

**‘BOPE LIM AND LIÞ IT IS FORLORN’: UNNATURAL  
CHILDREN IN *THE KING OF TARS*, *CHEVALERE ASSIGNE*,  
AND *SIR GOWTHER***

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***Abstract***

*Most Middle English romances are concerned with families and a large number have child or adolescent protagonists. Thus, the narrative of self making of the child or adolescent protagonist in these romances provides a kind of role model for the young audience. That they appeal to a young audience may be represented through the process of child education in Middle English Romances where the curriculum of reading, writing and music is distinctly specified. Children both symbolise a reassertion of order and they represent the continuation of families. So marked is the presence of children in Middle English Romances that it might even be thought of as a defining feature. However, there are few romances such as *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* which instead of representing children or their education, or accepted values of the Medieval society, focus on children’s physical imperfections. While the monstrosity of the children in *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* seems to reinforce Christian doctrine of salvation through baptism, such a solution still seems to raise questions about medieval values and beliefs. *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* appear to answer raised questions, but they seem to conclude without satisfactory solutions, resulting in a deliberately destabilising effect, which is ideological in itself. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore why children are represented as unnatural and imperfect human forms and how such representations undermine Christian doctrine of salvation through baptism in these romances.*

**Key Words:** *Medieval Literature, Middle English Romances, The King of Tars, Chevalere Assigne, Sir Gowther, Medieval children, Unnatural children in romances*

**Öz**

**‘Ne kolu var ne bacağı’: *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne* ve *Sir Gowther*  
Romanslarındaki Tuhaf Çocuklar**

*Birçok Ortaçağ İngiliz romanı aileleri ilgilendiren konuları ele alırken çocuk kahramanları ön plana çıkarmaya çalışır ve çocuk dinleyicilerinin kişilik gelişimine katkıda bulunması için çocuk kahramanları model olarak gösterir. Bu nedenle,*

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çocuk kahramanların eğitim süreçleri detaylıca anlatılır ve okuma, yazma ve müzik eğitimlerinin önemi bu romanslarda vurgulanır. Romanslarda anlatılan çocuk kahramanlar var olan toplumsal düzeni yansıttıkları gibi metinde geçen maceralar ve düzensizlikleri düzene sokmak ve düzenle oluşan toplumsal değerleri kabul ettirmek için çaba sarfederler. Böylece, romanstaki çocuk kahramanın varlığı romansı romans yapan tanımlayıcı bir değere dönüşür. Ancak *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* gibi bazı Ortaçağ İngiliz Romansları çocuk dinleyicilerine çocuk kahramanların düzenli eğitim kaygılarını veya Ortaçağ toplumunun değer yargılarını göstermek yerine çocuk kahramanların fiziksel kusurlarına hatta onların canavımsı görünümüne dikkat çekiyor gibi görünmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı genel olarak tüm Ortaçağ İngiliz romanslarında tasvir edilen, toplumsal değer yargılarına göre yetiştirilen ve toplumda statüsü olan çocuk kahramanlara rağmen bazı romanslarda çocuk kahramanların genel geçer kabul gören toplumsal değerlerin dışında nasıl farklılık gösterilebildiklerini ve çocuk dinleyicilere nasıl model olmadıklarını irdelemektir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Ortaçağ Edebiyatı, İngiliz Romansları, *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, *Sir Gowther*, Ortaçağda Çocuk, Romanslardaki Tuhaf Çocuklar

Most Middle English romances such as *King Horn*, *Floris and Blancheflur*, *Havelock the Dane*, *Guy of Warwick* and *Bevis of Hampton* have a child protagonist as Middle English romances usually appeal to a youthful readership as the narrative of self making, embodied in stories of children and adolescents, is of obvious interest to young people. The interest in the young readership is represented through the process of child education in Middle English Romances where the curriculum of reading, writing and music is distinctly specified. However, there are few romances such as *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* that do not directly deal with the education of the children or do not seem to present moral and social values of the society in Medieval England.<sup>1</sup> These romances do not seem to have been produced for the education of medieval young audience as they

<sup>1</sup> *The King Of Tars* survives in three manuscripts: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.2.1 (Auchinleck) folio: 7r-13v); London, British Library, MS Additional 22283 (Simeon) (folio: 126r-128v); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. A.1. (Vernon) (folio: 304v-307r). The edition from Auchinleck will be used in this article: Judith Chabot Perryman (ed.), *The King of Tars: A Critical Edition*, Heidelberg: Winter, 1980. *Chevalere Assigne* survives in one manuscript: London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (folio: 125v-129v). The edition from Cotton Caligula will be used in this article: Henry H. Gibbs (ed.), *The Romance of the Chevalere Assigne*, London: Oxford University Press, 1868. *Sir Gowther* is extant in two manuscripts: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1 (folio: 11r-28r); London, British Library, MS Royal 17.B.XLIII (folio: 116r-131v). The edition from MS Advocates will be used in this article: Anna Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (eds.), 'Sir Gowther' in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, 1995.

focus on the unnatural nature, physical imperfection and even the monstrosities of the child protagonist. This is the reason why in the debate concerning precisely what constitutes a medieval romance *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* seem to occupy a special position. The aim of this article is to explore why children are represented as unnatural and imperfect human forms and how the representation of children as unnatural and imperfect undermines Christian doctrine of salvation through baptism in *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther*. As David Williams put it “the Middle Ages made deformity into a symbolic tool with which it probed the secrets of substance, existence, and form incompletely revealed by the more orthodox rational approach through dialectics” and this is exactly how the unnatural children of *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* function (1996: 3).

In the conclusion to *Havelock the Dane* the poet observes that ‘Him stondes well that good child strenes’ (l. 2983), and indeed the Middle English verse romances often end in a formulaic manner with the hero marrying and having children (Sands, 2006). Havelock and his wife ‘geten children hem bitwene / Sones and doughtres right fivetene’ (ll. 2978-79); Sir Degravant and his lady ‘lyvede togydur without care / And seven chyldur she hym bare’ in *Sir Degravant* (Kooper, 2006). Similarly, the eponymous heroine of *Le Bone Florence of Rome* and her husband ‘gate a chylde the furste nyght’ (l. 2164) (Heffernan, 1976). Children symbolise reassertion of order, and represent the continuation of families. However, children are absent from the conclusions of *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther*; instead, they appear much earlier within the texts, forming a key part of the narrative rather than being an element in the formulaic ending. Unlike the children advocated by the author of *Havelock the Dane*, children are not ‘good’ and therefore all does not ‘stonde well’ (l. 2983) in *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther*.

Rather, these children are unnatural, even monstrous, and as such their existence raises issues for both the text and the reader. The grotesque appearance of these children seem to raise symbolic and ideological questions: the child’s physical imperfection is ‘the symbol and embodiment of its father’s spiritual irregularity, the fleshly revelation of his inferior religious status’ (Gilbert, 2004: 105). For instance, when the princess summons a Christian priest from her husband’s dungeons to christen the lump, it instantly becomes a beautiful boy in *The King of Tars*. If these issues are effectively and unquestionably solved then the unnatural child can be a powerful force in the assertion of prevailing moral and social values, as is the result in *The King of Tars*. It seems that the monstrosity of the children in *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* serves to reinforce

Christian doctrine of salvation through baptism. On the other hand, if the unnatural transformations of children into regular ones are left wholly or partially unresolved, unnatural children act to destabilise the conclusions and call into question established ideas of lineage, humanity, morality and even salvation and this will be analysed further below.

The children of *Chevalere Assigne* are unnatural. At first, they look like children, they are even ‘semelye’ (l. 42), and they also behave exactly as one expects. When they are abandoned in the forest wrapped up in a cloak ‘sone þe mantelle was vndo with mengynge of her legges’ (l. 105), a detail which is both endearing and realistic. The poem has been adapted and greatly reduced from the Old-French *La Naissance de Chevalier au Cygne* and it seems significant that the poet chose to retain a detail extraneous to the rapidly moving plot when turning a 3196 line poem into one of merely 370 (Davenport, 2002: 9-20). The only hint that the children might be unusual is that, when they are born, ‘a seluer cheyne / Eche on of hem hadde a-bowte his swete swyre’ (ll. 43-44), and this is almost negated by the description of the children as ‘Alle safe & alle sounde’ (l. 43). This immediately precedes the mention of the chains and is linked to it by the conjunction ‘&’ rather than ‘but’, implying that there is nothing amiss. It is therefore a stark shock to the reader when Malkedras ‘out withe his swerde & smote of þe cheynes’ (l. 146) of the six children he finds and ‘whenne þe cheynes felle hem fro þey flowen vp swannes’ (l. 148). For more than a third of the text it is not revealed that there is anything unnatural about the children, let alone what it is. This creates a feeling of unease and uncertainty: if the children that the text has made appear entirely natural are in fact monstrous, then what else might not be as it seems? After six swan children are baptised, their bodies turn into proper human form and their monstrosity disappears:

But on was always a swanne for losse of his cheyne.  
 Hit was doole fort o se þe sorowe þat he made;  
 He bote hymself with his bylle þat alle his breste  
   bledde,  
 And alle his feyre federes fomed vpon blode,  
 And alle formerknes þe water þer þe swanne  
   swymmethe.  
 There was ryche no pore þat myȝte for rewthe  
 Lengere loke on hym, but to þe courte wenden.  
 Thenne þey formed a fonte & cristene þe children. (ll.  
   358-65)

As Diane Speed puts it, the restoration and baptism of swan children in *Chevalere Assigne* is ‘an “exemplum to illustrate the working of Divine Providence” (1996: 144). However, the list of the names given to the children

which follows makes the reader acutely aware of the missing seventh child who must remain a swan and also that this ritual can do nothing to help him. By contrast, the child in *The King of Tars* is very obviously and immediately physically unnatural:

Lim no hadde it non.  
Bot as a rond of flesche yschore  
In chaumber it lay hem before  
Wiþouten blod & bon. (ll. 579-82)

Furthermore, ‘it hadde noiþer nose no eye, / Bot lay ded as þe ston’ (ll.584-85) and the idea of it being ‘stille as ston’ (l. 639, 662) is repeated. Although the first time it is mentioned in the romance, by the Sultan and the Princess, the lump is referred to as ‘þe child’ (l. 577) so that there can be doubt concerning its identity, it is afterwards grotesquely termed the ‘flesche’ (l.607, 622, 639, 662, 772) and given the pronoun ‘it’ to emphasise its lack of humanity. The lump is entirely without form, agency or identity and as such, as ‘Boþe lim and lip it is forlorn’ (l.593), it is ideally equipped to serve a symbolic function. When the princess conceives a child, it is a formless lump of ‘flesche’, without life or limb. The symbolic function of the physical appearance of the lump child seems to refer to the Christian Princess’ conversion to the Saracen faith. However, after the baptism of the lump child and the Sultan, this monstrous child transforms into a beautiful boy.

In *Sir Gowther*, Gowther’s unnatural nature is perhaps the most complicated of all these children in these romances because, as Joanne Charbonneau notes, this particular poem is a twisted version of the ‘typical chivalric bildungsroman’: unlike the lump child and the swan children, Gowther does not remain a child but grows up into an unnatural youth and an equally unnatural adult, but his abnormality begins at birth (2002: 21). Although ‘in a twelmon more he wex / then odor chyldur in seyvon or sex’ (ll. 145-46), unlike the other unnatural children, Gowther displays no particular outward signs of abnormality. Gowther’s monstrosity is not physical but moral. When Gowther is born, he is ascribed the potential for harm by being introduced as ‘won that coth do skathe’ (l. 105) that ‘sythen wax breme and brathe’ (l. 108). This harm is soon manifested: when his ‘melche wemen’ (l. 110) attempt to suckle him, ‘he sowkyd hom so thei lost ther lyvs’ (l. 113) with an appetite so prolific that ‘be twelfe monethys was gon / nine norsus had he slon’ (ll. 118-19). Robson offers the possibility of reading the deaths of the wetnurses in a more disturbing light, noting that, “although he is not actually described as sucking their blood the implication is that he does so, given the medieval physiological theory which held that milk was the mother’s own blood, transformed for the purpose of nurturing infants” (1992: 143). The infant Gowther is equally vicious towards his

mother, and when she tries to feed him ‘he snaffulld to hit so / he rofe tho hed fro tho brest’ (ll. 129-30). These lines show how Gowther violently sucks her mother’s breast and tears her nipple. Gowther displays none of the innocence associated with childhood, but is violent from birth.

As Gowther grows up, his unnatural acts of moral depravity continue as he ‘pursu[es] a life of reckless helter-skelter sadism’ in the words of Alcuin Blamires (2004: 45). He forges himself a ‘A fachon bothe of styлле and yron’ (l. 142), and he kills many men with a curved blade sword. His demonic qualities are emphasised in the terrible crimes he commits against virtuous people. He beats down men of holy church, he shuts priests and nuns in the church, burn them up:

Meydnys maryage wolde he spyll  
 And take wyffus ageyn hor wyll,  
 And sley hor husbondus too,  
 And make frerus to leype at kraggus  
 And parsons for to heng on knaggus,  
 And odur prestys sloo (ll. 196-201)

This long list of offences, emphasised by the repeated ‘and’ conjunction, is juxtaposed against the specific examples of his sacrilegious treatment of a group of nuns. First ‘he and is men bothe leyn hom by’ (l. 188), after which ‘he spard hom up in hor kyrke / And brend hom up’ (ll.190-91). The number and nature of Gowther’s crimes leave no doubt that he is unnatural, even if his appearance does not betray this.

Although *Sir Gowther* and *The King of Tars* contain the more obvious repellent, grotesque unnatural children it is also these two texts which provide adequate explanations as to why the lump child and the demonic Gowther exist. In both cases there is a problem with the father which provides an obstacle to the birth of a normal child. Gowther’s father is not the Duke as he should be, but ‘A felturn fende (l. 74). Vincent of Beauvais notes that ‘itaque per commixtionem feminum quam faciunt daemones illa sola animalia fieri possunt quae fiunt per putrefactionem, vt ranae, muscae & quidam serpentes’ [‘so it is out of the intercourse with women perpetrated by demons only creatures that come about through putrefaction such as frogs, flies and certain snakes come into being’] (1964; col. 157). The children of demons were thus understood as being both human and monstrous hence, given his paternity, Gowther’s horrific acts are unsurprising: all he does is ‘wyrke is fadur wyll’ (l. 174). Gowther’s monstrosity is because of his father. Here, Gowther’s physical and spiritual imperfection appears to be the symbol and embodiment of his father’s spiritual irregularity.

The problem is the same in *The King of Tars*: although the Sultan tells the Princess that the lump is created ‘All þurth þi fals bileue’ (l. 594), the text proves that she is correct when she accuses ‘For þi bileue it farþ so’ (l. 605). Gilbert explains that contemporary Aristotelian belief held that the mother provided the flesh of a child but that it was the superior influence of the father which shaped it into human form. The lump child has no proper form as the Sultan’s ‘religion is interpreted as a symbolic absence which leaves his child fatherless, unable to take the crucial step from maternal flesh to paternal body’ (2004: 110). Consequently, although Gowther and the lump child are quite obviously unnatural in their appearance or behaviour, the presence of such offspring is not in and of itself particularly strange.

In contrast, the reason behind the unnatural children in *Chevalere Assigne* is highly ambiguous. Taylor describes *Chevalere Assigne* as the story of ‘the transformation of children into swans by black magic’ (1969: 70). Moreover, Evans assumes that *Chevalere Assigne* is about ‘a queen and her children under the sway of an evil-mother in-law’ (1995: 70). This is indeed what the reader assumes in the absence of a more explicit reason for the children turning into swans, and the confusion seems to be encouraged by the text. When Matabryne is introduced, she is established as an evil character by association with the devil, as it is said that she ‘made moche sorwe / fors he sette her affye in Sathanas of helle’ (ll. 10-11). She is ‘cursed’ (l.38) and assists at the birth of the children because ‘she thowȝt to do þat byrthe a fowle end’ (l. 40) and is therefore in an ideal position to curse the newborn babies. It is also Matabryne who first introduces the idea of an animal birth long before the reader discovers that this is actually true:

Takethe þe welpes  
And sythen cone before þe kynge & vp on-hyȝe she  
sedye,  
‘Sone paye þe with þy qwene & see of her berthe’.  
(ll. 63-65)

Her actions towards the children and their mother and her evil associations point towards Matabryne as the culprit, but this is not the case. It seems unlikely that Matabryne would create the elaborate ruse involving the puppies if she could prove that the children were really half-beast, or indeed that she would bewitch them only to order to have them killed immediately. The fact that the children are born wearing the chains indicates that like Gowther and the lump child, the unnatural nature of the swan children is intrinsic, not extrinsic. It is not a curse that has been imposed upon the children that causes them to transform into swans, but some irregularity in their biological makeup.

However, what this could be remains mysterious. Unlike Gowther, the children do not have a demonic father substituting for their own, and there can be no doubt as to their parentage, the romance explicitly stating that ‘whenne it drowȝ towarde þe nyȝte þey wenten to bede / he gette on here þat same nyȝte resonabullye manye’ (ll. 33-34). Equally, unlike in *The King of Tars*, both parents appear to be Christian: when the king finds out that his wife is pregnant he ‘þanked lowely our lorde of his loue & his sonde’ (l. 36), and when the queen has been thrown into prison she ‘mony a fayre orysoun vn-to þe fader made’ (l. 90). If the swan transformation is not a curse, which it cannot be, there seems no clear reason why the children are unnatural. All that the text ever really reveals is that the lack of the necklaces causes the children to turn into swans.

Despite the lack of explanation the narrative continues as if it were the evil mother-in-law that were responsible. Matabryne’s invented accusation of animal birth is only incorrect insofar as the queen did not give birth to puppies: her children remain partially and inexplicably bestial. This lack of explanation leaves room for doubts in the mind of the reader about the natural order of things and the security of the definition of humanity. As Williams writes in his analysis of shape shifters, ‘it suggests, terrifyingly, that the boundaries of natural form are insecure, that it is somehow possible for a self to slip out of the protective clothing that declares its identity and become trapped in a shape that misidentifies and misrepresents it’ (1996: 123-24). For a human to appear as something other is comprehensible if there is a reason for that otherness as it can then be fixed or at least understood, but for an unnatural birth which causes so many problems to go unexplained is a frightening prospect.

It is for this very reason that the lump child of *The King of Tars* also proves to be the least problematic in matters of resolution. Whether the child is unnatural because it is product of a Christian and a Saracen or because it effectively has no father due to the Sultan’s failure to fulfil his paternal role, the obvious way to resolve this is the baptism suggested by the princess. This act removes the child from its fatherless state by giving him a new heavenly Father to provide a formative influence that the lump lacks and thus claims it wholly for the Christian God. Surely enough:

When þat it cristned was  
It hadde liif & lim & fas  
& crid with gret deray  
& hadde hide & flesche & fel (ll. 775-778)



Not only does it now look like a child, it also behaves like one. Although ‘flesche’ remains one of its constituent parts, it is flesh that has form and identity now that the priest ‘cleped it the name of Ion’ (l. 773). It has become entirely normalised through the transfigurative power of God.

In this manner, as Gilbert observes, *The King of Tars* ‘thus identifies the Christian God as the sole and all- powerful guarantor of paternity’, the superlative Father of all (2000: 335). There is no option other than to conclude as the Sultan does, not only that ‘Ihesu was of more miȝt / þan was his fals lawe’ (ll.830-31) but also that ‘certeyne, þi God is trewe’ (l. 939). The monstrosity of the lump child is important because it draws the reader in through a morbid fascination with its deformity in order to highlight its real purpose. The lump child functions as an ideological symbol to illustrate the transformative nature of salvation and the overriding power of the Christian God, a role hinted at when the term so often used to describe the lump, ‘flesche’, is also used to describe the body of Christ at line 858. Both the Sultan and the lump child have tools to facilitate the salvation of others.

This assertion of God’s omnipotence through the power of baptism to physically and morally transform is surprisingly absent from both *Sir Gowther* and *Chevalere Assigne*, although the unnatural children are baptised in both romances. Given the established tradition for hybrid children born of unsuitable unions to be made whole and perfect through baptism, as in *The King of Tars*, it might be expected that Gowther and the swan children would also be cured by this process of Christianisation (Montano, 2002: 118-32). However, this is clearly not the case. Before Gowther has begun to commit acts of violence but after his potential for monstrosity has been firmly established, ‘Tho Duke hym gard to kyrke beyre / Crystond him and caldhym Gowhter’ (ll. 106-107) and yet Gowther goes on to fully express his demonic nature: he is not exorcised through his nominal induction into the family of God or indeed through any external force. In *Chevalere Assigne* the potential transformative power of baptism is not even acknowledged, as it is only after the swan children have resumed their human forms through the inexplicable magical powers of the chains that ‘þey formed a fonte & cristene þe children’ (l. 365). The list of the names given to the children which follows makes the reader acutely aware of the missing seventh child who must remain a swan and also that this ritual can do nothing to help him. In these texts, baptism is denied any real power, appearing more as a social rite of passage than the potent religious act that it is in *The King of Tars*, and this casts a shadow of doubt over the ability of God to resolve all which is eventually propogated in the conclusion of both.

In *Sir Gowther* and *Chevalere Assigne* baptism is part of being human but plays no role in becoming human.

Interestingly, in light of this denial of baptismal transformation *Sir Gowther* attempts to resolve the problem of its demonic hero through voluntary conversion to Christianity in adulthood. Gowther goes to receive 'schryfte and absolycion' (l. 268) from the Pope, performs penance and eventually becomes a Saint after death. Hopkins considers that this places Gowther in a symbolic Everyman role: 'The message- that even the most grievous sinner can be saved, provided that he is truly repentant' (1990: 146). However, there remains seeds of doubt as to whether Gowther is truly repentant and the message as hopeful as Hopkins thinks. Although he agrees to his penance Gowther does so on his own terms despite his promise that:

Y schall the truly swere  
At thi byddng beyn to be,  
And hald tho penans that thu leys to me (ll. 285-87)

He rejects the Pope's request to 'lye down thi fachon then the fro' (l. 289). His insistence on retaining his weapon is another problem. He says that 'This bous me nedus with mee beyr'. Cohen suggests that this is because of 'a materialisation into extraphysical space of what he inside is' (1997: 229). Gowther's refusal to give up the 'fachon' [falchion] is therefore an indication that he remains other, with the potential for violence. The earlier violence is, thematically, far more impressive than Gowther's good works following his conversion and even as the poet reminds us of his sins in order to show his atonement for them they become vivid once more. When reading *Sir Gowther*, it is the sins that stand out, not Gowther's conversion, and this monstrosity renders it impossible to read *Sir Gowther* as a penitential romance. As Charbonneau argues, 'how could an author expect us to believe this hopelessly ill-prepared transformation from devil's son to Saint, from burner of convents to builder of them, from disfigurer and mutilator of women to caretaker of them?' (2002: 21).

Even if the reader does believe Gowther's unlikely transformation from sinner to Saint, this is not to say that he becomes any less unnatural. His penance, that he should:

Eyt no meyt bot that thu revus of howndus mothe  
Cum thy body within;  
Ne no worde speke for evyl ne gud (ll. 296-298)

is hardly an activity designed to encourage the reader to consider Gowther normal. Conversion to Christianity does not, for Gowther, represent

entry into the normal world but simply a different location outside it. Having been extremely sinful before his conversion, he now becomes extremely holy to the extent that he becomes a miracle working Saint after death. As Cartlidge argues, ‘it is as if the Devil’s magic so fearfully alluded to in the opening lines of the text has not been in any way cancelled or dissolved, but merely redirected “thoro the grace of God allmyght” (l. 738)’ (2005: 147). Gowther may become good but he can never become natural.

The transformation of the swan children of *Chevalere Assigne* into wholly natural beings is also impossible, although their resuming of human form is effected through the little that has been revealed of the origin of their problem:

Toke þey þe cheynes to þe water turnen,  
And shoken vp þe cheynes þer sterten vp þe swannes;  
Eche on chese to his & turnn to her kynde (ll.355-57)

However, as their origin is not properly explained, the solution to the problem of their unnatural nature can also never be fully satisfactory. Because only what causes them to do so but not why the children have the potential to turn into swans is worked out, they cannot be completely healed of their biological curse. The fact that ‘one was alwaye a swanne for losse of his cheyne’ (l. 358) lends an air of conditionality to the ending even for those children who have resumed their human forms. It is only the presence of the chain preventing them from being forced into the shapes of swans again, and the reader has already seen that chains can be broken. Hence, the children in *Chevalere Assigne* never become intrinsically fully human; they are only human for now.

Evans argues that *Chevalere Assigne* has a ‘homiletic ambience, with its opening and closing that indicate the romance is an exemplum of God’s help to the wronged’ (1995: 70). It does indeed end by saying ‘and þus þe botenyng of god browþte hem to honde (l. 370). However, the impotence of baptism is problematic in itself, but perhaps more worrying are the implications if the reader chooses to believe this statement that everything was brought to conclusion through the grace of God, for the conclusion is far from complete or settled. If God saved the swan children, why did he not save the seventh who is clearly in such pain and distress? The description of the solitary swan that ‘bote hym his bylle þat alle his breste bledde / and alle his feyre fedres fomed vpon blode’ (ll. 360-61) is highly emotive. In the longer French romance, the remaining swan plays an important role in the dynastic mythology of Godfrey of Boulogne, but without this family history which the author of *Chevalere Assigne* completely ignores it appears as a pathetic cruelty and, as such, an ideological problem. The reader is left with

either a God who is arbitrary in his salvation or a God who is not all-powerful, as has already been implied through the inefficacy of baptism. Thus, the unsatisfactory conclusion of *Chevalere Assigne* creates an opportunity for questions about divinity, established ideas of religion and what it means to be human.

Unlike many other Middle English romances, *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* represent children with physical and moral imperfections and neglect the process of child education in which the curriculum of reading, writing and music is distinctly specified. Accordingly, as argued above, the children in *The King of Tars*, *Chevalere Assigne*, and *Sir Gowther* function as unnatural and imperfect human forms. Given the established tradition for hybrid children born of unsuitable unions to be made whole and perfect through baptism, God's omnipotence through the power of baptism to physically and morally transform and restore the unnatural children to normalcy works well in *The King of Tars*. However, it is surprisingly absent from both *Sir Gowther* and *Chevalere Assigne*, although the unnatural children are baptised in both romances. Hence, while the monstrosity of the children in these romances serves to reinforce Christian doctrine of salvation through baptism, the absence of such a solution still creates an opportunity for questions about divinity and established ideas of religion. It is clear that as in the case of *The King of Tars* sometimes the text answers questions that it raises, but it is equally common to conclude without satisfactory solutions as in *Sir Gowther* and *Chevalere Assigne*, resulting in a deliberately destabilising effect which is ideological in itself.

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