



As appeared in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a courtroom scene, confrontation between accused and witness. From Jean Milles de Souvigny, *Praxis Criminis Persequendi* (Paris, 1541). Courtesy of the Harvard Law School Library, Treasure Room.

AHR Forum: The Return of Martin Guerre
The Refashioning of Martin Guerre

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WHILE MOST RENAISSANCE POPES AND PRINCES HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN by everyone but the historical specialist, one peasant of the sixteenth century, from a village near Toulouse in the foothills of the Pyrenees, remains well known. Martin Guerre—or rather the impostor who took his wife and birthright—has entered history. This is a remarkable fact, for generally the world of peasants lay outside what the elite of Europe in the past considered significant. Peasants were viewed within the comforting contexts of proverbial wisdom and pastoral buffoonery.¹ The personalities and perspectives of rural people usually were recorded only when peasants ran into trouble with the law. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's reconstruction of rural life in southern France in the fourteenth century and Carlo Ginzburg's examination of peasant religious beliefs in sixteenth-century Friuli rely on legal records.² These works have been acclaimed for revealing the motivations and values of ordinary people of the past, hitherto rendered mute by both their illiteracy and ignoble status.

Even within this select company, however, Natalie Zemon Davis's *Return of Martin Guerre* is exceptional. The events she examines were never lost to sight but instead became famous immediately and eventually inspired a play, two novels, and an operetta. The story was irresistible: the impostor, Arnaud du Tilh, posed as Martin Guerre, the husband of Bertrande de Rols, for over three years, thereby gaining a wife and property and fathering a child, only to be exposed by the true husband when he was on the verge of refuting those accusing him of deception. While Davis's book carried this dramatic story to an English-speaking audience, a film, *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, the product of collaboration between Davis and the moviemakers, presented it to an international one. No doubt because of the excellence and wide distribution of the film, Davis's book reached a more extensive

I would like to thank Elizabeth Anne Payne and Donald E. Queller for their encouragement and criticism in the writing of this essay.

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 1–2.

² Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1978); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md., 1980); see also his *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md., 1983).

audience than does the usual historical study. It has been hailed in the popular press as a vivid supplement to the film and in academic journals as a “realistic and brilliantly scholarly monograph,” an “imaginative history which is nevertheless solidly based and intelligently argued,” a “major work of historical reconstruction . . . performed without any kind of ideological bias.”³ It is the consensus, then, that *The Return of Martin Guerre* is a genuine rarity, a work of sophisticated scholarship with general appeal, a study that remains faithful to academic standards while conveying all the color and drama of a famous tale.

DAVIS WAS DRIVEN TO GIVE THE STORY OF MARTIN GUERRE its “first full-scale historical treatment” because she came to feel that the film did not adequately address “the motivations of people in the sixteenth century.” She was troubled that “the film was departing from the historical record,” especially because “the double game of the wife and the judge’s inner contradictions were softened.” She wanted to make room for the “perhapses” and “may-have-beens” that the historian uses to explain inadequate and perplexing evidence. She tells her readers that “what I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past.”⁴ The inventive aspects of Davis’s book stem largely from her employment of concepts and methods drawn from recent innovations in anthropology, ethnography, and literary criticism, all fields that have had a significant influence on what is widely regarded as the best contemporary historical scholarship.⁵ The result of Davis’s labors is a reinterpretation of the Martin Guerre story that is imaginatively conceived, eloquently argued, and intrinsically appealing. It is also strikingly different from the version of the story that has been accepted since the sixteenth century.

The traditional version of the story of Martin Guerre derives from accounts of the sixteenth century, especially from Jean de Coras’s *Arrest Memorable*, written by the *rapporteur* at the trial and a judge of the Parlement of Toulouse after the pseudo-husband was executed in 1560.⁶ In Coras’s commentary, the main character was Arnaud du Tilh, also known as Pansette, “the belly,” a charlatan brought to disaster by his own cunning and ambition. “It was truly a tragedy for this fine peasant,” the judge wrote, “all the more because the outcome was wretched, indeed fatal for him.”⁷ In his narrative as well as in his courtroom, Coras

³ The quotations are, respectively, from reviews by A. Lloyd Moote, *AHR*, 90 (October 1985): 943; Donald R. Kelley, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 37 (1984): 252; and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *New York Review of Books*, 30 (22 December 1983): 12–14. See also reviews by William Monter, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 14 (1983): 516; Edward Benson, *French Review*, 57 (1984): 753–54; Michel Simonin, *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance*, 47 (1985): 286–87; R. J. Knecht, *History*, 70 (1985): 121.

⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, viii–ix, 5.

⁵ For example, see the works cited in note 2, above.

⁶ Another contemporary work was Guillaume Le Sueur’s *Admiranda historia de Pseudo Martino Tholosae*, a pamphlet following the genre of a news account. Davis’s reinterpretation of the Martin Guerre story depends on her reading of Coras’s *Arrest Memorable*, and she gives the latter far greater weight than Le Sueur’s shorter, simpler account (see Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 4–5, 104, 114–15, 153 n. 17).

⁷ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 111.

unequivocally condemned Arnaud, yet, as Davis shows, he had a certain admiration for the impostor's abilities. Coras's focus was on the marvelous deception perpetrated by Arnaud, and in the many subsequent retellings of the tale, the emphasis was similarly on the arch-trickster, the sly thief of sexual favors and property.

Davis presents a radically different interpretation in which the focus is on Bertrande de Rols or, rather, on her relationship with the impostor. According to Davis, Bertrande was in fact Arnaud's accomplice, for she knew that the man claiming to be her husband was a fraud. She accepted Arnaud, they fell in love, and they regarded themselves as having an "invented" marriage. They willfully fabricated a lie, and, when challenged in court, they concocted a strategy of deceit and manipulation: "Bertrande searched her memory for a sexual episode [involving her true husband]—perhaps even embroidered it—with which they could surprise the court."⁸ With the return of Martin Guerre, however, Bertrande's "double role" collapsed, and she brought forth "prepared excuses" for her conduct. For his part, Arnaud remained faithful to his lover and accomplice, asserting that she had been duped as thoroughly as her fellow villagers of Artigat. Even in his confession on the way to the gibbet, the impostor "concealed from start to finish" Bertrande's role in their elaborate collusion.⁹

These two versions of the story of Martin Guerre could hardly be more different. The traditional account is a narrative of greed and deception, of perverted talents and a duped woman, of great ability in the service of fraud and theft. Davis's book tells a tale of devotion and collaboration, of love and identity, of how an invented marriage was destroyed by a hard-hearted man with a wooden leg. To Coras, Arnaud's abilities—his quick tongue and retentive memory—led a fine peasant into a tragicomedy of imposture. To Davis, the tragedy lies in the unmasking of Arnaud, "a kind of hero, a more real Martin Guerre" than the unsympathetic husband of Bertrande de Rols.¹⁰

The sharpest contrast between the two versions is in the characterization of Bertrande. In Coras's eyes, she was a dupe, who, "given the weakness of her sex, [was] easily deceived by the cunning and craftiness of men."¹¹ He considered her ignorant of Arnaud's true identity, hence innocent of wrongdoing. The Criminal Chamber of the Parlement of Toulouse agreed and declared that her child fathered by Arnaud must be regarded as legitimate. In his confession, Arnaud begged Bertrande's pardon for cruelly deceiving her. Amid all the squabbles in Artigat and in all the testimony taken from 180 witnesses by the court, apparently no one ever suggested that Bertrande was Arnaud's accomplice.

No one, that is, until Davis and *The Return of Martin Guerre*.¹² According to Davis,

⁸ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 57; 44, 50, 68–69.

⁹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 69, 86, 92.

¹⁰ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 113.

¹¹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 110.

¹² Davis suggests that a hint of Bertrande as an accomplice—or what she styles "the self-fashioning Bertrande" (*Return of Martin Guerre*, 118)—is found in two "male responses" to the story of Martin Guerre. The writers that she cites, however, did not regard Bertrande as an accomplice. A French poet of the later sixteenth century merely expressed sympathy "with the tricked wife," while Montaigne, in

Bertrande played a double role, deceiving her son by Martin Guerre, her relatives, friends, and neighbors. At the same time, Davis also turns upside down the moral judgment informing the traditional version of the story. No doubt if Bertrande's contemporaries believed she was guilty, they would have thought her as despicable as the impostor. From Davis's perspective, however, Bertrande is a heroic figure, independent, clear-sighted, passionate, and invariably "honorable." While Coras saw the wife as an innocent victim, Davis views her as a knowing actor and, though guilty of adultery and deception, all the more admirable because of the values embodied in her heroic transgression.

There is a complex relationship between these two versions of the Martin Guerre story. Davis does not simply counter Coras's sixteenth-century interpretation with her own twentieth-century one. Rather, in the absence of trial records, her analysis must depend on Coras's own account. In short, the twentieth-century reinterpretation presumably is based on a reevaluation of evidence contained in Coras's very different interpretation. With all its flaws, "combining features of a legal text and a literary tale,"¹³ the *Arrest Memorable* remains the best source for the story of Martin Guerre, and Davis necessarily must reinterpret it to sustain her own version. Of course, Coras's text does not give privileged access to past reality; the judge's assumption of Bertrande's innocence is not proof that she was in fact innocent. Indeed, to the extent that Coras's assertion of Bertrande's innocence may have been a consequence of a low estimation of female intelligence and judgment, one might be tempted to equate a declaration of Bertrande's complicity with a rejection of the judge's benighted view of the female sex. Davis eschews that temptation, however, and one of the strengths of her book is its portrait of Jean de Coras as a thoughtful, humane scholar, fully capable of recognizing female intelligence and of looking beyond elitist and patriarchal prejudices in his pursuit of truth.

Davis situates Bertrande's supposed complicity within her view of sixteenth-century peasant society. From this perspective, Bertrande's conduct is seen as an instance of the ingenuity and calculation commonly shown by peasant women who must maneuver within a patriarchal system. The male-dominated society put a premium on "the woman's ability to get her way with the men and to calculate her advantages," an ability that women passed along "through the deep tie and hidden complicity of mother and daughter." The four sisters of Martin Guerre were apparently displaying typically feminine calculation in siding with the pseudo-husband against his accuser: "[T]hey may have preferred him to their uncle as head of the family and its property." In Artigat, Bertrande "tried to fashion her

his "Of the Lame," referred briefly to the trial for imposture but without mentioning either Bertrande or a wife (see Davis, 118–19). In a 1941 novel, Janet Lewis presents a Bertrande who tacitly accepts the impostor for years and only slowly comes to realize the implications of her action. After reading Coras much later, Lewis wrote that she would have approached the story differently, apparently because of the indications in Coras that Bertrande had been suborned by Pierre Guerre (Janet Lewis, "Sources of *The Wife of Martin Guerre*," *Triquarterly*, 55 [Fall 1982]: 104); for more on Lewis's novel, see note 73 below. The same volume of *Triquarterly* (86–103) contains a translation of the main text of *Arrest Memorable*.

¹³ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 4.

life as best she could, using all the leeway and imagination she had as a woman." During the trial of the impostor, "she had to manipulate the image of the woman-easily-deceived, a skill that women often displayed before officers of justice any time it was to their advantage."¹⁴ As one reviewer of Davis's book summed it up, Bertrande almost succeeded in her "clever, dogged, double game of having her cake and eating it within the confines of a particularist, male-dominated society."¹⁵ This interpretation has hitherto been missing from retellings of the story of Martin Guerre inasmuch as Bertrande has been reduced to playing a muted second fiddle to Arnaud, "the inventive figure in the tale." Bertrande's true role has been overlooked or suppressed, Davis suggests, because of the unfortunate circumstance "that we have no female commentary on the story until the twentieth century."¹⁶

However that may be, Davis fails to show that her view of women in peasant society is relevant to the case she is examining. Instead, she imposes her notion of peasant women on Bertrande, whose conduct and character thereby are seen as if Bertrande had regarded the pseudo-Martin with the same calculating, self-interested eye that was supposedly characteristic of peasant women in general. In other words, since Davis assumes that rustic women consistently and covertly maneuvered for their own advantage, she does not consider it necessary to justify her assertions about Bertrande's calculating behavior. But, whatever the accuracy of Davis's view of peasant society, her application of that perspective to the story of Martin Guerre does not yield a portrait of Bertrande that is either plausible or persuasive.

DAVIS ADDS SUBSTANTIALLY TO ESTABLISHING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT within which the story should be understood when she uses archival material to illuminate questions of kinship relations, inheritance law, peasant migration, marriage contracts, military service, village custom, and judicial procedure. But, when she considers the relationship between Bertrande and Arnaud, the linchpin of her book, she is faced with a central difficulty: the historical record indicates that Bertrande was universally regarded as the impostor's victim, not his accomplice. In fact, the question of Bertrande's complicity never arose at the time, and Davis presents no evidence for her contention that "after much discussion" about Bertrande, the judges of Toulouse "agreed to accept her good faith" and not prosecute her for "fraud, bigamy, or adultery."¹⁷ Bertrande's good faith was always assumed, never a matter of debate, and, precisely because she was never considered liable for those charges, she was not prosecuted. Davis's claim to the contrary is not based on newly discovered material or on examination of surviving

¹⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 31, 55, 60, 68.

¹⁵ A. Lloyd Moote, *AHR*, 90 (October 1985): 943.

¹⁶ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 118.

¹⁷ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 90. On the same page, Davis states that the judges had to decide "what to do about the woman prisoner in the Conciergerie," that is, Bertrande. It is easy to forget at this point in Davis's narrative that Bertrande was imprisoned not on charges of fraud, bigamy, or adultery but because the judges suspected her of falsely accusing her husband of imposture.

records. Instead, it depends on her mere assertion that she has recognized a truth that apparently remained hidden from both the villagers of Artigat and the judges of Toulouse.

What of Bertrande de Rols? Did she know that the new Martin was not the man who had abandoned her eight years before? Perhaps not at the very first, when he arrived with all his “signs” and proofs. But the obstinate and honorable Bertrande does not seem a woman so easily fooled, not even by a charmer like Pansette. By the time she had received him in her bed, she must have realized the difference; as any wife of Artigat would have agreed, there is no mistaking “the touch of the man on the woman.” Either by explicit or tacit agreement, she helped him become her husband.¹⁸

This is Davis’s entire basis for claiming that the wife was in league with the impostor: that is, in sexual relations, Bertrande could not have failed to realize that her partner was not her true husband. Not only is there no hint of this in the sources, but the claim runs counter to the account Davis herself gives of Bertrande’s dismal sexual experience: she was married for some nine years without intercourse, which was finally achieved after a magic spell was lifted; pregnancy took place immediately, and, when their son was several months old, Martin abandoned her for eight years.¹⁹ After seventeen years of marriage, then, Martin and Bertrande could only have had sexual intercourse for a few months at most, hardly the sort of connubial experience making for a “touch of the man” that was indelible or unmistakable.

If Bertrande had perceived any difference in sexual manner between her spouse and the man claiming to be her husband, she could reasonably have explained it to herself as a consequence of her years of sexual abstinence, during which the precarious sexuality of her husband evidently gave way to virile confidence, perhaps assisted by the fleshpots of Spain and Picardy, where he soldiered. Equally important, Bertrande would have had to weigh any doubts arising from his sexual performance against the universal welcome accorded her presumed husband. Like all her in-laws and neighbors, Bertrande was fooled by Arnaud from the beginning.²⁰ He had gathered information about the Guerres’ marriage before his appearance, and he had days with Bertrande before going to bed with her in which to become familiar and garner even more intimate knowledge.²¹ He was welcomed home first by the sisters of Martin Guerre, whom Bertrande later especially blamed for misleading her. Coras gave substantial weight to the response of the sisters, which, along with the proofs of Arnaud and the wife’s eagerness to have her husband back again, seemed to the judge wholly sufficient to explain Bertrande’s falling for the impostor’s lies.²²

¹⁸ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 43–44.

¹⁹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 19–21, 24.

²⁰ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 44, 61.

²¹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 42–43.

²² Jean de Coras, *Arrest Memorable, du Parlement de Tolose, Contenant une 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 Arrestz Generaux le xii Septembre MDLX* (Lyon, 1561), 47, 52, 60–61, 67, 112. Davis states that Bertrande, when presented with her true husband at the trial, retailed her “prepared excuses: your sisters believed him too readily; your uncle accepted him”; 86. Coras’s account,

Davis offers nothing to counter Jean de Coras's understanding of Bertrande's innocence other than her own assertion about an inevitable sexual recognition, backed by a proverb about "the touch of the man." Even that proverb is not uniquely pertinent, for, in the conditions of sexual intercourse in peasant households of preindustrial Europe—the couple clothed, in a darkened house, amid the cold and dirt, surrounded by livestock and relatives—any wife of Artigat might equally well have regarded her bedmate with the jaded perspective expressed in the notorious masculine slur, "De nuit tous chats son gris."²³

In any event, even Davis agrees that Bertrande accepted Arnaud in her marriage bed because she was certain he was her spouse. Surely, the impostor's subsequent sexual habits would have had to be extraordinary for the happy, trusting wife to conclude that she was in error. As far as one can tell, neither she nor anyone else at the time came to that conclusion. The assumption, then, that sexual relations must have revealed the imposture to Bertrande is not an interpretation based on the sources; it is, rather, an opinion by a modern historian who apparently believes that unsubstantiated insight can itself be taken as evidence. This is a flimsy foundation on which to build an interpretation of the Martin Guerre story that contradicts the surviving evidence.

Behind Davis's assertion about Bertrande's response to the impostor is an equally unfounded assessment of the wife's character. After quoting a late fifteenth-century work, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, to the effect that the devil can make a wife consider "her husband so loathsome that not for all the world would she allow him to lie with her," Davis states that "Bertrande might not have put it in these words, but it seems clear that for a while [after marrying Martin] she was relieved that they could not have intercourse." In fact, Davis presents no evidence that Bertrande had any such view. The assertion about intercourse, however, is of a piece with Davis's portrayal of Bertrande as a woman of "stubborn independence," one who considered the bewitchment afflicting her marriage lifted only when she "was ready for it." When urged to divorce her impotent mate, she refused because of her "shrewd realism about how she could maneuver within the constraints placed upon one of her sex."²⁴ While Coras viewed this refusal as a touchstone of Bertrande's integrity, Davis sees it as a manifestation of the same

however, is considerably more pointed about whom Bertrande blamed: "Accusant les seurs dudit Martin sur tous les autres, qui avoient trop facilement creu, et assuré, que le prisonnier estoit Martin Guerre leur frère"; 81.

²³ In his commentary in the *Adages* on Plutarch's "All women are the same when the lights are out," Erasmus wrote, "Ego certe antequam Plutarchi locum adissem, hujusce Graeci adagii sensum à Gallico edoctus eram adagio. *De nuict tous chats son gris*" (*Opera Omnia* [Leiden, 1703], 2: 821). On cats, sex, and "all cats are gray at night," see Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1985), 95–96. On peasant sexuality, see Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge, 1979); *Les Amours paysannes: Amour et sexualité dans les campagnes de l'ancienne France (XVI^e–XIX^e siècle)* (Paris, 1975). Some comments by Montaigne suggest that pre-modern notions of sexual passion in marriage were very different from contemporary ones: see Michel de Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, Calif., 1965), 646–47, 649. See also Philippe Ariès, "Love in Married Life," *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, Philippe Ariès and André Béjin, eds., Anthony Foster, trans. (Oxford, 1985), 131, 136–38.

²⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 28.

shrewd realism that led Bertrande knowingly to accept the pseudo-husband, connive with him in deceiving her kinfolk, and finally abandon him when Martin Guerre reappeared.²⁵

According to Davis, Bertrande's realism and independence explain why the wife took her presumed husband to court, cooperating with Pierre Guerre, Martin's uncle, after he illegally acted as her agent in having Arnaud imprisoned for imposture. Explaining why Bertrande acted as a plaintiff on a charge of imposture against Arnaud is a crucial matter for Davis, since common sense dictates that an accomplice is unlikely to press a criminal charge against a collaborator. In the service of resolving this difficulty, Davis provides some questions that she supposes must have troubled Bertrande: "Would God punish them because of the lie? . . . She loved the new Martin, but he had tricked her once; might he after all not trick her again? And what if the other Martin Guerre came back?" Under pressure from her mother and Pierre Guerre (who was also her stepfather), "the stubborn woman calculated and made her plans. She would go along with the court case and hope to lose it. She would follow the strategy she had worked out with the new Martin about testimony and hope that the judge would declare him her husband . . . [S]he would also be prepared to win the case, however terrible the consequences for the new Martin."²⁶

Evidently a creature of utter calculation, Bertrande thus pursued a shrewd strategy in court that she kept secret from both her accomplice and his accusers. In the odd position of being a plaintiff in collusion with the defendant, she had to be careful not to trip up her pseudo-husband, while also pretending to be completely honest with the judges. She had to appear to be easily deceived but without convincing the court that she was in fact a victim of deception.²⁷ She had to make an accusation that she knew to be true, while also plotting with her accomplice to expose herself as a false accuser. In Davis's view, then, the peasant woman from Artigat committed herself to a plan of dizzying subtlety and complexity, one involving extraordinary manipulation of her relatives, the judges, and even her lover.

Coras recorded that in court Bertrande was nervous and uncertain, trembling in speech and with eyes fixed on the floor. The deluded judge did not realize, Davis asserts, that this was all a clever act, that Bertrande was adhering to a "text" she and her accomplice "had agreed upon months before."²⁸ Nor did Coras recognize that Bertrande was acting when she started weeping and trembling upon being confronted with Martin Guerre: "She was sufficiently steeled to the different possible outcomes of her situation so that when she arrived at the Criminal Chamber she was able to play her role quite well."²⁹

In Davis's interpretation, Pansette the impostor's role was also dauntingly intricate: to defend himself against the charge brought by Bertrande, he had to

²⁵ Coras, *Arrest Memorable*, 33; Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 28.

²⁶ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 60–61.

²⁷ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 68–69.

²⁸ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 75–76, 80.

²⁹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 85.

show that his accomplice had been suborned and was thus guilty of making a false accusation. He was successful at this ploy, and the court ordered Bertrande (and Pierre Guerre) imprisoned during the trial;³⁰ hence, success for the impostor meant a serious criminal charge levied against his accomplice. Of course, given Davis's scenario of complicity, all that Bertrande had to do to avoid such a fate was to refuse to render herself as plaintiff against her pseudo-husband, an action that would have had the incidental benefit of removing her lover from threat of execution. Davis never explains why this obvious and safe course was not taken by the duplicitous couple.

Davis's scenario becomes bewilderingly complex with the return of Martin Guerre. Abandoning the accomplice she had charged with imposture, Bertrande perforce wins her case and pours forth "prepared excuses." Arnaud still insists that he is the true husband, but the judges do not put the obdurate liar to torture because "they certainly did not want him to name Bertrande de Rols as his accomplice at the last minute."³¹ Davis fails to explain why the judges either suspected or covered up the peasant woman's supposed crimes. Moreover, Davis's argument requires us to believe that the judges who had imprisoned the plaintiff on suspicion of bringing a false accusation against her husband were also suspicious that the plaintiff was an accomplice in the imposture of the man she had charged with that crime. In other words, the court somehow suspected Bertrande of both false accusation and complicity with the accused. According to Davis, only one person suggested that Bertrande was not deceived by Arnaud: "Was the weakness of the [female] sex really so great that wives could not tell the difference between married love and adultery? The cuckolded Martin Guerre clearly thought not, as we know from the words attributed to him in court by both Coras and Le Sueur."³² Yet it is clear from those words that Martin Guerre simply (albeit severely) rebuked his wife for imprudence, not for choosing adultery over marital fealty.³³ A cuckold is a man whose wife has committed adultery, and apparently no one at the trial regarded the returned husband in that light. The judges would hardly have urged him to compassion for Bertrande if they had thought he was accusing his wife of the very crime of which they allegedly suspected her.³⁴ In sum, Davis presents a scenario in which the principal participants in a trial—the plaintiff, the defendant, and the judges—harbored secret designs and motivations that, by their very nature, cannot be substantiated by the sources.

³⁰ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 68–69, 76.

³¹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 86, 90.

³² Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 110. Davis follows this with the statement that "it is hard to imagine that the Coras we have seen dealing with Jacqueline de Bussi [his wife] could consistently believe that women were so easy to trick"; 110. The implication is that, since Coras had high regard for his wife's intelligence, he must somehow have seen Bertrande as undeceived by the impostor. Davis once more adduces Coras's wife to make the same point: "[W]e have no female commentary on the story until the twentieth century. Jacqueline de Bussi's reaction to her husband's gift book [that is, the *Arrest Memorable*] is unrecorded. I doubt that she believed that Bertrande de Rols could have been deceived for so long"; 118. Davis's suggestion, then, is apparently that Jacqueline de Bussi would have seen through her husband's putative conclusions regarding Bertrande in the *Arrest Memorable* because the wife was, of course, female.

³³ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 86.

³⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 86, 91.

GIVEN THE EVIDENCE REGARDING THE STORY OF MARTIN GUERRE, the assumption that Bertrande was Arnaud's accomplice necessarily involves convoluted reasoning and unsubstantiated assertions. As Coras perceived, Bertrande's accommodation to the charge of imposture and her timorous conduct in court argued that she was acting under duress, just as her refusal to swear that the defendant was not her true husband confirmed the court's suspicion that she had been suborned by her family. As far as one can tell, Bertrande's most fervent belief seems to have been in marital fidelity. At any rate, her sense of loyalty (rather than "shrewd realism") nicely explains her behavior throughout: her refusal to divorce, her "incredible longing . . . to have her husband back," her willingness to accept the proofs that Arnaud was her husband, her stand with him against family pressure, and her tearful submission to her true husband when she realized her error.³⁵ In the story of Martin Guerre, there is no need for unfounded hypotheses regarding maneuvering within sexual constraints, the perpetual uniqueness of sexual behavior, and secret pacts between a predator and his prey.

Having begun with such hypotheses, however, Davis is faced with the challenge of answering two resulting questions. First, how can one regard Bertrande as Arnaud's accomplice and yet still consider her as "honorable"? Second, what point of view was expressed in Coras's *Arrest Memorable*, Davis's principal source for her own interpretation, toward Bertrande and Arnaud?

Davis's determination to salvage "the honor of Bertrande de Rols"³⁶ is evident in the three contexts she establishes for regarding the relationship between the wife and the impostor. First, Bertrande and the pseudo-Martin fall in love, so their fraud fades in the glow of mutual affection. According to Davis, Bertrande had not merely prayed for Martin's return but had "dreamed of a husband and lover who would come back, and be different." She accepted the impostor because what she had "with the new Martin was her dream come true," a man she could live with "in passion."³⁷ Of course, the man she was living with continued to ferret out information from Bertrande about his presumed background. To Davis, that is not evidence of treachery and manipulation but rather a manifestation of the "intimate exchanges between husband and wife," which were "an ideal of Christian humanists and Protestant moralists," as well as an expression of "the Occitan delight in conversation" typically found in "the words of peasant lovers."³⁸ In describing Arnaud's challenge to the suborned Bertrande to swear he was not her husband, Davis places the impostor's maneuver in romantic guise: "He then made a test of her love and expressed his own."³⁹

To be sure, Arnaud may have come to have affection for the trusting peasant woman, but, not surprisingly, the sources are silent on the matter. It is perhaps noteworthy that, while the impostor asked for Bertrande's pardon on the ladder

³⁵ The quotation is from Coras's description of Bertrande's reasons for accepting Arnaud as her husband: "Ioint l'incroyable envie, qu'icelle de Rolz avoit, de recouvrer son mary"; *Arrest Memorable*, 82.

³⁶ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 27.

³⁷ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 34, 44.

³⁸ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 46.

³⁹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 69.

up to the gibbet, he never tried to justify his duplicity by claiming that he had acted out of love for her. None of the evidence adduced by Davis, such as Bertrande protecting Arnaud from a beating or his trusting her to support him in court,⁴⁰ testifies to more than Bertrande's fidelity or to the impostor's exigencies. There is no basis for asserting that the historical record "everywhere attests to his having fallen in love with the wife for whom he had rehearsed and her having become deeply attached to the husband who had taken her by surprise."⁴¹

Second, Davis suggests that the loving couple probably discovered a religious justification for their deception in the Protestantism that was reaching into the Toulouse region, especially in a non-sacramental view of marriage that allowed these adulterers to conceive of "marriage as something that was in their hands to make, indeed, as in their hands alone." Davis is aware that this speculation has the disadvantage of rescuing Bertrande from the frying pan of adultery only to throw her into the fire of bigamy. Nevertheless, she presents the romantic spectacle of the pseudo-Martin and Bertrande finding solace and "another justification for their lives" in the Reformed religion: "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."⁴²

The only evidence that Davis puts forth for these sentiments is that some Reformed soldiers and local converts to Protestantism smashed the altar of the Artigat church, although that was eight years after Arnaud's execution; that the de Rols family became Protestant, although Davis only cites documents regarding that family in the mid-seventeenth century; and that no priest played a major role in Arnaud's trial.⁴³ Davis suggests that it is also significant that Arnaud showed "respect" for his principal inquisitors, "men who were already attracted to Protestantism"—as if the charming impostor would dream of showing disrespect for judges who held his life in their hands, no matter what their religious views; or as if the judges would have been so given to fellowship with the accused peasant as to make him aware of their dangerous confessional leanings. Davis also finds it significant that Arnaud's final statement of contrition included no Catholic formulas or references to the saints.⁴⁴ Yet this negative consideration does not advance the argument that the putative accomplices sought justification for their illicit liaison in the new faith. All the sources say about Arnaud's spiritual sympathies is that, as a youth, Arnaud was notorious as "a constant denier and blasphemer of God's name," habitually swearing "on the head, body, blood, and wounds of our Lord."⁴⁵ This evidence much predates Arnaud's appearance in

⁴⁰ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 44–46.

⁴¹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 44.

⁴² Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 47, 48, 50.

⁴³ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 48–49; 142n.10.

⁴⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 50.

⁴⁵ Arnaud was "consummé, en tous vices, adonné à toute espece de larrecins, et affrontemens, ordinaire renieur, et blasphemateur du nom de Dieu . . . Les tesmoings rapportoient, qu' iceluy du Tilh, estoit costumier, iurer teste, corps, sang, et playes de nostre Seigneur, ce que vulgairement on appelle *Blasphemer*" (Coras, *Arrest Memorable*, 45; compare Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 37). Although Davis argues that the publications of Coras and Le Sueur on the Martin Guerre case had a certain Protestant setting (107), she does not consider that the absence of Catholic formulas or references to

Artigat, but at the very least it does not bespeak receptivity to the Reformed religion. In all, there is no warrant in the sources for introducing a religious dimension to the Martin Guerre story, not to mention the speculation that “local Protestant sympathizers [in Artigat] tended to believe the new Martin and the Catholics tended to believe Pierre Guerre.”⁴⁶

HAVING SUMMONED UP ROMANCE AND RELIGION TO ILLUMINATE the complicity of Bertrande and Arnaud, Davis also calls on notions of psychological reconstruction and reflectivity that likewise shift the focus of the story from deplorable deception to heroic commitment. From this perspective, the wife and the impostor were not being fraudulent and adulterous; rather, they were engaged in “self-fashioning,” in “inventing” a marriage, in creating new “identities.” Davis borrows the term “self-fashioning” from a recent work on Renaissance literature, and she takes it to refer to “the molding of speech, manners, gesture, and conversation” that aided advancement in elite circles.⁴⁷ Davis is concerned, however, to show that the fate of the elite and that of peasants was sometimes similar, that common folk too could fashion their lives in novel, self-conscious ways, and, further, “that an impostor’s fabrication has links with more ordinary ways of creating personal identity.” Unfortunately, Davis proves none of these things. Instead, after asserting that some sort of construction of identity may be seen in a person posing as another, she goes on to claim that, with Arnaud’s preparations for his appearance in Artigat, “it is clear that . . . [the impostor] was moving beyond the mask of the carnival player and the stratagems of the mere inheritance seeker to forge a new identity and a new life for himself.”⁴⁸

There is nothing to justify such an elevated and exculpatory perspective of Arnaud du Tilh’s imposture. Davis points to nothing in the historical record—no hint of self-reflection by the trickster, no provocative use of language in the sources, no revealing pattern of behavior, no suggestive inconsistencies or contradictions, no illuminating contrasts with other impostors—to substantiate her employment of “self-fashioning.” Pervasive and tendentious, the concept is merely imposed on the historical record as an ingenious assertion, a modish way of viewing sixteenth-century peasants. Viewed through the lens of self-fashioning, Arnaud is an audacious forger of self, not simply a clever fraud, while Bertrande is an assertive molder of identity rather than an unfortunate dupe; together, the inventive rustics fabricated a marriage.

the saints may have been the result of the biases of the chroniclers rather than the supposed Protestantism of the impostor.

⁴⁶ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 56.

⁴⁷ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 103. In the work from which Davis borrows “self-fashioning,” the term refers to considerably more than the personal prerequisites for courtly success: see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), 1–9. For some reflections on the story of Martin Guerre, see Stephen Greenblatt, “Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture,” *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, Patricia Parker and David Quint, eds. (Baltimore, Md., 1986), 210–24.

⁴⁸ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 4, 40–41.

It is easy to cast the story of Martin Guerre into self-fashioning terms, but the exercise does not result in a plausible account of the desired “motivations and values.”⁴⁹ According to Davis, when Arnaud asked Pierre Guerre for a financial accounting of the real husband’s property—the action that eventually led to Arnaud’s trials—“he was not just an impostor trying to take Martin Guerre’s money and run” but rather was giving “a sign of how comfortable he felt in his role.” Martin Guerre did not return to Artigat merely because he was alarmed at another taking his wife and land but may be regarded as having “come back to repossess his identity, his persona, before it was too late.”⁵⁰ Nothing loath, Arnaud matched the long-lost husband persona for persona: “It would be a mistake to interpret his behavior [in court] . . . as simply a desperate attempt to stay alive. Live or dead, he was defending the identity he had fashioned for himself against a stranger.” When Arnaud continued to deny his imposture after the return of Martin Guerre, his obstinacy did not reflect panic but rather how sincerely he had transformed himself into “the jealous husband.”⁵¹

Davis takes the idea of the impostor refashioning himself as Martin Guerre very seriously indeed. In the central chapters of her book (chaps. 5–6), she scrupulously tries to avoid referring to the impostor as “Arnaud” or “Pansette,” and she never adopts the chroniclers’ appellations of the “Pseudo-Martinus” and the “soy disant Martin Guerre.” For her, the refashioned rustic, “a more real Martin Guerre”⁵² than the original, is generally “the new Martin.” In dealing with the relationship between the supposed accomplices, Davis uses the impostor’s name only once, when stating that “Pansette’s rehearsals began once again,” with the impostor and the wife reviewing the sexual episodes of the Guerres’ marriage for information with which to dupe the court. Sometimes, when Davis uses the impostor’s real names, it is to emphasize his supposed transformation, as when she refers to “the rebirth of Arnaud du Tilh as Martin Guerre.” Sometimes, Arnaud is simply “Martin,” the distinction between refashioner and real spouse collapsing as thoroughly for the modern historian as it allegedly did for Arnaud du Tilh.⁵³ This is unfortunate, for in examining the tale of the famous imposture it is surely essential to keep straight who was Bertrande’s husband, what was a marriage, and who was really Martin Guerre.

The notion of self-fashioning functions as a way of elevating an interpretation of complicity between Bertrande and the pseudo-Martin from the sordid reality of fraud and adultery to that elusive realm where life approximates literature. Evoking imagination, intelligence, and subtlety, self-fashioning allows Davis to regard Bertrande and Arnaud as engaged in the same sort of artful construction of identity that supposedly typified princely courts and literary circles. A tale of

⁴⁹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 4.

⁵⁰ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 60, 84.

⁵¹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 91.

⁵² Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 113.

⁵³ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 57, 50. In the central chapters, Davis uses “Pansette” six times; “Arnaud,” ten; and “the new Martin,” forty-five. “Martin” is used to identify the impostor six times (52, 54, 56, 57). Thus Davis refers to the impostor as “the new Martin” or “Martin” three-fourths of the time.

mere trickery, as in the old version of the Martin Guerre story, piques curiosity but cannot sustain interest or analysis. A discourse on self-fashioning, on the other hand, is compelling to a modern sensibility preoccupied with ideas of role-playing and identity, beguiled by intricate theory and psychologizing. In effect, self-fashioning, along with romance and religion, glosses the conduct of the adulterous peasants. "The self-fashioning Bertrande" embraced "her dream come true" and invented a new marriage; the new, improved "Martin" found a new love, a new religion, and constructed a new self: "[T]he life he was fashioning for himself was operating like a conversion experience, wiping away the blasphemer . . . if not totally the trickster."⁵⁴ Of the trickster, there is abundant evidence, even a confession; for all the rest, there is no evidence whatsoever.

AFTER DEMONSTRATING HOW BERTRANDE THE ACCOMPLICE MAY BE REGARDED AS "honorable" when seen in the light of romance, religion, and self-fashioning, Davis is faced with a second crucial question: how can her view of Bertrande and Arnaud be reconciled with Jean de Coras's, especially since the *Arrest Memorable* is Davis's principal source for her own very different interpretation? Her answer to this depends entirely on a complicated psychological reading of both Coras and his text. She sees Coras as embodying a profound ambivalence toward the self-fashioning peasants, while she regards the *Arrest Memorable* as "an historical account that raises doubts about its own truth," much as the judges of the Criminal Chamber supposedly displayed "mixed feelings" even as they condemned the dazzling trickster.⁵⁵ Davis asserts that Coras came to identify himself with Arnaud, probably a Protestant like himself, poised and eloquent like himself, with a beautiful wife like his own, and a liar so inventive that his fabrications were akin to "self-fashioning," a practice that lawyers and royal officers "knew all about."⁵⁶ Thus Davis neatly employs her unfounded hypotheses regarding Protestantism and self-fashioning to argue for an equally unfounded identification of the inquisitor with the accused.

Davis establishes another point of identification with her assertion that Coras was a kind of attenuated Pansette of the legal commentary in that "he lies a little" when shaping his account to strengthen it as "a moral tale." Yet she neither spells out the moral she perceives in Coras's text nor does she indicate any egregious shaping of evidence by the legal theorist.⁵⁷ Her list of "exaggerations and omissions" in the

⁵⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 118, 49.

⁵⁵ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 108, 91n. According to Davis, the judges showed "lingering respect for the man who had dazzled them with his testimony" by treating his interests (that is, his property and his child by Bertrande) with consideration, by not torturing him, and by canceling his formal apology before the Criminal Chamber (89–91). But there is no evidence of "respect" shown by the court toward Arnaud. The judges were concerned for the interests of the Guerre family in dealing with the property and child; torture was not always used by the Toulouse court; and the apology was canceled when it seemed clear that Arnaud had no intention of apologizing, not (as Davis hints) because of fear that he would name Bertrande as his accomplice.

⁵⁶ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 102–03.

⁵⁷ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 108–09. Davis suggests that Coras may have seen "the story of Martin Guerre as conveying a Protestant message," but she concludes that "if Coras and Le Sueur had

Arrest Memorable is not persuasive. Her accusation that the commentator in one instance neglected to report a failure of Arnaud's memory is trivial, and the contention that Coras "presents himself and the court as less convinced of Arnaud's innocence than in fact they were" is overstated.⁵⁸ The Criminal Chamber's view of Arnaud's probable innocence is expressed clearly in Coras's statement that only the intervention of God, as manifest by the nearly miraculous return of Martin Guerre, prevented "a horrible and monstrous imposture" from going unpunished.⁵⁹

According to Davis, there is exaggeration in Coras's discussion of crimes such as abduction and sacrilege, of which Arnaud was not actually convicted. In her view, those annotations "gave him a chance to argue that Bertrande was coerced and that the death penalty was warranted."⁶⁰ Coras, however, did not need to grasp at opportunities to present Bertrande as a victim, as if he had to repress his recognition of the wife's outrageous behavior. The judge's annotations were intended to detail the manifold ways in which the unfortunate woman had been victimized, even if the culprit had not been charged by a court with the particular offense.⁶¹

Davis claims that Coras also exaggerates at another point, when "Arnaud du Tilh's prodigious qualities are built up by comparison with biblical, classical, and more recent impostors."⁶² But Coras's concern clearly was to discuss precedents and parallels for the case, not to enshrine Arnaud in a pantheon of heroes. The lawyer no more intended to have his readers see Arnaud as "prodigious" as Jupiter and Caesar than he wanted them to regard Bertrande as illustrious as Cleopatra, Cato, Brutus, Hannibal, and Empedocles because, like them, she said she preferred death to dishonor. Indeed, Coras was aware that a reader might misconstrue his intentions, and, hence, after discussing Arnaud's memory in the context of feats of recollection by Cyrus, Seneca, and Caesar, he was careful to warn that he intended no equation "of such an impudent impostor with such noble, grand, and illustrious persons."⁶³

All these supposed exaggerations and omissions, Davis claims, were "loopholes" in the *Arrest Memorable*, revealing Coras's uncertainties and allowing his commentary to be recast as a tragic drama.⁶⁴ She finds the most "curious omission" in the

such views, it must be said that they are not imposed by their texts"; 107. The reader, then, is left in some confusion as to the message or moral that Davis believes Coras intended his work to convey.

⁵⁸ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 109, 108.

⁵⁹ Without "le tout bon et puissant Dieu," "une si horrible, et monstrueuse imposture, demeurast celee, et incogneue"; Coras, *Arrest Memorable*, 70. Davis also maintains that Coras "never mentions that Bertrande and Pierre were imprisoned for months"; Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 108. But Coras states "car elle demeroit par l'appel encor arrestee"; *Arrest Memorable*, 84.

⁶⁰ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 109.

⁶¹ For example, see Coras, *Arrest Memorable*, 98, on how Bertrande was a victim of rape, albeit by deception rather than violence.

⁶² Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 109.

⁶³ "Ce que l'entends avoir escript, avec la protestation, qu'ay cy devant faite, de ne vouloir entrer, en comparaison d'un si impudent affronteur, avec personnes si nobles, grandes, et illustres"; Coras, *Arrest Memorable*, 52. On the comparisons regarding Bertrande preferring death to dishonor, see *ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 110.

first edition (1561) of the work to be an account of Arnaud's confession and execution, a flaw that leaves Coras's readers "some room for doubt about whether the Criminal Chamber actually did get the right man." On the contrary, no reader of Coras can doubt that the court and everyone else concerned had discovered the truth of the matter.⁶⁵ In any case, Coras made up for his "curious omission" in the second edition (1565) of the *Arrest Memorable*, where he devoted a passage to Arnaud's confession and execution. According to Davis, however, the judge could not help expressing his "conflicting feelings" about the dazzling criminal, since "ambiguity is reintroduced immediately" by a description of Arnaud's fate as a "tragedy," a comment that Davis chooses to see as expressing ambivalence about the impostor's guilt rather than dismay at his perverted talents.⁶⁶ This misconstruction is pivotal to Davis's argument, for she goes on to relate Coras's remark about tragedy to another writer's linking of the tragic with "prodigious" passion—"an association," Davis handily reminds the reader, "also suggested by Arnaud and Bertrande"—thereby proposing that Coras actually saw tragedy not in the self-destruction of a "fine peasant" but in the doomed romance of the wife and impostor. Again, self-fashioning crowns the pyramid of assumptions: "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."⁶⁷

Davis reconciles her interpretation of the Martin Guerre story with Coras's *Arrest Memorable* by asserting that, while the judge explicitly considered the wife innocent, an examination of his text, with its significant exaggerations, omissions, and comparisons, reveals another, unsettled view of Arnaud—and therefore of Bertrande as well. Supposedly troubled by psychological identification with Arnaud, Coras unconsciously allowed an element of ambiguity and tension into his commentary on the case, a "multivalent representation" that exposes his uncertainties.⁶⁸ On the one hand, Coras saw Arnaud as a treacherous deceiver, a virtually diabolical fraud and thief; on the other hand, he identified with the dazzling self-fashioner and fellow Protestant. Similarly, Coras regarded Bertrande as an innocent dupe, yet at some inarticulate level he also recognized that she had conspired with the impostor: this guilty Bertrande "is present in Coras's text, but is less prominent than the duped wife." Even though Coras had to admit explicitly that profound wrong had been committed by the ruthless impostor, he secretly could not deny to himself that there was something "profoundly right about the

⁶⁵ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 111; Coras, *Arrest Memorable*, 86: "Ainsi l'imposture dudit du Tilh, estant entierement descouverte, et le nouveau venu de tous uniquement receu, et recogneu, pour Martin Guerre, et le proces, par ce moyen du tout instruit, pour estre iugé diffinitivement, et iceluy veu"; see also Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 85.

⁶⁶ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 103, 111.

⁶⁷ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 112. The phrase "a play of tragedy between persons of low estate" is not from Coras but is quoted from Matteo Bandello's *Histoire tragiques*, the work that linked the tragic with "prodigious" passion and that does not discuss the story of Martin Guerre (see Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 153 n. 16). There is, of course, no indication that Coras conceived of "a play of tragedy" between Bertrande and Arnaud.

⁶⁸ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 110, 120.

invented marriage of the new Martin and Bertrande de Rols.”⁶⁹ Davis suggests that a psychological difficulty lay behind Coras’s conflicted feelings and uncertainties. An elite member of a patriarchal society, the learned judge identified with the pseudo-husband, “the rustic who had remade himself,” but could not face the psychic threat represented by Bertrande: “The possibility of an honorable woman disposing of her body as she pleases is much more disturbing than the self-fashioning of Pansette.”⁷⁰

NOTHING IS CITED FROM CORAS’S TEXT TO SUPPORT THESE CONTENTIONS. Given the nature of the argument throughout, that is entirely understandable. If the guilty but honorable Bertrande is “present in Coras’s text,” she cannot be there in the usual sense that makes quotation of, or reference to, the text possible. If Coras repressed his recognition of Bertrande’s guilt because of alarm at her freedom from sexual constraints, proof of that must be sought in curious omissions and subtle exaggerations in the text regarding Arnaud du Tilh. If Coras believed that the unmasking of “the new Martin” was a tragedy, his troubling recognition of that cannot be encompassed by traditional forms of scholarly evidence. If “Bertrande does not seem a woman so easily fooled” in bed by a rogue like Arnaud, it is to be expected that her subsequent deceits would elude documentation. Indeed, if Bertrande had collaborated with the impostor, she must have been embarked on an enterprise so secret and subtle that it escaped the notice of all her contemporaries as well as “every scrap of paper left . . . by the past.” Such arguments, it may be said, make footnotes to sources quite beside the point. If historical records can be bypassed so thoroughly in the service of an inventive blend of intuition and assertion, it is difficult to see what distinguishes the writing of history from that of fiction. As Montaigne observed about assertions being imposed on reality, “What can we not reason about at this rate?”⁷¹

Davis claims that the judges of Toulouse, in considering the “inventiveness” of Arnaud du Tilh, had to pose for themselves the question, “Where does self-fashioning stop and lying begin?”⁷² But the terms she ascribes to the judges should pose for her readers a more pertinent question: In historical writing, where does reconstruction stop and invention begin? The virtues of *The Return of Martin Guerre* are clear: its eloquent portrait of peasant life, its sense of communal values and prejudices, its sympathy for those outside the elite, its emphasis on the central role of women, its evocative detail and supple prose. Unfortunately, none of the central points of the book—the knowing Bertrande, the devious court strategy, the tragic

⁶⁹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 112, 103.

⁷⁰ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 112. Davis follows this statement with a quotation from a letter from Coras to his wife that details a “strange dream” (112). The letter comes from several years after Arnaud’s trial (see Davis, 98), and Davis does not explain how it substantiates anything found in the *Arrest Memorable*.

⁷¹ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, ix; Montaigne, “Of Cripples,” *Complete Essays of Montaigne*, 791. For some comments on history and fiction, see Carlo Ginzburg, “Prove e possibilità: In margine a *Il ritorno di Martin Guerre* di Natalie Zemon Davis,” in N. Z. Davis, *Il Ritorno di Martin Guerre* (Turin, 1984), 131–54.

⁷² Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 103.

romance, the Protestant justification, the self-fashioning peasants, the conflicted judge, the “multivalent” text—depend on the documentary record. As a result, a famous tale is given a reinterpretation that finally bears more resemblance to a historical romance than to an account “held tightly in check by the voices of the past.”⁷³

Jean de Coras wrote the *Arrest Memorable* to relate a true, fascinating story, not to give the villain of the piece “another chance” to argue his case or charm his audience.⁷⁴ The moral of Coras’s account has nothing to do with a tragedy of romance and self-fashioning but with the deadly weakness of perception, with the ways in which deception can reach into the most intimate relations and shape human destinies. The judge’s compassion was wholly reserved for an unimportant, luckless woman, and perhaps one of his main purposes in writing about the story of Martin Guerre was to enable others to understand how circumstances conspired with Bertrande’s own desires to make her an ideal victim for a cunning impostor.⁷⁵ In the end, it cannot be said that Jean de Coras was successful in that ambition. The events of Artigat will probably never again be analyzed in detail, hence the historical image of Bertrande will be fixed forever in the unlikely pose established by Davis’s reinterpretation. Humiliated by her husband’s impotence, abandoned by him for years, duped and seduced by an impostor, harassed by kinfolk, and shamed before her community, Bertrande de Rols now suffers the posthumous fate of being refashioned into an assertive and principled champion, the shrewd and ardent companion of a man who transformed himself for her. No longer a dupe and victim, she has become a heroine, a sort of proto-feminist of peasant culture.

This Bertrande de Rols seems to be far more a product of invention than of historical reconstruction. The same may also be said of Arnaud du Tilh, the forger of identity, and of Jean de Coras, the ambivalent inquisitor. As interesting, subtle, and complex as these characters are, it is doubtful that they have anything to do

⁷³ After completing this essay, I read Janet Lewis’s historical romance, *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (1941; rpt edn., Chicago, 1967). Davis states that Lewis’s novel “differs from my historical account in most respects, but they resemble each other in presenting a Bertrande who is not a dupe and who has some independence of spirit” (Davis, 118n.). In Lewis’s novel, however, Bertrande first suspects that the self-proclaimed Martin is an impostor after receiving him in bed (Lewis, 50). She sometimes thinks of him as “the new Martin” (Lewis, 50, 55). She slowly comes to realize “that she was consciously accepting as her husband a man whom she believed to be an impostor” (57; 55–65). Impelled by guilt and anger, she finally takes Arnaud to court, although even then she briefly hopes that the judges will declare him her husband (90). Arnaud’s performance in court and his tenderness toward Bertrande make the wife ponder questions of identity (96–97). When the real husband returns, he accuses Bertrande of complicity with the impostor. Arnaud tells Bertrande that he had transformed himself into an honest man “for your beauty and grace” (107). He embraces his fate as a sacrifice to Bertrande, while the latter recognizes that “the return of Martin Guerre would in no measure compensate for the death of Arnaud” (108). Lewis draws an affecting portrait of a Bertrande torn between love and duty, a heroine at once shrewd, passionate, and honorable (55, 57, 63–64, 95–96). Romance and self-fashioning are prominent themes in Lewis’s novel, along with the view that events unfold as a tragic drama for the peasant couple. Davis’s version of the story mainly differs from Lewis’s in her presentation of an explicit collaboration between the wife and the impostor, a religious perspective on that collusion, and a portrait of an unsympathetic Pierre Guerre.

⁷⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 103.

⁷⁵ This is one of the dominant themes in the *Arrest Memorable*; see 10, 20–21, 33, 37, 54, 69, 80, 85, 98, 106, 109–12.

with the actual story of Martin Guerre. The self-fashioning rustics and the conflicted scholar are nowhere to be found in the *Arrest Memorable*, a document that Davis implies is not to be trusted, in all its multivalent complexity, precisely because it fails to yield up the characters called for by her reinterpretation.

What Davis terms "invention," the employment of "perhapses" and "may-have-beens," is, of course, the stock in trade of historians, who are often driven to speculation by inadequate and perplexing evidence. Depth, humanity, and color in historical reconstruction are the products of imagination and do not flow from a vulgar reasoning upon data.⁷⁶ But speculation, whether founded on intuition or on concepts drawn from anthropology and literary criticism, is supposed to give way before the sovereignty of the sources, the tribunal of the documents. The historian should not make the people of the past say or do things that run counter to the most scrupulous respect for the sources. In discussing popular culture in preindustrial Europe, Davis has cogently observed that historians of that subject are strongly interested in people, "but I am not sure we really respect their ways very much; and this makes it hard for us to understand their lives."⁷⁷ Regrettably, in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Davis has permitted an excess of invention to obscure the lives of the people who engaged her sympathy and imagination. If readers of her book feel a kinship with Bertrande and lament the return of the man with the wooden leg, if they feel that they truly understand the lives of those long-dead peasants, it is, all unbeknownst, at the expense of respecting their historical integrity, their very different motivations and values. It is one of the charms of Natalie Zemon Davis's generous and imaginative approach to historical study that she even leaves open that possibility in the epilogue of her book: "I think I have uncovered the true face of the past—or has Pansette done it once again?"⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Compare Donald R. Kelley's review of Davis in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 37 (1984): 254.

⁷⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, "Proverbial Wisdom and Popular Errors," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif., 1975), 266.

⁷⁸ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 125.