

## Laughing at Knights: Representations of Humour in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, *Lybeaus Desconus* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*

### *Şövalyelere Gülmek: Sir Perceval of Galles, Sir Beues of Hamtoun, Lybeaus Desconus ve Geoffrey Chaucer'in Sir Thopas'ın Hikayesi'nde Mizah Betimlemeleri*

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**Abstract:** Romance conventions, motifs and archetypes blend in order to appeal to the moral concerns of the romance audience. In particular, chivalric romances are heroic narratives adapted to English feudalism and the Christian faith, either to depict a knight's moral progress or the aristocratic way of life; therefore, romance would seem to be the last place one would look for humour. Much of the humour in medieval romance is the effect of the exaggeration of heroic expressions and deeds, which then becomes mocking and ridiculous rather than heroic. This article concentrates on the representations of humour in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, *Lybeaus Desconus* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*. It discusses what makes these romances humorous, how the romance heroes are presented as laughable figures, while it argues the function of humour in these romances. The romance heroes and situations are compared, and they are presented in detail with specific examples from these romances. Romance as a humorous genre is discussed as to if its use is for humour as a means of laughter, for satire or for emphasis upon the idea of chivalry. By arguing the humorous nature of these romances, this article discusses how romance -the genre of noble characters- is ridiculed and becomes ordinary, while the virtues it represents are highlighted.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Middle English Romance, Humour, *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*

**Öz:** Romans gelenekleri, motifleri ve ilk örnekleri romans okuyucu/dinleyici kitlesinin manevi değerlerine hitap edebilmek amacıyla birbirleriyle uyum içindedir. Özellikle şövalyelik temalı romanslar İngiliz derebeylik düzenine ve Hıristiyanlık inancına bir şövalyenin ahlaki gelişim sürecini ya da soyluların hayatını tasvir etmek için uyarlanmış kahramanlık anlatılarıdır; bu nedenle, romans içerisinde mizah aranacak son yerdir. Ortaçağ romanslarındaki mizahın çoğu kahramanlık ifadelerinin ya da kahramanca hareketlerin abartılmalarının etkisiyle kahramanlıktan çok alaycı ve gülünç hale gelmelerinin sonucudur. Bu makale *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, *Lybeaus Desconus* ve Geoffrey Chaucer'in *Sir Thopas'ın Hikayesi* eserlerindeki mizah betimlemelerine odaklanmaktadır. Adı geçen romanslarda mizahın işlevini tartışırken, bu romanslara mizah katan öğeleri ve romans kahramanlarının mizahi figürler olarak sunumlarını ele almaktadır. Böylelikle, romans karakterleri ve durumları karşılaştırılmakta ve romanslardan belirli örnekler verilerek ayrıntılı bir şekilde sunulmaktadır. Romansın edebi bir tür olarak mizahı kahkaha, hiciv ya da şövalyelik erdemlerinin vurgusu olarak ele alıp almadığı da tartışmanın konusudur. Belirtilen romansların mizahi nitelikleri üzerinde durularak, bu makale - soylu şahsiyetlerin edebi türü olan - romansın nasıl tiye alındığını ve sıradanlaştığını, ancak temsil ettiği erdemlere nasıl dikkat çekildiğini ele almaktadır.

**Keywords:** Orta İngilizce Romans, Mizah, *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, Geoffrey Chaucer'in *Sir Thopas'ın Hikayesi*

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This article is a revised and extended version of the paper delivered in October 2012 entitled "Laughing at Knights: Representations of Humour in Middle English Metrical Romances" at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Akşit Göktürk Conference: "Humour in Literature" organised by İstanbul University, İstanbul, Turkey.

The Christian Middle Ages produced a literature of chivalry through romance highlighting human virtues mainly through praising physical endeavour. Accordingly, medieval romance drew attention to human virtues such as loyalty, generosity and honour, the codes of chivalry that are attributed mostly to the noble males of medieval society. The Christian medieval chivalric code placed the Christian God, knightly honour and the beloved lady above all else, and stipulated that a knight shall serve these three without reservation. In other words, a knight shall live up to the chivalric codes, be chaste, pious, brave and fond of his lover. In consequence, romance was a serious genre which conveyed realistic and important messages for a largely noble audience.

The diversity of the romances makes it difficult to make generalizations about them as a group as there are more than a hundred romances composed from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries in the forms of verse and prose which have different themes and provenances. Since it is difficult to identify the romance corpus entirely, romances are classified through employing various taxonomic strategies to offer a better understanding of their nature. These classifications are made by tracing the recurring themes, incidents or structures in the romances to reveal the compositional similarities and differences. They usually depend on which specific thematic or structural aspects of romances the modern editor wishes to highlight. Romances are classified in accordance with their being translations or adaptations, their audiences, their authorship, their textual communities, their being in prose or verse, their associations with other genres, on the basis of dominant and recurring features in generic and linguistic terms such as their matters (Rome, Britain, France, England) (Loomis 1924; Severs 1967; Barron 1987), meters and rhyme-schemes (tail-rhyme, alliterative), length (long or short), incidents and characters, date and area of composition (Barron 1987). As an alternative to all structure and motif-oriented taxonomies, *Floris and Blancheflour*, *Sir Degrevant*, *The Squire of Low Degree*, *The Tournament of Tottenham* and *The Feast of Tottenham* have been grouped as ‘Sentimental and Humorous Romances’ by Erik Kooper (2006).

Within all those taxonomies, the chivalric aspects and functions of medieval romances have been extensively studied by scholars (Gautier 1965; Kiernan 1973; Ramsey 1983; Fellows 1993; Goodman 1998; Brewer 2002; Radulescu 2010) however, the representations of humour in romances have been given little attention. There are few books examining humour in medieval English literature such as Don Lee Fred Nilsen’s *Humor in British Literature, from the Middle Ages to the Restoration: A Reference Guide*, which examines British literary humour during particular centuries in different chapters (1997). The origins of British humour in the Middle Ages is included only in one of its chapters. Lisa Perfetti’s *Women and Laughter in Medieval Comic Literature* is a study on humour and gender, pairing laughter and feminism (2006). In addition to these, Thomas H. Broughton-Willett, in his *Imperfect Analogies: Parody in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, focuses particularly on Chaucer’s use of parody (1992).

Humour in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas* have been studied separately in some articles and book chapters by several scholars with an emphasis mainly upon the parody of the generic features of the romance genre or of the protagonist himself. For instance, Caroline D. Eckhardt focuses on the naïve hero by comparing him to a “country bumpkin” (1974, 205) and presents his change from youth into manhood, presenting it as a bit of fun to read. Yin Liu considers *Sir Perceval of Galles* as a parody of chivalry and states that the romance “directs its humour not at the naïve hero, but at the chivalric ideal itself” (2001, 79), and mainly concentrates on Sir Perceval’s clothing and armour. In addition, Sian Echard compares Sir Perceval to the rude hero in Chrétien de Troyes’s

*Conte Del Graal* by defining Sir Perceval as a “lumpish hero” (1996, 63). Myra Seaman’s discussion of *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* as a parody is limited to the gender discourse of the romance (2001). While there is no article or book chapter on humour or parody in *Lybeaus Desconus*, there are various articles and book chapters concerning these issues in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*. Rhiannon Purdie’s exploration of the nature of the Chaucerian parody is based upon the layout used for the tail-rhyme stanzas, concentrating on the structure of the romance (2005). E. S. Kooper likens the same romance to an inverted “*hallow mirror*” reflecting back upon its audience (1984, 147). Ann S. Haskell, on the other hand, presents Sir Thopas as a puppet and a mock-hero and she mainly concentrates on the artificial aspects of the hero (1975). William W. Lawrence, in his article on the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, puts emphasis upon the satirical aspects concerning medieval knighthood (1935). Elizabeth Roth Eddy compares the parody in the tale with William Dunbar’s poem “*Sir Thomas Norny*” (1971). Kathy Cawsey focuses on the positions of the audiences and compares the responses of the medieval and the modern audiences, concluding that “*where the modern one must depend on close reading to perceive the ironic distance between Chaucer the Pilgrim and Chaucer the Narrator, the medieval audience would have readily noted the disparity between the two*” (2011, 82).

The majority of medieval romances lack humour –though some have comic scenes such as *The Tale of Gamelyn* in order to make the romance more acceptable to its audience because otherwise an outlaw’s rebellion against justice, though corrupt, would not have been tolerated. Humorous details may also be added to romances so that the severe language of the courtly romance is overwhelmed by the humorous overtone. Indeed, the use of humour in chivalric romances, although not commonly employed by romance writers, is edifying in terms of emphasising the chivalric ideals, in addition to parodying its literary conventions. Within this context, this article focuses upon the humorous representations of the chivalric codes in four Middle English romances *Sir Perceval of Galles* (c. 1440) and *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* (c. 1324), both about the maturation process of a naïve knight, *Lybeaus Desconus* (c. 1350) in which the eponymous knight is an illegitimate young man in search of his identity and his lineage, and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*, a tale that appears in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* published in 1387. The tale is a parody of romance conventions and representations. Therefore, this article differs from the aforementioned scholarly works which concern either the representation of humour in medieval English literature in general or only within a particular romance. Further, this article intends to explore the function of humour in multiple romance texts which have not been classified as humorous romances. It discusses how humorous representations highlight the chivalric virtues, while ridiculing the romance characters and situations. Thus, it argues for the edifying purpose of laughter by comparing the humorous representations in these serious romances from different corpuses and dates of composition.

It is appropriate to define romance in relation to other genres in order to reveal in what sense it employs the conventions of other genres and to what extent humour is applicable to the romance tradition. Indeed, romance is a ‘serious’ genre which conveys realistic and important messages for a mainly noble audience. In the fourteenth century, romances in Middle English became mostly popular and non-courtly as they addressed themselves primarily to a lower or lower-middle-class audience, while the fifteenth century romance was “*directed at a more sophisticated bourgeois audience*” (Pearsall 1988, 11-12). In the fifteenth century, several significant manuscript collections including romances were owned by families of gentry, demonstrating the popularity of romance among this class (Hudson 1989, 45). This variety of audiences brings about mixed representations in the presentation of chivalric ideals since it addresses different social classes by putting an emphasis upon the same ideals.

Romance is a very convenient genre to embody diversity in representations. Most English romance manuscripts are miscellanies, suggesting “*generic intertextuality*” (Whetter 2008, 42). This flexible textual transmission allowed romance authors to adapt or rewrite each other’s works (Finlayson 1980, 52; Boffey 2007, 116-117). Therefore, it is usually difficult to differentiate genres with standard definitions and group romance and hagiographical texts separately in the same manuscripts, because almost three-fifths of the existing thirteenth and fourteenth century romances occur in manuscript sources alongside both didactic and religious works (Brewer 2004, 53). This homogenous arrangement of texts blurs the distinction between the heroes of the romances and the saints of the hagiographies (Mehl 1968, 18). The vagueness concerning the generic difference of romance from hagiography is also apparent when making comparisons with folk tales and chronicles. Supernatural elements commonly used in romance are associated with the genre’s being a descendant of folk tale (Mehl 1968, 57; Frye 1976, 15) while its presentation of a particular historical period and its didactic intention to discuss political values through exemplary heroes are common features it also shares with the chronicles (Mehl 1968, 20-21). The diversity of generic attributions enriches the definition of romance as a genre, despite making its generic boundaries more complicated.

The generic intertextuality provides romance with a wealth of subject matter from which to draw its material, and romance derives from other medieval genres such as *chanson de geste*, epic, hagiography, chronicle and folk tale in order to formulate its subject matters. However, “*the chief parts are played by knights, famous kings, or distressed ladies, acting most often under the impulse of love, religious faith, or, in many, mere desire for adventure*” (Everett 1955, 3). Therefore, while romance involves armed combat to demonstrate knightly prowess, it celebrates heroic ideas, ideals and adventures as the successor to the epic and *chanson de geste* (Ker 1931, 3). Although Diana Childress draws attention to the edifying nature of merely pious romances, she states that “*instead of entertaining their audiences with the exploits of admirable men, the authors of the secular legends aim to teach moral lessons*” (1978, 319). The use of humour in chivalric romances also has indirectly this same edifying function. Humour, although not commonly employed by romance writers, is edifying in terms of emphasising the chivalric ideals, in addition to parodying the literary conventions of romance.

For instance, chivalric romances are heroic narratives adapted to English feudalism and Christianity, and “*the adventures are not there for their own sake, but to call forth the very essence of the knight’s ideal of manhood*” (Gibbs 1966, 8) which are didactic for the hero and also for the romance audience, either to depict his moral progress or the aristocratic way of life (Finlayson 1980, 57-59). In respect to its chivalric aspect, romance is defined as a “*narrative about knightly prowess*” (Severs 1967, 11), “*a story of adventure generally involving a considerable amount of armed combat [in which] ...love may or may not be an ingredient; when it is, it is often the occasion or the excuse for knightly prowess*” (Baugh 1967, 1-2). Commonly, the essential plot of romance is a quest of an individual knight for adventure, which is idealised and exemplary for its courtly audience; and romance attempts to civilise the violence included in the romance, and “*by a belief in the innate qualities of inherited blood it justified power as the legitimate expression of nobility*” (Welsh 2005, 153). Therefore, “*romance would seem to be the last place one would look for comedy and humour. The emphasis in romance on individual quest runs counter to comedy’s concern with the individual as a social being*” (Welsh 2005, 153-154). According to Maurice Charney:

“*Common*” people and common affairs of mundane life are the typical subjects of comedy, but not of romance. An idealized view of life, however, is

*easily parodied by the more realistic views of comedy, and humour never can be expelled from the antics of love and sexuality. Even bloody combat and violent death can have their comic absurdities. Most romances end happily, which means they are comedies in structure, both in the Aristotelian sense of a story of threats and obstacles overcome and in the more mythic sense of a story of the fulfilment of desire and the beginnings of a new life* (Welsh 2005, 154).

Much of the humour in medieval romance is the effect of exaggeration of heroic expressions and deeds, which turn out to be mocking and ridiculous. For instance, the humour in *Lybeaus Desconus* originates as a result of the naivety of the hero, who is unaware of his inexperience in chivalric deeds, but who acts as the most courageous knight at King Arthur's court:

*I am a child unknowthe  
And come out of the southe  
And wolde be made a knyght;  
Lorde, I pray thee nowthe,  
With thi mery mouthe,  
To graunte me anone right.”  
Than saide Arthure the kynge,  
“To me childe, without dwellinge:  
Whate is thi name aflight?  
For never sethe I was born,  
Sawe I never me beforne  
So semely to my sight”* (Salisbury & Weldon 2013, ll. 49-60).

In the romance, the young and unknown hero goes to King Arthur's court in order to be knighted, and King Arthur agrees to invest in him and gives him the name 'Lybeaus Desconus' (the Fair Unknown). When Elene and her dwarf arrive to ask Arthur to rescue the captive Lady of Synadowne, King Arthur grants Lybeaus Desconus's request for adventure and sends him on the quest. The eponymous knight triumphs over a series of knights and giants and liberates the Lady of Synadowne, after which he unlocks the secret of his noble parentage.

Central to this romance, particularly at its beginning, is Lybeaus Desconus's naivety, despite his eagerness to fight, which makes him a laughable hero. Early in the romance, when the Lady of Synadowne's messengers invoke King Arthur's assistance to save her from the wicked clerks' captivity, Lybeaus Desconus bravely accepts the challenge and willingly sets off to release the Lady, despite the Lady's reluctance since she is aware that Lybeaus Desconus is an inexperienced 'child' rather than a 'knight', though he pretends to be the bravest knight in King Arthur's court:

*The mayde began to chide  
And sayde, “Alas that tyde  
That I was heder i-sentt!  
Thy worde shall sprynge wide:  
Forlorne is thy pryde  
And thi lose shentt,  
When thou wilt send a childe  
That is witles and wylde  
To dele eny doughty dent,  
And haste knyghtis of renoun,*

*Syr Persyfal and Syr Gawyn,  
That ben abled in turment*" (Salisbury & Weldon 2013, ll. 178-189).

The romance lacks any farcical specificity; however, the eponymous hero's eagerness for the quest with ignorance of its perils, his participation in this heroic adventure despite his inexperience in armed combat, in addition to the obscurity of his noble identity which is quite unconventional in the heroic sense, make him a humorous hero:

*Syr Lybeus than answerde,  
"Yett was I never aferde  
For dred of wordys awe.  
To fyght with spere and swerde  
Somdell have I lernede.  
There many man hathe be slawe,  
That man that fleyth by wey or strete,  
I wolde the devyll had broke his nek,  
Wherever he hym take;* (Salisbury & Weldon 2013, ll. 202-210).

His humorous representation is not only for comic relief, or the indication of the multiplicity of the romance audience in terms of class (since humour is mostly associated with the lower-class audience), but a structural aspect for emphasis of the idea of chivalry. Chivalric ideals involving eagerness for the armed combat, assistance to the lady in need, bravery against the unknown and unpredictable evil are all celebrated through the hero's laughable chivalric stance and the task to which he has assigned himself. His glory in the battle on his way to rescue the Lady against Sir William, William's cousins, the giants, Sir Otys, Jeffron le Freudos and Sir Lanwarde, and his humility in rejecting the goods offered to him in return for his victories but sending them to King Arthur, reveal that he is more willing to fight to punish the wicked and relieve the pain of the victim than to prove his physical strength, all of which are the prerequisites of chivalric ideal.

There are also other humorous details in the romance which have to do with Lybeaus Desconus's life in the forest and his unknown background. Contrary to the display of the noble lineage in many romances in order to celebrate the hero's distinguished background, the eponymous hero lacks a proper name and home. He is, indeed, of noble background because he is Sir Gawain's son, which is unknown to him. He is represented quite unconventionally since he lives in the forest with his mother, and he is very close to her. Rather than having armour of his own, he clads himself in the armour of a knight he found lying dead:

*The childe wente him forthe to playe,  
Of dere to have som game  
He fond a knyght there he lay,  
In armes stoute and gaye,  
Slayne and made ful tame* (Salisbury & Weldon 2013, ll. 32-36).

When the child kneels in front of King Arthur, he says he does not know his name, but his mother calls him Bewfiȝ, and he never thinks to ask his mother what his true name is:

*His moder clepte him Bewfiz,  
And none other name,  
And this childe was so nyse  
He asked never, i-wysse,  
Whate hight of his dame* (Salisbury & Weldon 2013, ll. 26-30).

A knight who does not know his name bewilders the king, and he names him Lybeaus Desconus, which means 'the fair unknown'. These absurdities in the romance, therefore, make this particular romance a parody of the conventional representations in medieval chivalric romances.

Another romance parodying the stereotypical chivalric representations of a knight is *Sir Perceval of Galles*, in which Sir Perceval lives in a forest with his mother who retreats there after her husband is murdered in the tournament held to celebrate their son's birth. Due to the fact that she is unwilling to let her son live in the court since he may be slain in a tournament like his father, Sir Perceval is totally a stranger to the courtly way of life. He wears goatskin, plays with animals and hunts until he accidentally meets three knights of King Arthur (who is in fact his uncle), and he wants to become a knight like them. With their offer, he decides to go to King Arthur's court and ask to become knighted. Certain scenes in particular parody the romance genre, such as Perceval as a country boy wearing goatskin and riding his pregnant mare into Arthur's court to be made a knight:

*He went forthe to his mere,  
Tuke with hym his schorte spere,  
Lepe on lofte, as he was ere;  
His way rydes he* (Braswell 1995, ll. 477-480).

The plot combines the familiar romance elements of love, quest for adventure, supernatural elements, fight against the heathens, single combats, desire for chivalric display and marriage. However, there are several humorous scenes when Perceval talks to his mother, when he meets the knights, when he enters King Arthur's court and he attempts to burn the corpse of the Red Knight. He seeks God and thinks that one of the three knights he meets may be God:

*Thay were clothede all in grene;  
Siche hade he never sene:  
Wele he wened that thay had bene  
The Godd that he soghte.  
He said, "Wilke of yow alle three  
May the grete Godd bee  
That my moder tolde mee,  
That all this werlde wroghte?"* (Braswell 1995, ll. 277-284).

He is very naïve and he lacks courtly manners in his speech and actions. He thinks all horses are called mares and all knights have their own mares for riding. He rides too close to King Arthur that his mare almost kisses the king. In a daring way, he threatens King Arthur by telling that if he does not knight him he will kill him:

*He saide, "Faire childe and free,  
Stonde still besyde mee,  
And tell me wythen that thou bee,  
And what thou will here."  
Than said the fole of the filde,  
"I ame myn awnn modirs childe,  
Comen fro the woddes wylde  
Till Arthure the dere.  
Yisterday saw I knyghtis three:  
Siche on sall thou make mee  
On this mere byfor the,*

*Thi mete or thou schere!*" (Braswell 1995, ll. 501-512).

Perceval is proud of being his mother's son, -unlike a knight who is proud of his noble father-, and he aspires for a chivalric life, although his mother attempts to keep him away from armed combat so that he will be invulnerable. However, Perceval's involvement in King Arthur's court, his bold yet humorous challenge and threat to Arthur, his willingness to be knighted and participation in the armed combat bring him closer to the chivalric way of life, and humorously associate Perceval with any man who aspires to nobility:

*Than sayde Peceyvell the free,  
nd this Arthure the Kyng bee,  
Luke he a knyghte make mee:  
I rede at it be swaa!"*  
*Thofe he unborely were dyghte,  
He sware by mekill Goddes myghte:  
"Bot if the Kyng make me knyghte,  
I sall hym here slaa!"* (Braswell 1995, ll. 521-528).

Perceval, with the courage of ignorance, threatens King Arthur and declares that he is going to slay the king unless he knights him, without knowing that he is already King Arthur's nephew. In both *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Perceval of Galles*, Lybeaus Desconus and Perceval are not only mocked to parody the romance representations or chivalric ideals, but also to emphasise them through the representations of extraordinary romance heroes, who are inherently noble, yet unaware of their nobilities. The celebration of the chivalric ideals and the association of these ideals with the noble class are justified through the bold fight and glory of both heroes and the revelation of their noble identities towards the end of both romances.

Different from *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Perceval of Galles*, in *Sir Beves of Hamtoun*, it is not primarily the knight but the chivalric situation which is humorously presented. On the other hand, the romance does not parody the conventional romance representations. It is, rather, a reminder of the chivalric ideals, particularly in terms of the issues of fidelity, loyalty and sacrifice. Beves's horse Arundel becomes the embodiment of the ideals which are expected to be represented within the chivalric circle. Beves extraordinarily exiles himself in order to save his horse from death after King Edgar's son is kicked and killed by his horse, Arundel:

*"Nai," queth Beves, "for no catele  
Nel ich lese min hors Arondele  
Ac min hors for to were  
Ingelonde ich wile forswere;  
Min eir ich wile make her  
This gode knight, min em Saber."  
In that maner hii wer at one,  
And Beves is to Hamtoun gone;  
(Herzman, Drake & Salisbury 1999, ll. 3575-3582).*

This happens after the King's son attempts to untie and take Arundel, when Beves refuses to offer him the horse as a gift. The King's barons decide to kill the horse, but Beves exiles himself from England with his wife Josian to compensate for the sentence, choosing to suffer instead of witnessing his horse's death. This exploits the trope of the hero/horse relationship in romance in order to tie the person of the hero to the geographical locality. Through his surrogate, the horse, Beves becomes personally associated with the place, in this case Arundel. With his sacrifice,



Beves becomes an embodiment of reliability and trust, which are chivalric ideals, and proves that loyalty and love need sacrifice, without expecting anything in return, as in the case of Beves's suffering instead of his horse. Moreover, Beves's sacrifice is proposed as a reaction to political and social injustice, jealousy and deception inflicted by those who rule. His willingness to go into exile away from England in order to compensate for his horse's death sentence and choosing to suffer instead of witnessing his horse's death is humorous since a knight is equated to a horse through taking on its punishment; yet, his willingness to suffer to save his horse, *de facto*, highlights the virtues all knights shall live up to. Beves's reaction is modest and non-violent; yet, he tries to right a wrong, and this celebrates a hero whom many members of the gentry shall aspire to by paying attention to the significance and morals of personal loyalties.

Apart from the use of humour in the above mentioned romances in order to emphasise the virtues of chivalry and somehow to parody the stereotypical representations of romance heroes, Geoffrey Chaucer's humorous representation in *Tale of Sir Thopas* is an obvious parody of romance as a genre, because it is explicitly a parody of the romance conventions and representations. The humorous representation is uninterrupted throughout the text, although it is not completed with a proper ending by Chaucer. With the absurdities in *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Chaucer has written a mockery, a low burlesque, designed to ridicule through imitation of the style and subject matter by handling an elevated matter in a trivial manner and often for the purpose of satire.

The humorous description of Sir Thopas is pervasive and a parody in order to satirise the ideals of chivalry within the body of Sir Thopas. The tale gets its comic effect by manipulating the heroic world of a knight and through exaggerating the heroic utterances and incidents; therefore it becomes a literary as also a social satire by directing it against the world of heroes, actions and sentiments that are represented in romances. The deliberate exaggerations and the distortions of the heroic world through humorous representations of the hero turn the tale into parody. It is however, wrong to assume that Chaucer satirises romance as a form of literature through humour; as a matter of fact, what Chaucer criticises through humour is the exaggerated style and diction of the romances. As J. A. Burrow points out, "[t]he object of the joke is not romance itself, but the popular English varieties of romance: old poems such as *Guy of Warwick* and *Bevis of Hampton*, and recent derivatives such as *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Launfal*" (1984, 54). It is also mentioned in *Tale of Sir Thopas* as follows:

*Men speken of romances of prys,  
Of Horn child and of Ypotys,  
Of Beves and sir Gy,  
Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour --  
But sir Thopas, he bereth the flour  
Of roial chivalry!* (Benson 2008, ll. 897-902).

Through the references to these particular chivalric romances, it is obvious that Chaucer knows these romances and that he is parodying the conventional representations in them, even with the incomplete ending of *Tale of Sir Thopas*. Since the tale is interrupted by the Host before it is concluded by Chaucer the pilgrim, it is unknown whether it has a stereotypical romance ending -which is mostly the marriage of the knight and his lover- or the ending was unconventional and unexpected; yet, it includes all the stereotypical literary conventions of a medieval romance such as the description of the knight, his riding to seek adventure, his love for a fairy mistress though he does not know who she is, the romance landscape- a forest-, the encounter with a giant, the feast and the arming; yet, each of them is subverted. Sir Thopas's name is more

appropriate for a girl, as well as the description of his complexion with a white face, red lips and lady-like nose and looks:

*Sire Thopas wax a doghty swayn;  
Whit was his face as payndemayn,  
His lippes rede as rose;  
His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,  
And I yow telle in good certayn  
He hadde a semely nose.*

*His heer, his berd was lyk saffroun,  
That to his girdel raughte adoun;  
His shoon of cordewane.  
Of Brugges were his hosen broun,  
His robe was of syklatoun,  
That coste many a jane (Benson 2008, ll. 724-735).*

Every detail related to Sir Thopas is uncourtly and inelegant. The sports he is excellent in are archery and wrestling which are lower class activities and more proper for a yeoman or a miller than a knight. He carries a grey hawk on his hand and a grey hawk is in fact carried by a yeoman, not by a knight:

*He koude hunte atwide deer,  
And ride an haukyng for river  
With grey goshawk on honde;  
Therto he was a good arheer;  
Of wrastlyng was ther noon his peer,  
Ther anyram shal stonde (Benson 2008, ll. 736-741).*

The arming of the hero is a perfect example of the mixing of the plausible and the absurd. What is ridiculous is the presentation of the details with modifications, exaggerations and oddities such as the white surcoat with no coat of arms:

*And over that his cote-armour  
As whit as is a lilye flour,  
In which he wol debate.  
His sheeld was al of gold so reed,  
And therinne was a bores heed,  
A charbocle bisyde;  
And there he swoor on ale and breed  
How that the geaunt shal be deed,  
Bityde what bityde!  
His jambeux were of quyrboilly,  
His swerdes shethe of yvory,  
His helm of latoun bright;  
His sadel was of rewel boon,  
His brydel as the sonne shoon,  
Or as the moone light.  
His spere was of fyn ciprees,  
That bodeth werre, and nothyng pees,  
The heed ful sharpe ygrounde;*

*His steede was al dappull gray,  
It gooth an ambil in the way  
Ful softly and rounde  
In londe.*

*Loo, lordes myne, heere is a fit!* (Benson 2008, ll. 866-888).

The shield is made of gold, so soft and heavy; the leathern, not steel, greaves; the sword-sheath is made of ivory yet no sword is mentioned; the helmet is made of a cheap metal, latten. Without sword or spurs, Sir Thopas goes riding off on a dapple-grey steed, a gentle horse, which is more suited for a female (Pearsall 1994, 163-164). His quest for his love is interrupted by the giant, Sir Oliphaunt, whom he meets in the forest while riding. Sir Olifaunt has three heads, which makes Sir Thopas afraid of him, and he makes excuses in order not to fight him by saying that he will come back next day with his armour:

*The child seyde, "Also moote I thee,  
Tomorwe wol I meete with thee,  
Whan I have myn armoure;* (Benson 2008, ll. 817-819).

Indeed, Sir Thopas escapes followed by the slingshots of the giant. Apparently, Sir Thopas is not heroic but cowardly and effeminate; thus, he falls short of the knightly ideal through his endeavour to be a perfect knight due to his lower-class birth, effeminacy, bourgeois tastes, appearance and uncourtly accomplishments, all of which are in total contrast with the ideal representations in chivalric romances. William W. Lawrence rightfully suggests that *Tale of Sir Thopas* is a caricature because:

*[It is] intended primarily for the simpler middle-class folk who could read no French, or not read at all. In these pieces courtly elegancies are often neglected. Probably Chaucer felt this, and deliberately made his carpet knight plebeian. It is further urged that 'such a poem would have been highly appropriate, during the visit of the Flemish embassy [in 1383]4 [...] or immediately after it. Such a satire would certainly then have had a point and an appeal which it could hardly have had at any time later'. This raises two difficulties: first, is it likely that Chaucer looked upon the Flemings at the time of this embassy as fit objects for satire; and second, is it likely that Sir Thopas was composed as early as 1383-84?* (1935, 87).

Apart from being a fourteenth century political and social satire, it is apparent that the tale is a parody of the literary conventions of the romance genre. Chaucer experiments with the romance conventions, attempts and indeed achieves the re-contextualising of the stereotypical representations through a romance hero through humorous depictions. Chaucer's experimentation with romance makes romance humorous and unusual, plebeian and incomplete. Unlike romances read and listened to for their didacticism for the particular audience, Chaucer's 'new' romance is interrupted by the Host because of its absurdity and for being a waste of time. When the Host interrupts, he says nothing about the romances, the descriptions of Sir Thopas, the diction and the style of Chaucer. In other words, he complains about none of the usual things the romance critics have chosen for commentary, except for the form and the effect of the rhyme. He tells "*thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!*" (l. 930). "*This may wel be rym doggerel!*" (l. 925). The Host here invents a new word which means "*poetry badly written or ridiculous, sometimes because the writer has not intended it to be serious*" (Gaylord 1979, 85). In that sense, Chaucer not only breaks the conventional seriousness but also the nobility and happy ending of the

traditional romance contexts. Hence, Chaucer's romance becomes absurd and inappropriate for a noble audience; yet on the other hand, it reminds the romance poets that the over exaggeration of chivalric representations is subjected to being boring and waste of time for their audience.

Consequently, while *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* and *Lybeaus Desconus* highlight the chivalric virtues through humour, and partly and indirectly parody the representations of romance heroes, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* directly parodies the representations of these virtues through exaggerated expressions and incidents in romances, in addition to the language and the style adopted by the romance poets. Chaucer's tale is an example for how not to produce a romance. Ironically, his work becomes absurd, although he attempts to criticise the romance representations, style and language. Although the function of humour is to parody all the conventional literary elements of the contemporary English popular romances in *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Sir Perceval of Galles* and particularly in *Sir Thopas's Tale*; *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* employs a hero and an incident which romance conventions take for granted, but presents it humorously in order to emphasise the significance of the virtue of loyalty and sacrifice. While humour functions to parody the romance conventions, it is also utilised so that the chivalric virtues and ideals are highlighted and adopted by the members of the nobility and the middle-class romance audience who aspire to be noble. In other words, through the subtle humour, it is not only the romance conventions which are parodied but also the romance poets who are criticised; and more importantly it is the audience who are conditioned to think deeper upon the points emphasised through their humorous representations. The more they laugh at the knights and their treatment, the more they understand what they stand for, and when they take humour in romances seriously, they realise the morals provided by these romances.

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