required to undergo any formal training or trials, for all that was necessary for knighthood was the requisite financial means. In fourteenth-century England, knighthood could be purchased, and in some cases, a wealthy merchant or tradesman was more likely than an impoverished nobleman to achieve the rank of knight. Among those knighted, in fact, were several mayors of London.[6] One mayor who attained knighthood was William Walworth, who was knighted for his role in the suppression of a peasants' revolt through the wounding of the rebel leader, Wat Tyler.[7] Walworth was, however, not a man of noble blood, nor was he trained as a knight at arms. In addition to being mayor of London, he had also been a financier and a fishmonger.[8] The fact that Walworth was rewarded with knighthood for his aid in pacifying a peasants' revolt demonstrated that the rank of knighthood was becoming more a position of privilege than a vocation accompanied by a multitude of responsibilities.

Knights who ascended from origins similar to those of William Walworth could hardly be expected to fulfill the traditional role expected of the warrior aristocracy. They would not have possessed the courtly upbringing and military training of knights in previous centuries. Furthermore, they did not earn their rank by distinguishing themselves on the battlefield, and therefore, their knighthood was nothing more than recognition of wealth that they had acquired through commerce or craftsmanship. As such, many of these knights of the gentry likely had little interest in honouring the legacy of knighthood. They were probably more

---

[3] Joanne A. Charbonneau, "Sir Thopas," in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales Volume II,*
ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 662.
[4] Charbonneau, "Sir Thopas," 663.
[5] Jill Man, *Chaucer and the Medieval Estates Satire.*
(Cambridge: Cambridge at the University Press, 1973), 118.
[6] G.G. Coulton, *Chaucer and His England,* 7th ed.
(London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1946), 192-193.
[7] Derek Brewer, *Chaucer and His World*
(London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1978), 154, 155, 159.
[8] Brewer, *Chaucer and His World,* 54.

concerned with advancing their own status through the romantic archetypes of chivalry.

Regardless of the degree to which common-born knights used idealized notions of knighthood to gain aristocratic prestige, few of them had a particularly strong appreciation for chivalric epic. For these merchants, craftsmen, and burgesses, the trappings of nobility belied sensibilities which attested to a comparatively unrefined upbringing. Ideological values which differed based on social caste were reflected in the fact that epic tales were often written to please a specific demographic. Those tales for which the intended audience was composed of wealthy commoners therefore tended to have little relevance to the ideals of chivalry.[9] The lack of expression of chivalric principles in poetry intended for non-noble audiences was thus indicative of an assumed disinterest on the part of well-to-do peasants in the pursuit of knightly glory. This being the case, one of the most logical motivations for the pursuit of the rank of knighthood was a desire to benefit from the legends of such knightly heroes as Count Roland without the burden of emulating their achievements.

The theme of lowborn individuals ascending to positions of prestige had further basis in the events of Chaucer's own lifetime. It was reflective of how Chaucer, despite having no noble ancestry himself, rose to a degree of influence that likely equaled that of some members of the nobility. Chaucer was born into a wealthy yet common lineage, for his father John Chaucer, as well as John's stepfather Richard, were vintners in London.[10] John Chaucer, however, was also the deputy to King Edward III's chief butler, and throughout his life, John's son Geoffrey was involved in civil service to several nobles, such as John of Gaunt, even rising to the position of esquire within the household of King Edward III.[11] The fluidity of the social hierarchy in England during the late fourteenth century was clearly a defining element in the life of Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer was therefore well suited to comment on how the principles and practices of the warrior aristocracy were affected by social mobility.

Considering Chaucer's close connections to such nobles as John of Gaunt, it is reasonable to assume that he developed a respectable understanding of heraldry and of the rituals and principles of knighthood, and of the traditions of chivalric romance. As Edward III's esquire he served the King in a diplomatic capacity.[12] Such a position would undoubtedly immerse him within the courtly culture of ritual and pageantry. Chaucer's presence within the social circles of the nobility also suggests that his intended audience was a predominantly aristocratic one. This being the case, *The Tale of Sir Thopas* would speak to nobles in a subtle language of symbols and references, an understanding of which would be required in order to

[9] Donald R. Howard, *Chaucer and the Medieval World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 67.
[10] F. E. Halliday, *Chaucer and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1968), 8.
[11] Paul Strohm, "The Social and Literary Scene in England," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer,* 2nd ed., ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambride: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2-3.
[12] Halliday, *Chaucer and His World,* 34.

appreciate the humourous implications of the poem. It is also critical to note that within *The Canterbury Tales,* it is implied that the pilgrim who recites *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is intended to represent Chaucer himself.[13] Given that the other pilgrims are fictitious characters, it may be reasoned that *The Tale of Sir Thopas* has, in fact, greater realistic significance than the stories told by the other pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales.* The increased realistic significance of the *Tale of Sir Thopas* would then lend credence to the idea that *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is a commentary on the corruption of chivalric virtue by the rise of members of the middle class to the rank of knighthood. Chaucer's noble audience would have definitely observed, and probably rankled at, the efforts of the gentry to imitate their social superiors.

Another social stratum which may have been included within the intended audience of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* was that of the non-noble bourgeoisie, the target of satire within the poem. With respect to individuals of this class, *The Tale of Sir Thopas* served the purpose of drawing their attention to the absurd image that they presented in the trappings of aristocracy. *The Tale of Sir Thopas* therefore demonstrates sympathy to the concerns of nobles regarding individuals who sought to flout the long-established social hierarchy, and also represents an admonition to the pretentious new class of bourgeois commoners.

Chaucer likely observed that knights who had ascended to their position from the ranks of merchants and burgesses often did not share the military vocation of their aristocratic fellows. Knights of this particular origin often had more of an affinity for administrative matters than for the pursuit of glory on the battlefield. This was a noticeable trend in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. One example of such a knight was Richard Adderbury, a descendant of a well-to-do common family who eventually became a Member of Parliament as well as a sheriff, and eventually achieved knighthood in 1333.[14] Other such knights gained their status through involvement in legal affairs, such as William Thorpe, who received knighthood upon rising to become a justice of the King's Bench in 1345.[15] This suggests that in England during the High Middle Ages, knighthood varied in its significance, for though it often implied an aristocratic heritage as well as military distinction, it might also be the mark of a wealthy commoner who had distinguished himself through services to his liege in a civilian capacity.

Another critical facet of the satire displayed in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is the unorthodox appearance of Sir Thopas' combat armament, which contains vital symbolic details in relation to his lineage and knightly virtue. As Sir Thopas prepares for his approaching battle with the giant Sir Oliphaunt, various elements of his weapons and armour raise doubt regarding his ability as a knight, as well as the legitimacy of his knightly status. Particularly, certain crucial elements are omitted from Sir Thopas'

[13] T. W. Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer*
 (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1964), 88.

[14] Peter Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400*
(Dover: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1993), 123.
[15] Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400,* 124.

raiment. Among the most significant of these items are the sword and spurs. In *Chansons de Geste,* knights such as Roland are clearly described as wearing a sword as well as spurs. To a medieval knight, the sword and spurs were badges of knighthood which were bestowed upon a new knight in the ritual of investiture. Just as a new knight would be granted the right to wear these badges, so too might he be stripped of them, were he to be deemed unworthy of knighthood in the eyes of his lord.[16] The absence of a sword and spurs as part of Sir Thopas' equipment suggests that he may never have undergone the traditional rituals of investiture that were associated with ascension to knighthood. It may alternatively imply that Sir Thopas is a disgraced knight continuing to misrepresent himself as a knight in good standing. Assuming Sir Thopas to be of wealthy yet non-noble origin, the latter possibility may indicate that he sought knighthood only as a token of status, and was unprepared to fulfill the duties that accompanied it.

In addition to being a symbol of a knight's proven worthiness of his rank, the sword, in particular, had several crucial symbolic connections with the duties associated with knighthood. The most vital, perhaps, was its religious implication. As a manifestation of the metaphysical concept of the Christian Cross, the sword represented the knight's role as a defender of the Church and an agent of divine justice.[17] During the ceremony of investiture into knighthood, the sword received the benediction of a priest. This rite bespoke its purpose – to be used in the service of the Almighty.[18] The absence of a sword as part of the armament of Sir Thopas therefore signifies a preoccupation with secular matters above the duty of a knight as a warrior of God and defender of the Church.

One of the possible interpretations of the absence of this symbol of religious duty is the idea that the wealth associated with the acquisition of knighthood by men of common ancestry represented a conflict with the Christian ideals of chivalry. Medieval Church doctrine taught that wealth and luxury were best avoided, an idea immortalized in the tomb epitaph of Edward the Black Prince:

> "On the Earth I had great treasures, which gave
> me great nobility,
> Lands, houses, great treasures, silver and gold.
> But now I am a poor caitiff, laid deep in
> the earth."[19]

---

[16] Irving Linn, "The Arming of Sir Thopas,"
Modern Language Notes, 51, no. 5
(Spring 1936): 310.
[17]JFR Day, "Losing One's Character: Heralds and the Decline of English Knighthood from the Later Middle Ages to King James I,"
in *Chivalry, Knighthood, and War in the Middle Ages,* ed. Susan J. Ridard
Sewanee Mediaeval Studies Number Nine
(Sewanee: University of the South Press, 1999), 101 – 104,
citing
College of Arms MS L5 *bis,* fols 35-35ᵛ. In *A Catalogue of Manuscripts in the College of Arms: Collections, Vol 1,* by Louis Campbell and Francis Steer, *et al.,* 24-5.
[18] Raymond Rudorff, *The Knights and Their World*
(London: Cassell and Company Ltd, 1974), 89.
[19] Juliet Vale, "Knightly Codes and Piety."

This passage was likely intended to imply humility on the part of the Black
Prince, recognizing that luxury was only of value during earthly existence,
and that it was folly to pursue wealth because of its impermanence. During
the Middle Ages, trade and commerce were considered to be undesirable
vocations. This was due to the fact that many people were concerned about
putting their souls at risk through the acquisition of profit and luxury.[20]
Wealthy urban commoners such as merchants and usurers were held in
contempt by clergy and warrior aristocracy alike, for their occupations were
believed to have connections with the Devil, and they were considered to be
an unwanted burden on society.[21] Sir Thopas' connection to the wealthy
merchant or artisan class would thereby place him in conflict with the ideal
of chivalry espoused by St. Bernard. The ideal paragon of chivalry, in the
eyes of St. Bernard, was not a decadent and secular aristocrat but an austere
and pious crusader.[22] Sir Thopas, being a luxuriously dressed coward who
seemingly purchased his own knighthood, stands as a diametric opposite to
St. Bernard's chivalric ideal. Chaucer's portrayal of Sir Thopas without a
sword as part of his battle raiment was therefore suggestive of knighthood
attained outside of the Grace of God.

Curiously, however, Chaucer portrays Sir Thopas wearing a sword
not with his armour, but as part of the opulent dress in which he is arrayed
at the outset of the tale. This sword is not discussed in the manner which
would be typical of a knight in a *Chanson de Geste.* Not only is it mentioned in
only one particular instance, but unlike such legendary swords as King
Arthur's Excalibur or Count Roland's Durendal, this sword is nameless.
During the Middle Ages, some knights would name their swords, a practice
which attributed a certain spiritual power to the weapon.[23] The fact that the
sword carried by Sir Thopas is devoid of a name therefore indicates the
purely mundane nature of the weapon, as well as the idea that it is merely a
generic object with no special connection to its owner. The representation of
Sir Thopas' sword as a completely material object of no spiritual significance
suggests that this sword does not carry any ecclesiastical blessing, a further
testament to the irreligious nature of middle class knighthood.

The detail, however, which most clearly displays the dubious nature
of Sir Thopas' lineage, is his heraldic imagery, or rather lack thereof, a
characteristic which calls into question the legitimacy of Sir Thopas' knightly
status. As part of his armour, Sir Thopas wears a surcoat which is completely
unmarked instead of one that displays his family's arms.[24] This clearly
reveals his lack of noble lineage, for in Medieval England, the right to wear
armorial emblems was the exclusive domain of the nobility, as well as

---

History Today 37, no. 11 (Fall 1987): 12.

[20] Lillian M. Bisson, *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*
(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998),165.

[21] Richard W. Kaeuper, *Holy Warrior: The Religious Ideology of Chivalry*
(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 162-164.

[22] Maurice Keen, *Chivalry*
(London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 5.

[23] Matthew Strickland, *War and Chivalry*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 64.

[24] Linn, "The Arming of Sir Thopas," 306.

certain individuals who had been judged worthy of the privilege.[25] At first glance, this appears something of a contradiction, as Sir Thopas is described as the son of the lord of Poperinge. Poperinge, however, was a city in Flanders, rather than a fiefdom.[26] As such, it was not governed by an aristocratic feudal lord, but rather by an oligarchy of merchants before 1302, and by artisan's guilds afterwards.[27] This connection, therefore, does not confirm Sir Thopas' noble lineage, but rather disproves it. A knight such as Sir Thopas, born not as a noble but as a well-to-do peasant, would not have received the same sort of courtly upbringing as a knight of noble origin, and therefore would be unsuitable to emulate the ideals embodied by such knightly heroes as Count Roland or Sir Lancelot.

Equally significant to Sir Thopas' lack of familial heraldic devices is the appearance of the shield that he wears as part of his armour. The device displayed on this shield denotes concepts suggestive of Sir Thopas' connection to peasantry, and symbolizes qualities that were not befitting to a knight at arms. The emblem depicted on Sir Thopas's shield is the head of a boar, which was frequent fare at medieval banquets, as well as being commonly displayed on the outside of taverns.[28] It is plausible that this image implies a preference for aristocratic luxuries and social circles over the rigors of warfare. The association of the boar's head with a tavern environment may alternatively allude to gluttony or a fondness for the poorer and less sophisticated pleasures enjoyed by the peasantry. Either of these explanations reflects unfavourably on the chivalric virtue of Sir Thopas, for the former suggests a knight who places social ascension before duty, while the latter implies a man of common origin who imitates his social superiors while remaining attached to the customs and pleasures associated with his lesser station.

This implication of the boar's head is also expressed with regard to the true symbolic meaning of this heraldic device. For instance, one of the concepts connected with the boar's head is that of hospitality.[29] Despite the generally positive connotations of hospitality, it may also be seen to imply a certain degree of extravagance and profligacy. The image of the boar's head on Sir Thopas' shield, apparently displaying hospitality as a personal creed or guiding principle may suggest a preference for the luxuries and comforts of purchased noble status to the strenuous and perilous environment of the battlefield. Another possible interpretation of the boar's head device is in fact the idea of knighthood gained through purchase rather than through noble lineage and military achievement. During the Middle Ages, a boar's head was frequently the price for which an individual might acquire feudal

---

[25] Dave D. Davis, "Hereditary Emblems: Material Culture in the Context of Social Change,
Journal of Anthropological Archaeology, 4 (1985): 153.
[26] David Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*
(London and New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1992), 446-447.
[27] Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders,* 132.
[28] Helen Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22.
[29] W. Cecil Wade, *The Symbolisms of Heraldry*
(London: George Redway, 1898), 31.

tenure from a lord.[30] This indicates the possibility that a boar's head was a
sufficient offering to allow a man of non-noble birth to ascend to the rank of
knighthood. This further represents a grievous abasement of the prestige
and honour of knighthood in England during the late Middle Ages.

In Medieval England, one of the most significant factors in facilitating
the increase in social mobility as represented in the garb of Sir Thopas was
the Black Death, a devastating plague which swept across Europe in the mid
fourteenth century. In order to understand the connection between the
Black Death and the rise of knighthood among non-nobles, it is crucial to
note that one's ability to become a knight was technically dictated not by
noble ancestry or lack thereof, but simply by certain property qualifications.
In the year 1247, the practice began that even non-noble freemen whose
land produced an income of at least forty shillings per year, were elevated to
the position of knighthood so as to allow them serve in shire courts.[31] The
Black Death allowed more individuals to achieve this level of income by
precipitating economic upheavals which added fluidity to the social class
structure of Medieval England. In England during the Middle Ages, noble
knights themselves recognized that the prestige of their rank was contingent
upon social structure as well as the clear delineation of a caste of social
inferiors.[32] Following the Black Death, however, it became increasingly
difficult for more conservative knights to maintain the exclusivity of their
social stratum, as the lowborn survivors of the plague eagerly took
advantage of social mobility which was previously unknown to them.

The plague which struck Europe in the middle of the fourteenth
century was a catalyst for dramatic transformations in medieval economy
and class structure, for it weakened the foundations of feudal hierarchy and
thus allowed non-nobles to rise above the station of their birth. The Black
Death resulted in a certain degree of reversal of the socioeconomic standing
of nobles and peasantry. For those peasants who survived the Plague, labour
shortages granted them the luxury of improved wages for their work. This
would lead to financial difficulties for feudal lords, and would be
exacerbated by the increased availability, and resulting devaluation, of once-
occupied parcels of land.[33] This would almost certainly prove to be a dire
threat to the military supremacy of the warrior aristocracy, for the
equipment of a knight was an expensive investment. Indeed, the exalted
status of mounted warriors during the Middle Ages was owed at least in part
to the considerable cost of a warhorse.[34] This meant that many of those
individuals who had been inculcated with the values of knighthood and
chivalry were no longer in a position to continue the traditions of their
forebears. The Black Death therefore led to a decline in the power of the

---

30 Wade, *The Symbolisms of Heraldry,* 31.
31 Jennifer Laing and Lloyd Laing, *Medieval Britain,*
(London: Herbert Press, 1996), 31.
32 Laing, *Medieval Britain,* 27.
33 Jim Bolton, " 'The World Upside Down' Plague as an Agent of Economic and Social
Change,"
in *The Black Death in England,* ed. Phillip Lindley and Mark Ormrod
(Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1996), 18.
34 Strickland, *War and Chivalry,* 23.

ancient military aristocracy, and made way for the rise of a new noble estate from the ranks of ambitious commoners.

Members of this new class of ascendant nobles sought to emulate the prestige of those who had once been their social superiors, however, differences in values as well as in areas of training often led such individuals away from the pursuit of chivalric glory. Among the ranks of the new landholding stratum were wealthy urban commoners such as lawyers and merchants. These individuals took advantage of the wide availability of land that resulted from the Plague in order to purchase vacant parcels of land as a means to raise their standing to what had once been the level of the feudal aristocracy.[35] The efforts of these new gentry to imitate the material culture of their former betters offended conservative members of the true nobility, who were concerned by the implications of this emerging ambiguity of social distinction. In 1413, the concerns of traditionalist nobles led to the enactment of sumptuary laws in order to prevent the confusion that would result from wealthy commoners adopting the trappings of nobility.[36] The elements of satire within *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are clearly connected to this trend, for the character of Sir Thopas portrays the very image of a man of common birth who imitates the warrior aristocracy in style, though not in principle.

Not only did the Black Death dramatically alter the socioeconomic dynamics of fourteenth-century England, but it was also responsible for drastic shifts in ideology. Moral principles, religious beliefs, and material culture underwent radical transformations as many people became horrifyingly cognizant of their own mortality. One of the trends that occurred after the Black Death was that the Church was losing the support of its lay followers. This was partially a result of the complacency with which the Church responded to the Plague. Although many members of the laity were convinced that the Plague was a punishment from God for their moral laxity, they did not observe a particularly fervent effort on the part of the Church to warn them by castigating them for their sins. Clerics, furthermore, were just as susceptible as the laity to death as a result of the Plague, which, in the eyes of the laity, was a sign of God's displeasure with the clergy.[37] The fact that many priests were lost to the plague led the Church into frantic haste to fill those offices which had been left vacant, leading to the appointment of unqualified candidates. One such instance occurred in Winchester between 1349 and 1350, when new clerics were appointed to the offices of priest, deacon, and sub-deacon.[38] The resulting concerns regarding the competence and virtue of the clergy would give lay parishioners cause to fear for their souls. It may therefore be inferred that lay disaffection with the Church would also be a factor in the divergence of ascendant gentry knights from one of the most important roles traditionally

[35] Colin Platt, *King Death*
(Buffalo and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 64.
[36] Platt, *King Death,* 63.
[37] Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death*
(New York: The John Day Company, 1969), 160.
[38] Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death,* 3rd ed.
(Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 2003

associated with chivalry. Such knights could hardly be expected to serve as defenders of a Church in which they had lost so much of their confidence.

Just as the Plague had weakened the faith of the laity in the virtue and Divine authority of the Church, so too did it alter their perspectives with regards to morality, pleasure, and luxury. There was little doubt that the Plague had instilled in those who had survived it, a heightened awareness of the inevitability of death. This being the case, it was perhaps only natural for some to respond by forsaking austerity and moderation and thereby maximizing their enjoyment of what they expected to be a short earthly existence. This decline in inhibition was, to some degree, reflected in the opulent and sexually suggestive nature of the garments for both sexes which became fashionable in England in the years immediately following the plague.[39] Many people had turned to such profligacy as a means of sheltering themselves from the fear of death which constantly plagued their thoughts. Also, not surprisingly, they were often determined to reap as much pleasure as possible from what they saw as a small allotment of time for earthly existence.[40] Considering their association with an increasingly sybaritic social and material culture, knights who had risen from the ranks of the newly wealthy would rarely measure up to St. Bernard's austere chivalric ideal of the devout, self-denying crusader. Such knights, furthermore, would in all likelihood be reluctant warriors at best, being loath to hasten the arrival of their already impending demise.

In *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, Chaucer used satire to illustrate the degeneration of chivalric virtue in late medieval England as a result of well-to-do commoners ascending to the rank of knighthood. The standards for attaining the rank of knight might be considered relatively lax since property qualifications became sufficient for the achievement of knighthood in 1247. The function of knights thereby became less military and more administrative as merchants and burgesses purchased their entry into the knightly caste. The traditions of knighthood suffered a devastating blow in the middle of the fourteenth century as a result of the Black Death. As in other parts of Europe, the population of England was decimated, and the new economy and mindset that predominated after the plague proved unable to sustain the hierarchical traditions to which people of all castes had long been accustomed. As the pawns of society captured knighthood, so did the ideals of chivalry in late Medieval England begin to wane.

---

[39] Howard, *War and Chivalry*, 111.
[40] Ziegler, *The Black Death,* 275.

<u>Bibliography</u>

<u>Primary Sources</u>

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "Sir Thopas."
In *The Canterbury Tales,* ed. Jill Mann, 501-509.
London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005.

<u>Journal Sources</u>

Davis, Dave S., "Hereditary Emblems: Material Culture in the Context of Social Change." *Journal of Anthropological History* 4, (1985): 149-176.

Linn, Irving, "The Arming of Sir Thopas."
Modern Language Notes 51, no. 5 (Spring 1936): 300-311.

Vale, Juliet, "Knightly Piety."
History Today 37, no. 11 (Fall 1987): 12-17.

<u>Book Sources</u>

Barr, Helen. *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England.*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Bisson, Lillian M. *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World.*
New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Bolton, Jim. "'The World Upside Down' Plague as an Agent of Economic and Social Change."
In *The Black Death in England,* ed. Phillip Lindley and Mark Ormrod,
17-78. Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1996.

Brewer, Derek. *Chaucer and His World.*
London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1978.

Charbonneau, Joanne A. "Sir Thopas."
In *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales Volume II,*
ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel,
649-715. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005.

Coss, Peter. *The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400.*
Dover: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1993.

Coulton, G. G. *Chaucer and His England,* 7th ed.
London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1946.

Craik, T. W. *The Comic Tales of Chaucer.*
London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1964.

Day, J. F. R. "Losing One's Character: Heralds and the Decline of English
Knighthood from the Later Middle Ages to King James I."
In *Chivalry, Knighthood, and War in the Middle Ages,* ed. Susan J. Ridard, 97-
116.
Sewanee Medieval Studies, Number Nine.
Sewanee: University of the South Press, 1999.

Halliday, F. E. *Chaucer and His World.*
London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1968.

Howard, Donald R. *Chaucer and the Medieval World.*
London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987.

Kaeuper, Richard W. *Holy Warrior: Religious Ideology of Chivalry.*
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

Keen, Maurice. *Chivalry.*
London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

Laing, Jennifer and Lloyd. *Medieval Britain.*
London: Herbert Press, 1996.

Loomis, Laura Hibbard. "Sir Thopas."
In *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales,*
ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, 486-559.
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1941.

Mann, Jill. *Chaucer and the Medieval Estates Satire.*
Cambridge: Cambridge at the University Press, 1973.

Nicholas, David. *Medieval Flanders.*
London and New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1992.

Platt, Colin. *King Death.*
Buffalo and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.

Rudorff, Raymond. *The Knights and World.*
London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1974.

Strickland, Matthew. *War and Chivalry.*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Wade, W. Cecil. *The Symbols of Heraldry.*
London: George Redway, 1898.

Ziegler, Philip. *The Black Death.*
New York: The John Day Company, 1969.

Ziegler, Philip. *The Black Death,* 3rd ed.

Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 2003.