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Hybrid Film and Book Review: Daniel Vigne, dir., *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982) and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

By Ruben Paredes

Natalie Zemon Davis' book and Daniel Vigne's film, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, are two works aimed at retelling and analyzing the 16th century case of an impostor claiming the name, family, and property of Martin Guerre. The tale begins in 1527 as Sanxi Daguerre and his family leave their property in the Basque village of Hendaye to resettle in the French village of Artigat. Sanxi's son, Martin Guerre, eventually marries a woman named Bertrande de Rols and together in Artigat, they have a son. However, Martin Guerre later abandoned his family after he was accused of stealing grain by his father. In 1556, the impostor Arnaud du Tilh arrived in Artigat and claimed that he was Martin Guerre, eventually fathering two children with Bertrande. Doubts grew about Arnaud's identity following a land dispute between Arnaud and Martin's uncle, Pierre Guerre, leading to Arnaud being tried in Toulouse. At the trial, the true Martin Guerre appeared and Arnaud du Tilh was found guilty and sentenced to death. Both historian Natalie Zemon Davis and filmmaker Daniel Vigne aim to reconstruct this dramatic story, with each emphasizing the significance of Guerre's wife Bertrande de Rols in unique ways. Vigne successfully recreates a compelling story of deception, while Davis utilized Bertrande's experiences to analyze the prevailing cultural, religious, and gender norms of early modern European society.

Davis' analysis of the case through her scholarship provided a perspective that centered primarily around Bertrande de Rols and the theme of legitimizing identity. Davis writes on how Bertrande was left in a difficult position following Martin's departure, previously being a married woman and then abruptly becoming neither a wife nor a widow, all while raising a son

alone.¹ Davis examines how the patriarchal customs and laws of Artigat dictated Bertrande's social status, a woman with her marriage status left in limbo and unable to remarry unless she could find concrete proof of Martin's death. Arnaud's impersonation of Martin Guerre offered Bertrande the opportunity to rebuild her identity as a respected wife and woman of high virtue, as demonstrated through Bertrande's refusal to separate from Arnaud during the village's questioning of his identity and defending Arnaud during his first trial in Rieux. Davis' emphasis on the role of Bertrande offered a refreshing perspective on how the case of Martin Guerre was not only a struggle for Arnaud du Tilh to retain his identity as Martin Guerre, but also for Bertrande to maintain her identity as a respectable woman with her honor and status intact.

While an gripping motion picture, Vigne's retelling of the case of Martin Guerre, however, downplays the importance of Arnaud and Bertrande, especially how they found and seized opportunities in the context of the growth of the Protestant religion. The shift from Catholic dominance to growing Protestant sympathies in the village of Artigat was especially crucial for Bertrade and Arnaud, as they were likely able to avoid the Catholic practice of confessing their sins to a priest.² While religion is depicted throughout the film, it came in the form of Bertrande's inner turmoil of possibly being condemned to Hell for adultery and raising an illegitimate child with Arnaud. Confessing to God alone, as the film illustrates, allowed Bertrande and Arnaud to conceal the true nature of their marriage and protect their reputation as loyal husband and wife from human and divine judgement. However, the film presented very limited discussion of Catholicism and Protestantism and how Arnaud and Bertrande were able to use it to their advantage.

¹ Natalie Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 33.

² Ibid., 47.

While many historians were critical of Vigne's film (Davis included) due to various historical inaccuracies, his film draws in viewers with a suspenseful and tense relationship between Bertrand and the imposter Martin Guerre. Rather than depicting Bertrande as an accomplice who was aware of Arnaud's identity, Vigne highlights Bertrande as a victim of Arnaud, cycling through her inner turmoil of being loyal to her husband or believing the villagers who accused the new Martin of being an impostor. It was not until the last segment of the film in which Arnaud du Tilh committed his fatal error; accidentally revealing that he learned of Martin's abandoned life in Artigat after having met him during their time in the army of Picardy.³ Bertrande viewed this as the truth, and is shown in a saddened state as Arnaud is executed in the very last scene of the film. Vigne bestows grace and instills humanity into Bertrande, showing her as a victim of a love she wished she could have, a romance that was unfortunately built on deception and could not be legitimized. While many historical accounts point to Bertrande perhaps being a willful participant in concealing Arnaud's identity, Vigne's film argued for a more sympathetic understanding of Bertrande's position and her want for a stable and loving marriage.

The story of Martine Guerre's return is one of deception, identity, love and loyalty. Vigne's film brought forth these themes through his powerful directing, using Bertrande de Rols' inner turmoil in tandem with her actions to defend the new Martin Guerre in an attempt to bring to life a tragic love story. While historical inaccuracies were present in the film, Davis' extraordinary work complements it with detailed analyses. Davis detailed explanations and her knowledge of Basque and French marriage and inheritance laws vividly illustrate how religion helped to legitimize marriage and spiritual salvation, and how gender roles influenced status in

³ Daniel Vigne, dir., *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982: France: European International), DVD. 1:38:18-1:46:00.

16th century French communities. Davis' and Vigne's respective works provide the most intimate and well-analyzed retelling of the story of Martin Guerre, demonstrating how motion pictures can serve as the bridge between historical works and entertainment.