

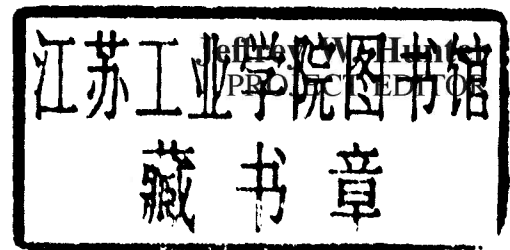
☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 204

Volume 204

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook*, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language As-

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Natalie Z. Davis

1928-

(Full name Natalie Zemon Davis) American novelist, historian, essayist, and critic.

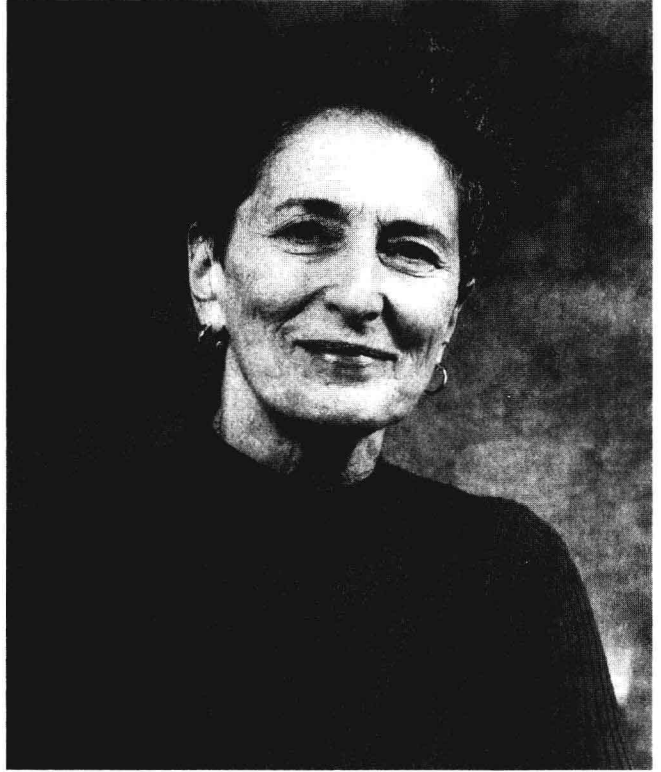
The following entry presents an overview of Davis's career through 2002.

INTRODUCTION

A pioneer in the field of social history, Davis is known for her reconstructions of the lives of ordinary individuals—merchants, artisans, and peasants—in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Her best-known books are *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975) and *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983).

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Davis was born Natalie Zemon on November 8, 1928, in Detroit, Michigan, to Julian Leon and Helen Lamport Zemon. Davis credits her father's example for her own decision to become a writer; a prosperous businessman in the textile industry, he had an impressive library and wrote plays for amateur theatrical groups and for the USO during World War II. Davis attended public elementary school in her suburban Detroit neighborhood and a private girls' high school, Kingswood, where she was one of two Jewish students in her class of 30. After graduation, she enrolled in the history honors program at Smith College where she became active in a number of left-wing political groups. In 1948, a year before her graduation from Smith, she eloped with Chandler Davis, a graduate student at Harvard who came from a family of New England Quaker left-wing intellectuals. Although his parents both earned Ph.D.s, the family had little money, in contrast to the Zemon family, who disapproved of the match. Although she risked expulsion from Smith for marrying without permission, Davis was nonetheless permitted to graduate with her class, earning a B.A. in history. The next year, she received an M.A. from Radcliffe and accompanied her husband to the University of Michigan where he taught mathematics and she pursued a Ph.D. Their activism against the Korean War drew the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee and resulted in his dismissal from the university and imprisonment for six months in the federal prison at Danbury, Connecticut. During this time, Davis taught at Brown University, the first of many teaching posts she held during her career.



In 1952 Davis made her first visit to France and the following year she completed her doctoral exams; she received her Ph.D. in 1959. Meanwhile, the couple had three children: Aaron, Hannah, and Simone. Blacklisted at universities in the United States, Davis's husband joined the faculty at the University of Toronto in 1962 and the family relocated to Canada. Davis began teaching at the University of Toronto a year later. In 1971, she accepted a professorship at the University of California-Berkeley, and in 1978 became the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History at Princeton University. She is currently professor emeritus at Princeton and adjunct professor of history at the University of Toronto. She maintains homes in both Toronto and Princeton, New Jersey.

MAJOR WORKS

Davis's works combine rigorous scholarship with popular appeal and tend to blur the distinctions between various disciplines, particularly history and anthropology, as well as the distinctions between various literary

genres, particularly social history and biography. She concentrates on the lives of common people rather than the elite; typically her subjects are artisans, laborers, minor clerics, and peasants rather than aristocrats or bishops. Her first book, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, is a collection of essays on subjects ranging from the collective movement among journeyman printers, to the establishment of an agency for poor relief, to the effect of religious change on urban women. The work established Davis's reputation as a pioneer social historian. Her next effort constituted her most popular success. After serving as a consultant on the film *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (1982), a fictionalized account of a sixteenth-century peasant who left his village and had his identity assumed there by an imposter, Davis wrote the historical novel *The Return of Martin Guerre*, in which she attempts to fill in some of the gaps in the film version and to treat the story more as history than as fictional narrative. In 1987, she produced *Fiction in the Archives*, a collection of sixteenth-century letters written by convicted criminals in France hoping to have their sentences commuted. Davis adds her own commentary on the social and political significance of the letters, and analyzes differences in the style and content of letters written by women as opposed to those written by men. *Women on the Margins* (1995), tells the stories of three seventeenth-century women: a Jewish businesswoman in Germany, a Catholic missionary who co-founded a convent in Quebec, and a Protestant text illustrator in the Dutch colony of Suriname. In Davis's *Slaves on Screen* (2000), she returns to her interest in cinema; the work covers the representation of slaves in such popular films as *Spartacus*, *Amistad*, and *Beloved*. Also published in 2000, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* is a study of the social and cultural meanings behind the exchange of gifts.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Because Davis's work appeals to historians as well as the general public, her books are often reviewed in both scholarly journals and popular periodicals. Assessments of her work are mixed. Many fellow historians have praised her innovative work in the field of social history, including her treatment of the lives of ordinary citizens, or "history from below," as it is sometimes called. Charmarie Jenkins Blaisdell commends Davis for giving voice to the men and women affected by the social and political changes taking place in the early modern world, people "who have been largely ignored because they left practically nothing in writing." Richard Cobb, however, believes that in Davis's work "the people themselves are generally assigned a somewhat peripheral part, the author frequently intervening to interpret their thoughts, aspirations and actions for them, as though they could not always be trusted to speak for themselves." Similar controversies surround *The Return of Martin Guerre*, with reviewer

Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie praising it as a "major work of historical reconstruction," and Robert Finlay contending that parts of the work appear to be "far more a product of invention than of historical reconstruction" particularly the character of Martin's wife, whom Davis turns into "a sort of proto-feminist of peasant culture." While several scholars accuse Davis of excessive fictionalizing in her work, Jonathan Dewald maintains that the author "has sought to restore our direct contact with voices from the sixteenth century" and commends her collection of letters of remission, *Fiction in the Archives*, for accomplishing that purpose. The fiction to which the title refers exists within the letters themselves as petitioners tried to state their cases in the most favorable way possible. Addressing Davis's "innovative methodology," Nancy L. Roelker explains that it consists of "finding linkages that others have overlooked, combining sociological, political, and legal aspects of history with literary analysis and psychological insights."

Women on the Margins, while well received, also generated critical debate. Many critics, such as Anne Jacobson Schutte, praise the work for its eloquent treatment of the lives of three very different women, calling it "a marvelous read" for both scholars and the general public. Schutte expresses reservations, however, about Davis's treatment of one of her subject's relationship with the indigenous population of Suriname. Endowing the woman with "an unusually sympathetic view of indigenes in the Dutch colony strikes this reader as forcing possibilities beyond the margins of plausibility," claims Schutte. Patricia Seed contends that since two of Davis's three subjects took part in the colonization of the Americas, their status as "women on the margins" must be viewed in relative terms. As white Europeans, these women were far more powerful than their counterparts among the indigenous population, contends Seed. Reviewers of *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*, draw attention to Davis's blurring of the usual distinctions between academic disciplines. Keith Thomas, for example, reports that "by applying anthropological theories of the gift to the understanding of history, Davis has illuminated the texture of social and personal relationships in sixteenth-century France." Of her career as a whole, Peter N. Miller maintains that Davis "has been one of the most innovative historians working in North America in the past four decades. Without any self-promoting fanfare, Davis's works have set many of the fashions now followed by other historians."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays (essays) 1975

- **Le Retour de Martin Guerre* [with Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel Vigne] (screenplay) 1982
The Return of Martin Guerre (novel) 1983
Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France (history) 1987
Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives (history) 1995
The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France (history) 2000
Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision (criticism) 2000

*Written by Carrière and Vigne; aspects of the screenplay's plot and characterization were the result of a collaboration between the writers and Davis.

CRITICISM

Richard Cobb (review date 18 October 1975)

SOURCE: Cobb, Richard. "Hard Times." *Spectator*, no. 7686 (18 October 1975): 506-08.

[In the following review of *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Cobb maintains that Davis speaks on behalf of her subjects rather than allowing them to speak for themselves.]

"... Throughout the essays I have had a continuing concern about the sources for the lives of people most of whom are illiterate," states the author at the beginning of this collection of eight studies of popular attitudes and mentalities in sixteenth century France [*Society and Culture in Early Modern France*]. And, later in the work, she expresses intentions similarly commendable on the part of a popular historian, commenting, on the subject of her abundant and meticulously researched sources: "It may also guide us in the venture that first attracted me to these collections—to use them to hear the voice of the people therein . . ." Elsewhere she traces the path on which she has set herself: "To track down the source of Misrule [in the particular sense of Carnival], I left the streets of Rouen and Dijon and Lyon and other cities and went to the villages . . ." and she concludes, with the slightly alarming statement—alarming in that it suggests the existence both of a new orthodoxy and of a "school"—"We, current historians of popular culture in pre-industrial Europe, have a strong streak of interest in the people." It would indeed seem to be an advantage.

No one concerned to write history "from below" could find fault with such admirable sentiments; and Dr Davis has surrounded herself with an impressive *pleiade* of social and ecclesiastical historians, not only of the

sixteenth century, as well as with wide-ranging anthropologists. Yet, in the course of eight studies ostensibly devoted to the common people of urban and rural France, the people themselves are generally assigned a somewhat peripheral part, the author frequently intervening to interpret their thoughts, aspirations and actions for them, as though they could not always be trusted to speak for themselves, and sometimes even "intellectualising" on the subject of forms of protest both primitive and spontaneous, thus adding to them dimensions that would no doubt not have occurred to the participants at the time. The discrepancy between the stated aim of the studies and their actual content and interpretation may have to some extent been imposed on Dr Davis by the very nature of the documentation available to her, much of it from the pens of authorities who observed the common people from outside and from above. This is particularly true of the vastly impressive range of secondary works on which she has drawn so abundantly; but it also applies to sources illustrating the administration of relief and charity, forms of popular leisure, the pattern of violence, and the gulf between popular language and the interpretation put on proverbs by the literate.

This is hardly the fault of the author. But she has also complicated, and perhaps distorted, her stated task by her very choice of subjects. There is a section on '**The Rites of Violence**,' the title of which pre-supposes that there were indeed such rites, so that Dr Davis is often driven to seek patterns where, in all probability, no such patterns in fact existed. Popular violence is not something that easily responds to the drill of a twentieth century historian. Two other sections, the one entitled '**Women on Top**,' the other '**City Women and Religious Change**,' represent a legitimate bid for current preoccupations with the history of women (by women); but they turn out not to be quite what their titles appear to suggest. In the first, very few women do in fact emerge on top (or in any other clearly defined position), while, in the second, it turns out that women reacted in a number of different and largely unrelated ways to the choice offered between the new faith and the old, between Calvinism and Catholicism, and that their reactions were often unconnected with the fact that they were women. In another section, she suggests that it was much the same with men. In the section on '**Printing and the People**,' it again emerges that there was little enough connection between the two. And, indeed, why should there have been, in a society so largely illiterate? It is much the same with '**Proverbial Wisdom and Popular Errors**,' yet another couple unwillingly harnessed together and that then, breaking harness, run off in quite different directions. Perhaps this is one of the occupational hazards of a popular historian concerned first to *poser le problème* (his or her problem,

not that of the obscure heroes and villains of the narrative) and then to find answers that are intellectually satisfying.

In other words, if this immensely erudite work can be at times disappointing, it is because the author has often been concerned to prove too much. Her analysis of the professional grievances of the Lyon print-workers (*les griffarins*) is enthralling; and, in this section, she does not attempt to relate the unrelatable, admitting that there was no apparent connection between their attempts to better themselves professionally and their choice of religion. It is clear from the narrative that many print-workers—and their masters too—opted for Calvinism when they thought that Calvinism was going to come out on top (as indeed it did at one time in sixteenth century Lyon), and that they rediscovered the merits of Catholicism when the new religion was clearly on the decline numerically. She has an equally admirable and minutely-documented section on the administration of charity through the Lyon *aumône général*, and on the attitudes of the various authorities to various forms of poverty, “legitimate” or inadmissible.

It is when she attempts to discipline her material and to make it say more than it actually says that she is in danger of constructing artificial patterns of behaviour or of events and of expressing, sometimes in almost solemn terms, what is perfectly obvious. On the subject, for instance, of religious riots, while she no doubt rightly makes much of the fear of “pollution,” it seems rather too far-fetched to suggest that, let us say in Lyon, when a Catholic mob threw a Protestant corpse into the river, it was in order to “cleanse” both it and the community, the Rhône and the Saône being credited with some of the properties of holy water. I very much doubt whether anything of the sort ever occurred to the murderers: Lyon had two rivers and many bridges, both offered the most obvious way of disposing of victims. And if a crowd set fire to a Protestant house, the purpose again can hardly have been to “cleanse” it of a heretical presence; fire was simply the easiest, most readily-available form of destruction. Equally, it comes as no great surprise to learn that religious riots were likely to occur on great feast days at funerals or christenings, in or near a place of worship. Nor are we greatly enlightened when told that religious riots respond to quite a different calendar from that imposed by the fluctuations of the price of grain. And do we really need to be reminded of such comparative rates of urban literacy as: “Very high: apothecaries, surgeons, printers. High: painters, musicians, taverners, metalworkers. . . . Medium (about 50 per cent): furriers and leatherworkers, artisans in textile and clothing trades. Low to very low: artisans in construction trades, in provisioning, transport; urban gardeners; unskilled day-workers”? Many historians of the eighteenth century have long been aware that male immigrants to Paris or Lyon came

from much farther afield than female ones. One could have hit upon many such *grandes vérités* without recourse to anthropological techniques and reliance on such a quoted source as: “an evaluation of the retraining of unemployed men in Detroit as practical nurses.” How does this help us with the study of XVIth century begging?

Dr Davis believes that, in the October Days of 1789, there were men dressed up as women; but there is absolutely no evidence of this. I do not know of any feminist militant who was guillotined during the French Revolution (though a Dutch female spy was executed) and women *were* admitted, as spectators, to the clubs of 1793 and the Year Two. *Qui veut trop prouver ne prouve rien*. Dr Davis enjoys a well-deserved reputation as a pioneering social historian of sixteenth century France, a period both mysterious and not easily penetrable. But it is a pity that she has at times fallen into didactic attitudes and that, in her anxiety to blaze the trail, she has sometimes put up too many signposts. Popular leisure, which had to be crammed into a very small space of time, had to be *fun*; popular violence was often governed by topography and neighbourhood, and, historically, it needs to be closely related to the narrative of events. Dr Davis, often by asking the wrong questions, has at times missed simple answers. She has an immense range of scholarship at her disposal; what seems sometimes to be lacking, in the present study, is the tiny spark of imagination, the empathy that enables the historian to penetrate beyond the stated to the unstated but assumed. Popular history is not an intellectual exercise.

Charmarie Jenkins Blaisdell (review date June 1976)

SOURCE: Blaisdell, Charmarie Jenkins. Review of *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, by Natalie Z. Davis. *American Historical Review* 81, no. 3 (June 1976): 599-600.

[In the following review, Blaisdell recommends *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* for its treatment of the lives of ordinary people in sixteenth-century France whose stories are largely neglected in conventional histories.]

As a collection of essays on peasants, artisans, and the illiterate populace of the cities of early modern France, this book [*Society and Culture in Early Modern France*] should interest historians who are not directly concerned with the period or with popular history. Through what she calls “case studies” of the *menu peuple*, Natalie Davis demonstrates her impressive and wide-ranging research not only into little-known or

used documents of her period but also into the scholarship of the social sciences in general. Though five of these essays have appeared in periodicals, their presence in this volume allows readers to appreciate the coherence of Davis' research and methodology and to acknowledge the significant contribution of her work to opening new vistas on the society of early modern Europe.

Davis clearly demonstrates the importance of collective behavior, playlets, pamphlets, welfare rolls, village festivals, political tracts, and sermons to understanding relationships among people and grasping the cultural traditions and symbols of a period. But this collection is scarcely a mere potpourri of popular sources relating to the *menu peuple* and the culture of early modern Europe. As the author points out, she has presented her material according to certain views of social structure and process, which have emerged out of her years of work with the documents. Using the studies of sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists to shed light on the society and people she studies, Davis has demonstrated the value of the cross-disciplinary approach and has provided scholars with a multidimensional and dynamic scheme of early modern society that acknowledges many more variables in the social order and more complex causes and results of social change than property, power, sex, age, and religion alone or together can encompass.

In these essays, as in all her work, Davis raises questions and poses answers that are crucial to an understanding of this society and point the way for further investigation. She asks what kinds of experience might contribute to the formation of social consciousness among male artisans. What prompted Protestant allegiance among groups, in particular urban women. What political and social use, if any, did public festivals serve. Further she explores patterns of sexual inversion in literature and popular festivals, the shape and structure of popular religious violence, and the goals and actions of the participants in religious riots in sixteenth-century France. She looks for the relationship between written and oral material, which leads her to ask what impact did the establishment of new communication networks have when printing touched popular life in the sixteenth century. To further enrich the readers' understanding of this society and culture, the book is illustrated with eight pages of woodcuts, paintings, and engravings chosen with a combination of Davis' precise scholarship and delightful humor.

Because Davis is interested in social structure, the context of social change, and the relationship between the religious and secular as well as between male and female, her work will inevitably raise questions for historians of other periods and places. Students of the sixteenth-century Reformations will be interested

especially in these glimpses into the lives and values of the men and women—artisans, tradesmen, and craftsmen—who experienced the impact of the changes taking place around them but who have been largely ignored because they left practically nothing in writing.

This work offers scholars two rewards. First, Davis' important contributions to early modern European studies are now collected and edited (in many cases with new footnotes and insights), making them easily accessible. Second, having sampled this *apéritif*, the historian will eagerly await the *pièce de résistance*: Davis' anticipated study of the printers in sixteenth-century Lyon.

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (review date 22 December 1983)

SOURCE: Ladurie, Emmanuel Le Roy. "Double Trouble." *New York Review of Books* 30, no. 12 (22 December 1983): 12, 14.

[In the following review, Ladurie summarizes the narrative of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, praising Davis for an unbiased reconstruction of *Guerre's* story.]

The biographies of peasants and especially the autobiographies of country people are a longstanding problem. We owe to the habits of Protestant introspection the fascinating life history of the Swiss mountain dweller, Thomas Platter, written in the sixteenth century; for the seventeenth century, as far as I know, nothing of the kind exists, at least in French. During the eighteenth century, Jansenism (as an almost Calvinist exercise of self-examination) provided us with the memoirs of the expeasant Restif de la Bretonne. The picaresque tradition produced the recollections of Jamerey-Duval, an obscure vagabond who tramped for many years through the regions of Champagne, Burgundy, and Lorraine. The culture disseminated by the Napoleonic wars finally made possible the childish notebooks of the young forester Coignet, who became a captain in the Imperial armies and a memorialist in retirement. As can be seen from this tally of a few names, the harvest is poor. Thus the temptation is strong to supplement these few autobiographies by writing biographies of rustic or peasant characters. That is what Natalie Davis (who teaches at Princeton) has done with great success, in [*The Return of Martin Guerre*] her reconstruction of the Basque or Gascon peasant Martin Guerre, of his "double" Arnaud du Tilh, and of the people around them.

The story of Martin Guerre is extraordinary. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the Guerre family emigrated from the Basque region of the Pyrenees to

Gascony, in the south of present-day France. One of the Guerre children, Martin, grew up there on the land and married a girl from the same locality, Bertrande de Rols. The marriage was not happy; the husband was half impotent, or perhaps bewitched. He deserted the family home, enlisted as a soldier, fought on the enemy side in battles on the frontiers of the kingdom of France. He was injured and lost a leg. In accordance with old Basque traditions, he then took service as a valet with a Spanish lord in the northwestern corner of the Iberian peninsula.

One fine day "he" returned to his village . . . or, more accurately, his ghost in all too solid form took his place. Another man, a genuine Gascon named Arnaud du Tilh, had decided to pass himself off as Martin Guerre, by making use of a vague physical resemblance and all the uncertainties it engendered. The second Martin managed to get himself accepted by the family of his "wife" and by Bertrande herself, who was only too happy to collude with a more vigorous and lovable companion than the one she believed lost forever in war and exile. Children were born from this new union, ostensibly a continuation of an older bond. Everything seemed to go like a dream. The second Martin had a head for business and alongside farming went into trading—the classical route to social advancement for a young farmer of that time.

But Martin number two, alias Arnaud, wanted to settle accounts with his "wife's" uncle, the older relation who had managed the family's property in the absence of the real Martin Guerre. The uncle flew into a rage. Suspicions, previously hidden beneath the surface, now burst into the open. Witnesses recognized Martin number two as a man called Pansette ("little paunch"), the nickname du Tilh had acquired in his home village because of his well-upholstered shape. The Guerre family, but not the wife, tried to beat the highly suspect neo-Martin to death. He was put on trial for imposture, first at Rieux, a nearby small town, and then the appeal case went to the prestigious Parliament at Toulouse. There, the competent and conscientious Judge Jean de Coras finally persuaded himself, erroneously, that Pansette was the genuine Martin Guerre.

Then came a *coup de théâtre* straight out of one of Feydeau's farces: the *real* Martin turned up, hobbling on the wooden leg he'd acquired after his soldiering wound. He confounded the imposter, who was therefore sentenced to be hanged by due process of law in Bertrande's own village, where his long-camouflaged crime had been witnessed by everyone. Before his death, Pansette touchingly acknowledged his wrong-doing; he even instigated legal action against his own relations so that his family's property could go to the children he had had by his "wife." The marriage of the genuine Martin and Bertrande put itself back together somehow,

or so it would seem; a century later their descendants were still cultivating amicably the lands of the family parish. As for the good Judge Coras, later to be hanged as a Protestant, he wrote an account of the whole affair—the first piece of French sensational journalism.

The affair is an interesting one for several reasons. First, as Natalie Davis shows in her intelligent and subtle analysis, the story gives an inside view of an otherwise little-known world, the private lives of peasants. Many people confuse the country folk of the past with the unfeeling, uncouth gorillas depicted by some otherwise excellent historians. Zola's peasantry, for example, or even worse, Karl Marx's, a peasantry idiotically compared by the great man to a sack of potatoes. Martin and du Tilh also correspond, in the second place, to period stereotypes. Martin Guerre matches the conventional image of the hulking, clumsy Basque, while du Tilh is the embodiment of the fast-talking, sharp-witted Gascon, capable of dissimulation, a born actor, energetic, eager to "climb" in a society which does not always acknowledge his worth at its true value.

Third, and most important, peasant culture, in this story as in many others, shows its ancient power to represent in *real* life what in high culture was no more than a sublime fiction suitable for Greek tragedies or Latin and French comedies. In Plautus's *Amphitryon* (and in Molière's, in the next millennium), the hero, a Theban general away at the wars, is replaced by Jupiter during his absence. The god takes on all the features of the man, and plays the role of false husband even in the bed of Amphitryon's wife, Alcmene. The affair ends with Jupiter returning to his celestial headquarters and a reconciliation of the mortal couple. This is roughly the story of Martin Guerre, except that the latter story is true, takes place more than a thousand years after Plautus's comedy was written, and has no Jupiterian happy ending for the usurper of another man's identity.

In this sense the Martin Guerre affair is a "primitive" episode in the terminology of ethnologists and prehistorians. René Girard, the author of *Violence and the Sacred*, for example, holds that myths derive from true facts; he often alludes to the violent vengeance and bloody vendettas of the dawn of time, which could not be defused until the sacred, collective murder of a scapegoat took place. From this point of view, the Guerre episode is typical of the events Girard evokes: one man becomes the twin and monstrous double of another. Ambivalent and undifferentiated, Pansette is at the same time good for his new family and bad in his own actions. He adopts the physical mask of Martin, usurps his position and identity, to gain the affection of his wife and the product of his land. As a consequence, the previously blunted desires of the real Martin (alerted of his misfortune by some good soul who traveled into the depths of Spain to find him) are reawakened as if by jealousy and by a procedure of imitation (*mimesis*).

The one-legged Martin, a cultural hero of the return to the social order, returns to his hearth. He replaces the brutal, tribal vendetta, which his uncle favored, with judicial revenge. The vengeance ends, properly, with the death of the criminal Arnaud, who accepts his punishment with a certain piety, and even welcomes it. We are not yet at the stage of the scapegoat arbitrarily chosen by the community from among the innocent, since here it is the guilty party who fulfills the collective expiation in return for the sacrilege committed in his own homeland. So this text, for all its vivid realism, is still a "primitive" episode. Pansette is hanged, and society avenged, mended, reconstituted. Everyone can retrieve his true identity, his goods, his wife, his legitimate offspring. Communal unanimity springs forth anew thanks to the unmasking and punishment of du Tilh.

One can only admire Natalie Davis for the major work of historical reconstruction she has performed without any kind of ideological bias. It's true that Martin Guerre has previously fascinated Americans—or more accurately, American women. Before Natalie Davis, another woman from the US told the story of the Gascon "Jupiter" and the Basque "Amphitryon" in the persons of Martin and Arnaud, but she told the tale with incomparable talent and little learning.¹ Natalie Davis has also collaborated on an excellent film of the story (produced in France) as well as writing this book. Comparing her learned work with the screen images of Daniel Vigne and Jean-Claude Carrière, my own preferences are no doubt biased. I once asked a woman if she knew of *War and Peace*, and she replied ingenuously, "Yes, I've read the book, but I prefer the movie." About Martin Guerre, I would say, without any hesitation, the movie was great, but Natalie Davis's book is even better.

Note

1. Janet Lewis, *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (Swallow, 1941; 1967).

Eric Christiansen (review date 14 January 1984)

SOURCE: Christiansen, Eric. "Ce n'est pas le Guerre." *Spectator* 252, no. 8114 (14 January 1984): 20-1.

[In the following review of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Christiansen takes issue with Davis's claims to have discovered the true story of Martin Guerre.]

It is a curious story. Martin Guerre was a young Basque farmer living in South-West France with a good-looking wife on a decent property belonging to his father. Then he was caught stealing a little of his father's grain, and suddenly disappeared. That was in 1548. His wife Ber-

trande and his little son then had to live without him for eight years, until it was rumoured that Martin was back, and staying at a nearby inn.

His sisters went out and welcomed him, and the rest of the village followed suit. His parents were dead, but his wife was there, and soon he was living with her once more and running the family property with some success. He had a daughter by Bertrande, and set up as a dealer.

Then his uncle began to quarrel with him over the way he was managing the property. In the course of the quarrel, he claimed that Martin was not Guerre at all, but an imposter. Some believed this claim, but not Bertrande, or the other members of the family. However, the uncle eventually managed to bring him to trial by underhand means, and a large number of witnesses were summoned to identify him. Some 40 claimed that the defendant was Martin Guerre and nobody else. About 45 thought he was a rascal named Arnaud du Tilh, alias The Paunch. About 60 were undecided. The prosecution was evidently instigated out of personal enmity, and there was little about the young Martin Guerre which the accused didn't know when questioned; nevertheless he was found guilty of impersonation. He appealed to the High Court at Toulouse, and there was a second trial. Closer investigation almost convinced the judges that he had been wrongly condemned. Witnesses were still equally divided on the subject of his identity, but his wife and his closest relations were unanimously in his favour.

Then the real Martin Guerre turned up, minus one leg. He had spent the last 12 years as a servant, a soldier, and a pensioner of Spain, and had decided to come home. Sensation in court. At first the imposter brazened it out; then his supporters lost confidence in him, and finally, most reluctantly, his wife Bertrande. On 12 September 1560 the court sentenced him to death as Arnaud du Tilh. He confessed in public before the village that he had impersonated Guerre and deceived his wife and family, and asked them to forgive him. Then he was hanged, and his body burnt.

Bertrande and the real Guerre were reunited, had more children and lived connubially ever after. The case became famous, and one of the judges wrote a book about it, considering the various questions it raised in detail. Three still need answering.

Firstly, how did Arnaud du Tilh discover enough about Guerre to attempt the impersonation? He never confessed to meeting him, and was by no means his double: he was fatter, and his feet were smaller, apart from other differences.

Secondly, how did he manage to deceive so many people who could not have gained by conniving at the deception? Even a confirmed non-hoaxer might be hard