

Women and Inheritance in Norman England:

The Case of Geva Ridel.T¹

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A few years ago I wrote of aristocratic women in early twelfth-century England that we must be sure not to make the surviving evidence fit into a framework of what we know to have been custom later, by assuming that a son passed over in favour of a daughter must have been illegitimate, or that there may have been two marriages, or that daughters inherited all their mothers' lands.² In other words, how flexible were norms of inheritance – I use 'norms' rather than 'customs' here deliberately – where women were concerned in early twelfth-century England? I suggested that, although we probably only hear part of the story from the written evidence, we need to place women in the context of their families to understand the decisions that were made about inheritance and marriage. Further problems arise when we remember that the written records usually relate to aristocratic women and (often) to special cases: the marriage settlement of Miles of Gloucester and Sybil of Neufmarché, for instance.³ Yet some of the greatest honours of England, such as Belvoir,⁴ Huntingdon,⁵ and Wallingford,⁶ to name but three, descended through women. The claims of women, whether as heiresses or as wives, thus presented opportunities for their overlord, the king, and they were also sensitive political issues. Marriage was, as Sir Richard Southern wrote, 'the easiest road to ready-made wealth' in Norman England,⁷ and if some became (by modern standards) millionaires on marriage, others must have been disappointed or angry when decisions about important marriages were announced.

One of the best known texts dealing with a marriage settlement in early twelfth-century England is that of Richard Basset, near the start of his career as a royal justice and sheriff of King Henry I, and Matilda, daughter of another royal justice, Geoffrey Ridel, who had drowned in the wreck of the White Ship. This, the *Titanic* of the twelfth century, had robbed the king of his heir and two other children, plus leading members of his entourage, who were returning from Normandy in November 1120 after a four-year absence. The king's happiness and his plans for the future had been destroyed, but he moved quickly to remarry in the hope of an heir, and there were pressing decisions about government which could not wait whilst he withdrew for a protracted period of mourning. The casualty list included Richard, the young earl of Chester, who had died without heirs, and Geoffrey Ridel, a royal justice, and the question of their successors was related in the person of Geva Ridel, mother of Matilda, whose marriage was disposed of in the text we shall now look at in more detail.⁸

The text survives in the form of a royal notification addressed to three earls, David of Northampton and Huntingdon, not yet king of Scots, the earl of Leicester, Robert II de Beaumont, and Ranulf I earl of Chester, and the sheriffs of those counties in which Geoffrey Ridel had held land. The notification was twice copied into the thirteenth-century Basset cartulary in the British Library, one of the earliest surviving collections of charters and memoranda for a lay family surviving from medieval England, its compilation recently redated to the years between 1236 and 1241.⁹ The main provisions of the text are that

Richard Basset was awarded permission to marry a daughter of Geoffrey Ridel and custody of Geoffrey's land until Robert Ridel could be knighted (i. e. attained his majority) and could marry a granddaughter of Ralph Basset. Ralph was the father of Richard and there is a clear sense conveyed by this terminology of the Bassets' concern not to lose Geoffrey Ridel's lands. Richard was to have twenty poundsworth of land with his wife as her marriage portion in chief ('of my fief') and the service of four knights. If Robert Ridel died without an heir by his wife, the king granted to Richard Basset and his heir by the daughter of Geoffrey Ridel, all Geoffrey's land of whomsoever it was held, that is, the under-tenancies as well as the tenancies in chief. And if the daughters (plural) of Geoffrey were not married in the lifetime of Robert Ridel or whilst they were in the custody of Richard Basset, Richard was to make provision for them according to the king's advice and consideration. The king concluded that this gift and agreement had been made at the request and advice of Ranulf earl of Chester, William (de Roumare), Ranulf's half-brother, Nigel d'Aubigny and other kinsfolk. The notification was witnessed by the chancellor of the earl of Chester, the dean of Lincoln, a clutch of royal *familiares*, three Bassets, perhaps Richard's brothers, and prominent members of Ranulf of Chester's entourage. The place of issue was Woodstock, one of the king's favourite residences, and the date of issue was between January 1121 and 10 June 1123 when the king left England for Normandy. Henry is known to have been at Woodstock in March 1121¹⁰ and again in January 1123.¹¹ It is tempting to ascribe the text to the earlier date, when Henry took a series of crucial decisions about patronage in the aftermath of the wreck of the White Ship.

This is a remarkable text for a variety of reasons: first there is the careful provision for the custody of heirs to a royal official, not their mother, who does not figure here. Secondly, there is the involvement of Ranulf of Chester, who had recently been allowed to succeed his cousin Richard as earl, his half-brother William de Roumare and their kinsman, Nigel d'Aubigny, one of the king's closest companions: here is a valuable insight into those able to influence royal decisions. Thirdly, a close inter-relationship between the affairs of royal officials, Geoffrey Ridel, Ralph and Richard Basset, is indicated. Fourthly, there is the king's interest in all of this to ensure that Geoffrey Ridel's successor in the midlands was a safe pair of hands. Perhaps there is a parallel with the appointment of Geoffrey de Clinton as sheriff in nearby Warwickshire.¹²

My concern here, however, is with the unnamed mother in the case, Geva Ridel, of whom it has been claimed that 'perhaps no figure in medieval history has excited more controversy or engaged the attention of genealogists so much,'¹³ an overstatement, but one which alerts us to the interest of the problems surrounding her life and lands. To understand the ramifications, however, we need a few details about her husband Geoffrey, and about the lands of Robert de Boucy which passed via Geva to the Bassets. The early stages of Geoffrey's career are obscure.¹⁴ He, or a man of the same name, was mentioned in Domesday Book as having come to England from Apulia in the company of Roger Bigod's brother.¹⁵ A man named Geoffrey Ridel, who became duke of Gaeta, was prominent amongst the Normans of south Italy at this time, and he obviously may well have been related to our Geoffrey.¹⁶ The place of origin of the latter has not been identified, but it seems likely that it was somewhere in western Normandy, possibly in the neighbourhood of Mont-Saint-Michel, where Geoffrey's brother Matthew was a monk.¹⁷ A man from this region might well have attracted the notice of Henry I, who before his accession had been

count of the Cotentin.¹⁸ Matthew Ridel was promoted to the important abbacy of Peterborough in 1102, but remained abbot for only a short period.¹⁹ Geoffrey Ridel began to appear as a witness to royal documents for the first time during the early years of Henry I's reign, particularly in relation to the east midlands.²⁰ It has been pointed out that Henry's justices tended to work in the region where their own lands were situated,²¹ and thus it seems likely that Geoffrey by this time was married to Geva Ridel.

The manor of Drayton in Staffordshire was Geva's marriage portion, given to her by her father Earl Hugh of Chester: it was so identified in a charter of Earl Ranulf II of Chester.²² Yet by the time of the Basset cartulary, it was evidently family tradition that Geva was the daughter and heiress of Robert de Boucy. For the Bassets, this explained how the Boucy estates had come into their family.²³

In her two surviving charters, however, Geva styled herself as the daughter of Earl Hugh.²⁴ After the death of her husband Geoffrey, Geva never seems to have remarried, and in the 1140s she turned to the foundation of a religious house, Canwell Priory in Staffordshire, and it was in favour of Canwell that her charters were issued. These make no reference to her maternal kin, and Geva styled herself by reference to her husband and her father. There is no doubt that Geva was the channel through which the Boucy estates passed to the Bassets; the question is when and how?

Was Geva the child of a lawful marriage of her father? Dugdale thought she was, because Drayton had been granted to her in free marriage, but it seems he was mistaken.²⁵ Geva was a Latinized form of the old English name Giofu, and it seems possible therefore that she was the child of a liaison between Earl Hugh and an Englishwoman.²⁶ Earl Hugh, as already mentioned, is known to have married only once to a wife of high rank: if Geva was her daughter then this would surely have been recalled? He is also known to have been promiscuous, because the chronicler Orderic Vitalis, in a memorable pen portrait, mentioned Hugh's numerous sons and daughters by concubines.²⁷ Two sons are mentioned elsewhere by the author: one, Robert, became a monk at Saint Evroul and, briefly, abbot of Bury St Edmunds.²⁸ Another, Otuel, became tutor to Henry I's heir Prince William and died with his master in the White Ship. Otuel married Margaret, the widow of William de Mandeville, and by marriage acquired some of the Mandeville estates.²⁹ Two sons had thus been generously provided for, so the king was hardly going to jib at generous provision for a daughter. The earl like his royal master was willing to provide handsomely for illegitimate daughters and to arrange prestigious marriages for them.

If Geva's mother was English, there is no clear information about her status. The manor of Drayton had been held before the Conquest by Earl Aelfgar of Mercia and was in the king's hands in 1086.³⁰ It is just possible that Geva's mother came from Earl Aelfgar's family. After all, this would help to strengthen Hugh's claim to succeed to the earl's lands and power in the midlands, and it might explain why she was generously treated. On the other hand, it might be argued that if the mother *was* of high status, her ancestry would not have been forgotten and the earl would have surely have gone through a marriage ceremony with her. We simply do not know.

Earl Richard of Chester came of age and was married to Matilda, Henry I's niece,³¹ probably in 1115, and about five years later perished in the White Ship without leaving any children. Who then was to succeed to the vast inheritance of Earl Hugh? Orderic was quite clear on this point: Ranulf, daughter of Earl Hugh's sister Matilda was the nearest heir (*contiguus heres*).³² There were other nephews: another sister Judith had married Richer of L'Aigle, a marriage which had produced sons and daughters,³³ and a third sister, Hélisende, had married William count of Eu.³⁴ In other words, there were legitimate nephews and nieces as well as a surviving daughter, Geva.

Was there any chance that Geva would succeed? If of legitimate birth, she was a great heiress. In the early twelfth century it was by no means certain that the claim of a daughter would be preferred over nephews, nor would she have been allowed to remain a widow outside a religious community. An earlier comparable instance was perhaps Judith, widow of Earl Waltheof, who allegedly preferred to enter the religious life rather than remarry, and whose daughter became the bride of Simon de Senlis.³⁵ The fact that Geva did not so far as is known either remarry or retreat from the world strengthens the possibility that she was illegitimate.

One possibility is that Geva's claim to succeed her father was in effect bought off by a grant of the lands of Robert de Boucy, and that this was the route by which the Boucy lands came to the Bassets.³⁶ Yet if her claim was not strong because of her birth there was little for which to compensate her. She could however have been the wife of Robert de Boucy. If so, would this marriage have been before or after that to Geoffrey Ridel? Geva was said to have held Drayton in the time of Earl Hugh according to Ranulf II's charter, from which it is possible to calculate that she would have been at least fourteen or fifteen in 1100, old enough to have been married or widowed once.³⁷ The concern of Richard Basset's marriage settlement was with the land of Geoffrey Ridel, not Robert de Boucy, and by 1130 Richard Basset seems to have been in possession of most of the Boucy estates.³⁸ There is also the commonsense argument that Geoffrey Ridel is unlikely to have spent years as a royal justice, one of the few whom Henry of Huntingdon called a 'justice of all England,'³⁹ had he not had some reward for his service, and again this could have been from Rufus or Henry.

Against the argument for Geva's first marriage being to Robert de Boucy, however, is the text of another charter in the Basset cartulary by which Robert de Tosny of Stafford granted Madeley to Robert de Boucy to hold in fief, a charter witnessed by several of the same witnesses as the Basset marriage settlement. Taken at face value this suggests that a Robert de Boucy was still living after 1120: perhaps this was why the compiler of the Basset cartulary believed that Geva must have been Robert's daughter, not his wife. It is of course possible that although the charter is genuine in substance, the witness list was added later, or that this was a younger Robert de Boucy, not the man who may have been Geva's husband.

The problem clearly cannot be decisively resolved, but on balance it seems more likely than not that Geoffrey Ridel had held the lands of Robert de Boucy and that they passed via his widow Geva to the Bassets. It was Geoffrey Ridel whose name Geva retained and whose arms her grandsons are said to have used.⁴⁰ Geoffrey could have acquired them through

marriage, if Geva had earlier been Robert's wife, or they may have escheated and been regranted to him.

It would help if we knew more about Robert de Boucy. His name is thought to derive from Boucey near Pontorson on the border between Normandy and Brittany.⁴¹ A close neighbour there was the family of Macey, and members of this family were prominent tenants of Earl Hugh.⁴² Again, therefore, there is a connection with the earl. If Geoffrey Ridel came from the same region, given that his brother entered Mont-Saint-Michel, this might help to explain why he benefitted from a grant of the Boucy estates. He would not have been a complete outsider, and may even have been a kinsman.

In any event Geva was allowed to remain a widow and later in life turned to founding a priory. It is interesting that she chose a house for men, not for women, and that it was situated in Staffordshire, near an episcopal manor, not on her manor of Great Drayton nor that of Great Weldon, the chief manor of her daughter and son-in-law. The timing suggests that it may have been influenced by the death of her son-in-law and the political situation in the midlands in the 1140s. Both of her charters refer to the consent of her kinsman Earl Ranulf. She also referred to the authority of Bishop Roger of Coventry and Lichfield, who had an estate at Hints close to Canwell.⁴³ The site of the priory itself was near a spring associated with St Modwenna, a seventh-century hermit whose cult was centred on Burton-on-Trent.⁴⁴ It may be speculated that the decision to found a priory for men, rather than, say, a house for women where Geva herself could have retired, may have been shaped by family considerations, and it fits in with the devolution of her other estates which were hived off to Ralph II Basset.

Very little is known of the fate of her son-in-law Richard Basset after the death of Henry I. With the possible exception of an attestation of a document issued by King Stephen in 1136,⁴⁵ and a reference to the takeover of his castle at Montreuil-au-Houlme by William de Montpinçon as a base against the Angevins,⁴⁶ Richard disappeared from view. He was certainly dead by 1146 or 1147, when Geoffrey Ridel secured confirmation of his father's estates in England and Normandy from the Empress.⁴⁷ He in turn transferred a good part of the inheritance granted to his brother Ralph Basset: the manor of Colston Basset in Nottinghamshire, all that Geoffrey held of his grandmother's land, certain of his father's gains plus Witherley in Leicestershire (held of the earl of Leicester) and Pattingham in Staffordshire (held of the earl of Chester) in exchange for the Basset lands in Normandy, and their mother's dower manor of Kington Winslow in Berkshire, which was held of the abbey of Glastonbury.⁴⁸ Here we have the use of a grandmother and mother's estates to provide for a son – whether a younger or elder is not made clear, and the generosity of the settlement raises questions about the context in which the settlement was drawn up. Ralph Basset, founder of the Bassets of Drayton, thus held most of what might be called the Chester interest, and the rest of his grandmother's land passed to the church. Perhaps then we have another case where family arrangements were made to safeguarding landed inheritances in difficult political times, by dividing them between sons or by making pious donations partly motivated by the hope of removing them from the combat zone.

This tangled story tells us a good deal about politics, marriage, and the politics of marriage in the reign of Henry I. We can see how Ralph Basset kept a weather eye out for the

advancement of one of his sons, Richard, by an alliance with the daughter of a colleague. We can see too how far-reaching the effects of the wreck of the White Ship were, most drastically obviously for Henry I, but also for other great families, who sought to shape the king's decisions. Henry was not allowed to opt out for long. And with Geva Ridel it looks as though we have the child of a previously unknown union between a Norman father and an English mother.

NOTES

¹ I should like to thank Prof. William T. Reedy Jr for prompting me to reassess my views in *The Government of England under Henry I* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 169-70, 232, and Dr K.S.B. Keats-Rohan who both invited me to present a revised assessment at the International Medieval Congress, Leeds, 2001 and for her helpful discussion of the case.

² Judith A. Green, *The Aristocracy of Norman England* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 376

³ J. H. Round (ed.), *Ancient Charters*, Pipe Roll Society, 10 (1888), pp. 8-10.

⁴ Green, *Aristocracy of Norman England*, pp. 374-75; K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, 'The heirs of Berengar de Todei', *Prosopon*, 9 (July 1998); Judith A. Green, 'The descent of Belvoir', *Prosopon*, 10 (April 1999).

⁵ G. E. C., *Complete Peerage*, rev. edn V. Gibbs, H. A. Doubleday and G. H. White, 13 vols in 12 (London, 1910-59), VI, pp. 637-42.

⁶ K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, 'The devolution of the Honour of Wallingford, 1066-1148', *Oxoniensia*, 54 (1989), pp. 311-18.

⁷ 'The place of Henry I in English history', first publ. in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 47 (1962), 145, repr. in *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 206-33.

⁸ W. T. Reedy (ed.), *Basset Charters*, Pipe Roll Society, n.s. 1 (1995), no. 47.

⁹ *Basset Charters*, nos. 47, 26; pp. vi-viii for a description and dating of the Cartulary.

¹⁰ J. Stevenson (ed.), *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, Rolls Series, 2 vols (London, 1858), II, p. 162.

¹¹ ASC (E) 1123.

¹² D. Crouch, 'Geoffrey de Clinton and Roger earl of Warwick: new men and magnates in the reign of Henry I', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 55 (1982), p. 116-18.

¹³ G. Wrottesley, 'The Staffordshire Cartulary', *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, 3 (1882), p. 187.

- ¹⁴ See my forthcoming article in the *New Dictionary of National Biography*.
- ¹⁵ *Domesday Book*, ii, 180.
- ¹⁶ Amatus of Montecassino, *Histoire*, ed. V. de Bartholomeis, *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia*, 76 (1935), V.9, 18; pp. 231, 237; VII.3, p. 295; VII. 24, p. 315. I should like to thank Dr G. Loud for his help with the branch of the family in Italy.
- ¹⁷ M. Chibnall (ed. and trans.), *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis* (hereafter OV), 6 vols (Oxford, 1969-80), VI, p. 316.
- ¹⁸ OV, IV, 118-20; William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998), I, 710-12; Elisabeth M. C. Van Houts (ed. and trans.), *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis and Robert of Torigny*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1992-95), II, 204, 210-12. See also the suggestion by Keats-Rohan that Geoffrey was a man of the count of Perche: 'The prosopography of post-Conquest England: four case studies', *Medieval Prosopography*, 14 (1993), 1-51, at p. 24.
- ¹⁹ W. T. Mellows (ed.), *The Peterborough Chronicle of Hugh Candidus* (Oxford, 1949), p. 87.
- ²⁰ *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum* (hereafter RRAN), II, edd. C. Johnson and H. A. Cronne (Oxford, 1956), nos. 685, 703, 755, 793, 796, 969, 975, 985, 1000, 1015a, 1054, 1064, 1156, 1166, 1167, 1168.
- ²¹ W. T. Reedy, 'The origins of the General Eyre in the reign of Henry I', *Speculum*, 41 (1966), pp. 688-724, at p. 719.
- ²² G. Barraclough (ed.), *The Charters of the Anglo-Norman Earls of Chester c. 1071-1237*, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 126 (1988), no. 39. Attached to the manor in 1086 were burgesses in Tamworth, and there is a reference to Geva having given property there to Calke, a house of Augustinian canons founded by her half-brother, Earl Richard, *Domesday Book*, i, 246b; *Chester Charters*, no. 45.
- ²³ BL Sloane Roll xxxi.5r; xxxi.6r.
- ²⁴ W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, new edn, 6 vols in 8 (London, 1817-30), IV, pp. 105-6.
- ²⁵ W. Dugdale, *The Baronage of England*, 2 vols (London, 1675-6), I, p. 34.
- ²⁶ O. von Feilitzen, *Pre-Conquest Personal Names in Domesday Book* (Uppsala, 1937), p. 259. Keats-Rohan has pointed out that this suggestion raises the possibility that Geva, daughter and heiress of the Domesday Book tenant-in-chief Serlo de Burcy may also have had an English mother. For Serlo, see K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, *Domesday People* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp. 418-19. This Geva was the mother of Robert FitzMartin, whose gift of Teignton to Montacute priory was made for the souls of Earl Hugh and his wife and the welfare of Ranulf and his wife. J. H. Round commented that this Geva may have been connected with Earl Hugh's family: *Family Origins and Other Studies*, ed. W. Page (London, 1930), p. 78n.
- ²⁷ OV, II, 262.

²⁸ D. Knowles, C. N. L. Brooke and V. London, *The Heads of Religious Houses 940-1216* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 32; F. S. Schmitt (ed.), *Epistolae, Sancti Anselm ... Opera Omnia*, 6 vols (Stuttgart, 1946-61), nos. 266-67.

²⁹ OV, VI, 304; C. Warren Hollister, 'The misfortunes of the Mandevilles', *History*, 58 (1973), 18-28, reprinted in *Monarchy, Men and Institutions*, pp. 117-27.

³⁰ *Domesday Book*, i, 246b.

³¹ OV, V, 314.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ OV, V, 50.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Ingulph, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland*, ed. H. T. Riley (London, 1854), p. 146.

³⁶ Wrottesley, 'Staffordshire Cartulary', p. 188, followed by Reedy, *Basset Charters*, p. x.

³⁷ *Chester Charters*, no. 39.

³⁸ This is made clear in the Leicestershire Survey, which was included in the Basset cartulary and is thought to have been drawn up in 1129 or 1130 and is thus very close in date to the 1130 pipe roll. However some of the Boucy estates were said to be held by Richard Basset, others were 'of the fee of Ridel', see C. F. Slade (ed.) *The Leicestershire Survey* (Leicester, 1956). Moreover, although most of Robert de Boucy's estates eventually passed to the Bassets, not all did: the tenancy which he had held of Countess Judith in 1086 in Northamptonshire and Leicestershire passed to Robert FitzVitalis, see Keats-Rohan, *Domesday People*, p. 375.

³⁹ D. Greenway (ed.), *Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, Historia Anglorum*, (Oxford, 1996), p. 614-15.

⁴⁰ As cited *Complete Peerage*, II, 1 fn.

⁴¹ G. Tengvik, *Old English Bynames* (Uppsala, 1938), p. 77.

⁴² L. C. Loyd, *The Origins of Some Anglo-Norman Families*, Harleian Society, 103 (1951), pp. 61-2.

⁴³ *Domesday Book*, i, 247.

⁴⁴ *Victoria County History Staffordshire*, III, 213.

⁴⁵ *RRAN*, III, no. 284.

⁴⁶ OV, VI, 466-68.

⁴⁷ *RRAN*, III, no. 43, for corrected dating, see R. H. C. Davis, *King Stephen*, 3rd edn (London, 1990), p. 169.

⁴⁸ Wrottesley, 'Staffordshire Cartulary', pp. 188-89; W. Farrer, *Honors and Knights' Fees*, 3 vols (London and Manchester, 1923-25), II, pp. 269-71.