

THE STANZA-FORMS OF *SIR THOPAS*

It has long been recognized that the verse form of *Sir Thopas* is a definite feature of the humor of that delightful burlesque, but the exact meaning of it seems to have escaped attention. Some have seen in the prevailing stanzaic form a direct imitation of the stanza found in many of the popular romances and have discovered in the variations an intention on the part of Chaucer to satirize the helplessness and awkwardness of the authors of these romances, who, it is asserted, were unable to preserve the stanza with which they began and allowed it to degenerate into other easier forms and even into mere couplets. Kölbing (*Englische Studien*, XI, 496 ff.) rightly rejected this theory and suggested instead that by the variation of stanza Chaucer meant no more than to exemplify the various meters found in the popular romances of his day: "Ch. mit diesem Strophenwechsel nichts weiter beabsichtigt hat, als die verschiedenen metren zu charakterisiren, in welche romantische stoffe zu seiner zeit behandelt wurden."

In support of his view Kölbing exhibited the poem as containing eight stanzaic forms: (1) a six-line tail-rhyme stanza *aabccb*, vss. 116-21, 146-51, 152-57, 164-69, 180-85, 186-91, 192-97, 198-203; (2) the same, with the scheme *abab*, vss. 13-18, 19-24, 25-30, 31-36, 37-42, 43-48, 49-54, 55-60, 61-66, 67-72, 73-78, 122-27, 128-33, 134-39, 140-45; (3) a twelve-line tail-rhyme stanza *aabaabccbcb*, vss. 1-12; (4) a stanza with the scheme *aabybbg* (γ indicating a single-stressed line rhyming with *g*, the second member of the cauda), vss. 79-85; (5) a stanza *aabccbiddg*, vss. 170-79; (6) a stanza *abaabyccg*, vss. 96-105; (7) a stanza *abaabyaag*, vss. 86-95; (8) a stanza *aabccbiccg*, vss. 106-15.

These statements are accurate, and at first sight seem to yield no further meaning than Kölbing deduced from them, namely, that Chaucer indulged himself in a considerable variety of stanzaic forms; but examined more closely, they may reveal something of Chaucer's intention and the spirit in which he wrote.

In the first place, we may observe that, distinct as are these eight types, they are all mere variations of a single fundamental stanza, *aabccb*, *a* and *c* having four stresses and *b* three. This scheme expresses all the demands as to stanza structure which the poet felt laid upon him. If he gave more than this, he gave it as heaping measure, and we may well believe that he took a certain pride in this generosity, just as he liked from time to time to bestow on his readers *rimes riches*, although the ordinary rhymes were all that he stood bound for. It was an added beauty, a hint of skill, a suggestion of hoards of untouched wealth. That the poet may, in a particular poem, have chosen to give us more stanzas which show this excess of ornament than stanzas which merely satisfy the minimal requirements should not justify us in regarding him as under obligation for more than the minimum. Thus when Chaucer gives us a large number of stanzas of the form *abaab*, we are not justified in taking this as the normal form and in feeling that every stanza which has different rhymes for the two sets of long lines is, by so much, a failure to attain the standard for which he was striving. The stanza is *aabccb*, and when this is attained, the poet has satisfied all legitimate demands.

The first variation or, as we may call it, gift of his generosity, is, as we have just seen, a greater richness in the rhymes of the longer lines, making them all rhyme together instead of merely in couplets. Of these we have seventeen as against eight of the standard form *aabccb*. An interesting variety of this, with an even more heaping measure of generosity in rhyme, is shown in vss. 1-12, where the poet joins together two stanzas of the richer type by carrying the rhyme of the short lines through the two stanzas and producing the rhyme-scheme *abaabccbcb*.

The next variation is of a different type, vss. 79-85. It consists in the introduction into the standard type or the first variation of a short single-stressed line, which, if rightly understood, serves as a mere flourish and does not essentially alter the stanza. The second couplet, it will be noted, does not rhyme with the first, and consequently we may be inclined for a moment to regard the stanza exclusive of the flourish as belonging to the standard type, that is, *aabccb*. But on closer examination it appears that the second couplet though it does not rhyme with the first, does take up the rhyme

which precedes it by two lines just as is the case in the scheme *aabaab*; and we may therefore fairly regard this stanza with the flourish as a variation upon *aabaab* rather than upon the normal *aabccb*. The test of this observation is to read the stanza:

An elf-queen wol I love, y-wis,
 For in this world no womman is
 Worthy to be my make
 In toune;
 Alle othere wommen I forsake,
 And to an elf-queen I me take
 By dale and eek by doune!

The effect is distinctly that of the resumption of a preceding rhyme after a playful flourish.

The remaining variations are all of the same nature, though the results when expressed schematically seem at first very different. They may be presented thus: (1) *abaabyaag* (vss. 86-95); (2) *aabaabyccg* (vss. 96-105); (3) *aabccbrycg* (vss. 106-15); (4) *aabccbryddg* (vss. 170-79). Any one of them will make clear the structure and meaning of all. Obviously what has occurred is simply that the conventional stanza (*aabaab*) has been completed before the introduction of the flourish, after which a half-stanza of the same type has been added. The only differences between the four variant forms of this group are found in the differing treatments of the rhymes of the couplets.

It seems clear that we have in *Sir Thopas* not a mere miscellaneous collection of stanzaic forms, but a set of variations upon a single form, apparently made for some definite purpose.

What was this purpose? We have already seen that it cannot have been to satirize the awkwardness and helplessness of the authors of romances. It cannot have been, as Kölbing suggested, that Chaucer wished to exemplify the various verse-forms used in the romances of his day; for he uses only a few forms, all of them, as we have seen, simple variants of a single type. As an effort to introduce in a single poem all the meters of the romances *Sir Thopas* would be such a failure as only the most cogent reasons could justify us in charging upon so skilled an artist as Chaucer. If it is an imitation of one particular romance, it is obvious that to have its proper effectiveness it ought to have been formed upon one of the most widely

known of the romances of the day. None of the extant romances could have served as the model—or shall we say, the object of parody?—and it is inconceivable that one so popular as the theory demands could have perished without leaving a trace of itself or any imitations. Again, it can hardly have been Chaucer's object merely to exhibit his versatility in stanza-forms; for, in that case he has been singularly unskilful. In the first place, the variety is, after all, not very great; in the second place, the variations are not introduced climactically, but rather without any discernible principle of arrangement.

What, then, was Chaucer's purpose? The reply has perhaps already suggested itself. *Sir Thopas* is not a bitter satire; it is a good-humored rollicking burlesque, a *tour de force* of high spirits, the brilliance of which has hardly yet been fully recognized. In no other poem can we so plainly and clearly see Chaucer at play, having no end of fun with the romances and his readers and himself. The ballades to Bukton and Scogan and even the joyous lament of the Clerk over the current scarcity of Griseldas are not to be compared with it for freedom and *abandon*. Every ridiculous feature of the tenth-rate romance is exploited with glee—its exaggerations, its love of insignificant detail, its prolixity, its capacity for consuming hours in "passing a given point." And the versification is marvelously adapted to the contents and the extravagantly mirthful mood. It has the appearance of rapid motion with very slight real advance, and here and there comes a wonderful flourish, a bit of *bravura*, that in a moment communicates to the reader a vivid sense of the frolicsome mood of the poet and the joyousness of his self-imposed task. If we may change our angle of vision and use a homely figure, the author seems, so far as his versification is concerned, like an old horse that after working all day is turned out in the evening into a fine pasture. Relieved of his burden and delighting in his freedom, he stretches his cramped legs and canters across the pasture, kicking up his heels from time to time in sheer exuberance of good feeling, and settling down again into his pleasant canter almost without breaking his stride.

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