

THE RETURN OF MARTIN GUERRE



Natalie Zemon Davis

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Preface



THIS BOOK GREW out of a historian's adventure with a different way of telling about the past. The story of Martin Guerre has been recounted many times. In the 1540s in Languedoc, a rich peasant leaves his wife, child, and property and is not heard from for years; he comes back—or so everyone thinks—but after three or four years of agreeable marriage the wife says she has been tricked by an impostor and brings him to trial. The man almost persuades the court he is Martin Guerre, when at the last moment the true Martin Guerre appears. Two books were immediately written about the case, one by a judge of the court. All over France there were comments on it, by the great Montaigne among others. Over the centuries it was retold in books on famous impostors and *causes célèbres*, and is still remembered in the Pyrenean village of Artigat where the events took place four hundred years ago. It has inspired a play, two novels, and an operetta.

When I first read the judge's account I thought, "This must become a film." Rarely does a historian find so perfect a narrative structure in the events of the past or one with such dramatic popular appeal. By coincidence I learned that the scenarist Jean-Claude Carrière and the director Daniel

Vigne were starting a screenplay on the same subject. I was able to join them, and out of our collaboration came the film *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*.

Paradoxically, the more I savored the creation of the film, the more my appetite was whetted for something beyond it. I was prompted to dig deeper into the case, to make historical sense of it. Writing for actors rather than readers raised new questions about the motivations of people in the sixteenth century—about, say, whether they cared as much about truth as about property. Watching Gérard Depardieu feel his way into the role of the false Martin Guerre gave me new ways to think about the accomplishment of the real impostor, Arnaud du Tilh. I felt I had my own historical laboratory, generating not proofs, but historical possibilities.

At the same time, the film was departing from the historical record, and I found this troubling. The Basque background of the Guerres was sacrificed; rural Protestantism was ignored; and especially the double game of the wife and the judge's inner contradictions were softened. These changes may have helped to give the film the powerful simplicity that had allowed the Martin Guerre story to become a legend in the first place, but they also made it hard to explain what actually happened. Where was there room in this beautiful and compelling cinematographic recreation of a village for the uncertainties, the "perhapses," the "may-have-beens," to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing? Our film was an exciting suspense story that kept the audience as unsure of the outcome as the original villagers and judges had been. But where was there room to reflect upon the significance of identity in the sixteenth century?

The film thus posed the problem of invention to the historian as surely as it was posed to the wife of Martin Guerre.

I had to return to my original métier; even from location in the Pyrenees I was running off to archives in Foix, Toulouse, and Auch. I would give this arresting tale its first full-scale historical treatment, using every scrap of paper left me by the past. I would figure out why Martin Guerre left his village and where he went, how and why Arnaud du Tilh became an impostor, whether he fooled Bertrande de Rols, and why he failed to make it stick. This would tell us new things about sixteenth-century rural society. I would follow the villagers through the criminal courts and explain the judges' changing verdicts. And I would have the rare opportunity to show an event from peasant life being reshaped into a story by men of letters.

It turned out to be much more difficult than I had thought—but what a pleasure to recount the history of Martin Guerre once again.

N.Z.D.

Princeton

January 1983

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were willing to share with me their memories of their village and of the story of Martin Guerre. Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel Vigne gave me new ways to think about the connections between the “general trends” of historians and the living experience of the people. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie provided important encouragement when it was needed. Ideas and bibliographical suggestions were offered by numerous colleagues in the United States and France: Paul Alpers, Yves and Nicole Castan, Barbara B. Davis, William A. Douglass, Daniel Fabre, Stephen Greenblatt, Richard Helmholz, Paul Hiltbold, Elisabeth Labrousse, Helen Nader, Laurie Nussdorfer, Jean-Pierre Poussou, Virginia Reinburg, and Ann Waltner. Alfred Soman was generous in his advice for the chapters on criminal justice. The editing of Joyce Backman added much to the clarity of the text. Without the help of my authentic husband, Chandler Davis, this history of an impostor-spouse could never have existed.

ARREST MEMORABLE, DV PARLEMENT DE TOLOSE,

Contenant vne histoire prodigieuse, de nostre temps, avec cent belles, & doctes Annotations, de monsieur maistre JEAN DE CORAS, Conseiller en ladite Cour, & rapporteur du proces.

*Prononcé es Arrests Generaux le xii.
Septembre M. D. LX.*

A Raison cede.



**A LYON,
PAR ANTOINE VINCENT,
M. D. LXI.**

Avec Priuilege du Roy.

Claudii Puteani

ARREST DV PARLEMENT
 de Tolose, contenant vne histoire memorable,
 & prodigieuse, avec cent belles & doctes
 Annotations, de monsieur maistre
IEAN DE CORAS, rap-
 porteur du proces.
Texte de la toile du proces
 & de l'arrest.



V moys de Ianuier, mil cinq cens cinquante neuf, Bertrande de Rolz, du lieu d'Artigat, au diocese de Rieux, se rend suppliant, & plaintiue, deuant le Iuge de Rieux: disant, que vingt ans peuuent estre passez, ou enuiron, qu'elle estant ieune fille, de neuf à dix ans, fut mariee, avec Martin Guerre, pour lors aussi fort ieune, & presque de mesmes aage, que la suppliant.

Annotation I.

Les mariages ainsi contractez auant l'aage legitime, ordonné de nature, ou par les loix politiques, ne peuuent estre (s'il est loysible de sonder, iusques aux secretz, & inscrutables iugemens de la diuinité) plaisans, ny agreables à Dieu, & l'issue, en est le plus souuent piteuse, & miserable, & (comme on voit iournellement par exemple) pleine, de mille repentances: par tant qu'en telles precoces, & deuannees conionctions, ceux qui ont tramé, & proietté le tout, n'ont aucunement respecté l'honneur, & la gloire de Dieu: & moins la fin, pour laquelle ce saint, & venerable estat de mariage, ha esté par luy institué du commencement du monde. * (qui fut deuant l'offence de nostre premier pere, pour

a chap. dernier
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Introduction



“FEMME BONNE qui a mauvais mary, a bien souvent le coeur marry” (A good wife with a bad husband often has a sorry heart). “Amour peut moult, argent peut tout” (love may do much, but money more). These are some of the sayings by which peasants characterized marriage in sixteenth-century France.¹ Historians have been learning more and more about rural families from marriage contracts and testaments, from parish records of births and deaths, and from accounts of courtship rituals and charivaris.² 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 in 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?

But how do historians discover such things about anyone in the past? We look at letters and diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, family histories. We look at literary sources—plays, lyric poems, and stories—which, whatever their relation to the real lives of specific people, show us what sentiments and reactions authors considered plausible for a given pe-

riod. Now the peasants, more than ninety percent of whom could not write in the sixteenth century, have left us few documents of self-revelation. The family histories and journals that have come down to us from them are sparse: an entry or two on births and deaths and the weather. Thomas Platter can give us a portrait of his hard-working peasant mother: "Except one time when we said good-bye to her, I never saw my mother cry; she was a courageous and virile woman, but rough." But this was written when that learned Hebraist had long since left his Swiss village and mountain pastures behind him.³

As for literary sources on the peasants, where they exist, they follow the classical rules that make villagers a subject of comedy. Comedy is about "personnes populaires," people of low condition, so the theory went. "In a style humble and low, comedy represents the private fortunes of men . . . Its issue is happy, pleasant, and agreeable." So in *Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (the fifteenth-century collection of comic stories, several times reprinted in the sixteenth century), an acquisitive peasant comes upon his wife having sexual intercourse with a friend, is mollified in his rage by the promise of twelve measures of grain, and then to keep the bargain has to let the lovers finish up. In the *Propos Rustiques*, published by the Breton lawyer Noël du Fail in 1547, the old peasant Lubin reminisces about when he got married at the age of thirty-four: "I hardly knew what it was to be in love . . . but nowadays there is hardly a young man past fifteen who hasn't tried something out with the girls."⁴ The image of peasant feeling and behavior that emerges from such accounts is not without its value—comedy is, after all, an important way to explore the human condition—but it is limited in its psychological register and in the range of situations in which villagers are placed.

But there exists another set of sources in which peasants are found in many predicaments and in which the ending is not always happy: the records of different court jurisdictions. It is to the registers of the Inquisition that we owe Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's picture of the Cathar village of Montaillou and Carlo Ginzburg's study of the daring miller Menocchio. The records of diocesan courts are full of marriage cases, which historians have been using to understand how villagers and cityfolk maneuvered within the tight world of custom and law to find a suitable mate.⁵

And then there are the records of various criminal jurisdictions. Here, for instance, is the story told in 1535 to the king by a young Lyonnais villager who was trying to win a pardon for an impulsive murder. Even allowing for the phrases urged upon him by his attorney or notary, we have a portrait of an unhappy marriage:

About a year ago the said suppliant, having found a partner with a good dowry, married Ancely Learin and since then supported her honestly as his wife and sought to live with her in peace. But the said Ancely, without rhyme or reason, took it into her head to kill him, and in fact beat him and threw stones at him . . . The suppliant accepted this peaceably, thinking things would calm down after a time . . . But then one Sunday earlier this month of May, he was quietly eating with her and asked her for a drink of wine. She said she would give it to him in the head, threw the bottle at him and spilled wine all over his face . . . Then in her fury, she picked up a tureen and would have wounded the suppliant seriously if the servant-girl had not put herself between them . . . Being very excited, he picked up a bread knife, ran after the said Ancely and stuck it in her stomach.

The wife did not live long enough to tell her side of the story.⁶

From such documents we learn of peasant expectations and feelings at a time of sudden agitation or crisis. In 1560, however, there came before the Parlement of Toulouse a criminal case that revealed peasant marriages over many years, a case so extraordinary that one of the men who judged it published a book about it. His name was Jean de Coras, a native of the region, distinguished doctor of laws, author of Latin commentaries on the civil and canon law and humanist. Coras's *Arrest Memorable* summed up all the evidence, formal arguments, and judgments in the case and included his annotations upon them. It was not a comedy, he said, but a tragedy, even though the actors were rustics, "people of low condition." Written in French, the book was reprinted five times in the next six years and had several more editions in French and Latin before the end of the century.⁷

Combining features of a legal text and a literary tale, Coras's book on the case of Martin Guerre leads us into the hidden world of peasant sentiment and aspiration. That it is an unusual case serves me well, for a remarkable dispute can sometimes uncover motivations and values that are lost in the welter of the everyday. My hope is to show that the adventures of three young villagers are not too many steps beyond the more common experience of their neighbors, that an impostor's fabrication has links with more ordinary ways of creating personal identity. I also want to explain why a story that seemed fit for a mere popular pamphlet—and indeed was told in that form—became in addition the subject for a judge's "one hundred and eleven beautiful annotations"; and to suggest why we have here a rare identification between the fate of peasants and the fate of the rich and learned.

For sources I start with Coras's *Arrest* of 1561 and the short *Historia* of Guillaume Le Sueur, published the same

year. The latter is an independent text, dedicated to another judge in the case; in at least two instances, it has material not found in Coras but which I have verified in archival sources.⁸ I use Le Sueur and Coras to supplement each other, though in the few places where they are in conflict I give greater weight to the judge. In the absence of the full testimony from the trial (all such records for criminal cases before 1600 are missing for the Parlement of Toulouse), I have worked through the registers of Parliamentary sentences to find out more about the affair and about the practice and attitudes of the judges. In pursuit of my rural actors, I have searched through notarial contracts in villages all over the dioceses of Rieux and Lombez. When I could not find my individual man or woman in Hendaye, in Artigat, in Sajas, or in Burgos, then I did my best through other sources from the period and place to discover the world they would have seen and the reactions they might have had. What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past.

I

From Hendaye to Artigat



IN 1527 the peasant Sanxi Daguerre, his wife, his young son Martin, and his brother Pierre left the family property in the French Basque country and moved to a village in the county of Foix, a three-week walk away.

It was not the most usual thing for a Basque to do. Not that the men of Labourd were stay-at-homes, but when they traveled it was more likely out to sea, to trap whales on the Atlantic, even as far as Labrador. When they left for good, they were more likely to cross the Bidassoa River into the Spanish Basque country or down into Spain, rather than turn inland north of the Pyrenees. And the men who moved away were usually not heir to their family's property, as was Sanxi Daguerre, but younger brothers who could not or would not remain in the ancestral household. So important were these family houses to Basque villagers that each was given a name which the heir and his wife assumed: "They call themselves Lords and Ladies of such-and-such a house, even if it is only a pigpen," a hostile observer was to claim later on.¹

Sanxi Daguerre's house was no pigpen, however. It was located in Hendaye, right on the border between France and Spain, a village of few houses, according to a traveler in