

The return of martin guerre essay sample



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The return of Martin Guerre is a story of a peasant who left his wife, Bertrande and his son. After several years, a man called Arnaud du Tilh impersonated Martin Guerre, stole his identity and lived under Martin's name for three years until he became accused of this act. He almost convinced the court that he was Martin Guerre until the real Martin walked into the court. Davis, the author of the book illustrates why Martin Guerre left his family and inheritance, how the imposter came into Bertrande's life, and how economic and religion were playing a role in the sixteenth century society.

The fact that impostor was able to fool Bertrande could be due to the situation that she was facing at that time or could be simply due to his charm, ability to lie, and his similarity in physical appearance to Martin. However, Bertrande's situation could be the most powerful reason as she lived in a world "where organizational structure and public identity were associated exclusively with males" (29).

Since, the marriage laws of the time did not allow a woman to seek divorce and remarry, unless having two witnesses confirming the death of the husband with a proof, therefore, Bertrande who was left by her husband had no choice but wait for his return. In fact she was not deceived by Arnaud du Tilh but she actually chose to use her feminine intelligence and cooperated with this man in order to fulfill her role as a wife in society. Davis also reveals people's perceptions of marriage in sixteenth century.

Marriages of the time were often arranged more for economic reasons rather than any idea of romantic love. Marriage of Martin and Bertrande was not far from this ideology. It was a well-established contract between a farmer

family and the de Rols who were a member of local merchant. As much as this marriage looked good to both families from the economic point of view, it did not satisfy the couple. Nonetheless, there did not seem to be much of a connection between the two and Martin certainly did not go out his way to please her.

Their union started with Martin, having trouble consummating the marriage and as the author mentioned in her book, “ nothing happened in Bertrande’s marriage bed, it seemed, neither that night nor for more than eight years afterward. Martin Guerre was impotent. ” (19). Also, it was not easy for Martin to grow up in a new village with language barriers where his name was not common. “ If we can judge Martin Guerre’s state of mind from how he chose to spend the next twelve years of his life, there was very little he liked about

Artigat beyond his swordplay and acrobatics with the other young men” (21). Overall conditions made life impossible for Martin and made him to move from the village to Spain. When Martin left, some people, including Bertrande, may not have been surprised. After several years that martin was disappeared, a man introduces himself as being Martin Guerre. The memory of Martin as a distant, uncaring husband may have been in Bertrande’s mind when she met the charming impostor.

Immediately upon taking him into her home and into her bed, she would have noticed that the impostor was more experienced than the real Martin. This may have influenced her decision to conspire with the impostor, she could have the economic advantages that her family wanted and have the

caring husband she never had before. Indeed, all evidence declares the truth 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. They had two children together of which one survived.

The new man, and certainly Bertrande, have found justification for their decision to live together as married couple, in the new Protestant religions that were influential in part of France at the time. Bertrande's family and the entire town of Artigat converted to Protestant. The new religion and its law was beneficial to Bertrande as what was preventing her from taking actions towards new decisions were from catholic traditions. Since Bertrande and the new Martin seemed to have been influenced by Protestantism, they may have heard about new marriage laws in the reformed Geneva.

These laws allowed an abandoned wife to seek for divorce after she had been left for a year. Then the woman would be allowed to remarry.

Bertrande, in a way, was remarrying, for she knew that the new Martin was an impostor. The fairness of the new law may have helped her to justify her decision to accept the new Martin. Protestantism differs with Catholicism in another way that would help Bertrande accept her decision. Catholics must confess their sins to a priest instead of directly to God.

Although a priest was bound not to reveal the details of confessions to anyone, Davis contends that if Bertrande and the impostor had confessed their sins, the priest " would have excommunicated them as notorious adulterers"(47). Protestantism, on the other hand, requires no intermediary in confessions, believers confess to God directly. This fact, along with the

new Protestant marriage laws, would have made Bertrande's decision easier to accept. However, financial issues within the family lead to Pierre Guerre of accusing the new martin of being an impostor.

Since, Martin Guerre's father, had left everything to his son who disappeared from the village, the town decided to put his inheritance in the care of Martin's uncle, Pierre. Bertrande and her son would be supported by Pierre, while Pierre could profit from Martin's land in his absence. The Trial took place in the parliament of Toulouse with the presence of judge Coras. At first trial went on smoothly and the judge was going to announce that the new Martin was innocent and free of all charges. Although there was enough evidence to prove that he was guilty, other powerful factors may have been at play.

Firstly, Coras may have been influenced by Protestantism by the time of trial which could lead to a connection between the judge and a fellow protestant, who seemed to be taking better care of his wife than the real Martin Guerre. Secondly, once the fraud had been revealed, it is unexpected to " imagine that Coras could consistently believe that women were so easy to trick" (110). So maybe Coras suspected that the impostor and Bertrande were conspiring, but let her off the hook in the end because of the unfairness of what he would have certainly seen as a Catholic marriage law that left Bertrande with no options after being abandoned.

This illustrated that how the Catholic laws and tradition of the time limited women and presented them without any other choices where in this case Bertrande was left without being able to choose the right options. If she did

not accept the new Martin Guerre, she could have waited forever for the real Martin to return. It is also notable that how Protestantism could have revealed the unfair laws which were ruled women. Protestantism's rule on confession helped Bertrande live with her decision.

Davis illustrated how other characters were influenced by the laws of new religion, such as Coras, and how Protestantism may have influenced his decisions as a judge. Aside the religion, the persuasive power of the new Martin, also had a great impact on his decision. This was a phenomenal that was leading to the court's desire to find that this was the real Martin Guerre and not an imposter. As Davis illustrated in her book, the real Martin was an unsatisfied man who faced many failures in his life which eventually led him leave everything behind and disappear where as the new Martin was a loving, ideal husband.

Considering the original Martin Guerre's performance as a husband despite his athletic abilities, he was not able to consummate the marriage, face the pain and fear in his life to find a way out of it and instead he abandoned his wife, left his family, and ran out of responsibilities. On the other hand, the 'new' Martin Guerre was a man who showed what a responsible man he could be for his new family and more importantly for the community. The fact that he was suing a relative was relatively common at the time in that region and indicated that he was vigorously pursuing his economic interests.

Witnesses testified that he was a loving husband and father. His wife refused to speak against him. Additionally, it seems the local community was unwilling to speak poorly of him. In other words, the new Martin Guerre was

a better version than the old one in that he expressed traditional and accepted male roles and perceptions of marriage. Overall, the author of the book was very solid on the subject and gave a very clear view of the life, marriage, and tradition of the time in sixteenth century.

Davis clearly mentioned different aspects of the story as who the real Martin was and why he left everything behind. Also, she did a fantastic job in shaping the imposter's character through different chapters of the book. Most importantly she gave a clear view to the reader of how the tradition, and religion were playing a great role in that society and how these could influence each character's decision as well as how different roles were limited women and their choices.