

Cheuelere Assigne

(The Knight of the Swan)

anon

a late-fourteenth century Middle English verse romance

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This shortened Middle English version of the Old French romance Chevalier au Signe has been translated and retold from: Henry H Gibbs, 1868. The Romance of the Cheuelere Assigne. Published by N Trübner & Co. for the Early English Text Society. The text is found uniquely in British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii., dating to about 1460.

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Cheuelere Assigne

anon

fifteenth century

Alle weldynge god · whenne it is his wylle · wele he wereth his · werek with his owne honde · for ofte harmes were hente · þat helpe we ne myght · nere þe hynes of hym · þat lengeth in heuene – Almighty God defends us magnificently when he wishes; and we are often beset by troubles that we have no power to fight against and would be helpless but for the highness of he who dwells in heaven. I mention this because a lord once lived on an island called Lyor, a king called Oryens and he had a queen named Beatrice, who was a very beautiful lady, and a mother Matabryne who was a cause of much grief to himself and to many others, for she put all her trust in Satan. These were the closest relatives, as the book tells us, of the young Cheualere Assigne.

When it was time for them to find a place of their own, it says clearly in this book, King Oryens chose to live on this isle with his queen, whom he loved very much. But despite his love, he found it hard to be happy, for he had no heir to succeed him, no child to pass on the rule of his lands to, and it seemed to him that all his possessions might one day be lost. This made his heart very heavy.



As he and his young queen walked on a wall by themselves one day, hand in hand, the king looked down and saw a poor woman sitting at the castle gate. She had two young children who were obviously twins, and the sight of them caused tears to run down the king's cheeks as he turned towards his wife and with a great sigh, said: 'Do you see that shabbily-dressed woman over there? I bet those are twins she has given birth to; I would lay my head on it.' But the queen was not so impressed.

'Don't be too admiring,' she said. 'One man can father a single child on a woman but if he wants two babies at once, he needs two women for it or else it is a travesty, that's what I think. But every child has its own father, however many there may be!'

The king rebuked her for these harsh words, and when night fell, they went to bed. And that night, the king gave to his wife more than one child. The king was no fool and soon perceived that his wife was pregnant. He danced for joy and humbly thanked Our

Lord, for his love and for his blessing. But when his wife's pregnancy was nearing its full term, the only woman allowed near her was her cursed mother-in-law, Matabryne, who intended nothing but harm. When God desired that Beatrice should go into labour, Matabryne helped her to give birth to six healthy sons and a daughter, the seventh, all safely delivered. Each baby wore a silver chain around its neck. Matabryne laid the babies on a couch and sent for Marcus, who had served her for many years; she knew him to be a sensible and faithful man and she trusted him because of it.

'You must help me and be discrete,' she said. 'There is a deep river nearby. Throw all these babies into it. Then come back to the court as though nothing has happened, and you will be well rewarded for it, if you live.'

When Marcus heard these instructions, he cursed the day that such a harsh command should have been given to him, but nevertheless, didn't dare refuse to obey. The king, meanwhile, was waiting for some good news, but his mother Matabryne came to him and said things that caused him to worry instead. Then, as she passed a chamber door she saw seven puppies suckling a bitch. She took out a knife and killed the mother, threw the dead animal into a pit and took the puppies away with her, then came before the king and said: 'Son, come and reward your queen. See what she has produced.'

The king sighed, fearing the worst and believing everything that his mother was telling him. 'I suggest that you burn her,' his mother said as a horror unfolded before the king's eyes.

'She is my wedded wife and has never been unfaithful to me, I am sure, so God help me!' he replied.

'Ah, you are weak by nature and a miserable wretch,' his mother castigated him. 'Will you deny punishment to those who deserve it?'

'Madam, seize her yourself and do with her what you wish, but do it somewhere where I cannot see it.'

So his mother set off to where Beatrice lay recovering from childbirth, may God confound her. 'Get up, you wretched queen!' she shouted. 'You have beguiled my son and you will pay for it. You have taken lovers and let dogs have sex with you! First you will go to prison and then you shall be burnt.'

'Lady! Where are my dear children?' shrieked the young queen when she saw that they were not there. She groaned and at that very instant, two thugs burst into the chamber, seized her at Matabryne's command, took her to a deep dungeon, threw her in, bolted the door and left her there. They threw food down to her, and God provided more, as

The romance Cheuelere Assigne is a Middle English version of a tale that is told in an Old French romance, the Chevalier au Signe, or the Knight of the Swan. Another medieval version of this story was one upon which Richard Wagner based his opera Lohengrin. This Middle English retelling, which is in the form of an alliterative poem, was composed in the late fourteenth century and tells only the first part of a story which, in the Old French version, goes on to detail the ancestry of Godfrey de Bouillon, the first Christian king of Jerusalem. Elements of this story are also recorded by the Brothers Grimm in a fairy tale they named The Six Swans. This Middle English version of the tale is found in only one other manuscript: British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii., dating to about 1460.

she remained in that dark hole for eleven years. And she sent many a fine prayer to God, who saved Susanna from a wretched fate, asking him to save her also. But we must leave this poor lady in sorrow and discomfort and speak of the children and the man Marcus, who, as the queen is led to her prison cell, has been sent away to murder them.

Marcus travelled four miles through the forest until he came to the stretch of water he had been told to drown the babies in. He unfolded the cloth so that he could see them more clearly and they smiled up at him and gurgled as they lay there.



‘He who apportions intelligence,’ he whispered, ‘let him send me grief in abundance if I drown you this day, although I may pay for this with my life.’ And he laid them down, wrapped them back in the cloth, covered them and, lamenting that such beautiful babies should suffer such a fate, took them to a place of God and left them there. Soon the cloth came undone and blew around their legs, and they began to cry pitifully for the cold. They shivered and sobbed and wailed until a man heard them, a holy hermit who came to see what was wrong. When he

saw them, he fell onto his knees and cried aloud to Christ to send him some help, if he was to save these infants. Then a deer quickly came from the forest, running swiftly towards him, and fell down before the babies. They moved towards the deer’s milky udders as though instinctively and the hermit was very pleased with himself as he helped each baby to find a teat. When they had sucked their fill, he took the babies up and the deer followed, and she stayed with these babies for as long as God willed that it should be so, nourishing them; and so in this way, Christ sent his help.

The hermit made clothes for the growing infants out of some large leaves that he found in the forest. But one of the old queen’s henchmen, Malkedras, a forester – may the devil take him! – was passing the hermitage one day, saw the children and returned to court to tell Matabryne what he had seen.

‘And the really curious thing about it, Madam,’ he explained, ‘was that these children were all wearing silver chains around their necks.’

‘Don’t breath a word of this to anybody,’ Matabryne instructed him. ‘None of them must escape. And I shall speak with the man who has betrayed me.’ So she sent for Marcus, the man whom she had ordered to murder these babies, and asked him to tell her honestly what he had done with them.

‘This is the truth,’ he told her. ‘Madam, I left them beside a river, wrapped in a cloth, I assure you. I could not drown them; I didn’t have the courage to. Do what you like with me.’

Matabryne went over and gouged out both his eyes. He cried out for the pain, but she

made sure nobody knew what had happened. ‘Go back to that place,’ she told Malkedras, ‘and bring me those silver chains. And make sure that you kill them all with your sword. I shall give you such a reward, if you do this quickly, that you will thank me for the rest of your life.’

This hateful villain went away and soon arrived where the children were. The hermit had gone into the woods with one of them, to find food for them all. Malkedras attacked the remaining six children, drew his sword and cut off the chains. The children froze to the spot, they dared not move a muscle against him but when the chains fell from them, they flew away towards the river as swans, giving off a rueful cry.

Melkedras picked up the chains, took them back to the court and brought them to the old Queen Matabryne, the king’s mother. She took them, held them in her hands and then sent for a goldsmith to melt the metal down to cast into a goblet for her. When the goldsmith arrived, the old queen delightedly gave him the silver, along with his instructions, and he went away. Back in his workshop, he stoked up a furnace, broke up a chain, and it cascaded into many more pieces than it should have done. So he didn’t worry about the other five but cast a goblet of the correct weight using only half of the links he had gathered from this one chain. When night fell, he went to bed.

‘The old queen at the king’s court gave me six silver chains to cast into a goblet,’ he told his wife as they lay together. ‘I broke one up to lay it in the fire, but the links seemed to multiply as I did so, so I’ve taken the other five and put them in a safe place. I made a heavy enough cup from half of the links from that one chain alone.’



‘Keep the rest,’ advised his wife. ‘It must be God’s work. Or else they have been wrongfully taken. But if she gets a heavy enough goblet for them, how can she ask for more?’

So the goldsmith did as his wife advised and went to the palace the next morning, came before the old queen and presented to her the cup. She took it from him and felt its weight.

‘Was there any silver left over?’ she asked. He gave her the links from half a chain. She gave them back to him with a shrug of indifference. Then she paid him his fee and he left the court.

‘May Christ bless these chains!’ she exclaimed, holding the goblet, when the goldsmith had gone. ‘Those children are delivered out of this world! I wish that their mother was so delivered as well, for then I would control this land. My scheme will fail unless I can arrange for her death.’

The next morning, she went before the king and said earnestly: ‘A great many people are

perplexed, son, that your queen has remained unburned for such a long time; for she has deserved such a fate, if you remember. Summon all the people to appear before you, in eleven days' time.'

The king reluctantly granted this and his mother went off to leave her son to make the necessary arrangements. But on the night before the lady was due to be burned, an angel came to the hermit and asked if he slept. 'Christ sends you word of those seven children,' said the angel. 'He thanks you for saving them and wishes you to know that they were



the children of King Oryens and his wife Beatrice, and she bore them all together at one birth as a punishment for a foolish remark that she made on the royal castle wall. Over there in the river, six of them swim now as swans, ever since the wicked Malkedras took their chains from them. Christ intends the remaining child to fight for his mother.'

'Eternal God who dwells in heaven! – how can the boy accomplish such a thing when nobody knows who he is?' asked the hermit.

'Bring him to his father's court,' replied the angel. 'See that he is christened, and name him Enyas. He must be at the royal castle by midday, to rescue his mother. Do what I say, for God's will shall be done.'

The hermit spent the rest of the night lying awake, pondering upon what had happened, and shortly, as day dawned, he spoke to the boy: 'Christ has made you, son, so that you can fight for your mother.'

'What is a mother?'

'A mother bore you to a man and gave you life and nourishment.'

'Then can you tell me, father – how shall I fight?'

'Upon a horse, I believe,' replied the hermit.

'What animal is that? Is it one of those that live in the forest, or in the river? Or is it a kind of lion, perhaps?'

'I have never seen one, except in books,' admitted the hermit. 'They say he has a handsome head and four legs that are long and powerful, and that he is a noble beast, which is why he serves man.'

'Then, since God wants me to do this thing, let's get going!' exclaimed the child.

They each took a staff in their hands and set off. When the hermit let the boy stride on

ahead, an angel went with the lad to advise him, and sat on his right shoulder. The child soon came to a field where people were gathering. There was a huge bonfire piled up there, upon which the young queen was going to be burned. A great noise was coming from the direction of the city, an ominous sound, trumpets and loud drums, as they led Beatrice with the old queen right behind her, beating her drum with relish. The king rode in front of them all, by a furlong or more, and the boy hurried towards him and caught his horse by the bridle.

‘Who are you?’ asked the boy. ‘And who is the woman they are leading over there?’

‘I am the king of this land. My name is Oryens. The woman is being taken to the bonfire. She is Beatrice, my queen and she is going to be burned to death; for she has been accused of having sex with dogs and if this is true, her death should displease no one.’

‘Then you were not sworn-in properly when you were crowned,’ rebuked the child. ‘You were not crowned king to allow every injustice that your mother orders to be done, for she is cruel and unjust and a liar and she will be seen to be so when she is taken by the devil and skewered through the breast when she dies. I am only a small boy, as you can see, just twelve years old, but I will put my life in jeopardy, for better or for worse, to fight for this queen who has been so wrongfully accused.’



The king quickly gave his assent, delighted at any chance at all to save his wife. The old queen hurried over and ordered her son to come away. ‘It is not seemly to speak with such a scruffy child,’ she said angrily.

‘Ah, madam,’ said the king, ‘Are you entirely without blame? You have made a trap for this young queen – you know the truth. This boy tells me that he will be able to prove that neither you nor your words are to be trusted.’

Matabryne leapt at the child and grabbed him by the hair. He turned away, leaving behind a handful of his hair in her hand. ‘Ah, by the living God!’ the boy exclaimed. ‘Your head will lie on your lap for all that you have done. I ask for a knight to fight with, so that I can force out the truth.’

‘Is this really what you want, boy?’ shouted the old queen. ‘Do you want to die so young? Then I will find you a man to fight with, one who will quickly cut you down to size!’ She turned to Malkedras and commanded him to put on his armour and bathe the point of his spear in the boy’s blood – blood from the boy’s heart. The man seemed quite happy to receive this order.

Not far away was a holy abbot and this man approached the child in order to christen him. The abbot improvised a font and became the boy’s godfather, along with the Earl

of Aunthepas. His godmother was chosen to be the Countess of Salamere and they named him Enyas, as the book tells us, and afterwards they gave him many fine gifts. The bells rang out from the cathedral all by themselves, with nobody ringing them, while the battle took place, which they took as a sign of Christ's approval. And when he was christened, nobly and well, the king dubbed him a knight, as his nature seemed to require. Then the boy quickly asked the king to lend him a horse with a saddle and the king delightedly agreed to do so.

Feraunce was fetched, the king's own horse, and from a high tower some armour was taken and brought down. A white shield with a cross upon it was found hanging from a post and on it was written that it was meant for Enyas. When the boy was fully armed, he asked the king if he would lend him one of his best knights, the one he trusted the most, so that he could speak with him for a short while.

A knight caught the boy by the hand and led him away from the crowd.

When they had found a quiet place to speak: 'What is this animal called, that I have been asked to sit on?' asked the child in confidence.

'It is called a horse. It is a very good one and very accomplished.'

'Why is he eating iron? Won't he eat anything else? And what is that on his back? Is it a part of him, or is it tied on?'

'The iron in his mouth is called a bit, and the thing tied on his back is a saddle, where you sit.'

'What is this heavy coat that I'm wearing, then, with links and holes, and what is this heavy, hollow thing that's been put on my head? It's preventing me from hearing very well.'

'The thing on your head is called a helmet, and the coat of mail is a hauberk.'

'What is this big heavy thing hanging from my neck?'

'It is a shield.'

'And this long pointed thing?'

'That is a lance. Hold it in your hand and hit him as hard as you can with the sharp end. When it splinters, quickly take up another one.'

'But what if we both fall off our horses?'

'Get up onto your feet as quickly as you can, take out your sword and strike him again and again with it as fast as you are able. Bring the sword down with the edge foremost and hit any part of him that you can find. Take no notice of his helmet or his sword, but just hit him everywhere else and let the edge of your sword cut him to pieces!'

'But won't he strike me, if I hurt him?'

‘Yes, I know him quite well. He will strike you swiftly and ferociously, so try to find some bare flesh to aim at and force him to the ground, then cut off his head if you can. I can give you no better advice than this.’

‘May God reward you for teaching me so well,’ said the boy. ‘I now understand things much better than I did.’

The field was set out and they both galloped towards one another. Both their lances shattered on impact, and before galloping together once more they were given a couple of heavier lances that would not break. Each of them hit the other so hard with his new lance that everything that was not integral to their armour flew off at once and fell to the ground. They both tumbled head over heels onto the grass. Their horses ran riderless across the field, with Feraunce always in front and the other behind. It was not long before Feraunce kicked out with his hooves into the other’s face and blinded the animal. This was the first pleasure and reassurance that the boy was able to take, when the horse that he had been riding overcame its own adversary.

The two knights quickly got up, pulled out their swords and began hacking at one another.

‘Keep your sword away from my cross!’ cried the Knight of the Swan.

‘I don’t give a rotten cherry for your cross!’ shouted Malkedras, angrily. ‘I shall chop your shield into a thousand pieces before I have finished!’

Then an adder emerged from the boy’s shield and launched itself, spinning into Malkedras’s body, and in the same instant, a flame shot out from the cross straight into the knight’s eyes and blinded him. Then the Knight of the Swan brought down a mighty blow that cut the knight’s shoulder in two and the blade ran down into his heart. The man fell dead to the ground.

‘I shall deal with you in the way that that helpful knight instructed me to,’ said the child, conscientiously, and he removed the protection from the dead knight’s neck and cut off his head. Then he raised the head by the hair and placed it in the helmet, and thanked God on his bended knees, for giving him the grace to emerge as victor.

The old queen watched all this, saw her knight killed, turned her horse by the reins and rode quickly away towards the city. But the boy galloped after her, caught her, brought her back and threw her into the deadly flames. Soon there was nothing left of her but hot ashes.

The young queen was untied. Then the boy came before the king and told him that he was his son: ‘There are six more of us as well, born to Beatrice, your wife,’ he said. ‘She bore us all at one birth, for an untruth she uttered once, on a wall; but now all the others are swans swimming on a river and have been for a while, ever since that villain Malkedras took away their chains.’

‘By God!’ exclaimed the goldsmith. ‘I believe that this boy is telling the truth. I still have

five of those chains, just as they were given to me. They are all undamaged.'

Knights accompanied the goldsmith to fetch these chains, and then made straight for the river. They shook the chains in order to attract the six swans. The swans became aware of what was happening and each chose its proper chain and turned back into human form. But one could not do this, because his chain had been lost. It was terrible to see his sorrow! He bit himself with his sharp beak until the down on his breast was covered in blood. It was all over his lovely white feathers and clouded the water where the swans had been swimming. Nobody there had the heart to look at this spectacle any longer, so they all returned to the king's court.

A font was produced and the children were christened. One was called Vryens, another Oryens, the third was named Assakarye and the other boy Gadyfere. The girl was named Rose and the sixth, the Knight of the Swan, already had a Christian name. And thus they were restored, through the grace of God.