THE ANCESTRY OF SIR PAON DE RUET, FATHER-IN-LAW OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND OF JOHN 'OF GAUNT'

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ABSTRACT

There is convincing evidence that Sir Paon de Ruet may have been the same person as Sir Gilles de Roet. The article explores the possibility that this Gilles may have been linked to the Lords of Rœulx, who in turn were a younger branch of the Counts of Hainaut.

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The Foundation for Medieval Genealogy intends to produce the first instalment of a revised Plantagenet Ancestry[2] in 2003. It is hoped that this note, describing one aspect of work in progress, will be expanded to into an article co-authored with another genealogist who has already carried out extensive research on the same subject. The content of this note is, however, based solely on the writer's research. Comments and criticisms from others interested in Sir Paon's origins will be greatly welcomed, a solution to the problem even more so.

> 'The sixteenth-century herald Robert Glover identified Chaucer's wife … as a daughter of Paon, or Payne de Roet (Paganus de Rouet) of Hainault, and sister of Katherine Roet, who first married Hugh Swynford, knight, and later John of Gaunt. The daughters were co-heirs of their father, who was Guienne King of Arms. No contemporary proof of the identity of Chaucer's wife has come to light, nor has the name of the mother of Katherine Swynford and her supposed sister Philippa been found'. (Crow and Olson, 1966)

Geoffrey Chaucer married Philippa, who was almost certainly the daughter of a certain Paon de Ruet. He was in the *entourage* of Philippa of Hainaut who travelled to London in late 1327, to marry the young King Edward III. So Sir Paon's origins and career are of interest to biographers of the poet, all the more so since it very likely that Geoffrey and Philippa left descendants who are alive today[3].

There is, however, no doubt that Katherine, the mistress and then the wife of John 'of Gaunt', duke of Lancaster, was Sir Paon's daughter[4]. The descendants of John and Katherine are prolific. Yet no-one, to my knowledge, has succeeded in establishing Katherine's parentage. For those engaged in tracing the complete ancestry of the Tudor, Stuart and Hanoverian kings and queens, Sir Paon is the first person that they encounter who presents an *impasse*. The challenge to find a solution is considerable.

The chronicler Froissart identified Katherine's father as Sir Paon de Ruet[4]. It is likely that he was born in the early years of the fourteenth century. We also we know that Sir Paon was present at the siege of Calais in 1347 (Lettenhove, 1867-1877, **5:** 215) and was still

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[2] The original was compiled by William H. Turton and published in 1928.

[3] The case has been plausibly put by Moncreiffe (1983).

[4] For instance Lettenhove (1867-1877) **2**: 513: '… Paonnet de Roet, dont la fille fut plus tard duchesse de Lancastre et l'aïeule des Tudors'.

alive in 1351 (Lettenhove, 1867-1877, **15**: 199-400). He was perhaps Guienne King of Arms[5], but no contemporary records exist to prove this.

There is evidence that Paon was 'landed', rather than being an impecunious adventurer. In 1411, his grandson Sir Thomas Swynford (Katherine's son by her first husband, Sir Hugh Swynford) tried to retrieve an inheritance in Hainault that had come to him through his mother[6].

Manly (1926) has made a convincing case that Sir Paon de Ruet was the same person as Sir Gilles de Roet (*dit* Paon or Paonnet), named seven times in the cartulary of the counts of Hainault (Devilliers, 1881-1896). The life-events of Paon and Gilles coincide quite remarkably. They both bear the same family name (albeit spelt in rather different ways). So perhaps we should be searching for a Gilles rather than a Paon, and perhaps we should try to establish whether or not Gilles can be linked to the family of the Lords of Rœulx in Hainaut. As Cook (1919) notes, 'a great variety of spellings for Rœulx is found in the ancient documents, of which the commonest is Rues; others are Ruet, Rueth, Ruez, Roes, Roelx, Roeld [and] Ruelt'.

It would, however, be unwise to pursue this line of enquiry if the name 'Gilles' seldom or never appeared in the genealogy of the Lords of Rœulx. After all, it is a far from common forename. However, it does appear in their genealogy for several generations. The circumstantial evidence for a link between Paon de Ruet and the lords of Rœulx grows stronger.

Moreover, the arms of the Lords (later Counts) of Rœulx play upon the word 'roue' (wheel): 'vert, a lion argent, armed [teeth and claws] and langued gules, holding in its dexter paw a wheel'. Cook (1919), says 'the modern family of Roeult, *dit* Resteau, has for the Roeult quarterings, Gules, three wheels argent'. The tomb of Thomas Chaucer, Geoffrey's son, at Ewelme Church, Oxfordshire also displays the three wheels. None of this provides proof of a dynastic link, only strong supporting evidence as to Philippa's origin.

There is no doubt that the Lords of Rœulx sprang from a younger branch of the Counts of Hainaut. Over two centuries, they married their sons and daughters into the families of most of the prominent Low Countries' nobility[7], often thereby increasing their land-holdings. Their apogee was around the beginning of the fourteenth century. By the middle of the century, their power had vanished, their lands had been dispersed and the title had passed to another family. Paon, or Gilles, should he belong to the family of the Lords of Rœulx, might be a victim of the family's collapse from power into penury and obscurity – but a survivor, with patronage from the Queen-to-be Philippa, across the Channel in England.

Unfortunately, the genealogy of the last members of the Rœulx family is far from clear. The account given by Lejeune (1890) appears to be the most authoritative and complete. The penultimate lord of Rœulx was Gilles (called 'Rigaut'), living 1288, died in 1308. He married Isabeau de Ligne, Lady of Montreuil. Lejeune gives them a large brood of children, among who was another Gilles de Rœulx, just possibly the Gilles, (*dit* Paon) de Ruet, father-in-law of John 'of Gaunt' and Geoffrey Chaucer.

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5 See Nicolas (1843) who notes that Weever's *Ancient Funeral Monuments* (1767) records that on Sir Paon's tomb in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, there was once the inscription 'Hic Jacet Paganus Roet Guyenne Rex Armorum Pater Catherine Ducisse Lancastriae'.

6 *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, Henry IV*, vol. 4, Oct. 5th 1411, quoted by Manly (1926) p.54.

7 Among these are Boulaere, Morlanwelz, Gavre, Mortagne, Trith. Gand, Peruwelz, Ligne and Trazegnies. There were marriages too with the Burgraves of Doornik (Tournai) and Ghent. See primarily Lejeune (1890).

In summary, our quarry is perhaps a cadet of the family of the Lords of Rœulx, noble enough to be in the *entourage* of Philippa of Hainaut, to be knighted and to play a part (albeit not prominent) in fourteenth century society. He was probably born around 1309, and aged about eighteen when, as a young esquire, he came with Philippa of Hainaut to England. He may have married around 1340, and have children born in that decade. His grandson laid claims to lands in Hainaut. One of his daughters was the mistress, then the wife, of the richest nobleman in England. He was, it seems, no *parvenu.* His origins, however, remain elusive.

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