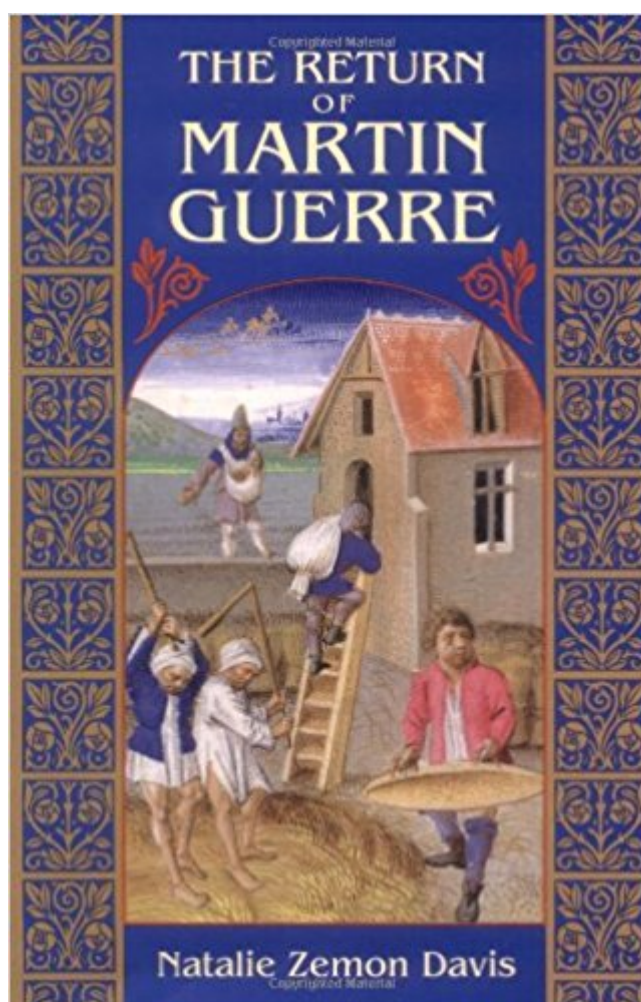


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# The Return Of Martin Guerre



## Synopsis

The Inventive Peasant Arnaud du Tilh had almost persuaded the learned judges at the Parlement of Toulouse, when on a summer's day in 1560 a man swaggered into the court on a wooden leg, denounced Arnaud, and reestablished his claim to the identity, property, and wife of Martin Guerre. The astonishing case captured the imagination of the Continent. Told and retold over the centuries, the story of Martin Guerre became a legend, still remembered in the Pyrenean village where the impostor was executed more than 400 years ago. Now a noted historian, who served as consultant for a new French film on Martin Guerre, has searched archives and lawbooks to add new dimensions to a tale already abundant in mysteries: we are led to ponder how a common man could become an impostor in the sixteenth century, why Bertrande de Rols, an honorable peasant woman, would accept such a man as her husband, and why lawyers, poets, and men of letters like Montaigne became so fascinated with the episode. Natalie Zemon Davis reconstructs the lives of ordinary people, in a sparkling way that reveals the hidden attachments and sensibilities of nonliterate sixteenth-century villagers. Here we see men and women trying to fashion their identities within a world of traditional ideas about property and family and of changing ideas about religion. We learn what happens when common people get involved in the workings of the criminal courts in the ancien régime, and how judges struggle to decide who a man was in the days before fingerprints and photographs. We sense the secret affinity between the eloquent men of law and the honey-tongued village impostor, a rare identification across class lines. Deftly written to please both the general public and specialists, *The Return of Martin Guerre* will interest those who want to know more about ordinary families and especially women of the past, and about the creation of literary legends. It is also a remarkable psychological narrative about where self-fashioning stops and lying begins.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Natalie Zemon Davis was a history professor at Princeton University when two French screenwriters, Jean-Claude Carriere and Daniel Vigne, asked her to act as a consultant on a film version of the infamous 16th century case of Martin Guerre. This project served as the impetus for Davis to research and write this immensely readable account of the Guerre event, a case of impersonation that caused an uproar in parts of France for years to come. The film version Davis consulted on starred Gerard Depardieu as the fake Martin Guerre, and a later American version, entitled "Sommersby," placed events during the American Civil War and starred Richard Gere and Jodie Foster. Any way you look at the situation, the Martin Guerre case is just plain strange. Davis traces the case back to the year 1527, when the Daguerre family left their Basque homeland in France and moved to the village of Artigat in the Languedoc region. The Daguerre family changed their name to Guerre in an effort to fit into the local community. The Guerre's quickly rose in prominence, although son Martin tended to enjoy acrobatics and swordplay in lieu of hard work. Martin soon married Bertrande de Rols, the daughter of a prominent local family. After some initial problems conceiving children, attributed to a dangerous curse by many in the community, Martin and Bertrande finally had a son. But things did not go well for Martin; his father accused Martin of stealing some grain, an accusation that, coupled with Martin's desire to avoid family squabbles over inheritance issues, resulted in Martin's sudden departure from his family and home. With Martin gone off to various adventures in Spain and parts unknown, Bertrande was in quite a spot. Hope was on the way, however, when a man shows up claiming to be the missing Martin.

Natalie Zemon Davis's book *The Return Of Martin Guerre* is a finely detailed, readable and well-researched account of the famous Martin Guerre and his impostor, Arnould du Tilh. But even more than simply outlining the facts of the story, Davis also uses her research to enlighten us on the roles of different family members in 16th Century rural French life, the politics of family life and peasant life in general, and the role of the growing shift from Catholicism to Protestantism among the elite as well as the peasant classes. In relation to family and marriage life, Davis uses Bertrande de Rols, Martin Guerre's wife, as an example of a strong, virtuous woman with familial duty and an obstinate nature. Davis uses this characterization to explain how de Rols was not a

weak-minded woman who was so easily duped by her missing husband's impostor, but was rather a woman who was in love and used her strength in order to fascillitate her new relationship with Arnould du Tilh: "Either by explicit or tacit agreement, she helped him become her husband." Bertrande de Rols, according to Davis, is an example of the more broad-minded and less misogynist peasant society of the village of Artigat in 16th Century France. Through Bertrande de Rols, learn about how surprisingly fair the law was towards women: "The testaments in the area around Artigat rarely benefit one child but instead provide dowries for the daughters....(If there are only daughters, the property is divided equally among them)" (11) Natalie Zemon Davis

The Return Of Martin Guerre is also a deeper historical chronicle of changes in the shift from French Catholicism to the new religion of Protestantism.

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