

## The Vows of the Heron

### I

In the month of September, when summer is on the wane, when the happy birds have ceased to sing and the vines dry up and the grapes are ripe and the trees lose their leaves which cover the roads, in the year 1338, I tell you truthfully, Edward was at London in his marble palace.<sup>1</sup> With him sat dukes, earls, and courtiers and ladies and maidens and many others. Those close to him call him Edward Louis.<sup>2</sup> The king was seated at table, without evil thoughts; with his head bowed, he was thinking of love. He was cousin to the good king of France and held him dear, as his loyal neighbour; he had no thought of war or strife against him. But, when Fortune changes, I believe, then words are spoken that give birth to evil. Thus it occurred at that time, because of a noble vassal who was of high lineage: his name, according to the courtiers, was Robert of Artois. He began the war and the terrible strife in which many fine knights were struck down dead, many ladies were made widows, and there were many orphans, and many fine seamen had their lives shortened, and many good women were forcibly corrupted; and a great many churches were burned and destroyed – and many more will be, unless Jesus brings this to an end.

### II

Lords, at the time of which I am telling you, when the air becomes cool after the warm season and joyous nature falls from its delights and the woods lose their leaves, and the meadows their flowers, Edward was at London, and his nobles with him, and a great many of his countrymen. Robert of Artois, a man of great worth, was there; he had been banished from the noble country of France, exiled from the land of fair King Philip, and he dared not stay in the land this side of the sea, in Hainault or Brabant or all of the Cambrésis or in Flanders or Namur or in the Auvergne.<sup>3</sup> For the love of the good king who held St. Denis, he was abandoned by kinsmen and friends alike, except by the king of England who received him well. He protected him against his enemies; he held him very dear, for he was his friend, drawn from his lineage on the side of the fleur-de-lis. That day the noble Count Robert was in London and he wanted to go falconing, because he thought of the gentle land of glorious France, from which he was banished. That day he hunted for fowl through fields and heaths. He had a small falcon, which he had bred, a muskadin falcon, as it is called in that country. He hunted along the river until he took a heron. As soon as he caught it, his face flushed and he said he would give it to Edward Louis and have his countrymen take vows on it. He and his subjects returned to London. He entered the kitchen and left the heron there. There it was properly plucked and stuffed and then, I say, it was roasted. The heron was placed between two silver platters. Count Robert took two *vielle* players and a lutenist to accompany them properly. He summoned two maidens, daughters of two marquis. They carried the heron into the vaulted hall. The two maidens sang as if very accustomed to it.

And Robert called out loudly, 'Clear the way! Clear the way, you miserable failures! Let the good people pass who are ruled by love! Here is meat for the valiant, for those who are the subjects of fair, amorous ladies. Lords, I have a heron, caught by my falcon, and I think no coward should eat it, but only valiant lovers who are filled with love. I believe that I have caught the most cowardly bird of all birds, have no doubt of that, for the nature of the heron is such that when it sees its shadow, it is terrified. It cries out and screams as if being put to death. The people of this country ought to swear on it, and since it is cowardly, it is my intention to give the heron to the most cowardly one who lives or has ever lived: that is Edward Louis, disinherited of the noble land of France of which he was rightful heir; but his heart failed

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<sup>1</sup> In fact Edward III king of England (1327-1377) was on the continent in September 1338. But the autumnal setting, which contrasts with the more usual Spring, foreshadows the ominous turn that events will take.

<sup>2</sup> Edward III is referred to here as Edward Louis to highlight his claim to be king of France instead of Philip VI (1328-50): he was supposedly the rightful heir to Louis IX (1226-1271), also known as Saint Louis, one of the most beloved kings in French history.

<sup>3</sup> Robert d'Artois had taken refuge at the court of Edward III in 1336. On 26 December, Philip VI king of France (1328-1350) demanded that Edward III as duke of Aquitaine desist from supporting Robert of Artois and surrender him. When Edward refused, Philip ordered his seneschal of Périgord and his bailli of Amiens respectively to take into his hands the duchy of Aquitaine and the county of Ponthieu on 24 May 1337. Robert took part in Edward III's military campaigns in France, was wounded in battle in 1342 and died later that year.

him and because of his cowardice he will die without it. So he should vow on the heron and tell what he thinks.'

When the king heard that, his face reddened. His heart pounded with anger and resentment, and he said, 'Since 'coward' is thrown up to me, I should defend myself, so I will speak my mind; and if I live long enough I will see my vow realized or I will die trying to accomplish it. I vow and promise to God in heaven and his sweet Mother, who nourished Him, that before this year is ended I will defy the king of St. Denis. And I will cross the sea, my subjects with me, and I will pass through the Cambrésis by way of Hainault, and in Vermandois I will take my lodging at will. I will set the country ablaze and there I will await my mortal enemy, Philip of Valois, who wears the fleur-de-lis; I will wait until a full month has passed. If he and his subjects attack me, I will fight him, he can be sure of that, even if I have only one man to his ten. Does he believe that he can take my land from me? If I once paid him homage, which confounds me now, I was young; that is not worth two ears of corn. I swear to him as king, by St. George and St. Denis, that since the time of Hector, Achilles, Paris or Alexander, who conquered many lands, neither youth nor noble ever exacted such tribute in France as I intend to do before the year forty-six if he does not attack me with his subjects.<sup>4</sup> But I renounce him, you can be sure of that, for I will make war on him by word and deed. With my oath I have undertaken this vow.'

When Robert heard that, he laughed and said to himself, 'Now I have my wish, since, on this heron that I caught today, a great war will begin, I think. I should be happy, by God in heaven, for I was wrongly separated and divided from the good king, and I was banished from the noble land of France and grievously separated from all my good friends. He was my brother-in-law, but he took my wife, my daughter and my children and imprisoned them. By the faith that I owe to daughters and sons, before I die, if it please Jesus Christ, I will have lodging in France, for I have friends there - I am a descendant of my lord St. Louis<sup>5</sup> - and there I will see Philip proclaim, 'St. Denis, Montjoie!' to the powerful King of France.'<sup>6</sup> When he was established as regent of France, I was part of his privy council, I tell you. Unfailingly I gave him loyal counsel, and I have been badly rewarded for it; but by God, who was put on the cross and pierced by the lance of the knight Longinus, I will go to France - I am not frightened - and I will do battle before I leave there. Now come what may, I have undertaken this; if I live long enough, my vow will be accomplished.'

### III

After Robert of Artois had vowed his will, he took the two silver platters again and the heron, which he presented to the king. And the two minstrels played sweetly in perfect harmony with the guitar, and the two maidens sang sweetly: 'I am going into the wood, as love instructs me.'<sup>7</sup> Then you could have seen great pleasure taken joyfully in game and delight. But afterward it turned to tragedy and will remain so unless God in His pity intervenes.

Robert of Artois did not remain still; he immediately and quickly leapt over the table. He went first to the Earl of Salisbury, who was seated by his mistress, the object of great love; she was appealing and courtly and of fair countenance.<sup>8</sup> She was the daughter of the Earl of Derby, who truly loved her.<sup>9</sup> And Robert said graciously to him, 'Good sir, you who are so bold, in the name of Jesus Christ, to whom the world belongs, make a vow of support on our heron without delay, I humbly pray you.'

He answered him: 'Why and how could I put myself at great risk in order to accomplish any vow perfectly? For I serve the most beautiful woman in the world according to what I have, and love instructs me. If the Virgin Mary were here and her divinity - nothing more - were taken away, I could not distinguish the two. I have asked her for her love, but she resists; but gracious hope makes me believe that she will yet have mercy on me, if I live long enough. I devoutly ask the maiden to lend me just a finger of her hand and simply place it on my right eye.'

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'forty-six' refers to the year 1346 before which date Edward had not exacted such tribute from the French. This may also be an allusion to the battle of Crécy at which the English army inflicted a heavy defeat upon Philip VI king of France (1328-1350).

<sup>5</sup> Robert d'Artois was the great-grandson of Saint Louis, that is to say Louis IX king of France (1226-1271)

<sup>6</sup> 'St. Denis, Montjoie!' was the traditional battle-cry of the French knights.

<sup>7</sup> Note that Salisbury picks up the words of this song in his subsequent vow.

<sup>8</sup> William Montacute received the title of earl of Salisbury on 16 March 1337.

<sup>9</sup> The earl of Derby had two daughters (Maud who died in 1362 and Blanche who died in 1369 at the age of 22) but both were far too young to have had a relationship with Salisbury within the time frame suggested by this poem; moreover, Salisbury had been married since before 1328.

'By my faith,' said the maiden, 'it would be ignoble for a lady who wants to command all the strength of her lover's body to refuse to touch him with one finger! I will lend him two; I agree to do that.' She immediately placed two fingers on his right eye and firmly closed the eye.

He asked her graciously, 'My lady, is it completely closed?' 'Yes, indeed.' Then his mouth spoke the thought in his heart: 'I vow and promise to God almighty and to his sweet Mother, resplendent with beauty, that my eye will never be open, for storm or wind, for evil or pain or disaster, and yet I will be in France, where there are good people; and I will set fire everywhere, and fight with great force against the army of Philip, who is very bold. If I am not captured in battle, then willingly will I help Edward to accomplish his plan. Now come what may, that is how it will be.' Then the beautiful maiden took away her finger, and the others saw that his eye remained closed.<sup>10</sup> When Robert heard the vow, he was delighted.

#### IV

When the Earl of Salisbury had vowed his will – and the eye remained closed throughout the war! – the baron Robert of Artois did not delay. He addressed the maiden, the daughter of the Earl of Derby: 'Young lady,' he said, 'in the name of Jesus Christ, vow on the heron the rights of this country.'

'Sir,' said the maiden, 'as you will, and I vow and promise to God in heaven that I will never marry any living man – duke, earl, prince, liege, or marquis – before this vassal has completely accomplished the vow that he has so nobly undertaken for love of me. And when he returns, if he escapes with his life, I will willingly give myself to him forever.' When the vassal heard that, his heart was overcome, and in his heart he was happier and bolder.

#### V

When the good maiden had expressed her intention to serve her friend, for it pleased her to do so, the count Robert of Artois did not hesitate. He took the silver platters from their bearer, for he eagerly sought, in his heart and mind, to say something through which France would be harmed, because he had lost that noble land, the rich country for which he grieved.

He spoke to Walter of Manny:<sup>11</sup> 'Sir,' said Robert, 'if it please you, vow your honoured pleasure on our heron.'

And Walter answered, 'There is no need to conceal it: I cannot make a vow that can be accomplished. But since I see honourable people here I ought to try to safeguard my honour. So my vow and promise to the blessed Virgin, who gave birth to the God who made heaven and the dew, concerns a good city protected by towers and surrounded by marshes and water – Godemar de Fay has long held it – and by the oath that I have sworn here, I will set it aflame some morning, and I will destroy that city and kill the people and leave them with gaping mouths; and I will leave there that day safe and sound, without a wound, and my army as well, for they will have entered with me. May God grant me the power to accomplish my will.'

When Robert heard it, he was very pleased, and he said, 'This is a powerful thing; if it happens thus, many a good man will die before it is done.'

#### VI

When Walter of Manny had pronounced his vow, Robert of Artois, of whom I have already spoken, again took the two silver platters and raised them up, and the three minstrels plucked their strings, and the two maidens sang loudly: 'We are led by faithful loves, which have enchanted us!' The count called on the good Earl of Derby and asked him, in the name of God and the Trinity, to vow on the heron his will and his pleasure.<sup>12</sup>

The earl replied very humbly, 'Robert, I will do as you wish; and I vow and promise – and it will be done – that if the English king leads us across to the land of France, of which so much has been said, then

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<sup>10</sup> According to the chronicler Jean le Bel, the Earl of Salisbury lost an eye while fighting in Scotland in 1333.

<sup>11</sup> According to Froissart, Walter of Manny (or Mauny) was a native of Hainault who swore to be the first to invade France and in fact led an expedition in an abortive assault on Mortagne that many regarded as a little ridiculous.

<sup>12</sup> Henry, son of Henry early of Lancaster, was made earl of Derby on 16 March 1337.

against a powerful and much-feared count (that is Louis of Flanders, as he has been called to the people of Philip of Valois the valiant, who calls himself king of France, but that is against the will of good King Edward, who is most proud...), may St. Thomas aid me, I have vowed in my heart to seek the count until I have found him. I will challenge him to a joust, if he dares; if he does not meet me with great power, by the faith that I owe Edward the valiant, I will set a fire so close to him that he himself can see and observe it.<sup>13</sup> Now come what may, I have vowed it.'

When Robert heard that, it pleased him greatly, and he said, 'I would welcome such a war. The time will yet come, and God has ordained it, when my children will be released from prison and I will be able to harm those who have so grieved me.'

## VII

When Robert of Artois had said what he thought, he took the two silver platters and raised them up. He came to the Earl of Suffolk and said to him, 'Good sir, you who are of the English over there, vow on our heron, and God will aid you.'<sup>14</sup>

The earl answered, 'I will not fail you, for I vow and promise – and I shall do it – that if the English king leads us there into the land of France, with its many knights, then truly I will relentlessly seek the son of an emperor who has much goodness in him (that is the king of Bohemia); I do not know if he will come, but if I meet him, by God's name, he will not fail to do battle with me – that has been my desire – with lance or sword, so that he will feel it and fall straight to the ground. And I will have his horse, though I doubt he will give it to me. Now come what may, that is how it will be.'

When John, who held Beaumont, heard that, he sighed from the great anger in his heart, and you can be sure that this pained him. He said, 'You have made an outrageous vow, for I, who am a relative of the good king who has conquered so nobly and will again, though he hates me and I love him, and he is over there, I will not fail him in time of need; for by the Lord who created the world, who was born of the Virgin when the star rose, I will not fail to deliver you to him as prisoner. The powerful king of Bohemia will hold you in prison: like it or not, it will not happen otherwise!'

## VIII

The Earl of Suffolk said, 'Let there be no anger! Love and courage and our great desire to challenge the land of France make us seek and accept this great task. These lovers should be spending their efforts on love. For he who loves with true love should advance; one should distinguish oneself in word or in deed. Everyone will approach the task very well, but returning from there will then be much harder.'

Count Robert of Artois did not want to delay. He had the minstrels put great effort into their playing and had the ladies dance to attract the prey. He took back the two platters and the heron. And he began to talk to John of Valkenberg.

## IX

The baron Robert of Artois did not want to delay. He began to address John of Valkenberg: 'And you, sir, who are so feared in war, vow on the heron your right to adventure.'<sup>15</sup>

He answered, 'I should have no part in a vow or promise, for I have nothing to give, since I am a poor man and do not want to be involved. But for love of you and to preserve my honour, I vow and promise – and wish to assure it – that if the English king crossed the sea and wanted to enter France through the Cambrésis, I would go and set the land ablaze before him; and I would not spare church or altar, or any

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<sup>13</sup> The only incident in which Derby faced the count of Flanders was when he took part in an attack on Louis' fortified island of Cadsant in November 1337. Unfortunately Derby slipped over during the first assault, only to be rescued by Walter de Manny who was regarded as the real hero of this attack on the count.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Ufford became earl of Suffolk on 16 March 1337. He was captured by the French at Lille in 1340, along with the earl of Salisbury. According to contemporary English sources, they were only released thanks to the intervention of the king of Bohemia.

<sup>15</sup> Jean de Fauquemont, also known as John of Valkenberg, took part in the invasion of the Cambrésis in September 1339. The territory owed allegiance to the emperor, Lewis the Bavarian, ally of Edward III, but was under French influence: Fauquemont and John of Hainault (Beaumont) achieved notoriety for the atrocities that they committed during this campaign.

pregnant woman I might find, or any relative or friend, however much he loved me, should he stand in the way of King Edward. To accomplish this I am willing to suffer. Now come what may, I will undertake this adventure.'

They all said to one another, 'Such a man deserves love for wanting to increase and raise his lord's honour!'

## X

Count Robert of Artois delayed no longer. He again took up the strong and heavy silver platters; and the two maidens went along singing: 'We are led by faithful loves, which have enchanted us!' Robert addressed a valiant knight, John of Beaumont, a conquering prince, and uncle of the good and powerful count of Hainault.<sup>16</sup> Robert said graciously to him: 'Vow on the heron, sir, I pray you.'

John of Beaumont said, 'Sir, as you wish, but I am astonished by so much talk. Boasts that are not accomplished mean nothing. When we are in taverns, drinking strong wines, and being watched by ladies with firm breasts in tight bodices and with bright eyes that sparkle with smiling beauty, nature makes us desire to do battle - only to want mercy later on. Thus we conquer Yaumont and Agoulant, and others defend Oliver and Roland.<sup>17</sup> But when we are in the field on our swift horses, our shields hanging from our necks, our lances lowered, and the terrible cold is chilling us, and all our limbs fail us entirely, and our enemies are approaching us, then we would rather be hidden in a cellar so deep that no one could ever find us. I would not give one besant for such boasting! And I am not saying this in order to avoid vowing; for I vow and promise on the true body of St. Amant that if the English king wanted to enter Hainault and pass through Brabant and go through the Cambrésis on his way into France, I would serve as marshal of his army, leading the great king to make war in France. For I will never fail him on anyone's account, and in his every need I will always be in the forefront, even if I lose my land and everything I have of value. But if the king of France wanted to summon me back To France, from which I know I am banished, by God the omnipotent, I would leave Edward so honourably that no one, great or small, could accuse me of behaving improperly or of harming him with any traitorous act. But if he does not summon me, then I pledge in God's name that I will always aid the good King Edward and will lead his army throughout this war.'<sup>18</sup>

When the king heard that, he thanked him for it.

## XI

When John of Beaumont had said what was in his mind, Robert of Artois did not long delay. He took the two platters and raised them. He did not forget the three minstrels: they were leading the two maidens who were singing. Robert knelt before the queen and said that he would serve the heron in good time, once she vowed what her heart instructed her.

'Vassal,' said the queen, 'you should not ask me. A lady cannot vow when she has a husband, for if she vows something, her husband has the power to revoke the vow she has made. And cursed be the person who would even think I would vow before my dear lord has commanded me to.'

The king said, 'Vow whatever you please! Whatever you vow, I will accomplish, if I can; I will make every effort. Vow boldly, and God will help you.'

Then the queen said, 'I have known for some time that I am pregnant; my body has felt it.<sup>19</sup> It moved in my body only a short while ago. And I vow and promise to God, who created me, who was born of the Virgin (whose body remained whole), and who died on the cross, crucified, that my fruit will never leave my body until you have led me to the land over there to accomplish the vow that you vowed. And if it

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<sup>16</sup> John of Hainault (or Beaumont as in this text) was the brother of William, count of Hainault (d.1337) and uncle to Edward III's wife, Philippa of Hainault. He led the army of John king of Bohemia at the battle of Cassel on 23 August 1328, and remained an ally in the subsequent years until the king had a disagreement with Lewis the Bavarian, husband of John of Hainault's niece.

<sup>17</sup> Beaumont is referring to boasts whereby the French brag about defeating Saracens, while their enemies are making similar claims about them: Yaumont and Agoulant are names of Saracen warriors, the traditional enemies of the French in medieval epics; Roland and Oliver are two of the greatest heroes in medieval France literature.

<sup>18</sup> Despite this bold pledge, Beaumont officially shifted his allegiance from Edward III to Philip VI in July 1346: the poet is perhaps making ironic reference to this betrayal.

<sup>19</sup> Queen Philippa, wife of Edward III, gave birth to her fifth child on 29 November 1338. He was christened Lionel of Antwerp.

is ready to be born before that time, I will kill myself with a great steel knife. Thus will my soul be lost, and the fruit will perish.'

When the king heard this, he was very distressed, and he said, 'Certainly, there will be no more vows.' The heron was cut up; the queen ate some of it. When that was done, the king made ready and stocked his ships; the queen went aboard. The king took with him many good knights; he did not stop until he came to Antwerp. When they got there, the lady gave birth; she had a fine and pleasing son; Lionel of Antwerp was the name he received at baptism. Thus did the good lady accomplish her vow. Before the others are kept, many good men will die, and many a good knight will proclaim himself miserable, and many a worthy woman will consider herself wretched.

Thus the English court set out across the sea.

Here ends *The Vows of the Heron*.