The Return of Martin Guerre

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS

Natalie Zemon Davis is one of the English-speaking world's best-known and most influential historians. She is now retired, but has taught at Brown University, the University of Toronto, the University of California at Berkeley, and Princeton University. Her pioneering work in the fields of social and cultural history emphasized the role of women, people of low social status, and other often marginalized and ignored figures. She is primarily a historian of early modern Europe, and her most famous work is *The Return of Martin Guerre*, which is considered one of the first "micro-histories"—accounts of the past that focus on the lives of individual people or communities rather than grand historical narratives.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mid-sixteenth-century France was in many ways a society in transition. Like many European countries throughout the early modern period, France was slowly evolving a more centralized government with a unified legal system, language, and culture. At the same time, however, it faced serious internal divisions when Protestantism began to spread into this historically Catholic country. As Davis shows, the Protestant Reformation had significant impacts at the local level, even in a small village like Artigat. Shortly after the events of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, religious tensions broke out into outright violence in the St Bartholomew Day's Massacre. Many French Protestants—including Jean de Coras, a judge at the trial of Martin Guerre and author of the *Arrest Memorable* (1561)—were lynched by their Catholic countrymen. Natalie Zemon Davis repeatedly highlights the way these tensions informed the events of Guerre's life in subtle and unexpected ways. Davis is one of the scholars most associated with a school of thought known as the New Historicism, a literary-critical movement that developed in universities in the mid-1980s. New Historicists emphasized the close interconnection between literary, intellectual, and cultural products (like books, news pamphlets, plays, etc.) and the social and economic context that produced them. In this sense, New Historicism is a "postmodern" approach to history and literature because it focuses on explaining social contexts, rather than uncovering supposedly immutable truths that transcend time and place. *The Return of Martin Guerre* is considered one of the founding texts of New Historicism because it uses traditional archival historical research methods to explore the more abstract "history of ideas" question of how people in the early modern period thought about personal identity.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Davis's account of the trial of Martin Guerre emphasizes how unusual it was for a story of love, deception, and tragedy to feature peasant protagonists, as opposed to aristocrats. In this sense, her book has much in common with other "microhistories" that focus on a specific swathe of society—women, the poor, the marginalized—who are often left out of traditional historical narratives. Perhaps the most famous example of history writing of this kind is a book roughly contemporary with *The Return of Martin Guerre*, David Levine and Keith Wrightson's *Poverty and Piety in an English Village* (1979). This book was revolutionary in that it used the records of a single village in Essex, England, to describe wider changes in English society and culture between 1500 and 1700. The "microhistory" approach has made a huge impact on contemporary popular literary culture. For example, Rebecca Skolot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), a bestselling non-fiction book that was later adapted into a film, tells the story of an African-America woman whose cells made major contributions to scientific research but whose own story had been all but forgotten. In *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Davis cites the work of Stephen Greenblatt, another significant literary historian whose work revolutionized the field of cultural history in the early 1980s. In particular, she draws on the concept of what Greenblatt called "self-fashioning"—the ways that early modern people molded their speech, clothes, gesture, and behavior in order to "advance" in society and gain wealth and public office. Greenblatt coined the term in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), a book contemporary with Davis's project that strongly influenced her thinking about the case of Arnaud du Tilh and Martin Guerre. She argues that Arnaud's three-year-long impersonation of Martin is a more extreme example of the "self-fashioning" behavior that allowed early modern people to shape their public personae for social gain.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Return of Martin Guerre*
- **When Written:** Early 1980s
- **Where Written:** United States, France
- **When Published:** 1984
- **Literary Period:** New Historicism
- **Genre:** Non-fiction
- **Setting:** France in the mid-1500s
- **Climax:** Martin Guerre returns home after a decade away to reclaim his identity, which had been stolen by an impostor, Arnaud du Tilh.

- **Antagonist:** Arnaud du Tilh
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Film to Book. Unusually, *The Return of Martin Guerre* started as a film *before* it was a book. Directed by Daniel Vigne and starring the famous French actor Gérard Depardieu, the French film *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* came out in 1982. Natalie Zemon Davis served as a historical consultant on the film. However, she decided that she wanted to write a non-fiction account of the case that would more fully explore the story and include nuance that the film had left out.

PLOT SUMMARY

The historian Natalie Zemon Davis begins by explaining why she decided to write *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a book about a famous case of imposture in a sixteenth-century French village. Although the story is well-known in film, theater, and popular culture, Davis wanted to write an account of the case from a historian's perspective, exploring what it can tell people about sixteenth-century rural society. She was also interested in the case because it centers on the private and emotional lives of peasants, rather than aristocratic characters, who were the typical subjects of sixteenth-century written accounts. In the popular fascination with the story of Martin Guerre, Davis sees a merging of "high" and "low" culture.

Martin Guerre was born into a Basque family who lived on the border between France and Spain. In 1527, Martin's father Sanxi the elder moved his brother Pierre, his wife, and his son to a village called Artigat in southwest France, leaving behind the family property. The Daguerres settled into their new life by adapting to the local culture. They changed their name to the more familiar "Guerre" and learned to speak the local language, Occitan. Their assimilation was evidently successful, because in 1538 Martin married Betrande de Rols, the daughter of a well-off local family who brought a substantial dowry. Martin and Bertrande were very young when they were married, probably in their early teens.

For eight years after the wedding, the young Martin and Bertrande did not consummate the marriage—until they had a son, Sanxi the younger. Martin was restless and longed to escape the constraints of village life. When Martin was twenty-four, he was accused of stealing a small quantity of grain from his father. Since theft is unforgivable in Basque culture, Martin fled the village, leaving his family and inheritance behind. He went to Spain, where he fought against his native country, France, as a member of the Spanish army. In a siege in 1557, Martin was shot and had to have his leg amputated and replaced with a **wooden leg**. Meanwhile, the abandoned Bertrande had to rely on the generosity of her male relatives. She was left with the ambiguous status of neither wife nor widow, since under church law, a wife could not remarry without firm proof that her husband had died. For almost a decade, she waited for Martin's return.

In 1556, a man called Arnaud du Tilh arrived in Artigat, claiming to be Martin. Arnaud had been born in a nearby village. He had an impressive memory, loved drinking and gambling, and was nicknamed "Pansette" ("the belly") because of his large appetites. After hearing about Martin's desertion, he had decided to impersonate the missing man and take his property. To prepare for the deception, he learned as much as possible about Martin's life and family; Davis compares him to an actor wearing a **mask** at a carnival. At first, Bertrande and the family didn't recognize him, but when he was able to recount memories from ten or fifteen years earlier (which he had probably learned from Martin's neighbors), they accepted him. Davis suggests that this is more plausible than it seems. After all, the Guerres hadn't seen Martin for almost a decade and had no painted portraits to remember him by.

However, although Bertrande might have been fooled at first, it's clear that at a certain point she must have realized that this was not her husband. Davis argues that Bertrande and Arnaud fell in love, and that he perpetuated the deception of his life as Martin Guerre with her consent and collaboration. For the next three years, they lived together as a married couple and had a daughter, Bernarde. But trouble started when Arnaud quarreled with Martin's uncle Pierre over management of the family property. Arnaud began buying, selling, and leasing land (including the ancestral properties in French Basque country), and he asked Pierre to see the accounts of the now-deceased elder Sanxi. When Pierre refused, Arnaud brought a civil suit against him. In retaliation, Pierre began claiming that this man was an impostor and was not really his nephew.

Pierre sued Arnaud in court for posing as Martin Guerre and "abusing" his wife by impersonating her husband. He filed the case in Bertrande's name, but without her permission. In 1560, Arnaud was arrested and taken to trial at Rieux. Pierre threatened to throw Bertrande out of the house if she didn't agree to take part in the trial—so she agreed to testify for the prosecution, although she hoped that she would lose the case. Bertrande loved Arnaud, but she also needed to protect herself: she wanted her son to inherit and to maintain her reputation as a respectable woman, which she couldn't do if she was branded an adulteress.

Davis explains that the court had a difficult task before them. Establishing identity fraud was nearly impossible in an era before fingerprinting, photography, or birth certificates. The court called 150 witnesses, some of whom swore that the man was Arnaud, some of whom swore he was Martin, and some of whom said that the two men looked alike but they couldn't say either way. No one could agree on exactly what Martin had looked like, since no one had seen him for a decade. The case

eventually went to a higher court at Toulouse. There, the evidence was similarly inconclusive, since even Martin's close relatives couldn't agree on whether Arnaud really was Martin or not. The court increasingly leaned towards ruling in favor of the defendant. Bertrande had a reputation as an honorable woman, and she claimed that Arnaud was her husband. Pierre seemed to have a vendetta against his son-in-law and seemed an untrustworthy witness. But just as the court was prepared to rule in Arnaud's favor, a man with a wooden leg arrived at Toulouse, claiming to be the real Martin Guerre.

After Martin lost his leg in battle, he was given a position as a lay brother in a wealthy Spanish monastery favored by aristocrats. However, he decided to come back to Artigat. Davis suggests that Martin heard about the trial and returned home to reclaim his family, property, and identity. Now that the real Martin had returned, Arnaud was exposed as a fraud. Pierre and Martin's sisters immediately identified Martin and begged his forgiveness. Bertrande embraced him and asked his pardon for her mistake, claiming she had been tricked and seduced by Arnaud. Martin, however, responded sternly, telling her that a wife ought to know her husband.

Arnaud was sentenced to perform a public penance in Artigat, followed by an execution by hanging. However, his daughter Bernarde was declared legitimate and allowed to inherit his property, since Bertrande had (supposedly) not been aware of the circumstances when her daughter was conceived. Arnaud was hung in front of the Guerres' house, and he died testifying to Bertrande's innocence, honor, and virtue.

After the trial, two layers, Jean de Coras and Guillaume Le Sueur, began writing their version of events. Le Sueur's book about the case, *Admiranda Historia* (published in 1561) is a straightforward news pamphlet that simply summarizes the case and draws an appropriate moral at the end. Coras's *Arrest Memorable* (1561) is more innovative, focusing on the story and characters rather than the legal facts. Coras also seemed to have some admiration for Arnaud, and he described the story as "a tragedy for this fine peasant." Davis points out that is unusual, since French tragedies typically feature only aristocratic personages. That Coras was able to conceive of the case as a "tragedy" suggests that he could see a grand narrative even among people of low social status. Another influential commentator who wrote about the case was the famous essayist Michel de Montaigne, who argued that the judge was not empowered to condemn Arnaud and sentence him to death under such poor evidence. For both Coras and Montaigne, there was much room for doubt in the case of Martin Guerre.

Meanwhile, life in the village seemed to return to normal. Martin and Bertrande made peace and even had two more sons. The Guerre and de Rols families remained close friends and allies for generations. But the case would not be so easily forgotten. Surely Bertrande did not forget her time with Arnaud, and the villagers would retell the story for many generations to come.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Martin Guerre – Martin was born into a family from Basque country, an area of southern France near the border with Spain. When he was a child, his family moved further north, to the village of Artigat, where Martin may have been bullied for his unfamiliar name and accent. The young Martin loved sword-fighting and village athletics. He had a great deal of interaction with women as a child: he grew up in a family of sisters and was married to Bertrande de Rols very young, around age fourteen. The marriage was initially not a success; they didn't have a child for eight years—perhaps because Martin didn't feel ready for marriage. Martin was stifled by village life and longed to escape the small community, but his father, Sanxi the elder, forbade him from traveling or leaving home. When he fled the village as a punishment for stealing a small quantity of grain, then, it might have been something of a relief. Martin settled in Spain, where he became a servant to a cardinal called Francisco de Mendoza. After Francisco's death, Martin fought for the Spanish army against his native country, France—demonstrating just how far estranged he had become from his old identity. In a siege of 1557, Martin was shot and had to have his leg amputated. From then on, he walked with a **wooden leg**, a characteristic that crucially differentiated him from the imposter Martin, Arnaud du Tilh. Martin must have heard at some point that another man had stolen his name in Artigat, and he returned home to re-claim his family and identity. He was immediately identified by his family. But when Bertrande begged his forgiveness, Martin reproached her, telling her that a wife ought to know her husband. In this respect, both the court and posterity has taken a mixed view of Martin. Certainly, he had been wronged by the imposter Arnaud. But on the other hand, his attitude toward Bertrande seemed callous—after all, *he* was the one who had abandoned his wife and family for more than a decade. Davis embraces these contradictions, depicting Martin's motivations sympathetically but not glossing over his personal flaws.

Bertrande de Rols – Bertrande was the daughter of a wealthy and prominent Artigat family. Her marriage to Martin Guerre when she was only a young girl was designed to solidify the alliance between the de Rols and Guerre families, demonstrating that women in sixteenth-century rural France often had little control over their lives and destinies. Even in a society that severely limited her independence, however, Bertrande carved out significant agency for herself. In Davis's account, Bertrande's attitude was characterized by "shrewd realism" about how to maneuver in a patriarchal world. For example, refusing to divorce Martin during the eight-year period when they had no children gave her the freedom to

enjoy a childhood with her sisters-in-law and the privileges of being a married woman. After Martin abandoned her and their son, Sanxi the younger, Bertrande had to rely on the generosity of her male relatives to support herself. For almost a decade, she was left with the ambiguous status of neither wife nor widow, since a wife could not marry again unless her husband was proven dead. Even in this difficult situation, however, Davis shows how Bertrande found a way to make a new life. She was able to live with Arnaud du Tilh as a "respectable" married woman by colluding in his impersonation of her true husband, Martin. She even had another child with him, Bernarde. When Arnaud's deception was uncovered, however, she claimed that she had been deceived—which was almost certainly not true, but it allowed Bertrande to maintain her reputation for honor and virtue. As Davis shows, Bertrande was strong-willed, honorable, and deeply concerned for her reputation. She was savvy enough to know that her power in the village community lay in being perceived as an honorable and respectable wife and mother, a position that she successfully maintained even after the extraordinary events of her life and marriage.

Arnaud du Tilh – Arnaud grew up in a village about a day's ride to the north of Artigat. His childhood was in some ways nearly the opposite of the man he would eventually impersonate, Martin Guerre. Martin had only sisters, Arnaud had only brothers; Martin loved sword-fighting, Arnaud didn't like sports. Arnaud's talents lay elsewhere, in his powerful eloquence and extremely good memory. Indeed, Davis writes that he was so clever that people suspected him of being a magician. As he grew up, he had a reputation for getting into unsavory entanglements with drinking, gambling, and prostitutes. His large appetites garnered the nickname of "Pansette"—the belly. At some point, he evidently discovered that Martin had abandoned his family and inheritance and decided to impersonate Martin. This impersonation was an extraordinarily impressive feat: he informed himself as much as possible about Martin's life, essentially "rehearsing" for the role he would perform for nearly three years. Davis argues that Arnaud and Martin's wife Bertrande fell in love, and that although she was not convinced by his impersonation she colluded in his deception so that they could live together as a married couple. This makes his eventual trial and execution for impersonating Martin all the more poignant. Arnaud argued persuasively, almost convincing the court that he was indeed Martin—until the real Martin himself showed up. At Arnaud's execution, he maintained that Bertrande was an honorable woman and he had deceived her, an attempt to protect Bertrande's reputation that Davis takes as an indication of his continuing emotional attachment to her. Davis's depiction of Arnaud is admiring and sympathetic. He was clearly very intelligent and gifted, and he led an extraordinary life. One might even argue, Davis suggests, that the real tragedy was not in the impersonation but in Arnaud's punishment and death.

Sanxi the Elder – Sanxi Daguerre (later known as "Guerre") was Martin's father. Originally of Basque origin, he moved the family to the village of Artigat when Martin was very young. Davis depicts him as determined to adapt to his new surroundings, which he did with great success: for instance, he changed the family name from Daguerre to the more familiar Guerre. However, he was also controlling, stern, and demanded unquestioning loyalty from his son. For example, he refused to allow Martin to leave the family business and farm, although Martin felt stifled by village life. He also harshly enforced norms of Basque culture that prohibit stealing, so much so that Martin fled the village and his family after stealing a small quantity of grain. He eventually forgave his son for that transgression and for his abandonment, but died before Martin's return.

Pierre – Pierre was Sanxi the elder's brother and Martin's uncle. He moved to Artigat with the family and also changed his name to "Guerre." Pierre was loyal and committed to the welfare of the Guerre family. After Martin's abandonment and the death of his parents, Pierre took on the status of head of the family. He married the widowed mother of Bertrande de Rols, Martin's wife, thus allowing him to provide for Martin's family. At the same time, however, he could also be stubborn and controlling. When the impostor Arnaud (as "Martin") asked to see the accounts of the elder Sanxi, Pierre reacted with great anger and became convinced that the new "Martin" was not who he said he was. In retaliation, he brought a lawsuit against Arnaud. He forced Bertrande to testify in the suit by threatening to throw her out of the house, although she maintained that Arnaud was her true husband. This demonstrates his willingness to use his power as head of the family to try to control and dominate other family members. After the trial—in which Martin returned and proved that Arnaud was an impostor—Pierre remained close with his nephew, since Davis notes that their names appear together on contracts and in lawsuits.

Sanxi the Younger – Sanxi the younger was Martin and Bertrande's son, named after Martin's father Sanxi the elder. Since the couple had married in their early teens, Martin seemed to feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities of parenthood and fled the village when Sanxi was still very young. In the ensuing decade, Sanxi lived with his mother and, for a while, with the impostor Arnaud du Tilh, who pretended to be Sanxi's father. Throughout Arnaud's trial, Bertrande worked hard to protect herself against the accusation of adultery by claiming that she had been deceived by Arnaud. This was not only to protect her own life—since the punishment for adultery was death—but also to protect Sanxi. If his mother were proven an adulteress, then Sanxi couldn't inherit the family property. By maintaining her position as an "honorable" woman, Bertrande protected both her own life and reputation, and her son's future.

Bernarde du Tilh – Bernarde was the daughter of Bertrande de Rols and Arnaud du Tilh, conceived in the period when Arnaud was impersonating Bertrande's husband Martin Guerre. Although she was technically illegitimate (since she was born of unmarried parents), the court declared her legitimate and allowed her to inherit Arnaud's property. This was because Bertrande claimed that she had been deceived by Arnaud; since Bertrande had *thought* Arnaud was her legal husband, the court decided, the product of their union was a legitimate heir. In this way, Davis argues, the court was lenient with Arnaud by providing for the future welfare of his daughter.

Jean d'Escornebeuf – Jean d'Escornebeuf was a local lord near the village of Artigat. He accused Arnaud du Tilh (as "Martin Guerre") of arson and had him arrested. Although the charges were later dropped, it provided a further blow to Arnaud's reputation and put a strain on his ability to continue his performance as Martin.

Jean de Coras – Jean de Coras was a lawyer and university professor who served as a judge when the case of Martin Guerre was tried at the Parlement of Toulouse, the most powerful court near the village of Artigat. He later wrote one of the best-known accounts of the case, the *Arrest Memorable* (1561), which Davis describes as an "innovative" book that encompasses multiple genres. Coras was well-positioned to write a book like this. He was not only a law professor whose lectures drew large crowds, but he also had personal experience with the law himself: after his mother died, she left him her property, and Coras sued his father for access to the inheritance. He was very fond of his wife, to whom he wrote long love letters, and became increasingly interested in the Protestant cause. Davis suggests that all this might have meant that Coras had reason to be sympathetic to Arnaud du Tilh, who was probably Protestant, had appeal as a romantic hero, and tried to use the law to assert his rights. And indeed, Coras does write the story of the case in a way that sometimes casts Arnaud in a positive light: he describes the story as "a tragedy for this fine peasant" that "makes it hard to tell the difference between tragedy and comedy." Davis points out that it is very unusual for someone at that time to conceive of a case involving peasants as a "tragedy," suggesting that Coras could see a tragic narrative even among people of low social status. Coras died in the St Bartholomew Day's Massacre of 1572, in which many French Protestants were killed.

Guillaume Le Sueur – Guillaume Le Sueur, like Jean de Coras, was also an eyewitness to the trial who wrote a published account of the story of Martin Guerre. Le Sueur's book, *Admiranda historia* (1561), is mostly a straightforward news pamphlet, but it also draws a moral at the end. Davis argues that people like Le Sueur looked to the case to provide appropriate moral lessons for readers.

Michel de Montaigne – Michel de Montaigne was a famous Renaissance French writer who coined the term "essay" (French for "to try") in regard to his short writings on various moral and philosophical topics. Like Jean de Coras and Guillaume Le Sueur, Montaigne also witnessed the trial of Martin Guerre at Toulouse. He later wrote about the case in his essay "Of the Lame," in which he argued that people should not be condemned to death when there is a lack of decisive evidence. For example, witches should not be burned because it is impossible to prove beyond a shadow of doubt that someone is a witch. To prove his point, he cited the trial of Martin Guerre, a case in which it was very difficult to prove that one of the men was the "true" Martin. Montaigne thought that the case "far-exceeded…our knowledge," demonstrating his intellectual humility and skepticism.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Francisco de Mendoza – Francisco de Mendoza was a Spanish cardinal who employed Martin Guerre as a servant after he fled Artigat and settled in Burgos, Spain.

Pedro de Mendoza – Pedro was a Spanish general and Francisco de Mendoza's brother. After his brother's death, he began employing Francisco's servants—including Martin Guerre. Martin fought in Pedro's army in the war against France in the 1550s.

THEMES

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IDENTITY AND PROPERTY

In *The Return of Martin Guerre*, historian Natalie Zemon Davis analyzes a sixteenth-century case of mistaken identity in which Martin Guerre abandons his family and property, and another man impersonates him to take over his life. In sixteenth-century France, rural peasants had few markers of identity. There were no photographs, birth certificates, or background checks. Instead, people's identity was synonymous with what they owned: the land they inherited, the goods they sold at the village market, and the children to whom they gave their last name. When Martin forfeited his property, he lost his identity. When Arnaud du Tilh assumed his possessions, he did more than impersonate Martin: under this logic of identity formation, he quite literally "became" Martin. *The Return of Martin Guerre* thus questions the assumptions about identity and property upon which sixteenth-century village life was founded.

When Martin's parents, the Daguerres from Basque country, first arrived in the French village of Artigat, the immigrant

family created a new identity in the village primarily by asserting property ownership, by marriage alliances, and by the exchange of goods. They became known in the village as tilemakers and landowners, which gave them a foothold among the better families of Artigat. Before, they had been foreigners, but once established in their trades, they were pillars of the community. This demonstrates the malleability of sixteenth-century peasant identity. Everything about the Daguerres could be changed to ensure that they fit in well in Artigat, even their family name, which they changed to "Guerre." The final measure of the family's success at assimilating into Artigat society was the marriage of their son Martin to Bertrande de Rols, a daughter of one of the wealthiest and most established families in the village. This suggests that in the sixteenth century, even what we would now think of as deeply personal components of identity—marriage and family—were closely allied with the exchange and ownership of property.

After about ten years of marriage, Martin ran away from Artigan and his wife after being accused of theft. When, after eight years, Arnaud du Tilh appeared and claimed to be Martin Guerre, Davis argues that the town, Martin's family, and even his wife were all fooled in part because his "return" enabled the passing down of property to the rightful heir of the Guerres. For a sixteenth-century peasant family, this was the proper order of things. As Davis writes, Arnaud may have been so easily accepted by Martin's friends and neighbors because "he was wanted in Artigat…the heir and householder Martin Guerre was back in his place." Without their eldest son, the Guerres were left with uncertainty—but with him (or someone resembling him) back, the family could be assured that their property would be passed on to one of their own. While he was living as Martin Guerre, Arnaud took on all of Martin's responsibilities as a father, husband, heir, and landowner. He farmed the land, developed the Guerre holdings, and provided for Martin's unmarried sisters. Since Arnaud took on Martin's property and duties, he essentially was living *as* Martin.

But property also eventually proved to be Arnaud's undoing, unraveling his assumed identity as Martin Guerre. Arnaud began buying, selling, and leasing land, including the family's ancestral properties in French Basque country, leading Martin's uncle Pierre to bring a lawsuit against him. Pierre, who considered "Martin's" behavior out of character, had finally become willing to question whether this man really was his nephew. This demonstrates just how important property was to ideas of identity in sixteenth-century rural French society: when Arnaud was the returned heir and householder, the Guerres were happy to accept him, but when he started disposing of the Guerre property in ways they didn't approve of, they turned on him.

In a rural society that lacked many modern markers of identity (like photographs and fingerprints), property was one of the primary ways that people knew who they were. Martin Guerre abandoned his property, and Arnaud du Tilh appropriated what he had left behind. Davis remarks that Martin Guerre might have asked who he was if "another man has lived out the life I left behind and is in the process of being declared the heir of my father Sanxi, the husband of my wife, and the father of my son." If identity was constituted by property in this society, then the loss of property was tantamount to the loss of identity.

NARRATIVE AND AUTHORITY

As a historical narrative of an event many centuries in the past, *The Return of Martin Guerre* is naturally concerned with questions of narrative and authority. How are stories told? Who has the right to tell them? Davis reflects on these issues both as a modern historian and in her description of the sixteenth-century narratives that first told the remarkable story of Martin Guerre's disappearance and the takeover of his life by another man who duped even Martin's wife.

Davis's preface explains that she decided to write a history of the legendary case of Martin Guerre because she felt that other accounts had omitted important factors—like the private and emotional lives of its peasant protagonists, the role of women, and various other historical nuances. She first worked on the case when she helped write the screenplay for the film *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*. But although she enjoyed working on the film, she felt that it told the story in overly broad strokes. Davis wanted to write about the case from the perspective of a historian, exploring what it could tell people about sixteenth-century peasant society. Davis explains that most accounts of peasant lives from the period depict people of "low condition" in stereotypical ways, and often mock their conditions and experiences for laughs. By contrast, she was interested in writing a book that would attempt to reconstruct how peasants thought about issues of emotion, hope for their futures, and personal identity. In many historical narratives, exploration of those subjects had been limited to people of high social status.

Arnaud du Tilh was so extraordinarily convincing as an impostor of Martin Guerre because he had a keen command of the power of narrative. He had an excellent memory and spent years preparing and rehearsing for his deception, so much so that Davis compares him to an actor wearing a **mask** at a carnival. The result was that he was able to convince people of his story, even when the evidence—like his lack of physical resemblance to his uncle Pierre and his son, the younger Sanxi—seemed to work against him. For example, when Arnaud first arrived in Artigat as "Martin," people were skeptical. However, when he was able to recount memories from ten or fifteen years earlier, the family and neighborhood accepted him. Davis suggests that Arnaud made the transition into Martin's life so smoothly not only because he had learned so much information about Martin, but also because he spread the news about "Martin's" return in advance, creating a narrative

before he even arrived. As Davis explains, "he came announced, predisposing people to perceive him as Martin Guerre." Even after many of the other Guerres had turned on him and declared him an impostor and taken him to trial, and even after the *actual* Martin had returned, Arnaud still maintained that he was the "real" Martin Guerre. Consequently, the court prevented him from speaking at the trial. This suggests that Arnaud was struggling to maintain control over the narrative, and that at the same time the court was trying to exert their own control over his story.

Davis spends the final chapters of the book writing not directly about Martin and Arnaud's imposture, but rather about the people and writers who discussed Martin Guerre's story in the sixteenth century. The stories that these people told about Martin tended to differ based on *who* told it, which raises the question of whether anyone can ever know the historical truth of what happened. One book by Guillaume Le Sueur, *Admiranda historia* (1561), is a straightforward news pamphlet that simply summarizes the case. However, it also draws a moral at the end, suggesting that people tended to use the narrative of Martin Guerre to express their own ideas about the proper order of society. Another book, the *Arrest Memorable* (1561) by Jean de Coras, is more inventive, focusing on the story and characters rather than the legal facts. Coras described the case of Martin Guerre as "prodigious," implying that it was unlike anything that had ever been seen in France before. Coras also seemed to have some admiration for Arnaud. He described the story as "a tragedy for this fine peasant" that "makes it hard to tell the difference between tragedy and comedy." Davis points out that this is unusual, since French tragedies and tragicomedies typically feature only aristocratic personages. That Coras was able to conceive of the case as a "tragedy" suggests that he could see a grand narrative even among people of low social status.

What was innovative about these early accounts, then, was that they saw the story of Martin Guerre as an extraordinary story of deception and human passions—even though it featured peasant characters. The case of Martin Guerre thus put peasants into the stories that sixteenth-century French society told about itself in a way that hadn't been seen before. At the same time, however, those narratives also tended to leave out certain perspectives, like the experience of Martin's wife Bertrande. All of these earlier accounts of the story depict her as foolish and easily deceived, while Davis, writing from a more modern viewpoint, suggests that she almost certainly was not. In this sense, a narrative of a historical event is always subject to bias depending on who is writing the story.

WOMEN, HONOR, AND POWER

In sixteenth-century French rural society, a woman's worth in the eyes of society was closely aligned with her "honor"—defined as morality, sexual chastity, and respectability. This concept was so important to both society's perception of women and women's own self-conception in this historical period that Davis devotes an entire chapter to "The Honor of Bertrande de Rols." Since women had few avenues for exerting power in this period, the preservation of their honor was the primary way they could command respect and social status in their communities. In the case of Martin Guerre, the honor of his wife Bertrande became a matter of legal questioning and public debate.

An important measure of a woman's honor in a peasant community like Artigat was her ability to be perceived as a virtuous wife and mother. Bertrande was married to Martin at an extremely young age (probably in her early teens) at the behest of her parents, demonstrating women's lack of control over their lives. When she and Martin did not conceive a child for eight years, the couple was shamed in the village. To protect her reputation, Bertrande claimed that a spell had been cast on her. This demonstrates again the village's valuation of children and family as the central responsibility of a woman's life. After Martin's disappearance, Bertrande was left with the ambiguous status of being neither wife nor widow—since under canon law, a wife could not remarry without firm proof that her husband had died. Although Martin abandoned her for nearly a decade, Bertrande's honor demanded that she not marry again, since in the eyes of the church she would be committing adultery. Without her husband, Bertrande also had little legal and social status. As Davis explains, women were subject to the authority of men and could inherit property only at the behest of their husbands and fathers. This meant that women could not, except in rare cases, run a shop, farm, or business. Consequently, Bertrande had to rely on the generosity of her male relatives for financial support.

Famously, Bertrande lived for nearly three years with another man, Arnaud du Tilh, who claimed to be her missing husband. Other commentators on the story often suggest that Bertrande was deceived, which removes her agency, eliminating the possibility that she made a deliberate choice. Davis, however, disagrees and argues that Bertrande at some point must have realized Arnaud was an imposter. However, she consented to allow the deception to continue—quite possibly, Davis argues, because she and Arnaud had fallen in love. At this point, Davis argues that Bertrande took her life into her own hands as she tried to maximize her power, security, and happiness while also maintaining her reputation as a respectable married woman. Her efforts to navigate that balance—to hold on to both her power and her honor—explain her behavior throughout the rest of the story.

For example, when Arnaud's imposture was discovered, Bertrande had to turn against him to preserve her reputation as an honorable woman. Martin's uncle Pierre opened a legal case against Arnaud in Bertrande's name, but without her consent, and Pierre threatened to throw Bertrande out of the

house if she didn't agree to take part in the trial. She therefore agreed to testify for the prosecution, although she hoped that she would lose the case. Pierre's ability to force Bertrande to bring a case against Arnaud suggests women's limited ability to maneuver within social strictures. Since Pierre was supporting Bertrande financially and she lived in his house with his permission, he had immense power over her life and decisions. At the trial, Bertrande ultimately testified against Arnaud and asked for Martin's forgiveness. She did this because refusing to do so would leave her open to accusations of adultery, and a conviction of adultery carried a sentence of death. If she claimed, instead, that she had merely been deceived, she could both preserve her own reputation as a respectable woman and also ensure her legacy: that her son would continue to be considered legitimate and receive his inheritance.

Ultimately, then, Bertrande maintained her reputation for virtue even though, as Davis argues, she probably knew that Arnaud was an imposter and allowed his deception to continue because he provided for her, loved her, and made her life more secure (so long as his deception remained hidden). At Arnaud's execution after his deception was revealed by the return of the real Martin Guerre, Arnaud proclaimed that Bertrande was an honorable woman and that he had deceived her. Although this was probably not true, the fiction that she had been tricked into believing another man was her husband allowed Bertrande to protect her honor (Arnaud's act of selflessness here also would suggest that he truly did care for Bertrande). Although Bertrande has often been depicted as foolish and easily deceived, Davis sees her as a woman who "tried to fashion her life as best she could" within a society that harshly punished those who deviated from its norms of respectable behavior. If Bertrande wanted to maintain her life, livelihood, and position in village life, she had to ensure that people thought of her as an "honorable" woman. Protecting her honor was, quite literally, the only way to survive.

THE NATURE OF EVIDENCE

The Return of Martin Guerre is partly an account of a famous trial, and the book is deeply concerned with problems of evidence. The case of Martin Guerre was so difficult to solve because it was not at all clear how the court should go about assessing the evidence for identity theft in 16th century France. How could it be proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Arnaud du Tilh was or was not Martin Guerre? The evidentiary problem was made even more difficult by the lack of measures of identification in sixteenth-century rural France; there were no photographs, fingerprints, or birth certificates. Ultimately, some commentators suggested that there was no legitimate way to arbitrate a case so lacking in evidence.

At first, Arnaud du Tilh turned the problem of evidence to his advantage. He was able to impersonate Martin Guerre because there was little physical evidence to disprove his claims. As Davis points out, the Guerres hadn't seen Martin for almost a decade and had no painted portraits to remember him by. Although they noticed that Arnaud was shorter and heavier than Martin, they also knew it was normal for people to gain weight over time. Without the evidence of photography or portraiture, Davis thinks it is plausible that the Guerres could have been fooled. Also, Arnaud talked to people who knew the Guerres, gathered information about his family, and memorized events from Martin's childhood, young adulthood, and marriage. If Arnaud could recount memories from ten or fifteen years earlier, this seemed like strong enough evidence that he was indeed Martin.

At the two trials brought by the Guerres against Arnaud to try to prove he was an impostor, the evidentiary challenges multiplied. Davis explains that it was nearly impossible to prove and document identity theft in an era when few people could sign their name and record-keeping was scanty at best. The court turned to the testimony of more than 150 witnesses, but this merely increased the confusion. Some swore that the man was Arnaud, some swore he was Martin, and some said that the two men looked alike but they couldn't say either way. No one could agree on exactly what Martin had looked like—suggesting, again, that Martin's ten-year absence had left no physical evidence behind by which to judge the merit of these competing claims. Even Martin's immediate family and relatives disagreed in their testimony. Clearly the evidence of memory was unreliable and not a firm enough ground on which to build a case against Arnaud.

As the case went on, the court increasingly turned to other forms of evidence. There was no consensus on whether or not Arnaud was the true Martin. So the judges turned instead to considering the relative credibility of the witnesses. For example, they believed that Martin's wife Bertrande was an honorable woman, and she had maintained throughout the trial that Arnaud was her husband. This seemed strong evidence that Arnaud was telling the real Martin. The judges also began to distrust the credibility of Martin's uncle, Pierre, who had brought the suit against Arnaud. Arnaud claimed that Pierre had made up the story because he had a vendetta against him due to a quarrel over some family lands—this was clearly true. Since no one could prove that Arnaud *wasn't* Martin, the judges started to lean towards ruling against Pierre and chalking it up to a family feud.

In the end, the real Martin Guerre showed up at the trial walking with a **wooden leg**, providing final and irrefutable physical evidence of Arnaud's fraud. (Multiple witnesses confirmed that the real Martin had lost his leg fighting for the Spanish military.) But if he hadn't shown up, Davis suggests that Arnaud probably would have won the trial. There was no strong evidence to prove that he was or wasn't Martin. Indeed, some felt that even after Martin did show up, there was still cause to

doubt the ruling. When the famous essayist Michel de Montaigne wrote his account of the trial, he suggested that the judge was not empowered to condemn Arnaud and sentence him to death under such poor evidence. Even now, some aspects of the case remain shrouded in mystery. Davis ends the book by admitting that even she is not sure whether her own story is the truth, when there remains so much room for doubt.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MARTIN'S WOODEN LEG

After Martin Guerre fled his home village, he served in the Spanish military and lost his leg while fighting against his native country, France. The wooden leg that replaced Martin's lost leg ironically came to mark him as the "real" Martin. In an era before many of the modern markers of identity—birth certificates, passports, photographs—it was very difficult to prove which man was the real Martin and which was the impostor Arnaud du Tilh, who had assumed Martin's identity in his absence. When Martin returned to Artigat to claim that he was the true Martin Guerre, the wooden leg provided clear and incontrovertible evidence that he was who he said who he was, since multiple eyewitness accounts confirmed that Martin now walked with a wooden leg. In this sense, the wooden leg symbolizes Martin's real identity—it demonstrated the truth of who Martin was when that identity was under threat. Since Martin's friends, family, and neighbors hadn't seen him for more than a decade, the witnesses in the trial of Arnaud du Tilh couldn't agree on whether Martin was tall or short, thin or fat, or whether he had certain identifying marks on his body. The wooden leg, however, provided firm proof of the real Martin's identity. In this sense, Davis suggests that identity is constituted by external markers. In the case of Martin Guerre, identity was not inherent or intrinsic to a person—which is how people usually think about identity. Rather, it had to be proven by outward signs like Martin's wooden leg.

THE CARNIVAL MASK

In sixteenth-century French peasant communities, the villagers frequently hosted carnivals in which people could dress up as others using costumes and masks, taking on other identities—even just for an evening. In Davis's reading, the mask evokes many forms of impersonation in Renaissance culture, suggesting that everyone is always impersonating someone or something else. The mask, in other words, symbolizes the fact that identity is always, in some sense, a charade. For instance, the Daguerre family "masked" their identity by changing their name to "Guerre" when they arrived in Artigat in order to better assimilate to their new community. Likewise, healthy beggars sometimes pretended to be disabled or blind in hopes of appealing to people's charitable impulses. Furthermore, Davis describes Arnaud du Tilh as "rehearsing" for the role of Martin Guerre, underscoring the theatrical dimensions of his deception. Arnaud essentially wore the "mask" of Martin, like a player in a carnival. But Davis suggests that this impersonation was merely an extreme example of the performances in which many people engaged when they took on new personas, like the Daguerres who became the Guerres. The carnival mask is such a resonant symbol for Davis because it shows that everyone masks their identity in one way or another.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harvard University Press edition of *The Return of Martin Guerre* published in 1983.

Preface and Introduction Quotes

❝ But we still know rather little about the peasants' hopes and feelings; the ways in which they experienced the relation between husband and wife, parent and child; the ways in which they experienced the constraints and possibilities of their lives. We often think of peasants as not having had much in the way of choices, but is this in fact true? Did individual villagers ever try to fashion their lives in unusual and unexpected ways?

Related Characters: Bertrande de Rols, Arnaud du Tilh, Martin Guerre

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Davis explains that she has written a new account of the legendary story of Martin Guerre because she wanted to retell the popular narrative in a different way. Previous accounts had focused on the story's sensational qualities—impersonation, adultery, a dramatic legal trial—but Davis is drawn to the case of Martin Guerre for what it reveals about the private and emotional lives of people who lived in the past whose inner lives and psychologies are otherwise not very well documented. Social historians have uncovered many previously unknown details of how peasants lived, but their accounts have

tended to emphasize the "constraints" of the peasants' lives— dwelling, for instance, on the fact that most peasants died in the same village in which they were born. Davis, by contrast, aims to speculate about the feelings and ambitions of peasants and to foreground the choices that they *did* have. In the case of Martin Guerre, his impersonator, and his wife, Davis sees peasants taking control of their circumstances and making their own unusual choices about the lives they wanted to live.

❝ [H]ow, in a time without photographs, with few portraits, without tape recorders, without fingerprinting, without identity cards, without birth certificates, with parish records still irregular if kept at all—how did one establish a person's identity beyond doubt?

Related Characters: Martin Guerre, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Davis explains the reasons why the trial of Martin Guerre was so contentious, involving hundreds of witnesses, a great deal of what people might now call "media attention," and a re-trial. This was because the evidence in the case was so unclear. Today, it is relatively easy to prove a case of identity theft, since people are given many markers of identity from the day they're born. In a rural sixteenth-century French village, however, no one had passports or birth certificates. In fact, as Davis points out, there might not even have been any record that a person had been born at all, since the baptism records of churches were "irregular." This made cases of identity theft nearly impossible to prove. If Arnaud du Tilh claimed to be Martin Guerre, and a significant number of people agreed, who could prove him wrong?

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Into this village, then, came the Daguerres, settling to the east of the Lèze, acquiring land (perhaps buying someone else's *propres*), and establishing a tileworks [...]. To be accepted by the village they had to take on some Languedoc ways. Daguerre became Guerre; if Pierre had used the Basque form of his name, Betrisantz or even Petri, he now changed it.

Related Characters: Martin Guerre, Sanxi the Elder, Pierre

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Davis explains that when Sanxi Daguerre moved his wife, his son Martin, and his brother Pierre to Artigat, a village in southwest France, he had to leave his old identity behind. The Daguerres were natives of Basque country, an area of France on the border with Spain. By moving further north, they had to adjust to a new culture and even a new language (Occitan, the language spoken in southern France, or the "Languedoc"). This radical transformation of the family's identity was closely linked to the acquisition of property. To gain a foothold in Artigat, they bought land of their own and opened a tilework business. Social integration was critical to their economic success. In order to be accepted as members of the community, they even changed their last name to the more familiar "Guerre" (and Davis suggests that Pierre may also have changed the form of his first name). Davis spends the opening chapter describing this identity change—from the Daguerres of Basque country to the Guerres of Artigat—because it demonstrates the transformations and changes that people in this period had to undergo in order to adapt to new environments. This, in turn, shows that, in some ways, people's identities were much more fixed than they are today, because they were much more firmly rooted in specific geographies and cultures.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Much of the time historians of population movement think of peasant migration as due only to economic considerations; the case of the Guerres shows this is not the whole story. Martin dreamed of life beyond the confines of fields of millet, of tileworks, properties, and marriages.

Related Characters: Martin Guerre

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, again, Davis shows her interest in undermining preconceived notions and traditional historical narratives. For example, many historians might assume that the Guerres left Basque country looking for better economic opportunities, but Davis suggests that there might have been other factors, and it's possible that they could have simply been looking for a new life in a new place. Similarly,

Martin Guerre clearly longed to escape Artigat and felt stifled by the constraints of village life. This demonstrates that many peasants did have ambitions and aspirations to change the circumstances into which they were born, even if such stories are often left out of conventional historical accounts.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ [W]hen urged by her relatives to separate from Martin, she firmly refused. Here we come to certain character traits of Bertrande de Rols, which she was already displaying in her sixteenth year: a concern for her reputation as a woman, a stubborn independence, and a shrewd realism about how she could maneuver within the constraints placed upon one of her sex. Her refusal to have her marriage dissolved, which might well have been followed by another marriage at her parents' behest, freed her temporarily from certain wifely duties. It gave her a chance to have a girlhood with Martin's younger sisters, with whom she got on well. And she could get credit for her virtue.

Related Characters: Bertrande de Rols

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Davis explains that women in this period, because they were regarded as property, lacked agency and control over their own circumstances. For example, Bertrande was married to the husband of her parents' choice as a teenager. Even as a young woman, however, Bertrande displayed what Davis calls a "shrewd realism" about how to get her own way. By refusing to divorce Martin on grounds of impotence, she could live outside her parents' house and make her own choices—since Davis suggests that they would probably have just married her again to someone else. Her refusal to leave Martin also shows another significant character trait: her deep concern for her honor and reputation. By refusing the divorce, she managed to both create a situation that allowed her more power and agency while also gaining a reputation as an "honorable woman."

❝ Bertrande's status was much reduced by all these events. Neither wife nor widow, she was under the same roof with her mother again. Neither wife nor widow, she had to face the other village women at the mill, the well, the tileworks, and at the harvest. And there was no easy remedy for her in law…a wife was not free to remarry in the absence of her husband, no matter how many years had elapsed, unless she had certain proof of his death.

Related Characters: Bertrande de Rols

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Bertrande's plight after Martin's departure demonstrates just how dependent women were on men in this period. Women were limited to a few roles in society, all of which were defined by their relation to men—wife, widow, mother. As Davis points out, Martin's abandonment left the village unsure how to understand Bertrande or find a role for her in the community. She wasn't a wife anymore, since she had no husband; but she also couldn't be considered a widow, since there was no proof that her husband had died. Her lack of legal recourse in being unable to divorce Martin also demonstrates the severe restrictions placed on women's ability to control their own lives. Even when Martin had been gone for a decade, he still exerted a significant influence on Bertrande's life and choices.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Was it so unusual for a man in sixteenth-century villages and burgs to change his name and fashion a new identity? Some of this went on all the time. The Daguerres left Hendaye, became the Guerres, and changed their ways. Every peasant who migrated any distance might be expected to do the same…At carnival time and at other feastdays, a young peasant might dress as an animal or a person of another estate or sex and speak through that disguise.

Related Characters: Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

One of Davis's aims in *The Return of Martin Guerre* is to demonstrate connections between this seemingly bizarre and outlandish story—a man who pretended to be someone else—and other, broader aspects of society and culture in sixteenth-century France. For instance, she points out that Arnaud wasn't the only person in this story to take on a new identity. The Daguerres became the Guerres when they moved from Basque country to Artigat. Meanwhile, people frequently dressed up in masks and costumes to "become" someone else on stage. Arnaud's case was extreme in that he actually took on a whole new life and identity for several years. But as Davis shows, this case might tell us more about the social sanctioning of various forms of transformation and impersonation than has been previously recognized. Many people transformed themselves or wore various forms of "masks" to take on a new identity, even if they didn't go as far as Arnaud.

Chapter 5 Quotes

I think we can account for the initial acceptance by family and neighbors without having recourse to the necromancy of which Arnaud was later accused and which he always denied. First of all, he was wanted in Artigat—wanted with ambivalence perhaps, for returning persons always dash some hopes and disturb power relations, but wanted more than not. The heir and householder Martin Guerre was back in his place.

Related Characters: Martin Guerre, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Davis suggests that Martin's family and neighbors may have been fooled by Arnaud because they wanted to believe that the real Martin had "returned." Martin was the heir of his family, and his return enabled the passing down of property to the eldest son of the Guerre family. With him back, the family could be assured that their property would be passed down to the next generation. This again points to the close link between identity and property: Martin was defined by his status as the "heir and householder" of the Guerres, and the family was looking for someone who could play that role. For a while, Arnaud did an exemplary job of taking on Martin's responsibilities as a father, husband, heir, and landowner. He farmed the land, developed the Guerre family's holdings, and provided for Martin's unmarried sisters. In this sense, he didn't only impersonate Martin—he also took on all the roles and responsibilities associated with that identity.

What hope might the Protestant message have offered to the new Martin and Bertrande during the years they were living together as "true married people"? That they could tell their story to God alone and need not communicate it to any human intermediary. That the life they had willfully fabricated was part of God's providence.

Related Characters: Bertrande de Rols, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Davis describes Arnaud and Bertrande's life together as an "invented" marriage because they were both aware that their marriage was, in the technical sense, a fraud—since Arnaud was not the man Bertrande had married in church a decade earlier. At the same time, there was perhaps something more profoundly legitimate about the marriage, in that both had chosen one another out of their own free will. (This was particularly significant for a woman like Bertrande, who had little choice in her first marriage.) In this sense, Davis suggests that Protestantism might have been appealing to the couple because it deemphasizes the power of the church and centers the individual's relationship with God. Bertrande and Arnaud weren't living in the marriage that had been solemnized and approved by the church, but their marriage had legitimacy because they chose to maintain it regardless.

Chapter 6 Quotes

To put it another way, if the real Martin Guerre had never come back, could Arnaud du Tilh have gotten away with it? Some of my pragmatic fellow historians have suggested that, if the impostor had not asked for the accounts and had followed more closely the uncle's expectations in regard to the family property, he could have played Martin Guerre for years and no one would have mind. On the other hand, recently when I talked about Bertrande and Artaud with people in Artigat who were still familiar with the old story, they smiled, shrugged their shoulders, and said, "That's all very well—but that pretty rascal, he lied."

Related Characters: Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In her speculations about how long Arnaud could have maintained the fiction of his life as Martin Guerre, Davis raises questions about how identity was constructed in this period. On the one hand, identity was closely linked to property. Perhaps if Arnaud had not tried to sell land and commercialize the Guerre holdings as he did, no one would have suspected anything. However, Davis also raises the possibility that this "lie" was too big to keep forever—and that, eventually, some evidence would have come out that destroyed everything Arnaud built. However much he tried to fashion himself as Martin, he was, in the end, telling a lie. Rather than associating identity solely with external markers like property, family names, and legal records, Davis suggests that there was something essential that made Arnaud himself and *not* Martin Guerre.

❝ She had tried to fashion her life as best she could, using all the leeway and imagination she had as a woman. But she was also proud of her honor and her virtue and was, as she would say later in court, God-fearing. She wanted to live as a mother and family woman at the center of village society. She wanted her son to inherit.

Related Characters: Bertrande de Rols

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Davis shows that Arnaud and Martin were not the only people to fashion new lives for themselves. From a situation in which extreme restrictions were placed on her life and choices—married at a young age and then abandoned—Bertrande made a new life in her "invented marriage" with Arnaud. But this freedom was not the only thing that mattered to Bertrande. She also cared deeply about her honor and reputation for virtue in the community. This was not just a matter of personal pride; Davis points out that for women like Bertrande, an honorable reputation was what affirmed them as wives and mothers, ensured the legitimacy of their children, and gave them a place "at the center of village society." If Bertrande was proved an adulteress, her son would lose his inheritance. Bertrande tried to maximize her power as best she could, but in the end, she also needed to maneuver within the very real strictures placed on her by her society.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Forty-five people or more said that the prisoner was Arnaud du Tilh alias Pansette, or at least not Martin Guerre, since they had eaten and drunk with one or the other of them since childhood…About thirty to forty people said that the defendant was surely Martin Guerre; they had known him since the cradle.

Related Characters: Martin Guerre, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Because there were so many problems of evidence in the case—a lack of firm proof one way or another that Arnaud was who he said he was—the court was forced to rely on the testimony of many witnesses. The court hoped that a majority of people would say that this man was either Martin Guerre or Arnaud du Tilh. However, they were disappointed in this expectation. Roughly equal numbers of people claimed that this man was Martin as claimed that he was Arnaud, while many others admitted that they simply didn't know. There was also a problem with the credibility of the witnesses. Many of the people called to testify had known either Martin or Arnaud since they were small children, like Martin's sisters. Even *these* people disagreed, demonstrating just how clouded and confused the case had become. If not even Martin's own siblings could agree on what he had looked like, how could the court possibly prove a case of identity theft?

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ If [Bertrande] had wanted to betray [Arnaud] at this point, all she had to do was tell a story he could not repeat; instead she adhered to the text they had agreed upon months before.

Related Characters: Bertrande de Rols, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout her account of the story of Martin Guerre, Davis has had to do a great deal of speculation. She believes that Bertrande and Arnaud fell in love, although there is of course no decisive proof of that in the archival record. For Davis, one of the strongest pieces of evidence that Bertrande was in love with Arnaud was that she never betrayed him, even during the two trials at Rieux and Toulouse. If she had really wanted to prove that Arnaud was not her husband, she would have simply told a story from their supposed shared past that he would not have been able to corroborate. Instead, it seems that the two of them collaborated and agreed on the stories they would tell in court. This demonstrates Bertrande's continuing love and loyalty to Arnaud as well as her concern for her own reputation. She declared that Arnaud was her husband both in order to protect him and because she needed to maintain her reputation for honor and virtue, which depended on her having believed that Arnaud was indeed Martin when she lived with him and had a daughter with him.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Who am I, Martin Guerre might have asked himself, if another man has lived out the life I left behind and is in the process of being declared the heir of my father Sanxi, the husband of my wife, and the father of my son?

Related Characters: Martin Guerre

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83-84

Explanation and Analysis

Davis firmly believes that Martin most likely heard about the trial, which prompted him to return to Artigat after so many years. Martin had willfully renounced his identity, family, and property more than a decade before. However, he probably always believed that his identity and his home would still be waiting for him, were he ever to decide to return and claim them. When he heard that another man was living with his wife and family and taking his name, this must have presented a threat to his very sense of self. By leaving his property behind, Martin also lost his identity. He may have thought that he could move through the world freely and return to where he had come from at will, but in fact, he learned that his departure from Artigat so long ago had more profound consequences than he could have imagined. Identity was not, after all, something intrinsic to himself. As Martin learned, if didn't return to claim his identity, someone else would take it.

❝ Even on the ladder up to the gibbet he was talking, preaching to the man who would take his place not to be harsh with Bertrande. She was a woman of honor, virtue, and constancy, he could attest to it. As soon as she suspected him, she had driven him away.

Related Characters: Bertrande de Rols, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

As Davis has shown, Bertrande demonstrated her loyalty to Arnaud by sticking to an agreed-upon script during the trial and thus refusing to incriminate him. After Arnaud was condemned to death, he showed his loyalty to her in a different way. He confessed to the crowd that he had lied to and deceived Bertrande—although this was almost certainly not true, since Davis believes that she collaborated in his deception. Paradoxically, by telling this lie, he protected Bertrande's "honesty," in the sense that Bertrande's legal defense rested on the premise that she had lived with Arnaud for three years believing that he was her husband, Martin Guerre. She would only be seen as blameless if she had been deceived, not if she had deliberately committed adultery with another man. By testifying to Bertrande's "honor" and "virtue" and claiming that he had deceived her, Arnaud demonstrated his love and care for her by protecting her reputation.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Lawyers, royal officers, and would-be courtiers knew all about self-fashioning—to use Stephen Greenblatt's term—about the molding of speech, manners, gesture, and conversation that helped them to advance, as did any newcomer to high position in the sixteenth century. Where does self-fashioning stop and lying begin?

Related Characters: Jean de Coras, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

As Davis has explained before, she believes that the case of Martin Guerre has historical interest not only because it was a sensational and fascinating legal trial, but because it can offer broader insights about sixteenth-century French society. For Davis, Arnaud's successful imposture of Martin for several years was so disturbing to contemporary commentators because it showed the dark side of the smaller deceptions in which many people were engaging. She cites the historian Stephen Greenblatt's use of the term "self-fashioning" to describe the ways in which people could subtly shape their identity in order to "advance" in society. They might dress and speak in a certain way, for example. This was not too far off from what Arnaud did, since he also took on the "mask" or persona of Martin Guerre by adopting certain ways of talking and being. Of course, Arnaud's case was extreme, in that he literally pretended to be someone else, but Arnaud's ability to remake himself demonstrates the malleability of *all* identities in this period.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ The originality of Coras's vision of this peasant story should be stressed. The French tragicomedy ended happily and used aristocratic figures for its leading personages. [...] That Coras could conceive of "a play of tragedy between persons of low estate" depended on his being able to identify himself somewhat with the rustic who had remade himself.

Related Characters: Arnaud du Tilh, Jean de Coras

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Davis explains why Jean de Coras's account of the trial of Martin Guerre, the *Arrest Memorable* (1561), was so innovative. He described the case as "a play of tragedy between persons of low estate," which emphasized the dramatic qualities of the story and its suspenseful narrative. This was already unusual for a legal narrative, typically a dry genre. But Coras's book was even more unusual in that his "tragedy" featured peasants and people of low social status. In the mid-sixteenth century, the French tragedy centered exclusively on aristocratic protagonists. A conventional tragedy might feature, for instance, a tragic love story between a knight and a noblewoman, or an aristocratic character undone by a fatal flaw. When peasant characters did appear, it was usually as comic relief. By conceptualizing the story of Martin Guerre in this way, Coras suggested that even people of "low estate" could also be appropriate subjects for a tragedy—a significant innovation in genre and storytelling.

❝ In Coras's "comitragic" version...one can approve the cuckolding of the once impotent and now faraway husband. Here Arnaud du Tilh becomes a kind of hero, a more real Martin Guerre than the hard-hearted man with the wooden leg. The tragedy is more in his unmasking than in his imposture.

Related Characters: Jean de Coras, Martin Guerre, Bertrande de Rols, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Davis brings out another insight from Coras's description of the story of Martin Guerre as a "tragedy," explaining that this reframed the story people thought they knew, undermining the traditional hierarchies of heroes and villains, protagonists and comic relief. The people who are usually at the margins—peasants and "people of low estate"—are now at the center. The story is called *The Return of Martin Guerre*, but in the end, Davis suggests, Martin makes for an unsympathetic hero. Instead of identifying with the man who abandoned his wife and family, readers might instead be drawn to the love story between Arnaud du Tilh and Bertrande de Rols. In this way, Arnaud may even have been a more "real" Martin than the man himself, since unlike Martin, Arnaud loved Bertrande and took on his role in the community. In this rewriting of the narrative, perhaps Arnaud is the true hero of the story of Martin Guerre.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ Montaigne insists how difficult it is to know the truth about things and how uncertain an instrument is human reason. "Truth and falsehood have both alike countenances...Wee beholde them with one same eye."

Related Characters: Michel de Montaigne , Martin Guerre, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

As a young man, the famous essayist Michel de Montaigne witnessed the trial of Martin Guerre at Toulouse. In one of his essays later in life, Montaigne used the case of Martin Guerre to make an argument against punishment without due process or evidence—like, for example, the burning of witches. When he saw Arnaud du Tilh condemned to death for impersonating Martin, Montaigne was struck by the unreliability of the evidence in the case. Witnesses disagreed with each other. Even the evidence of Martin's wooden leg was not necessarily conclusive, since it didn't follow that any man with an amputated leg must be Martin. In such cases as these, Montaigne argued, there is no justification for capital punishment. Truth and lies often look the same to us, he argued, having "alike countenances," the same face. This is a particularly resonant image in this famous case of impersonation, calling to mind the symbol of the carnival mask, which is a "false" face that looks like a "true" one. When people aren't sure which face is the true one, Montaigne wrote, they should reserve judgment.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ The story of Martin Guerre is told and retold because it reminds us that astonishing things are possible. Even for the historian who has deciphered it, it retains a stubborn vitality. I think I have uncovered the true face of the past—or has Pansette done it once again?

Related Characters: Martin Guerre, Arnaud du Tilh

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

In the final pages of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Davis returns to the questions about truth, falsehood, and the nature of evidence raised by Montaigne. For Davis, this is not only an ambiguity about the famous case of Martin Guerre—it is also an uncertainty at the heart of her project as a historian. She has tried to uncover the "true face of the past," sorting out fact from fiction, but some parts of the past are ultimately irrecoverable. People can only learn about history from the surviving evidence, and as Davis pointed out in her preface and introduction, that evidence is always necessarily limited and partial. She thus leaves the reader with lingering questions, not only about the case, but about her own narrative of the story of Martin Guerre, Arnaud du Tilh, and Bertrande de Rols. Davis emphasizes her attempt to tell a truthful narrative, but in the end, she leaves some ambiguity as to whether this is the "true face" of history, or merely another mask.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

The historian Natalie Zemon Davis explains why she decided to write *The Return of Martin Guerre*, which she calls "a historian's adventure with a different way of telling about the past." The famous story of imposture has been told and re-told in novels, folklore, plays, and even an opera, so Davis felt the need to account for why the world needed another version of the story of Martin Guerre.

Davis begins the book by justifying her reasons for writing a new version of an old story. This suggests that even familiar narratives can be told in new and what Davis calls "different" ways, depending on the perspective and aims of the person telling the story.

Davis first came to the story when she helped write the screenplay for the film *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, starring the famous French actor Gerard Depardieu. Although she enjoyed working on the film, she felt that it told the story in overly broad strokes. She was drawn to "dig deeper" into the case, finding out more about, for instance, the Basque background of the Guerres, the role of women, and the role of religion in a community that was split between Protestants and Catholics. Although the film was exciting and suspenseful, she felt there was still "room to reflect upon the significance of identity" and other important cultural and historical issues. She decided that she wanted to write a non-fiction account that would leave no details out, exploring what the story can tell people about sixteenth-century French rural society.

Providing further support for her proposition that this book represents a new and different way of writing about the past, Davis explains that she is, unusually, adapting her book from a film. Her book will aim to keep the narrative suspense of the movie while incorporating more historical nuances, exploring details that the film had to leave out. For example, Davis is particularly interested in exploring the perspectives of the women in the story—an angle that is often left out in other accounts.

Davis explains that nobody knows much about the private and emotional lives of rural peasants in sixteenth-century France, because over ninety percent of them were illiterate. Historians typically learn about people's lives through letters, diaries, or literary sources—none of which are likely to exist for peasants. The stories that have survived are often stereotypical or played for laughs, relying on the low comedy trope of the "personnes populaires" (or common people). For example, historical collections of comic stories like the *Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* and *Propos Rustiques* depict villagers in amusing or ridiculous sexual situations and have a limited psychological register.

One of Davis's central aims in this book is to focus on the lives, emotions, and experiences of peasants. As she explains, these people are often left out of both traditional historical narratives, since those accounts rely on documentary records, and many of these people were illiterate. They are also often left out of legends and stories, since those narratives tend to feature aristocratic protagonists. In this sense, Davis's book shows how a narrative can change when it is re-centered on different types of people.

Court records provide more clues as to the inner lives of peasants, but they are often incomplete and fragmentary. For example, Davis points out that a 1535 case of a woman who murdered her husband doesn't give the wife a chance to tell her side of the story. One unusually well-documented case is that of Martin Guerre, chronicled in a book called *Arrest Memorable* (1561) by Jean de Coras. The book was enormously popular, with five reprints over six years in French and Latin.

Part of the problem with the stories people tell about the past, Davis argues, is that they only provide one side of the story. Often this is due to a lack of evidence. The case of Martin Guerre is so useful, then, because it is so well-documented, providing a valuable record of the lives of people whose lives were otherwise not written about realistically—if at all.

The case of Martin Guerre is so valuable, Davis argues, because it shows how peasants thought about issues of "sentiment," "aspiration," and personal identity. It is also unique in that the story inspired retellings in high literary culture, providing a link between the lives of peasants and their social "betters." Davis explains that she began her research with the print accounts of the trial of Martin Guerre, but soon dug into contemporary legal cases and local archives in villages in southwest France. She writes that the resulting story is "in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past."

Davis has tried to write not only about the lives of peasants, but their emotions, dreams, and ambitions as well. This is a hard task for a historian, who can only work with the available evidence. Consequently, Davis has written a narrative that is based on as much archival evidence as possible, but with some extrapolations of her own to fill in some of the gaps.


CHAPTER 1

In 1527, Martin Guerre's father, Sanxi Daguerre, moved to a village called Artigat in southwest France, leaving behind the family property on the border between France and Spain. With Sanxi came his wife, his son Martin, and his brother Pierre. Why the family chose to leave their ancestral home is unknown, but Davis suggests that perhaps they were trying to avoid French-Spanish military conflict or the plague. Whatever the reason, the family left Basque country and crossed the Pyrenees to the region near Toulouse, which had become increasingly economically important as the city grew in wealth and power. They finally stopped in the village of Artigat, a farming and artisanal community that had grown prosperous through trade routes with Toulouse and neighboring villages.

Davis begins her story with the migration of the Daguerre family—a long journey for a family to make in the sixteenth century, and one that would have involved significant cultural and economic adjustments. Significantly, the family left their ancestral property behind. Property was closely linked to identity in sixteenth-century France. When the Daguerres left their family property and moved to the village of Artigat, they were essentially changing their identity and starting a new life far from everything they had known before.

The Daguerres had to adjust to some new social customs. In Artigat, property was divided equally among sons, rather than simply being inherited by the oldest son. It was thus much easier to sell property in Artigat than in Basque country, where land could only be separated from the family that owned it with great difficulty. Artigat also had a linguistically mixed makeup; people tended to speak of mix of Occitan, the language of southern France, and a Catalan dialect.

In Artigat, the Daguerres had to adjust to a new language and culture. This was a region that placed less of an emphasis on the close link between property and identity. Here, property was divided equally among children (which tended to make landholdings smaller) and was much easier to sell, suggesting that people were less attached to property as a marker of identity.

The villagers didn't owe service or taxes to a feudal lord, so there wasn't much legal oversight. Instead, they tended to settle disputes locally. The local lord was Jean d'Escornebeuf, but he had little authority over the community. The nearest legal authorities were in the town of Rieux and the city of Toulouse. Davis suggests that all this would have appealed to the Daguerres, who had previously lived in a community where they had a great deal of personal freedom.

The relative freedom of Artigat from feudal control was appealing to the Daguerres. However, Davis suggests that the case of Martin Guerre would not have happened had there been more direct legal oversight. The village community largely had to regulate itself, making it very difficult to determine what counted as convincing legal evidence.

The Daguerres changed their name to the more familiar "Guerre" and learned to speak the local language, Occitan. They ran a successful tilework business and farmed the local land. Davis explains that Martin's mother would have adapted her dress to the way that other women dressed in the community. They would have all become more accustomed to using written language, since Basque was not usually used for record-keeping. However, Davis suggests that although they probably learned enough writing skills to keep simple accounts, they probably would not have learned to read, since there was no schoolmaster in Artigat who could have taught them. Meanwhile, the Guerres had four more daughters.

The Daguerres settled into their new life by adapting to the local culture. After moving to Artigat, the family had to take on a new identity. Far from their native land, they would have changed their dress, customs, and language. This assimilation even extended to changing their name, suggesting that changing the place where they lived and owned property amounted to a change in their entire identity.

The Guerres were evidently successful at integrating, because in 1538 Martin married Bertrande de Rols, the daughter of a well-off local family who brought a substantial dowry. That Bertrande's father thought this was a successful match suggests just how well the Guerres had been accepted in Artigat. Martin was only fourteen at the time of the marriage, and Bertrande was probably a similar age. From the evidence of contemporary marriage contracts, Davis guesses that Bertrande's dowry was probably around 50 to 150 livres, equivalent to the price of a vineyard or field. Martin and Bertrande were married in the village church and then ceremonially put to bed with a "resveil," a spiced drink designed to ensure the fertility of the marriage.

The marriage of Martin and Bertrande was considered the final measure of the Guerres' assimilation into Artigat society. People today tend to think about marriage as a deeply personal component of their identity, but this demonstrates that, in the sixteenth century, marriage was closely tied to the exchange and ownership of property—like, for example, Bertrande's dowry. Bertrande was married at a young age and had no choice of her husband, demonstrating women's lack of agency and control over their lives in this period.

CHAPTER 2

For eight years after the wedding, the young Martin and Bertrande didn't conceive a child. Bertrande would later claim that this was because a jealous sorceress cast a spell on them, rendering Martin impotent. Because they didn't conceive, they were shamed and gossiped about in the village. Davis suggests that this was probably not the first of Martin's misfortunes. When he was a child, villagers may have made fun of his accent and his foreign name. When it became publicly known that he was impotent, young men of the village dressed up as women and assembled in front of the Guerre house, ringing bells and beating on wine vats. Finally, a wise woman appeared and told them how to lift the spell. After performing four masses and eating special cakes, the "spell" was supposedly lifted and Martin and Bertrande conceived a son, Sanxi.

Both Martin and Bertrande were publicly shamed for "failing" to conceive a child, for different reasons. For Martin, this represented a failure to generate a male heir to whom he could pass down the Guerre property. Without a son, the family's inheritance—and thus its identity—would be compromised. For Bertrande, her inability to conceive a child was cause for shame because this was a society in which women were primarily imagined as wives and mothers. Without a child, Bertrande was failing to inhabit her proper social role.

However, Martin's troubles weren't over. He liked little about Artigat except swordplay, which he loved. He fought frequently with his father and disliked village life, but there were few options for escape: his father would not have allowed him to go to university or to make his fortune in Spain. Davis argues that Martin's case shows that peasants didn't only migrate for economic reasons; sometimes, people wanted to leave their communities because they dreamed of a life outside the confines of the village or the farm.

In writing about Martin's conflicts with his father and desire to escape the constraints of the village life, Davis points out that peasants, too, would have had greater dreams and aspirations than they were often shown to. People may have wanted a different sort of life than the one society prescribed for them—a part of history that is often left out of mainstream historical narratives.

In 1548, when Martin was twenty-four, he was accused of stealing a small quantity of grain from his father. Davis suggests that this probably reflected a power struggle between father and son. Since theft is unforgivable in Basque culture, Martin fled the village, leaving his family and inheritance behind.

The link between identity and property was so strong in sixteenth-century Basque culture that Martin felt he had no choice but to abandon everything he knew after he stole a small quantity of grain from his father.

Martin settled in Burgos, Spain, where he learned Castilian and became a servant to a cardinal called Francisco de Mendoza. In the 1550s, Burgos was a large and flourishing city, and Francisco was a powerful figure in the church. Martin would have seen many sights unimaginable in Artigat—splendid palaces, elaborate rituals in the cathedral, and crowded city streets. After Francisco's death, Martin entered military service under his brother Pedro, having always had a talent for swordplay. As a member of the Spanish army, he fought in Flanders against his native country, France. In 1557, at the siege of Saint-Quentin, Martin was shot and had to have his leg amputated and replaced with a **wooden leg**.

Martin made a new life for himself in Spain, and Davis wonders whether he would have had any regrets about the life he had left behind. Removed from his ancestral home and property, Martin was able to become, essentially a new person, in a whole new career and sphere of life. That's a transformation that would have been unimaginable for many peasants in this period. At the same time, the case of Martin Guerre shows that some peasants did have the power and opportunity to change their identity, if they wanted to.

CHAPTER 3

When Martin left Artigat, Bertrande was probably about twenty-two years old. Davis explains that Bertrande would have grown up learning household and domestic skills before she was married. Bertrande, too, was considered "bewitched" for having failed to conceive a child with Martin, since one contemporary source—the *Malleus Maleficarum*—explains that the devil can bewitch women to make their husbands "loathsome" to them. However, Davis considers it unlikely that Bertrande loathed Martin. Although her family urged her to separate from him (since impotency was grounds for dissolving a marriage), she never did. Her refusal to have her marriage dissolved allowed her to have a childhood with Martin's sisters, to live outside her parents' home, and kept her from being forced to marry again. Then, when Bertrande might have felt more ready for sex and childbirth, the "spell" causing Martin's impotence was mysteriously lifted.

Many accounts of the story of Martin Guerre depict Bertrande as a victim or a simple dupe, but Davis doesn't believe this was true. Rather, she writes a new narrative that highlights some of the ways that Bertrande was in fact quite strong-willed. For example, Davis suggests that despite being married at quite a young age, Bertrande may have used the excuse of the "spell" to deliberately delay the consummation of the marriage and childbearing until she felt ready for sex. In this sense, Bertrande found ways to gain power for herself within the limited roles allowed to women in this period.

In this period, Davis explains, women were subject to the authority of men and were considered to be the property of their husbands and fathers. Although they had little formal legal and political power, women like Bertrande played an important role in the economic life of the community and found a way to exercise influence in more subtle ways. For example, women performed important economic tasks (like trimming vines, cutting grapes, spinning thread, and making bread). Some women even lent out small sums of money with interest or worked as midwives and surgeons.

Davis resists the tendency to depict all women in the sixteenth century as subject to the authority of men. Although there was great legal and economic inequality, she also highlights the ways that women like Bertrande played important roles in their communities and exercised power in ways that might not be immediately apparent.

Women were often left at a disadvantage when they were widowed. Wives inherited property from their husbands only when explicitly specified in the will. However, there were also advantages to widowhood, as widowed women had more freedom, could own property, and were addressed by the honorific "Na." For example, one local noblewoman owned and leased her own land after the death of her husband. After Martin's departure, Bertrande was left with the ambiguous status of neither wife nor widow, since, under canon law, a wife could not remarry without firm proof that her husband had died.

The problem for Bertrande, Davis suggests, was that sixteenth-century French society only offered women a limited selection of roles: "respectable" wife, mother, or widow. After Martin's departure, it wasn't clear whether Bertrande was a wife or a widow. Thus, her social, legal, and economic position in the community was in dispute. This shows just how closely women's power was linked to their respectability in their family roles.

Martin's parents eventually forgave him for his disappearance, and Martin's father named Martin as his heir in his will when he died. Still, Martin's departure was a disaster for Bertrande. She experienced a considerable reduction in status. For instance, since she no longer had a household of her own, she had to live under the same roof as her mother again. Pierre had married Bertrande's widowed mother, thus taking responsibility for Martin's family by marriage. In the meantime, Bertrande waited more than eight years for Martin's return without remarrying. Davis suggests that she might have been helped in her solitude by her four sisters-in-law and by the wise woman who had helped her during her period of "bewitchment." Perhaps she dreamed that her husband would return and be different.

Like Martin's identity, Bertrande's identity was also defined by her property and role as a member of two land-owning families—the Guerres and the Rols. Without her husband, it wasn't clear how Bertrande could make her way in the community or how people would view her. Davis points out that the fact that Bertrande didn't marry again for more than a decade testifies to her stubbornness, authority, and strong moral values.

CHAPTER 4

In 1556, a man called Arnaud du Tilh arrived in Artigat, claiming to be Martin. Arnaud was born in the village of Sajas, about a day's ride to the north of Artigat. Arnaud was from an ordinary rural family in the country of the "Comminges," an agriculturally rich area. However, the villages were also subject to the authority of a local lord who levied taxes and interfered in village life. Arnaud's family stood amongst the "middle rank" of peasants and Arnaud would probably have stood to inherit a small amount of land. In Davis's telling, the one extraordinary thing about the du Tilh family was their son Arnaud.

Davis repeatedly describes Arnaud's family as "ordinary," since they had only a small quantity of land. That is, they weren't poor by peasant standards, but they weren't among the wealthiest families either. However, Arnaud turns out to be more than just "ordinary," suggesting yet again that there is more to people than where they come from.

Arnaud was very clever, with a talent for speaking and an excellent memory. But he was also restless, fond of drinking, gambling, and visits to prostitutes, perhaps in the taverns of Toulouse. He was nicknamed "Pansette" ("the belly") because of his large appetites. He loved carnivals, where people would dress up in costumes and **masks** and pretend to be someone else. Like Martin, he longed to escape the constraints of village society, which he did by joining the French army and serving on the battlefields of Picardy.

Arnaud and Martin had something in common: both men wanted to escape village life and dreamed of something outside the world of farming, land, and trade. In this sense, Davis shows again that the identities of peasants in this period were not simply determined by their land, property, and social condition. People sometimes wanted more, and took steps to lead "extraordinary" lives.

Bertrande later suggested that Martin and Arnaud might have met in the army, which was how Arnaud knew about Martin's abandoned property and family. However, it seems more likely to Davis that Arnaud's story, as told to the court, is the truth: that in 1553, on his way back from the army camp in Picardy, Arnaud met two of Martin's neighbors, who mistook him for the missing man. Arnaud then cunningly informed himself about as much of Martin's life as he was able, planning to impersonate him and take his property. Davis compares him to actor wearing a **mask**, like a player at the carnivals popular in sixteenth-century French villages.

Arnaud's love of masks and costumes symbolizes his desire and ability to change his identity. Rather than seeing his life as something that had been determined for him, Arnaud "self-fashions" his own identity by choosing to become Martin Guerre. This was not an accident, Davis shows, but a deliberate choice. Arnaud carefully rehearsed for the role of Martin by meeting his neighbors and learning about his background and family.

Davis poses the question of how unusual it would have been for a sixteenth-century person to change his or her identity. She points out that there are many cases in rural peasant society in which people assumed new identities. The Daguerres became the Guerres when they arrived in Artigat. At carnivals, people frequently dressed up as someone else. Healthy beggars pretended to be disabled or blind. But Arnaud's deception was more elaborate, since he practiced and memorized for several years in order to "become" Martin Guerre.

Davis highlights the ways that many people in this period changed their identity when adapting to a new culture, like the Guerres. She also emphasizes the radical potential of transforming one's identity by taking on someone else's name and property. Davis suggests that Arnaud was not just in search of an inheritance—he was also looking for a new life.

CHAPTER 5

Arnaud first arrived at a hotel near Artigat, where word spread that "Martin" had returned. At first, Bertrande, Pierre, Martin's four sisters, and the rest of the family didn't recognize him. But when he was able to recount memories from ten or fifteen years earlier, they embraced him. (Martin had long since been forgiven for his theft.) Even then, however, Arnaud did not immediately leave for Artigat, but stayed in the hotel to recuperate. It was there that he first got to know Bertrande.

At first, it seemed as if there was a lack of physical evidence that this really was the "returned" Martin Guerre. However, the family accepted Martin once he presented other forms of evidence. He clearly remembered events from their shared past, which they took as proof that this was Martin.

Davis suggests that Arnaud's ability to successfully impersonate Martin is more plausible than it may seem: after all, the Guerres hadn't seen Martin for almost a decade and had no painted portraits by which to remember him. Although Bertrande might have been fooled at first, Davis believes that at a certain point she must have realized that this was not her husband. The marriage between Arnaud and Bertrande was "an invented marriage," Davis argues, and depended on Bertrande's explicit or implicit consent and collaboration.

It might seem implausible to people today that a family could be convinced that an entirely different person was their lost father, brother, or nephew. However, Davis argues that standards of evidence were different in the early modern period. Without a photograph or even a portrait to remember him by, Martin's family and neighbors might have indeed had somewhat hazy recollections of what he had looked like.

Davis argues that the evidence suggests that Bertrande and Arnaud fell in love, and that Bertrande became his accomplice in the deception. There are many signs in the historical record of her care for him: for instance, she tried to physically protect him from the blows of her relatives and later talked of the intimacy of their marriage, the way they "conversed day and night." In the next three years, they had two daughters, only one of whom (Bernarde) survived infancy. It may have been easier for them to justify this "invented marriage" because, in the sixteenth century, a contract before witnesses was sufficient to consider a couple married. According to Davis, Bertrande and Arnaud may have considered a marriage "something that was in their hands to make."

Unlike other accounts of the story of Martin Guerre, Davis emphasizes Bertrande's agency in choosing to accept Arnaud as her husband. Bertrande's first marriage had been quite literally made for her: at the age of thirteen or fourteen, she was married to the husband that her parents had chosen for her. This second time, she made her own unconventional marriage. Although Bertrande and Arnaud knew that they had "invented" their relationship, they may have considered their marriage as legitimate as others because it came about as a result of their free choice.

Bertrande and Arnaud never confessed their sin to a local Catholic priest. Davis suggests that they may have been sympathetic to the reformed religion, Protestantism, which emphasizes personal and direct connection to God—without the need for mediation by a confessor. By the 1560s, Protestant proselytizers had reached the southwest of France. Bertrande's family converted, and it is possible that the couple had become Protestants as well. Davis notes that, for example, Arnaud did not reference saints in his final confession, and talked only of God's mercy towards sinners—a Protestant convention of prayer. The "new religion" might have offered Bertrande and Arnaud the chance to tell their story to God alone, without need of any priest or human intermediary.

Davis is interested in the impact the "new religion"—Protestantism—might have had on Bertrande and Arnaud. For example, they may have found Protestantism empowering because it removed the need for the authority of priests in making decisions about their life and marriage. At the same time, however, Davis admits that there isn't decisive historical evidence that Bertrande and Arnaud were Protestant. Here the historian has to extrapolate based on her own evaluation of the evidence.

CHAPTER 6

After three years of marriage with Bertrande, Arnaud was thriving: he developed the Guerre holdings and became a "rural merchant," trading in goods and commodities around the neighboring villages. However, his economic ambitions soon led him to quarrel with Pierre over management of the family property. Arnaud began buying, selling, and leasing land (including the *propres*, the family's ancestral properties in French Basque country), and he asked Pierre to see the accounts of the elder Sanxi, who had been the administrator of his nephew's property. When Pierre refused, in late 1558 or early 1559, Arnaud brought a civil suit against him before the king's judge at Rieux.

The conflict between Arnaud and Pierre demonstrates just how important property was to ideas of identity in sixteenth-century France. For several years, Martin was accepted as a landholder, heir, and pillar of the community. However, when he began to deviate from the norms of property management—by selling ancestral land, for instance—Pierre turned on him. This suggests that control of property was fundamental to how people understood their place in the world and even their identity.

Such actions were not unheard of among peasant families: Davis cites other cases that went before the court of Rieux involving legal squabbles over property and inheritance. But for Pierre, such an action was an unthinkable rebellion against his patriarchal authority. He became convinced that the new "Martin" was an impostor. In retaliation for the lawsuit, he began telling family and neighbors that Arnaud could not be Martin, since he had forgotten many Basque phrases, looked very different, and no longer enjoyed swordplay.

Once Arnaud began disposing of the family property in unconventional ways, doubts suddenly came into Pierre's mind. Before, he had accepted the new Martin—now, he wasn't sure. Certain pieces of evidence that he had once disregarded (like the new Martin's lack of interest in swordplay) now took on new significance. This demonstrates that when it comes to evidence, people often see only what they want to see.

However, Bertrande continued to maintain that Arnaud was indeed the true Martin. Arnaud claimed that Pierre had made up the story. The quarrel split the villagers, some of whom believed Pierre and some of whom believed Arnaud. The village shoemaker observed that Arnaud's feet were smaller than Martin's. Martin's sisters swore that Arnaud was their brother (Davis suggests that they probably preferred him to Pierre as head of the family). This difference of opinion seemed to cut across certain swaths of society: local Protestants tended to believe Arnaud and Catholics tended to believe Pierre.

Davis points out that whether people believed Arnaud or Pierre tended to depend on their preexisting biases, alliances, and preconceptions. Martin's sisters preferred Arnaud as head of the family, so they took his side. More traditional Catholic villagers were more likely to prefer Pierre, the older patriarch. What counts as evidence, Davis shows, is often as much a matter of what people want to believe as anything else.

In 1559, there were two more blows to Arnaud. A solider from Rochefort came through the village and told people that the real Martin was still alive and now walked with a **wooden leg**, having had his leg amputated two years earlier. Also, Arnaud was imprisoned and accused of arson by Jean d'Escornebeuf, a local lord. The case was dropped, but it further damaged Arnaud's credulity and reputation.

The imprisonment by Jean d'Escornebeuf damaged Arnaud's credibility, demonstrating that the persuasiveness of someone's evidence often depends on the perceived trustworthiness of the witness. Meanwhile, the news about Martin's wooden leg suggested that there might be decisive physical evidence that would settle the question of the "real" Martin's identity once and for all.

Pierre made inquiries and found out that "Martin" was actually Arnaud. He opened a formal legal inquiry in Bertrande's name without her permission. After Arnaud was released from prison in 1560, he was arrested and taken to prison again. Pierre threatened to throw Bertrande out of the house if she didn't agree to take part in the trial. She agreed to testify for the prosecution, although she hoped that she would lose the case. However, Bertrande also needed to protect herself, since she wanted her son to inherit and to maintain her reputation as a respectable woman.

Pierre was able to force Bertrande to testify against Arnaud because she lived in his house and was reliant on his protection and financial support. This demonstrates the severe restrictions placed on women's choices and agency in this period. At the same time, however, Bertrande's ability to walk a delicate line—protecting Arnaud, and protecting her own reputation—is evidence of her resourcefulness under those restrictions.

Davis wonders whether Arnaud's imposture would have been exposed if he hadn't challenged Pierre in this way—that is, by leasing the family's ancestral properties and asking to see the family accounts. On the one hand, this behavior certainly would have been out of character for Martin, but on the other hand, Davis thinks that Arnaud's "big lie" would have come out eventually, one way or another—since such a lie has significant consequences for interpersonal relationships.

Davis comes to the conclusion that Arnaud's unusual behavior in selling the family land was not the only threat to the continuation deception, given that a lie like this is nearly impossible to maintain. Arnaud did an exceptionally good job rehearsing for the role of Martin Guerre, but eventually, the evidence would have turned against him.

CHAPTER 7

Arnaud's trial was held at the king's court at Rieux, since defrauding someone's identity was a serious crime that could be punishable by death. The court called 150 witnesses, some of whom swore that the man was Arnaud, some of whom swore he was Martin, and some of whom said that the two men looked alike but they couldn't say either way. No one could agree on exactly what Martin had looked like. Forty-five people claimed that the prisoner was Arnaud du Tilh, while about an equal number (including Martin's sisters) claimed that he was surely Martin Guerre and they had known him since their birth.

Establishing proof of identity fraud was nearly impossible in an era before fingerprinting, photography, or birth certificates. The court had to rely on the evidence of people's recollections—which, as Davis shows, can be exceptionally unreliable. There was no "objective" standard of evidence to fall back on, because there was no decisive proof of what Martin had actually looked like.

Bertrande moved out of Pierre's house to live with a family in Rieux, since the court determined that Pierre had been forcing her to testify. This must have been a difficult time for her, as her honor became a matter of public inquiry. Arnaud said that she was an honorable woman who was being forced to testify against him. Bertrande made a good performance on the stand, recounting intimate details about her wedding night with Martin that Arnaud was able to corroborate.

Davis points out that Bertrande had a very difficult line to walk. She wanted to save Arnaud's life, which she probably tried to do by rehearsing stories and agreeing upon details that they could repeat in their testimonies. However, she also needed to protect her own reputation and life by asserting her innocence. If Arnaud was found guilty, she had to claim that she had been deceived—or she, too, would be guilty of adultery.

Arnaud, meanwhile, made a brilliant legal defense without the benefit of an attorney, accusing Pierre of having made up the whole story to discredit him and take his property. When he confronted Bertrande on the stand, he said that he would submit to any death the court chose if she would swear that he was not her husband. Bertrande was silent, demonstrating that she was not prepared to swear against Arnaud. Arnaud argued that Pierre hated him because of the lawsuit and was fighting for survival. After all, the court would punish someone who made false accusations with the same harsh penalties that someone would receive for committing fraud.

Arnaud did his best to attack the credibility of Pierre's evidence by painting him as an unreliable witness. He claimed that his uncle hated him and was using this accusation to punish him for the lawsuit—which, admittedly, was true. However, Davis points out that this also raised the stakes for Pierre. A false accusation of this kind was also considered a serious crime. If Pierre lost the case, he might also be subjected to severe punishments—which made him even more determined to prove that Arnaud was a liar.

Arnaud didn't look like his sisters or his son, the younger Sanxi. On the other hand, the witnesses gave contradictory testimony, and the handwriting test couldn't be used because neither Arnaud nor Martin had ever signed their name prior to Martin's disappearance. After months of deliberation, the judge declared Arnaud guilty of imposture and "abusing Bertrande de Rols." They sentenced him to be beheaded and quartered (a punishment usually reserved for nobles). Arnaud appealed the case to the Parlement of Toulouse.

Although the court eventually declared Arnaud guilty, the case was far from clear-cut. The witnesses had not given conclusive evidence, and because of the illiteracy of the defendant there was no physical evidence like handwriting to make things clearer. The fact that Arnaud was able to appeal the decision at Rieux to a higher court suggests that the legal system recognized that there was a serious problem of evidence in the case.

CHAPTER 8

Bertrande's case was tried at the Parlement of Toulouse, the most powerful court in the region. One of the judges was Jean de Coras, a lawyer who would later write the definitive account of the case. The judges were increasingly split by religious ideology (some were Protestant and some were Catholic), and in the years to come those divisions would become even more dangerous and violent. At the time, however, they were able to focus their energies in concert on the strange case of a man who impersonated a woman's husband for three years. Davis suggests that it might have been easier for Coras to write about this case than to write about the mounting religious and political tensions in the country directly.

Davis spends a significant amount of time describing the divisions in Artigat between Protestants and Catholics and the ways in which differing ideologies might have impacted whether people tended to believe either Pierre or Arnaud. She explains that the situation was similar at the Parlement of Toulouse: the judges were divided according to their backgrounds and belief systems. These contexts influenced the lens through which people judged and told the story of Martin Guerre.

While the trial went on, Pierre and Bertrande were both imprisoned along with Arnaud. When the court called Bertrande to the stand, she claimed that she had been deceived and had never collaborated with the defendant. Arnaud, on the other hand, said that he believed his wife had been pressured to testify against him by Pierre. Davis points out that Bertrande was probably still on Arnaud's side here, since, at any point, she could have betrayed him by telling a story he would not have been able to repeat. But she didn't: they both stuck to a seemingly agreed-upon script.

As Davis points out again, Bertrande was in an impossible position. The penalties for adultery were severe and would involve the disinheritance of her children. At the same time, she wanted to protect Arnaud. So when she went on the stand, she wanted to prove that this man was truly her husband, Martin—but if it was proven that he wasn't, *she also needed to maintain that she had been deceived all along. Her ability to walk this line demonstrates her resourcefulness and ability to find power for herself in a historical moment that severely restricted her agency.*

The court placed the most value on the testimony of close relatives who had known Martin since childhood. But even those witnesses were unable to agree on whether Arnaud really was Martin. People claimed that Martin had particular warts or bodily features, but no two witnesses described the same feature. Some said that the real Martin was slimmer, but on the other hand, it was normal for people to gain weight as they aged. What increasingly counted was not the quantity of witnesses, but their quality and credibility. Coras undertook a systematic investigation of the witnesses, but found himself "perplexed" by the lack of evidence and the conflicting accounts from different people.

The problem for the court at Toulouse, as at Rieux, was that there was no "objective" standard of evidence in the case—no photograph to prove what Martin had really looked like, for instance. The court decided to base their decision on the credibility of the witnesses, but this standard of judgment also had its problems, given the number of conflicting accounts. Davis shows here just how problematic it can be to assess the reliability of various forms of evidence.

Coras increasingly leaned towards ruling in favor of the defendant. Bertrande had a reputation as an honorable woman, and she had lived with Arnaud for three years. Martin's four sisters seemed to be "respectable and honorable women," and that the defendant resembled them seemed more telling than his lack of resemblance to the younger Sanxi, since he was closer to them in age. On the other hand, Pierre seemed to have a vendetta against his nephew and had confessed to misrepresenting himself as Bertrande's agent by opening a case in her name without her permission, and even to plotting his nephew's death. The lawsuit showed that he had ample motivation to denounce his nephew. Moreover, the defendant himself seemed trustworthy, with his perfect recollection of events from decades earlier.

The court came close to ruling in Arnaud's favor because even though the evidence wasn't conclusive, his witnesses seemed credible—and, crucially, "honorable." The court records frequently described Bertrande and Martin's four sisters as "honorable women," for instance. This demonstrates just how important concepts of honor and respectability were in this society, particularly when it came to judging the trustworthiness of women.

Finally, the court adhered to the principle of reasonable doubt—that "it was better to leave unpunished a guilty person than to condemn an innocent one." Acquitting Arnaud would give Bertrande a husband and Sanxi a father. But just as the court was prepared to rule in Arnaud's favor, a man with a **wooden leg** arrived in Toulouse, claiming to be the real Martin Guerre.

Eventually, the court came to the conclusion that although it couldn't be proven that Arnaud was *Martin, it couldn't be proven that he* wasn't *either. However, this standard of evidence changed entirely with the arrival of the real Martin, with the indisputable, physical proof of the wooden leg.*

CHAPTER 9

After Martin lost his leg at the battle of Saint-Quentin, he was given a position as a lay brother in a wealthy Spanish monastery favored by aristocrats. Why, Davis asks, did he come back to Artigat? It is possible that he simply got tired of the religious life, and that after the war he hoped he could be pardoned for his treason in fighting for Spain. However, Davis considers it more likely that Martin heard about the trial and returned home just in time to reclaim his family, property, and identity.

It may have been a coincidence that Martin returned home at this crucial moment in his trial, but Davis considers that unlikely. Rather, he probably heard that an imposter had taken over his land and family, which spurred him to return to the home he had abandoned a decade earlier. This demonstrates the importance of property to early modern ideas of identity. Martin had to come home because, if he didn't, another man would take his place and his identity.

Martin and Arnaud were each questioned separately. At first, things seemed to go well for Arnaud: he remembered events from the past better than Martin. But then the court asked Arnaud how he had used witchcraft to learn so much about Artigat and the Guerre family, to which he reacted with anger and fear. The du Tilh brothers were called as witnesses, but they fled. Pierre was asked to identify Martin from a group of men all dressed alike, and he immediately identified Martin correctly. Martin's sisters were shown Arnaud and Martin side by side. They wept, identified Martin as their brother, and begged his forgiveness for being deceived by the imposter. Finally, the court heard testimony that the real Martin now walked with a **wooden leg** after he was injured in battle.

Whereas before there had been much uncertainty about the physical appearance and traits of the "real" Martin, the return of Martin Guerre put many of these doubts to rest. Pierre and Martin's sisters, for instance, were able to immediately identify him from a line-up, although they hadn't seen him in more than a decade. Meanwhile, the court's accusation that Arnaud had committed witchcraft suggests that people often attribute to supernatural causes things that they don't understand—like how one man could somehow convince so many people that he was someone else.

Bertrande was then called as a witness. She had been imprisoned for several months, but she had had access to the Gospel and had prepared herself for a variety of outcomes. Consequently, her performance was flawless. She embraced Martin and asked his pardon for her mistake, claiming she had been deceived and seduced by Arnaud. Martin, however, responded sternly, telling her that a wife ought to know her husband.

Martin's lack of sympathy upon his reconciliation with Bertrande shows the emphasis placed on a wife's loyalty in this period. Although everyone else had also been deceived by the impostor, she singled out for insufficient loyalty to her husband. However, her ability to claim that she had been deceived—thus protecting herself from sharing Arnaud's fate—demonstrates her talent at maneuvering within social strictures.

The real Martin had now been identified. However, there was little legal precedent for a case like this: some courts treated imposture as a joke, some as a minor crime. Prison was not an option because prisons in this period were only used for debtors and people awaiting trial. The choice was to be made between fining Arnaud, subjecting him to various forms of physical punishment, and execution. Previous convictions of this kind had been punished with banishment and imprisonment as galley slaves. However, when Arnaud was convicted of imposture he was sentenced to perform a public penance in Artigat, followed by an execution by hanging. Davis argues that the court took the case so seriously because it involved stealing someone's property and inheritance.

As Davis shows, Arnaud might have been punished in a variety of different ways for his imposture. The court might have treated it like a joke, for instance, but instead, they sentenced him to death, suggesting that imposture with the aim of stealing someone's property was considered a grave crime—perhaps because sixteenth-century French society took the relationship between property and identity so seriously. Indeed, identity theft today is also subject to severe legal penalties, suggesting that this relationship is as sacred today as it was in the sixteenth century.

Arnaud was in some ways treated with lenience, perhaps demonstrating the court's respect for his extraordinary performance. His daughter Bernarde was declared legitimate and allowed to inherit his property, since Bertrande had not been aware of the circumstances when she was conceived. The court also declared that Bertrande had been easily deceived, but was an honorable woman. They were lenient, too, with the Guerres: Pierre was not punished for his schemes against Arnaud and Bertrande, and Martin was also not punished for treason against his country, since the court considered that he had suffered enough from the loss of his leg and patrimony. Davis suggests that all these sentences were designed to support marriage and the children issuing from it.

The court made a significant concession to Arnaud in declaring his daughter legitimate, since that meant she could inherit property, keep his name, and make a life for herself as a member of the community. Without that legitimacy and entitlement to inherit property, Bernarde would have had a hard time making her way in the world. Davis suggests that the court's decision in this matter demonstrates their commitment to "family values" and their determination to support the social institutions of marriage, children, and the legal inheritance of property across generations.

Arnaud, Martin, and Bertrande were summoned before the court for the last time. The famous essayist Michel de Montaigne was in attendance. Arnaud maintained to the end of the trial that he was the "real" Martin and that the other man was an impostor. Consequently, the court prevented him from speaking publicly in Toulouse. At Artigat, Arnaud finally reassumed his old identity, admitting that he had lied and stolen the property and family of another man. He disposed of his property, even initiating a civil suit against some du Tilh family members to ensure that Bernarde would receive her inheritance. He began by asking for pardon before the church and in sight of the whole village. He was hung in front of the Guerres' house, and died testifying to Bertrande's innocence, honor, and virtue.

Arnaud clung to the fiction that he was the "real" Martin until his execution, demonstrating his attachment to the false narrative that he had constructed. When he did finally confess, however, he was careful to protect two people: his daughter Bernarde and his "invented" wife, Bertrande. By claiming that he had deceived Bertrande—although Davis believes this was almost certainly not true—he was able to protect her honor and virtue in the eyes of the community. This suggests his continuing love and emotional attachment to her.

CHAPTER 10

After the trial, both Coras and another Toulouse lawyer, Guillaume Le Sueur, began writing their version of events. Le Sueur was a little-known author of some translations and history books, and in 1560 he wrote the "Admirable History of the Pseudo-Martin of Toulouse," based on the court's notes and perhaps on his own experience of the trial. Coras, on the other hand, was better-known: born in 1515, he was a judge and university law professor in Toulouse whose lectures drew large crowds. By the time of the trial, he was considered an "illustrious" author and scholar and even had a biography of him written by a former student.

Davis spends most of the last chapters of the book describing the characters of the people who told Martin Guerre's story to posterity. As she shows, the story looked very different through the eyes of Le Sueur, a little-known translator, versus Coras, a celebrity law professor. Coras had already had a successful literary and legal career by the time of the trial, which gave him a ready-made audience for his narrative.

Coras had personal experience with the law. After his mother died, she left him her property, and Coras sued his father for access to the inheritance. Meanwhile, he married (twice), had a son, and continued to lecture and write law books. He was very fond of his wife, to whom he wrote long love letters, and he became increasingly interested in the Protestant cause. He wrote a treatise against clandestine marriages, a book that he hoped would influence public opinion outside the university. All this meant that Coras had reason to be sympathetic with Arnaud.

Davis points out the significant similarities between Coras and Arnaud, the man he would later write about. Like Coras, Arnaud was poised, intelligent, a Protestant sympathizer, seemed to love his wife, and had been willing to sue his uncle for his patrimony, just as Coras had sued his father. This demonstrates how the past experiences and sympathies of an author can influence how they frame a narrative.

Although Coras was initially sympathetic to Arnaud, he eventually realized his mistake. Even so, he remained fascinated by the case, because Arnaud's deception demonstrated just how quickly the valued qualities of charm, eloquence, and "self-fashioning" could turn into outright lying. Coras accused Arnaud of being a magician aided by an evil spirit, but he also recognized that there was something in the case that spoke to the broader social condition of people in sixteenth-century France. Writing a book would allow him to revisit the case and examine its implications.

Davis discusses Arnaud's case through the lens of the idea of "self-fashioning"—the way that early modern people could project a certain image of themselves through, for instance, careful selection of clothing and gestures. These qualities were widely applauded in courtiers. In Arnaud's imposture of Martin Guerre, however, we see the darker and more extreme implications of a widespread social practice.

CHAPTER 11

Le Sueur's book about the case, *Admiranda historia* (published in 1561) is a straightforward news pamphlet that simply summarizes the case and draws an appropriate moral at the end. The book sold well, suggesting that there was significant appetite for news about the case. By contrast, Davis describes Coras's *Arrest Memorable*, published in the same year, as an "innovative" book. Although the book resembles a traditional legal commentary, Coras in fact devotes relatively little attention to legal matters, choosing instead to focus on the story and characters. The book was in French rather than Latin, the language of the courts. He described the case of Martin Guerre as "prodigious," implying it was unlike anything that France had ever seen before. Davis points out that Coras was probably the first legal figure in France to write a book about the law for popular publication.

Davis draws a contrast between a more traditional legal narrative, the Admiranda historia, *and Coras's* Arrest Memorable. *Coras's book represents a new way of writing about the law—perhaps much as Davis's book frames itself as a new way of writing about the past. For one, Coras's book was far more accessible: it was written in a language people could read, and it was intended for popular publication rather than an audience of fellow lawyers and legal scholars. It focused not on dry legal facts but on the more colorful details of the case. In this sense, the* Arrest Memorable *is a book that encompasses multiple genres: part legal narrative, part social critique, part fiction.*

This "new use of a traditional form" allowed Coras to play with the relationship between "text" and "annotation." Unlike a conventional legal commentary, which presents cases with marginal explanations by the author, Coras's annotations often had little to do with the law and focused instead on social and philosophical issues.

Coras's book shows the way that a traditional narrative form—the legal commentary—can be subverted and used in a new way. Where the reader might expect notes on the details of the law, Coras instead presents annotations on the law's broader social implications.

Davis suggests that Coras used the case to comment on ideas and issues that mattered to him, such as evidence, the nature of proof, and social problems like child marriage and spousal abandonment. Both Coras and Le Sueur may have found that the story contained a Protestant message. They dedicated their books to Protestant patrons, and they suggested that this case might not have happened under a Protestant church, since a Protestant church would have allowed Bertrande to dissolve her marriage after her abandonment.

A case like Martin Guerre's mattered not just because it was sensational and unusual, but because it became a way of commenting on larger social concerns. For example, Coras could use the complexities of church law to suggest that Protestantism might offer a better alternative to the strict rules of Catholicism.

Coras's *Arrest Memorable* mounts arguments for and against the accused. For example, he calls Arnaud the "defendant" in the text and "this prodigious offender" in the annotation. He also makes some changes, exaggerating Arnaud's powers of memory and accusing him of greater crimes (including dealings with the devil). He writes that Bertrande was easily deceived by "the weakness of her sex," but is unsympathetic to Martin for abandoning his wife, and he leaves out the details of Arnaud's confession.

By omitting the details of Arnaud's confession, Coras leaves the reader with doubts that the court really did convict the right man. Although on the one hand he seems to condemn Arnaud, he is also more sympathetic to him in some places—lending the book a narrative complexity that one doesn't often find in legal commentaries.

In the 1565 edition, Coras adds a description of Arnaud's confession at Artigat. His annotation describes the story as "a tragedy for this fine peasant" that "makes it hard to tell the difference between tragedy and comedy." Davis points out that Coras is being very innovative here, since French tragedies and tragicomedies—like, for example, the popular translations of the *Histoires tragiques* of Bandello— typically feature only aristocratic personages. It also suggests that he may have been sympathetic to Arnaud as a tragic hero. In this reading, the tragedy is in Arnaud's punishment, not in the crime.

Davis suggests that Coras's book is so memorable in part because it leaves the reader with a fundamental ambiguity: is Arnaud a villain or a hero? The outcome of the case, which ended with Arnaud's conviction and execution, would suggest the former. But by describing the case as a "tragedy," Coras leaves room for a different interpretation.

CHAPTER 12

Le Sueur's book followed what Davis calls the "expected path" of a news pamphlet—it became more legendary, and the facts got increasingly muddled. By contrast, Coras's book proved immensely popular, and was re-printed frequently throughout the sixteenth century and translated into several languages. Coras himself died in 1572, lynched at the St Bartholomew Day Massacre, an attack on French Protestants by their Catholic countrymen.

Davis suggests that Coras's death in an act of religious violence is significant because it throws new light on Martin Guerre's story. As religious dissent in the country grew and there was increasing doubt about which was the "true" church, Davis suggests, people might have been even more drawn to this story of imposture and the elusiveness of truth.

Some people read about the case of Martin Guerre as part of their legal training, while others read it as a "marvelous" and "prodigious" popular legend. Davis notes that people frequently bound Coras's book with other books about the case, and that it sometimes appeared alongside accounts of floods, comets, and other miraculous incidents. Almost all of these other accounts of the case emphasized Arnaud as the protagonist and downplayed Bertrande's agency, depicting her as the deceived and manipulated wife. The exception is a 1592 poem by a man that identifies with the tricked wife, admitting that "many girls I have seen with the same appearance…could change places readily / And deceive me easily," thus expressing sympathy for Bertrande.

As Davis shows, the story of Martin Guerre looks very different not only based on who is writing *it, but also who is* reading *it. Law students reading Coras's book as a case study might read the story differently than people who saw it as a popular and suspenseful legend. What most of these reader responses have in common is that they de-emphasize Bertrande's agency. However, Davis's account re-centers Bertrande in the case, offering another example of a new way to tell an old story.*

Michel de Montaigne, a famous writer and essayist, had witnessed the trial at Toulouse as a young man. In his essay "Of the Lame," he argued that witches should not be burned because there is always a lack of evidence, since it is impossible to prove beyond a shadow of doubt that someone is a witch. To prove his point, he cited the trial of Martin Guerre, a case in which it was very difficult to prove that either of the men was the "true" Martin.

The case of Martin Guerre in many ways tested the limits of the legal system and the standards by which evidence is judged, posing the question: without any objective markers of identity, how could someone prove that they were who they said they were? Montaigne took this problem to its logical conclusion, arguing that the case shows the limits of people's ability to perceive the truth.

Montaigne thought that the case "far-exceeded…our knowledge," and he suggested that the judge was not empowered to condemn Arnaud and sentence him to death under such poor evidence. He uses a popular proverb ("He knowes not the perfect pleasure of Venus that hath not layne with a limping woman") to underscore the limitations of people's ability to reason due to faulty assumptions (such as the assumption that "what they lack in their legs they make up for in their genitals"). Montaigne argued that people's imagination often gets the better of them in such cases, and Davis points out that it was not entirely clear that even Martin's **wooden leg** was as clear a sign as the court took it to be.

Montaigne saw the story of Martin Guerre as a cautionary tale that demonstrates the unreliability of evidence admitted in court. Multiple witnesses disagreed as to whether Arnaud really was the "true" Martin, even at the end. The wooden leg was taken as an indisputable marker of Martin's identity, but even then, there was some room for doubt, since perhaps the story of Martin's amputation was itself untrue. In cases where the death penalty is the punishment, Montaigne argued, it is not acceptable to condemn people to death in the absence of clear and indisputable evidence.

EPILOGUE

By 1563, everything seemed back to normal in Artigat. Pierre and Martin were on good terms, their names appearing together on contracts and in lawsuits. Although there is no record of what happened between Martin and Bertrande, Davis suggests that they had reason to make peace, as Martin needed a wife to care for him in his infirmity, and Bertrande needed a father for her children and to maintain her respectable reputation. Moreover, they both needed to maintain appearances in order to preserve their position in the eyes of the village community. After all, "if she were an adulterer, then he was a cuckold." After Bertrande's death, Martin married again and had a child by his second wife.

The reintegration of Martin back into the Guerre family suggests that property remained very important as an index of identity. When Martin took back his role as heir and head of the family, he was accepted. Martin's reintegration also demonstrates the persistence of gender roles and commonly accepted ideas about women's virtue and honor, since Bertrande needed to live as Martin's wife again in order to be accepted in the community as a "respectable" woman.

Martin and Bertrande even had two more sons, who inherited the family property along with Martin's son by his second wife. The lands were split between Martin and Bertrande's children and Martin's son by his second wife, suggesting that the family continued to follow Basque customs of inheritance. The descendants of the Rols and Guerre families owned property together and were godparents to each other's children.

Despite all that had passed between the Rols and Guerre families, property kept them together, since they owned land jointly for several generations. This demonstrates again the importance of land and inheritance to understandings of identity and family bonds in sixteenth-century French peasant communities.

Davis asks whether all this means that life went on as if the imposture had never happened. She suggests that the case would not be so easily forgotten. Surely Bertrande did not forget her time with Arnaud, and the villagers would retell the story for many generations to come. They almost certainly heard about Coras's famous book, and the story became local legend. Even in the late twentieth century, when a new arrival to the village observed that "nothing ever happens in Artigat," an old woman once again told the story of Martin Guerre.

Davis resists an easy ending to the story of Martin Guerre. Although the historical record would suggest that everything went back to normal, she guesses that this was probably not the case—that Bertrande didn't forget Arnaud, and that people still talked about the legendary imposture. This shows her willingness to extrapolate and speculate about people's emotional lives in ways that might take her outside the official record.

The reason the story of Martin Guerre has been "told and retold" so many times since the sixteenth century, Davis thinks, is that it "reminds us that astonishing things are possible." Davis wonders whether her own telling of the story is representative of the truth, or if it is simply another one of Arnaud's **masks**.

Davis recognizes that the story of Martin Guerre is an appealing and sensational one, and she openly questions the reliability of the evidence she has used to construct this particular narrative. For Davis—as for other people who have written about Martin Guerre—there is still profound uncertainty at the heart of the case.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Houghton, Eve. "*The Return of Martin Guerre*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 May 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

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