

What Matabryne the Queen Mother Wants in *Chevalere Assigne*

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I.

Surviving only in the fifteenth-century Cotton Caligula A. ii. along with seven other romances, *Chevalere Assigne* is generally comprehended as a medieval romance sitting in the circle of the so-called Swan Knight or Swan children literature. It is because of the young protagonist named the Chevalere Assigne (“the Swan Knight”), and because the knight’s fourth brother whose name “Gadyfere” reminds readers of Godfrey of Bouillon, the legendary leader of the First Crusade.¹ Unlike *La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*, one most immediate source for the Middle English *Chevalere Assigne*, whose texts are fairly extensive in length from 3196 lines to 1681 lines (Davenport 9), our romance consists only of 370 lines, making it one of the shortest extant medieval English romances. Such brevity of the text,

¹ Godfrey of Bouillon’s ancestry is believed to have gone back to the mysterious swan knight.

and in particular spending many lines on the two “teaching scenes” (Davenport 11), where the twelve-year-old protagonist later baptized as Enyas is educated first by the hermit and then by one of his father’s knights, have encouraged critics to read the romance rather too readily as a “religious,” “straightforward and unified narrative” (Lumiansky 103). According to such line of interpretation, this romance is primarily meant to have instructed high-born teenage boys, like the Swan Knight (Davenport 17; Lumiansky 103; Stratton 121). Saying that the romance may have pious and didactic intentions does have a point because, as Diane Speed argues, the story starts with the prologue where God’s intervention in human affairs is overtly stated, and is followed by the narrative that to many degrees can be read as an “exemplum to illustrate the working of divine Providence”(144).

Nevertheless, it is still questionable whether the message of the romance is uniform enough to grasp with ease, and whether adolescent boys are the most likely targeted audience body, as critics have asserted. There are indeed “teaching scenes,” in one of which, raised in the secluded woods for twelve years, the protagonist acquires very rudimentary knowledge about differences of animals, the meaning of the mother, and fighting skills and weapons required in a military duel. Yet, let us be reminded that in the later medieval period when this romance was circulated, a boy in his early teens was already deemed as a young adult who is mature enough to marry and establish his own family.² In other words, medieval boy readers of the Swan Knight’s age may not have had to read the romance in order, say, to tell a horse from a lion, one of the very first questions that the Swan Knight has to ask. Reading this romance as a juvenile educational story has difficulties explaining the first half of the romance in which the young

² Regarding the theories and practices of matrimony of English noble households in the later Middle Ages, including different marriage ages for boys and girls, see Ward, 12-33.

protagonist does not appear yet, and acts and relationships of the grandparent and parent generations are the main focus of the narration. Namely, the mother of the Swan Knight's slandering of a poor mother of twins before her own conception with seven children, and the queen mother Matabryne's seemingly unmotivated conspiracy of murdering her seven newborn grandchildren and of the subsequent imprisonment of her daughter-in-law, all of which happen in the beginning of the romance, will not be able to be properly explicated, if the romance has to be appreciated primarily as a long-delayed rite of passage of the young knight. In this essay, my primary concern with *Chevalere Assigne* lies with the old queen Matabryne, the queen mother of King Oryens in a land of Lyor, the mother-in-law of the queen Bewtrys, and the grandmother of the Swan Knight and his six other siblings. Critics have dismissed her from their serious discussions, reducing her to a personification of evil and relating her aggressive performances as manifestations of such innate depravity (Speed 148-49, 151). Rather, I would argue that, read in the specific context of the later medieval upper-class household, the romance's delineations of the old queen mother may be imbued with contemporary socio-cultural assumptions and anxieties over the socially and politically active queen mother, one of which may be that: her agency and influence can become so powerful as to mislead and even override the male sovereign authority and even to interrupt the succession of the royal lineage in the end.

II.

As Barbara Creed notes in *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1), images of the active old maternal figure who is terrifying, evil, monstrous, to name a few, have a long abiding history, inundating many myths, folktales, romances, and other artifacts, and successfully (re)evolving themselves into variants in

different cultures and times. It is thus not surprising to witness such “bad” old maternal characters in medieval English romances. Two of the romances that are compiled along with *Chevalere Assigne* in the manuscript of Cotton Caligula A. ii, *Emaré* and *Octavian*, for example, represent the old maternal figure who, like the queen mother Matabryne, calumniate and persecute the young female character as adulterous, and subsequently calls the paternity of the latter’s child(ren) into question. What, however, makes *Chevalere Assigne* distinctive from these romances is that, unlike the other analogues in which the old maternal character plays her part as one of the villains, and her threat is most often short-lived, the old queen mother in our romance presents herself as a prevailing perpetrator until the very last moment of the story. The romance thus holds in check readers’ any hasty association of Matabryne with such maternal traits as care-giving, nurturing, sacrificial, reconciliatory, and so on. Some details, in which, discovering the seven babies disposed of in a deep forest, the hermit raises the abandoned children as a foster parent, not knowing their real identity as royal children, and the supposedly God-sent hind keeps suckling the babies who would otherwise perish at any moment, suggest that the romance indeed recognizes the value of mothering itself. Nonetheless, surprisingly, the romance does not perceive mothering as a function or quality naturally and exclusively preserved for human females, in that the young queen Bewtrys and the old queen mother Matabryne are not presented as such. These two human females fail to exert and sustain the same momentum of mothering that the man and the beast demonstrate.

The romance opens with the young queen Bewtrys who reveals herself as a woman uncompassionate, malicious, and jealous of the fertility of another woman. The text explicitly states twice (196-97; 348-49)³ that the queen’s own bearing of seven children, which makes her bound to the

³ All the references to the text are from Gibbs’s edition.

queen mother's calumny and imprisonment for twelve years, is a divine retribution for her initial slandering of one destitute mother who was one day witnessed along with her twin babies outside the castle. Namely, the romance proposes that, as a young queen, Bewtrys is deficient in kindness, compassion, and by implication maternity. It is why God punishes her with the birth of seven children. In this vein, it becomes the queen herself who robs herself of the chance to mother her own children. In the first teaching scene where the now twelve-year-old Swan Knight is told by the hermit to go to rescue his biological mother, he asks what a mother is (210). It is little coincidence that the boy has to ask this question, considering the reality that he has had no experience of having been breast-fed or nurtured by a woman mother. To this question, the hermit replies: A mother is "A woman þat bare þe to man sonne, & of her reredde" (210). But, as Davenport points out, the audience (and the perceivable Swan Knight as well) knows that this answer is "only half true to the experience in the poem," where only bearing has been accomplished, and "rearing has been cut out" because of the hard-hearted biological mother and by the romance's "other mother" Matabryne (18) who refuses to recognize herself as the grandmother to the newborns.

Noticeably, even before she unwinds her plots against the daughter-in-law and her newborn children, Matabryne is called a perverse character "þat made moche sorwe" and "set her affye in Sathanas of helle" (9-10). And as the narrative progresses, the romance sporadically brings back its initial judgment on her. Arguably because of such repeated textual damnations of her, and more reasonably because of her own aggressive performances, critics like Diane Speed see her "not so much a vicious person, potentially still capable of redemption, as vice personified" (149). According to this line of reading, the queen mother is supposed to undergo "no change in herself" but merely unfold "her evil nature until she is forcibly stopped" (Speed 149). Indeed, the ways she

performs to other characters are scandalous and draw little sympathy from readers. In the child-giving scene where she still waits for the young queen to complete her delivery, the queen mother “thow³ to do þat brythe to a fowle ende” (40). After birth, she commands her subordinate named Marcus to stealthily drown the newborn grandchildren, with a specific instruction that he has to “caste hem [the babies]” into the “fyrste grymme watur,” and “lete hym for the slyppe” (51-52). Making the king believe that the queen has given birth to seven whelps, not human babies, she bids the king to burn the unchaste and sinful woman at the stake: “lette brenne her a-none for þat is þe beste” (68). Later when the queen mother discovers that, taking pity on the fate of the royal babies, Marcus decided to abandon the seven children in the forest instead of murdering them, she plucks out his eyes (135). Twelve years later, the queen mother once again pressures the king to burn his queen in public (ll.184-89). When the Swan Knight comes to rescue the queen, Matabryne jumps on him, tearing a handful of his hair (255).

Despite these disturbing instances of the queen mother, it is nevertheless still arguable whether she is indeed an utter incarnation of satanic vice, as critics have insisted. As Davenport suggests, brevity of *Chevalere Assigne* may work as an impediment for the characters to be endowed with any substantive psycho-social dimension, rendering, as a consequence, their identities more symbolic and stereotypical(10-11). This however does not sanction us to draw on a conclusion that, because of the fact that she is the most symbolic character of all in the romance, the queen mother has zero psycho-social context. Rather, I would contend that, into this much stereotypical queen mother figure does the English romance imbue the medieval English society’s anxieties about the potential, detrimental impacts that the old but strong royal mother may make upon the royal household and the dynasty. The ways in which the romance represents the queen mother may have reminded the contemporary

medieval readership of historical English queen mothers, like Eleanor of Provence, Edward I's queen mother who is claimed to have exerted critical influences on the king's issuing of the Edict of Expulsion, according to which the Jews were expelled from England (Howell 287-312). Or the figuration of the queen mother in the romance may have encouraged the audience to anticipate the emerging of the formidably influential and capable royal mother, like Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII and grandmother of Henry VIII who, upon the death of her son Henry VII, became regent for her young grandson Henry (Jonas and Underwood 171-201; Parsons 63-65).

Considering these historical English royal mothers who were markedly agentic and influential, the fact that Matabryne the queen mother is represented as an old yet strong queen mother of an adamant will and daunting agency does not sound like an artistic incidence. That the young king has ruled the kingdom implies that the old king, Matabryne's husband, has been dead, thus her being entitled to be called the dowager queen or the queen mother. When the story starts, the young king has already married his queen, and been living in their own place "into a place . . . /. . . after his lykyng dwellede he þere, /With his owne qwene" (ll.12-13). These lines suggest that, as it was a usual medieval practice, the old queen as a dowager queen may now have managed her own household, separately from the main household of the royal couple. It is implied from the presence of a forester named Malkedras that she has her own estate. And she has her own subordinates who take care of her businesses, one of whom is the man named Marcus who is ordered to drown the royal babies. Minor and passing as his function in the romance seems to be, Marcus provides a significant hint at what sort of the queen mother may be. Having faithfully served Matabryne for so long, he is introduced as a man "hadde serued her-seluen skylfyllly longe" and "was trewe of his feyth & loth for to tryfulle" (47-48). Unlike the forester

whom the romance calls a “cursed man” (121) and who, without any regret, willingly acts as an assassin of the seven children at the old queen’s command, Marcus unfolds himself as a different kind of man who acts according to a sense of morality:

“He þat lende the wit,” quod he “heyne me with sorowe,
 If I drowne þou to day thowghe my deth be nyȝe.”
 Thenne he leyde hem adowne lapped in þe mantelle,
 And lappede hem, & hylyde hem & hadde moche rewthe,
 That swyche a barmeteme as þat shulde so be-tyde.
 Thenne he takethe hem to criste & aȝeyne turnethe. (99-104)

Disclosed in this passage, Marcus is a God-fearing man and cannot drown the royal newborns simply because it is morally wrong. Even though not murdering the children leads him to betray the old queen whom he has served so long, he cannot execute this particular command of his lady. This incident of Marcus encourages one to infer that the old queen mother cannot be such a wicked person all the time, not a personification of evil, at least, who lives on the essence of evil to the uttermost; otherwise, the conscientious Marcus could not have served her loyally many years.

Then, how are we supposed to interpret the old queen mother’s aggression that starts with the young queen’s giving birth of seven children? As a way to find answers to this question, it may be helpful, first, to examine her relationships to the king and the queen. The romance represents the king as a good-natured person replete with a sense of compassion, as illustrated with the episode of the poverty-stricken mother of twins in which he rebukes his queen when she slanders the mother as adulterous (32). However, it is another matter whether he can make a competent ruler out of what he is, at least from the queen mother’s perspective. King as he may be, he appears easily influenced by and yielding to his dowager mother; he is not in the slightest resolute enough

to put her under his control. When the old queen first accuses the young queen as a sinful adulteress who has copulated with a dog, and bids him to burn the queen at the stake, the king refuses to do so. However, in the end he gives in to her insistence and lets her imprison the queen at wherever she may want: "Dame, þanne take here þy selfe & sette her wher þe lykethe, / So þat I se hit noȝte what may I seye elles?" (69-70). Twelve years later when the old queen brings up the same matter, the king grieves over the recurrent situation, but again allows her to treat his queen in the manner that his mother would like (184-89). Surprisingly, though his mother repeatedly vituperates and humiliates him, calling "A, kowarde of kynde" and "combred wrecche" (71), the king does not even attempt to redress such a problematic relationship to his mother. In the beginning of the romance, it is said that the king runs his royal businesses "aftur his lykyng"(13). However, these examples of the king's dysfunctional relationship to his matriarchal mother strongly suggest that she may not have been satisfied with the ways in which her son has ruled the kingdom, and that the king cannot make himself a desirable king to the point of gratifying the old queen.

The young queen reveals herself as a different sort of person from the king. As the opening scene where she speaks maliciously about the mother of twins illuminates, the young queen unfolds herself as one who, unlike the king, cannot sympathize with subjects in plights. This episode also hints at her tactics of utilizing her adverse circumstance on her behalf. By accusing the mother of twins of an adulteress, for instance, the queen diminishes her own weakness of being childless, with the implication that it is better for a wife to be infertile and chaste, like herself, than to be fertile and unchaste, like the mother of twins. The young queen, in other words, is remarkably expedient and calculating. The queen mother seems to have long perceived this attribute of her daughter-in-law. As she imprisons the apparently sinful queen, the old queen criticizes her, saying: "Thow hast

by-gylethe my sone it shalle þe werke sorowe" (78). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the primary meaning of the word "by-gylethe" is to "deceive" (1a) or to "cheat" (1b). Yet, one of its derivative meanings includes to "get the better of (sb.); dupe, outwit." What the queen mother intends to address by employing this particular verb in her sentence is not that the young queen has cuckolded the king, as often interpreted (after all, it is the old queen herself who has fabricated the conspiracy of adultery), but that the queen has dared to outwit and sway the king. This is the situation that the old queen seems to have put up with, and the arrival of royal children may tell her that it is high time to get rid of the young queen from the king and the royal family.

That the young queen is tactical and has exercised considerable influences on the king and the affairs of the kingdom by implication suggests that the former is not as docile and artless as the king, and that, overtly or indirectly, she may have interfered in the old queen's ways and businesses. Thus, removing the cunning daughter-in-law away from the king and her children from the line of succession will allow the queen mother to steer the king at whatever directions she may want, and to more freely involve herself in the politics of the kingdom. She unfolds this line of thought much more conspicuously when she pressures the king to burn his queen in public for the second time:

They [the swan children] be delyuered out of þis worlde were þe
 moder eke,
 Thenne hadde I þis londe hollye to myne wylle:
 Now alle wyles shalle fayle but I here dethe werke. (180-82)

This monologue discloses that the old queen recognizes the young queen not as her daughter-in-law but as a political opponent who has to be defeated if she wants to place the whole land under her full grip. The same

motif is witnessed recurrently in later medieval romances, most notably in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, where the Muslim sultanness does not see the Christian princess Constance as her daughter-in-law but as an alien who threatens to adulterate the religion and culture that she seeks to represent and protect.⁴ Interestingly enough, in the queen mother's mind in our romance, as in the case of the sultanness, the battle over power has to be fought between her and the young queen, not between her and the male monarch. Though concerned about the presence and influence of the daughter-in-law upon the king and the household, the mother-in-law occupies a more advantageous position than the other in the battle from the beginning. For, first, the young queen has not accomplished her greatest obligation to reproduce an heir to the king, and thus her voice in the royal household is as yet weak, and her ground shallow. Second, even if the young queen succeeds in bearing issue, her fertility and reproduction can be vilified anytime as adulterous and sinful by those who want to damage her, and, as a consequence, her honor can be smeared, and she can be placed in custody, or banished from the royal household. In the worst case, even her life can be at peril. When the queen is subject to these hazards, her child cannot be spared because the mother's infidelity is naturally translated into the child's illegitimacy. This whole process must have worked like a script that would guarantee the fall of any royal consort in history and fiction. The young queen Bewtrys in *Chevalere Assigne* cannot be immune from such snare. The queen mother in our romance is seen to bring down the young queen to destruction precisely according to the same script. It is worthy to point out that the queen mother identifies the seven children with *their* mother, with the young queen, not with *her* son or

⁴ It is true that because of different ethnicity and culture, the sultanness' relationship to Constance in the *Man of Law's Tale* is much more complicated than Matabryne's relationship to Bewtrys. Geraldine Heng discerningly explores the relationship of the sultanness and Constance in light of their different race and religion in her *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* 181-238.

herself. This phenomenon in which a grandmother figure considers her grandchild(ren) the extension of the child(ren)'s mother, not her own progeny is one recurrent motif witnessed in medieval romances, including the *Man of Law's Tale*, *Emaré*, and *Octavian*, that delineate the strained inter-generational family relationships of women. This tendency of medieval romances in which the royal grandmother figure denies her kinship to her grandchild(ren) primarily because the former cannot accept the child's mother in her household is in striking contrast with how modern romantic movies, as in *Princess Diary*, often feature the royal family relationships of different generations, that the royal grandmother seeks to find and legitimize her grandchild, even if the child's mother is still not accepted as a member of the royal family. One probable explication why the medieval royal grandmother insistently refuses to admit her relation to the grandchild is that she cannot hold the child separately from the mother, that legitimizing the child may naturally mean to acknowledge the mother whom she wants to exclude from the royal household.

One might argue that Matabryne is a perverse and "castrating" (Creed 139) maternal figure whom one can readily witness in modern horror movies, like *Psycho*, *Fanatic*, and *Friday the 13th*, in all of which the mothers, like the queen mother in our romance, appear possessive, dominant, and threatening to their own sons and to the sons' partners. Such a psychoanalytic approach seems surprisingly well applicable to investigate the mother-son relationship in *Chevalere Assigne*, though the figuration was made roughly seven hundred years ago. The son-king in the romance is witnessed to be completely defenceless to his mother's vituperations and mistreatments. Such that he even has been unable to protect his own family, wife and children, from her machination, despite the fact that he has been suspicious all the while that his mother may have deeply involved herself into the calumny of his queen and the queen's uncanny birth of the animal children. When the Swan Knight first meets his father at the

battle scene, the king who still does not know the identity of the boy as one of his long-lost children informs the boy that his queen is about to be burned at the stake, because: “She was sklawnndered on-hyze þat she hadde taken howndes; / And 3yf she hadde so don here harm were not to charge” (233-34). The first meaning of the word “sklawnndered” in the *Middle English Dictionary* is to “calumniate (sb.), slander (a woman’s name or virtue); accuse (sb.) falsely.” Thus, the king’s employment of this word in his speech reveals his hunch that the queen must have been falsely charged by his own mother with having lain with a dog. Having proven to be extraordinarily perceptive, the young knight fathoms what the king implies, and summarizes in an outspoken manner the king’s problem in relationship to the old queen that he has been misled and overridden by the queen mother: “Whenne þou tokest þe þy crowne kyng whenne þou made were, / To done aftur matabryne for þenne þou shalt mysfare” (237-38).

III.

Chevalere Assigne through the narrator and other characters, especially through the Swan Knight, sporadically touches on the perverse—“felle and fals”(l.239)—nature of Matabryne the queen mother. Multiple divine interventions that directly thwart the old queen’s plans, as illustrated in the hermit’s discovery of the seven babies deep in the woods and the mysterious advent of a hind that willingly suckles the babies, are also employed throughout the narrative to suggest that God disapproves what the queen mother intends to do. I admit that these structural arrangements and devices to a certain extent work to ahistoricize the queen mother as an archetype of the evil maternal figure that inundates myths, folktales, and romances, and to essentialize her performances as manifestations of innate

depravity. Right alongside this stereotypical perception of the queen mother, however, the romance also invites readers to perceive another overtones, socio-political ones, that the agentic and influential dowager queen may emit. *Chevalere Assigne* starts with one critical reality that the royal couple has no heir yet, and it is what the king has been grieving over: “That he hade no chylde to cheuene his londis; / But to he lordeles of his whenne he þe lyf lafte: / And þat honged in his herte” (16-18). The king and his queen are the *loci* where their private desires and public behalves become intertwined, in that they are husband and wife to each other, but they are at the same time the public figures as king and queen. Accordingly, whether or not they have a legitimate heir is no longer solely their personal concern. Instead, as Margaret Howell notes, the “need for an heir to the throne is a matter of political pragmatism” (256). Considered in this vein, the queen mother’s attempts to disturb the royal lineage by calumniating the queen and by destroying the royal children are to be deemed as political acts, acts that are highly treasonous to the monarch and to the kingdom. Her demise of being burned at the stake may not be a coincidental arrangement, given that in many medieval and early modern narratives women charged with treason are shown to be burned in public. Despite the king’s long wish to have an heir, the old queen strives to eliminate his newborn children, striving to obliterate their kinship to her and to the king. Instead, she takes the children as the extension of their problematic mother whom she regards as a meddling enemy, a most likely impediment to her attempts to place the kingdom in her complete hold. What this figuration of the political queen mother intones is that the old queen does not see herself as the king’s retired mother or a usual grandmother who would play the customary role as an emotional and social “lynchpin” (Rosenthal 260) for the royal household. Instead, she sees in herself the qualification for a strong, capable ruler who can better administer the kingdom than the male monarch. What the queen mother

desires however directly collides with the contemporary patriarchal and patrilineal ideology and also with what I would call the young generation-oriented principle of the romance genre, according to which the young (male) protagonist is supposed to take over the society and the narrative in the end. In this light, the old queen's daunting agency and abiding influence that overwhelm and intimidate the younger generations can become "vices." Also, in this context, the queen mother can be told "felle and fals" (239); however, this does not fully legitimize the criticism that the romance delineates the queen mother as she is, as an allegorical figure of evil.

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ABSTRACT**What Matabryne the Queen Mother Wants in *Chevalere Assigne*****Ju Ok Yoon**

One peculiar aspect of the fourteen century English romance *Chevalere Assigne* is that Matabryne the queen mother is represented as the sole and formidable antagonist of all the characters in the text. When her daughter-in-law gives birth to seven children, the queen mother replaces her newborn grandchildren with seven whelps and plots to drown them. She makes the king imprison the apparently sinful queen for over a decade and then instigates him to burn her at the stake. Later when the Swan Knight (*Chevalere Assigne*), one of the seven grandchildren whose lives have been miraculously spared, appears to save his mother from being burnt in a field, the queen mother attacks the young knight in person, and then strives to kill him in the combat that she had set up. Scholarship of *Chevalere Assigne* has repeatedly pointed out that the queen mother is the principal villain, simply attributing her aggression wielded against others to her fallen nature. In this essay, I would argue that, read in the specific context of later medieval royal household, the romance's delineations of the old queen mother may be imbued with contemporary socio-cultural assumptions and anxieties over the strong old royal mother, one of which may be that her agency and influence can become powerful enough to mislead and override the male sovereign authority and to interrupt the succession of the royal lineage. With this intention in mind, I want to focus my discussion of *Chevalere Assigne* on what Matabryne the queen mother may want.

Key Words | *Chevalere Assigne*, Matabryne, queen mother, Swan Knight