

**Robert J. RABEL**

**Impersonation and Human Identity in the *Odyssey* and *Sommersby***

*Sommersby*, the 1993 film directed by Jon Amiel, has received little critical attention and largely been dismissed as a mediocre remake of 1982's *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a film in which a man returns from war to his village in sixteenth-century France after being absent for many years and is confronted by people who claim he is not who he says he is. *Sommersby* transposes the story to America at the end of the Civil War and features Richard Gere and Jodie Foster in the story of a man who returns from a more recent war claiming, in this case, to be Jack Sommersby. However, his dog fails to recognize him and his wife is uncertain of his identity, since he seems a better man than the husband who left her to go off to war. Moreover, the man claiming to be Jack Sommersby has a deep and abiding interest in Homer, a subject that never concerned her husband in the past. In *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, Jon Solomon has noted the film's references to Homer, though he does not describe them in any detail.

In this talk, I argue that *Sommersby* is a clever conflation of *The Return of Martin Guerre* and the *Odyssey*, the influence of the *Odyssey* on *Sommersby* operating simultaneously on two different levels. Both the makers of the film and Jack Sommersby, the major protagonist within the film, work consciously and in conjunction to recreate Homer's epic. The filmmakers, for their part, fashion each major character after a closely corresponding Homeric model. At the same time as the makers of the film evoke the *Odyssey* through their construction of plot and character, Jack Sommersby works from within the film to create the *Odyssey* anew by emulating Odysseus' exemplary epic recovery of wife, house, and land. Jack Sommersby becomes, in effect, an ersatz Odysseus, a hero reliving the Western world's classic epic of return. Jack thus functions as a reflexive counterpart of the makers of *Sommersby*, much as Odysseus self-reflexively matches the poet of the *Odyssey* in cleverness and the ability to tell a well-made story.