The Scourge of the Clergy

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The Scourge of the Clergy: Peter of Dreux, Duke of Brittany.

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OLIVER OF MACHECOUL

Peter's son Oliver, generally known as Oliver of Machecoul, has been the subject of much speculation most of which has been based on inadequate knowledge of the available evidence. In general scholars have accepted him as the son of Peter by his second wife, Margaret of Montaigu.\(^1\) M. Blanchard, however, has very ably opposed this view. He quotes an epitaph which states "C’est dame Nicolle, la mère monsieur Oliver de Mackecou" and points out that the only other Oliver of Machecoul was Oliver II who was certainly the son of Eustachie of Vitré.\(^2\) This then is a positive statement that Oliver's mother was named Nicole. Only overwhelming evidence that Margaret was his mother could outweigh it.

As a matter of fact even without this epitaph there is ample reason for refusing to accept Oliver as Margaret's son. Margaret was married to Hugh of Thouars as early as 1203.\(^3\) Taking twelve years old as a safe minimum age for marriage, she must have been at least thirty-nine when Peter married her in 1230. When one considers that she had lived with Hugh of Thouars for twenty-seven years without having any children, it appears unlikely that she should have born Peter a son.\(^4\) Only the delight of nature in freakish pranks, especially in the realm of procreation, might cause one to decline to accept this argument as conclusive. Fortunately there is an even stronger proof that Oliver was not Margaret's son—he inherited none of her lands. It is most difficult to conceive how Margaret could have been the heres legitima of Montaigu and yet transmit


\(^{2}\) "Cartulaire de Rauc," Archives historiques du Poitou, XXVIII (1898), cxxx-cxxxiii.

\(^{3}\) Morice, Preuves, I, 797.

\(^{4}\) In 1225, some four years before Hugh's death, he and Margaret stated clearly that they had no children. Cartulaires du Bas-Poitou, p. 192.
none of her inheritance to her son. While the uncertainty surrounding the exact nature of Margaret's right to the baronies of La Garnache and Montaigu prevents this proof from being absolutely conclusive, in combination with the other evidence it seems sufficient to establish the fact that Oliver was not the son of Margaret and Peter.

Thus there is no sound reason for not accepting the epitaph quoted by Blanchard and making Oliver the son of Dame Nicole. This conclusion immediately brings forward the question of his legitimacy. M. Piet believed that he was a bastard, but Blanchard with true chivalry points out that there is no evidence strong enough to justify aspersions on Nicole's virtue. While it is indeed impertinent for a historian to probe the chastity of a fair lady of the past, I cannot but believe that M. Blanchard's chivalry is misplaced and that Nicole yielded to Peter without the formalities of a wedding. One must, of course, lay aside the consideration that there is no evidence whatever that Peter had a third wife. An argument from silence must not be used to question a lady's virtue. But it is extremely difficult to find a time when Peter could have married Nicole. It is true that he was a widower from the death of Alix in 1221 to his marriage to Margaret in 1230, but in 1226 he planned to wed Jeanne of Flanders and in 1229 Alix of Cyprus. Although it is not impossible that Peter might have fitted a short period of wedded life into those nine years, his general conduct was that of a heart-free bachelor. There is, however, a still better reason for doubting Oliver's legitimacy—he inherited none of his father's lands except the barony of Machecoul to which Peter had no real claim. Peter's sister Isabel gave Oliver part of the revenues which had been settled on her by her husband Count John of Roucy.\footnote{Duchesne, \textit{Maison de Dreux}, p. 330.} For the rest he was obliged to live on what he could retain from his father's usurpation of Machecoul. Now it is, of course, clear that even if he were legitimate Oliver would have had no claim to any part of Brittany, but it is inconceivable that Peter would not have given him some share in his other fiefs.
In summary one can only say that our knowledge of Oliver's origin is most unsatisfactory. He was certainly not the son of Margaret, and there seems little doubt that his mother's name was Nicole. He may have been Peter's legitimate son and Nicole the duke's chaste wife, but the available evidence tends to support the contrary view.

M. Levron has written a very pleasant passage based on the belief that Peter wrote the chanson "Nouviaument m'est pris envie de bien amer par amors" for Margaret of Montaigu. When one considers that Margaret was certainly thirty-nine and probably somewhat older when Peter married her, this seems most improbable. If one chooses not to accept the apparently overwhelming evidence presented by M. Bédier to prove that John of Brittany rather than Peter wrote the chansons ascribed to *Li quens de Bretaigne*, it would seem that Dame Nicole might well be credited with inspiring this poem.

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