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Critical Review

The Return of Martin Guerre

If you wake up in a different time in a different place, can you wake up as someone else?

Ed Norton becoming Tyler Durden Fight Club (1999 Sony Pictures).

In this time in this place when I consider identity theft, I worry that my credit card information will vanish into the ether of the internet. In the hands of a malign computer hacker, I will be resurrected at the speed of light in ones and zeroes, maxing out my credit card. My face may appear on a Chechnian passport for reasons I will never know. My image and information can be used to make forgeries, but the code cannot replicate me. My self is mine and cannot be copied. My identity can be borrowed but not taken. This is the contemporary dilemma of identity theft. How would identity theft take shape five centuries in the past?

The student of history is always faced with the challenge of leaving the present out of the past, acting the temporal agent. Time travel is history. For the uninitiated, "The Return of Martin Guerre" is a true story of stolen identity in the early 16th century. Recorded with the

accuracy and vision of the virtuosa, Zemon Davis recreates the “comitragedy”¹ of Martin Guerre. A story “so beautiful, so delectable and so monstrously strange”², Davis assembles an orchestra of primary sources. Her recreation of the true story is a tantalizing narrative dripping with dramatic and situational irony. Her skillful use of foreshadowing pieces together the unbelievable true story. She burns into the mind of the reader the question, who is Martin Guerre? With a symphony of ‘facts’ she makes a concerto with the ‘truth’, the mark of literary genius is a story’s resolution that leaves you with more questions than answers.

Natalie Davis’ skill as a storyteller shines light on the philosophy of identity, and the dark (and not impossible) possibility of the being copied and stolen. The story of the ‘double’ has roots in Rome, the mythology of Saturn’s double “unfolds as Amphitryon returns from the battlefield impersonated by [Roman God] Saturn. The Amphitryon legend and “the motif of doppelganger (double) and possibilities resulting from this ambiguous twilight of manifestations”³. First authored by dramatist and philosopher Plautus (201 BCE). His work inspired the creative for two millennia. The idea of the doppelganger inspires and terrifies, mystifies and by nature, disqualifies. One is the original, the other is the copy. Can I be copied? Can I be stolen? Can I be replaced?

This is very clear from the outset, Martine Guerre is the original, Arnaud DuTihl is the copy of Martin Guerre, the doppelganger. Let’s begin at the end; the execution of Arnaud du

¹ Davis, N.Z. “*The Return of Martin Guerre*” Fellows of Harvard College USA 1983, p.109 - Davis, M.Z. “Martin Guerre” p.112

² Davis, N.Z. “*Martin Guerre*” p.108 – Jean De Coras “*Arreste Memorable*” 1561

³ Neumarkt, P. “The Amphitryon Legend in Plautus, Mulier, Dresden, Kleist, Glradoux and Kaiser” *American Image* Vol. 34 No. 3, John Hopkins University Press 1977, pp. 357-358

Tihl, the impostor of Martin Guerre “found guilty of imposture and false supposition of name and person and of adultery”⁴.

Let us take a moment to consider the philosophical implications of the copy, the simulacra. “It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double”⁵. The operational double is not just a copy of a copy, but a life replicated and imitated. Not copied but replaced. A remarkably eidetic young Arnaud DuTihl assumed the identity of Martin Guerre. So bizarre was the case, tried in the year 1560 of our Lord that there was no existing legal precedent. Judge and court appointed reporter Jean de Coras pens the story in “*Arreste Memorable*” (1560), about a replica, not simply forgery.

As a student of history, I am guilty of two things, demonstrated to me by the author. First, I underscore the value, even the reality of the common man (or woman). The peasant, serf, slave or pauper “much of the time historians [...] think of peasant migration due to only economic considerations”⁶. The peasant works the land for his nobles, the serf is a part of the noble’s land, the slave is property of the noble. The Guerre family’s migration is a testament to my hubris. There was, circa 16th century more mobility for the peasant than I imagined, as is there more opportunity for upward mobility. The elaborate network that formed the local economy had a structure that made it possible to accumulate a moderate wealth to live in

⁴ Davis, M.Z. “Martin Guerre” p.86, cited as the actual verdict in the Register of Parliament, ADHG, in Tournelle. 76 Sept.12, 1560.

⁵ Baudrillard, J. “Simulcra and Simulation” Michigan USA 1981 p.3

⁶ Davis, M.Z. “Martin Guerre” p.22

relative comfort. The migrations of peasants had much to do with freedom of choice, rather than economic dictum.

As for Baudrillard's philosophy, the object's replica is (and was) preferred over the object itself. In this case the object being Monsieur Guerre. This certainly was the case with his wife, who could not have not known her husband was not who he said he was. She was in love with the copy, and the copy was in love with her. The original was insubstantial in comparison to the copy. The copy was preferred over the original. History points to the fact that Bertrande, loving, doting, scheming wife was complicit in building the perfect copy. She was in love with the copy, not the original. The philosophy of Baudrillard's simulacra and the simulation rings as true then as it does now.

To elaborate, the simulacra, the copy of Martin Guerre "represents the difference between making another person's life your own and merely imitating him"⁷. Arnaud DuTihl was not a forged document, nor was he a borrowed identity, he was a complete replacement, body and soul. He became Monsieur Guerre and lived as the duplicate for years.

In order to unravel the identity and discover the truth to the burning question, who is Martin Guerre? The question led to an elaborate trial and appeal. The trial saw one hundred and sixty witnesses interviewed by the King's Court. Among the witnesses, Martin Guerre's four sisters, who believed the impostor was real. Bertrande, wife to Martin Guerre, swore under oath and to God and to all the world to see that the impostor was in truth, her husband. Uncle Pierre, who swore the impostor was in fact an impostor, would try and fail to have the impostor murdered.

⁷ Davis, M.Z. "Martin Guerre" p.39

As for the body of witnesses, thirty swore the fake Martin Guerre was real, forty-five claimed he was a 'false' Martin Guerre, an impostor. The remaining sixty witnesses didn't know who he claimed to be, and possibly didn't really care.⁸

The Italian historian Croce declared that "all history is contemporary history", and as a student of history I now see more clearly than ever the challenges of leaving the present out of the past. Any contemporary would not understand the difficulties of seeing through the veil of Martin Guerre. The 'then' had no reference points for identity. Mirrors were for the rich, there were no paintings or illustrations of Monsieur Guerre and thus no reference to his appearance. He existed only in memory, and was disappeared for eight years.

Again, attempting to leave the present out of the past, let us now visit the law upon which the verdict was almost based. "The principal of Roman law, 'it was better to leave unpunished a guilty person than to condemn an innocent one'"⁹. The first trial of the second Monsieur Guerre was about to see the second Monsieur Guerre come out first. Free to return to his 'fake' and so very real life, almost.¹⁰ The dramatic irony now makes this story so much stranger, just as the gavel was about to drop, along with all charges against Monsieur Guerre, enter, Monsieur Martin Guerre claiming to be the original, and that the defendant is a copy. Now more than ever the burning question... Who is Martin Guerre?

The accuracy and sheer unwavering commitment of the copy to its original form is a testament to the mind and memory of the copy. Arnaud DuTihl's recall of past events that

⁸ Davis, M.Z. "Martin Guerre" p.54

⁹ Davis, M.Z. "Martin Guerre" p.81

¹⁰ The foreshadowing in this essay is inspired by the author, M.Z. Davis, who uses the technique with the effect of a master narrator. The dramatic irony now comes into full effect with great effect.

never happened to him infers that either; he must have known Monsieur Guerre or he was in collusion. To adopt his identity, memories, mannerisms, wife, life land and titles, sisters, uncle, debtors accounts and details that that could only have been known to the real Martin Guerre.

The possibilities are of course scrutinized in exacting detail by the author. Davis suggests that they could have met as soldiers. Yet the universe in its infinite wisdom saw Monsieur Guerre, a Frenchman fighting for the Spanish monarch. DuTihl fought for the French crown. Their encounters as soldiers would have been across a battlefield, as sworn enemies. They would be trying to kill each other, not muse on days gone by where the observant DuTihl could learn mannerisms and secrets from Monsieur Guerre. Non, c'est impossible. Martin Guerre's disappearance from his life led him to Spain, where he was pressed into military service. The author clarifies this murky military maybe, "it is hard to see how they could have been intimates in the army, since Martin was fighting for the King of Spain [high treason], the enemy of the King of France"¹¹. The real Martin is guilty of sleeping with the enemy, whilst his enemy (his arch-enemy, his nemesis) is sleeping with his wife. As for the question of the self-made make-believe man, "where does self-fashioning end and lying begin?"¹²

Ultimately the simulacra becomes the simulation. The replica becomes more than the original. The only common between the two is the question... Who am I? We have a vainglorious and unbelievable true story. How could Martin's wife Bertrande have mistaken her husband for another Martin for over three years? The story, "so beautiful, so delectable and so monstrously strange"¹³, is high drama fit for a king. The high drama of a lowly peasant and

¹¹ Davis, M.Z. "Martin Guerre" p.38

¹² Davis, M.Z. "Martin Guerre" p.103 - Greenblatt

¹³ Davis, M.Z. "Martin Guerre" p.108 – Jean De Coras "*Arreste Memorable*" 1561 – repeated for effect

soldier. The real Monsieur Guerre risks persecution for his allegiance to the enemy the King of Spain upon return to his old life, after eight years of absence. The ‘thought experiment’ posited by the author in trying to imagine scenarios as to why he would return to Hendaye (Toulouse). He may have caught rumours of this remarkable dispute as ‘hot gossip’. He may have learned of the malignancy growing in his life and chose to excise it, he may have tired of serving the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem as a layman. Maybe he missed his life, but he didn’t seem to miss his wife.¹⁴ This is of course speculation, but the serendipity of his reappearance proves that timing is everything. The talent of DuTihl led many to speculate that perhaps he was in league with the “diabolic arts”, how could he possibly keep in order the “thousand necessary lies” without assistance from the dark arts?¹⁵

The story of Martin Guerre makes us re-examine the concept of identity theft, the skill of the author makes us re-examine the concept of identity. The true story of Martin Guerre, as documented in detail by Jean DeCoras, who claimed early during the court proceedings that he knew what the ‘truth’, elusive as the ‘truth’ may be. “He knew where the truth lay there and was not ready [as judge and court appointed reporter and celebrated author/ orator/ prodigy] to put all his public force behind it. It was easier for the moment to find out the truth about a man’s identity”¹⁶.

The ‘real’ Monsieur Guerre got his life back. The life he abandoned all those years ago, leaving in his place a proxy, his copy. His simulacra became his simulation. There must have

¹⁴ Davis, M.Z. “Martin Guerre” p.81

¹⁵ Davis, M.Z. “Martin Guerre” 109

¹⁶ Davis, M.Z. “Martin Guerre” p.77

been an 'easier' way for DuTihl to live and die, what began as a crime of opportunity became a life of elaborate imitation.

The infinite jest of the identity crisis. The strains of trial. The stolen life of a common man. This is the comedy and tragedy of errors that answer the burning question; who is Martin Guerre? The truth is always so much stranger than fiction, and we are left with more questions than answers.

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