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Introducing an Age of Impostors

Early modern Europe was teeming with impostors. Men and women from all walks of life were inventing, fabricating and disguising themselves, lying about who they were or pretending to be someone they were not. As a result, authorities, both religious and secular, were frantically creating new means for ascertaining each person’s identity. The story told in this book is one chapter in the long history of a contest between the forgers of identities and the creators of new and more efficient methods of identification, methods which in their turn bred new imaginative ways for evading the removal of masks. It was a race which began with the dawn of civilization – for example Odysseus disguising himself as a beggar to enter the city of Troy, or the biblical Jacob stealing his father’s blessing by impersonating Esau (Genesis 27) and the Gileadites identifying the Ephraimites by their inability to pronounce Shibboleth (Judges 12:5–6) – and has never ended. Today, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, despite the most sophisticated means of identification based on the latest advancements in science and technology, the battle against impersonation and the invention of identity is still far from won. “Identity theft” has become the number one crime in the USA, and the media are inundated with films, television series and books on every manner of impostor – many of them based on real-life sensational stories, such as Catch Me If You Can, which recounts the adventures of Frank Abagnale Jr in the 1960s, or L’Adversaire, which tells the story of Jean-Claude Romand who succeeded for 18 years in masquerading as a doctor and in 1993 murdered his family when he was about to be exposed. In a recent case in England (reported in the media on 5 May 2011), a conwoman, Alison Reynolds, posed not as a single daughter of the poet T.S. Eliot, but as his twin daughters and – with the ease offered by Photoshop – concocted a double picture of herself as two separate persons.

Yet, although a universal and perennial phenomenon, every age has bred different kinds of imposture and new methods for verification of identity according to its bureaucratic and technological possibilities. Therefore, examining particular ways of forging identities, as well as the authorities’
persistence at unmasking impostors during a certain period, can be a fruitful endeavour towards understanding some of the fears, anxieties, hopes, aspirations, limitations and feasibilities typical of a specific time and place. As Natalie Zemon Davis convincingly argues, it is an historiographical error to transpose an imposture story from one environment to another: Arnauld du Tilh, Martin Guerre’s *Doppelgänger*, Bernarde, the deceived wife, and the judges’ hesitations in that drama, were all products of sixteenth-century France; the plot would have unfolded very differently had the story taken place in the United States during the Civil War.¹

In a similar manner one could say that, although royal pretenders have appeared in practically every country and every century, from Nero impostors in 69 CE² down to Kumar of Bhawal in Bengal³ and Anna Anderson, claiming to be Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna of Russia, in the 1920s and 1930s, each one bore the unique features of his or her age and circumstances. Each episode can tell us far more about the mentalities of its period than about the mentality of an archetypical false pretender. Also, the stakes when claiming a throne were so high that suspicion and close scrutiny were particularly intense and chances of success minimal, if at all. It is in fact surprising that such pretenders did rally a large number of followers, many of whom were sincere believers in the royal identity of the impostor, however unlikely. Indeed, expectations for a return of “the hidden king” were sometimes so high that there was all of a sudden a large cluster of false princes. The centuries which separated the Middle Ages from the modern period were undoubtedly such a time with several Sebastians in Portugal, several Dimitris in Russia, several York princes in England, a leader of a revolt in Aragon in 1522 calling himself *El Rey Encubierto* (the Hidden King), a number of heirs to the Sultan’s throne and even one prince of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.⁴ Such a wave requires historical explanations which go deeper and further than the psychological makeup of individual impostors or the opportunistic motivations of supporters.

Then there are those kinds of false identities which are rife in one period and almost non-existent in another. Dangers threatening members of particular groups loom large in one age and then disappear; benefits to be had by claiming affiliation to a certain ethnic group or profession are there one historical moment and gone the next; people’s gullibility waxes and wanes: easily fooled by simple ruses at one time, men and women may become over-suspicious later on (though by no means should one assume a linear progress from naïveté to sophistication); and, obviously, available means for establishing veracity, distinguishing fact from fiction, have been piling up at a very rapid pace in modern times. It was not only recent discoveries of fingerprinting,⁵ DNA profiling and biometrics which created a wholly new world of identification, but it was also the nineteenth-century art of photography, as well as earlier continuous improvements in means of communication ever since the development of public postal services,⁶ which