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Im Gespräch

Heroes, Heroines, Protagonists

Natalie Zemon Davis

eingeleitet von Gabriele Jancke und Claudia Ulbrich

Natalie Zemon Davis, geboren 1928 in Detroit, lehrte Geschichte in Providence, Toronto und Berkeley, an der *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris, ist Henry Charles Lea Professor of History emerita an der Princeton University und Adjunct Professor of History, Anthropology and Medieval Studies sowie Senior Lecturer for Comparative Literature an der University of Toronto. Ihr Forschungsgebiet ist die Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte Europas im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert. International bekannt wurde sie durch Arbeiten zur Reformationsgeschichte in Frankreich und zum Humanismus. Der Kulturanthropologie und der Historischen Frauenforschung hat die durch zahlreiche Preise und Ehrungen ausgezeichnete Historikerin wichtige Impulse gegeben. Das Interesse an einzelnen Menschen und ihren Lebensläufen, die faszinierende und reflektierte Umsetzung ihrer Forschungsergebnisse in Erzählungen und eine dezentrierte Geschichtsschreibung kennzeichnen ihre Arbeitsweise. Im Sinne einer „Geschichte der Möglichkeiten“ untersucht sie das Handeln von Menschen in Positionen an den Rändern und kann so eine Vielzahl von Handlungsoptionen aufdecken, die den Menschen verfügbar waren, wenn auch nicht unbedingt als durchgängige, weit verbreitete Muster. Auf diese Weise ist Geschichte für sie nicht ein fertiges und in sich geschlossenes Modell. Vielmehr wird sie mit dem Aufdecken vielfältiger, wenn auch scheinbar „marginaler“ Handlungsmöglichkeiten zugleich Potential für die Zukunft.¹

In ihren international breit rezipierten Büchern „The Return of Martin Guerre“ und „Women on the Margins“² stehen einzelne Frauen und ihre Lebensgeschichten im Zentrum der Erzählung. Natalie Zemon Davis, eine Spezialistin der dialogischen

1 Vgl. Monika Bernold u. Andrea Ellmeier, Geschichte, Hoffnung und Selbstironie. Natalie Zemon Davis im Gespräch, in: *L'Homme. Z. F. G.*, 3, 2 (1992), 98–104.

2 Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge, Mass. 1983 (dt. Die wahrhaftige Geschichte von der Wiederkehr des Martin Guerre, München 1984 u. Frankfurt a. M. 1989); dies., *Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*, Cambridge, Mass. 1995 (dt. Drei Frauenleben. Glikl, Marie de l'Incarnation, Maria Sibylla Merian, Berlin 1996).

Geschichtswissenschaft, versteht es, die Geschichten ihrer ProtagonistInnen so zu gestalten, dass sie im Spannungsfeld von individueller Besonderheit und historischer Bedingtheit verortet werden. Die Biografien einzelner Personen beinhalten demnach die Chance, die Strukturen einer Gesellschaft nach allen Seiten hin auszuloten, individuelle Handlungsräume zu rekonstruieren und die Möglichkeiten, Entscheidungen zu treffen, darin aufzuspüren. Von den AkteurInnen her gefragt, werden diese Geschichten einzelner Lebensläufe zu den roten Fäden einer narrativen Geschichtsschreibung. Gleichzeitig verflechten sie sich mit dem Gewebe der Kontexte – mit den minutiös nachgezeichneten materiellen, ökonomischen, rechtlichen, religiösen Bedingungen, mit den Begrenzungen und Verhinderungen und auch mit den Möglichkeiten, die darin liegen. Dieser Zugang wird frühneuzeitlichen Gesellschaften in besonderem Maße gerecht, insofern sie – wie die neuere Forschung zunehmend deutlich macht – stark durch persönliche Beziehungen und personalistische Strukturen geprägt waren. Die historische Kulturanthropologie, so wie Natalie Zemon Davis sie mit entwickelt und geprägt hat, liefert ihr nicht nur methodische und thematische Orientierungen dafür, sondern auch eine von vornherein auf die Praxis von AkteurInnen gerichtete Perspektive, die für einen transkulturellen Horizont offen ist. Diese Konzentration auf einzelne Personen und ihre Lebensgeschichten bringt die Erfahrungen und das Handeln in den Vordergrund wissenschaftlicher Darstellung.

Für das Heldinnen-Heft haben wir Natalie Zemon Davis um ein Interview gebeten. Da es absehbar war, dass sich kein Gespräch arrangieren lassen würde, entwarfen wir eine Fragenliste, um einen Dialog zu initiieren, der sich elektronischer Medien bediente. Unsere Fragen bezogen sich zum einen auf das Thema des aktuellen L'Homme-Heftes und waren zum anderen auch Teil eines längeren Gesprächs über Personenkonzepte, das auf die Sektion „Selbstzeugnisse in transkultureller Perspektive“ auf dem Historikertag in Aachen 2000 zurückgeht.³ Wir wollten von Natalie Zemon Davis wissen, wie sie die schwierige Beziehung zwischen Feminismus und Heldinnen, die sie in „Women's History in Transition“ und „On the Lame“⁴ andeutet, erklärt und wie sie ihre eigenen Arbeiten in Bezug auf ein Heldinnenkonzept verorten würde. Weitere Fragen bezogen sich auf das Konzept der Individualität im Sinne Jacob Burckhardts, von dem wir argwöhnten, dass es sich auf eine geschlechterbezogene Vorstellung von Helden zurückführen ließe. Nach der Lektüre von „Boundaries and the Sense of Self“⁵ auf der

3 Vgl. die Kurzdarstellung: Selbstzeugnisse in transkultureller Perspektive (Leitung: Kaspar von Greyerz und Claudia Ulbrich), in: Eine Welt – Eine Geschichte? 43. Deutscher Historikertag in Aachen, 26. bis 29. September 2000, Berichtsband, hg. im Auftrag des Verbandes der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands e. V. von Max Kerner in Zusammenarbeit mit den Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeitern des Aachener Organisationsbüros, München 2001, 48–55; im einzelnen Claudia Ulbrich: Eine Welt – Eine Geschichte?, ebd., 48–50; Gerhard Wedel, Lebensweg, Wissen und Wissensvermittlung. Arabische Biographik (13. Jahrhundert), ebd. 51; Natalie Zemon Davis, Autobiographical Writing in a Cross-Cultural Context, ebd., 51–52; Desanka Schwara, Selbst und Kontext. Tagebücher jüdischer Jugendlicher aus Osteuropa (um 1900), ebd., 52–53; Kaspar von Greyerz, Kommentar, ebd., 53–54.

4 Natalie Zemon Davis, „Women's History“ in Transition: The European Case, in: Feminist Studies, 3 (1976), 83–93; dies., On the Lame (AHR Forum: The Return of Martin Guerre), in: American Historical Review, 93 (1988), 572–603.

5 Natalie Zemon Davis, Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth-Century France, in: Thomas C.

einen sowie „The Return of Martin Guerre“ und „On the Lame“ auf der anderen Seite war uns nicht klar, ob Natalie Zemon Davis Individualität überhaupt für einen brauchbaren Zugang halten würde und wie sie die Beziehung zwischen *individuality* und *agency* sieht. Ihre Antworten formulierte Natalie Zemon Davis in einem zusammenhängenden Text, der auf unsere Fragen eingeht, ohne explizit auf sie Bezug zu nehmen. Auf diese Weise ist eine wissenschaftliche (Kurz-)Autobiografie entstanden, in der Natalie Zemon Davis ihr Forscherinnenleben seit der Studentinnenzeit unter dem Aspekt ihrer sich wandelnden Einstellung zu verschiedenen Heldinnenkonzepten erzählt. Ausgangspunkt ihrer Überlegungen ist die Spannung zwischen der klassischen und der literarischen Vorstellung von *hero/heroine*. Sie spielt dabei auf Uneindeutigkeiten in der englischen Sprache an, die sich im Deutschen ungleich besser darstellen lassen, wenn man von „HeldInnen der Geschichte“ spricht und sich die schillernde Bedeutung des Wortes „Geschichte“ (*story/history*) zunutze macht. Da wir der Auffassung sind, dass die Texte von Natalie Zemon Davis mit der Übersetzung vieles von dem verlieren, was ihre Arbeitsweise gerade auszeichnet – die Klarheit und Genauigkeit ihrer wissenschaftlichen Prosa ebenso wie der reflektierte Umgang mit verschiedenen Bedeutungsebenen –, haben wir uns entschlossen, ihren Text in der Originalsprache wiederzugeben.

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There are two ways of constructing the idea of hero/heroine. One is the classical idea of Hero, a figure larger than usual life, with extraordinary qualities – perhaps with a tragic flaw, but still through deeds and virtues fulfilling roles admired by contemporaries and later generations. The other is a literary idea of the hero of a story or protagonist, that is, the person – or persons – whom the writer makes the center of a narrative and follows through from start to finish. Of course, the two ideas can overlap, but it's helpful to separate them for analysis.

When I first began my historical research decades ago, I was not interested in constructing a classical Hero or even Heroine. The concept seemed too aristocratic and focused on great figures for me. I remember reading Sidney Hook's "The Hero in History"⁶ when I was a student. He talked about "event-making" leaders – men and even a few women – whose beliefs, character, and decisions had had a significant effect on their time. To influence the course of history, Hook said, the Hero had to meet some "group interests" of the day, economic or national, but he or she still had some freedom to make choices about which forces to favor.

I liked the idea of choices that could make a difference in history, but I wanted to explore human agency in another direction. Rather than individual kings, queens, revolutionary leaders and thinkers, I turned to the choices and decisions of persons often constructed only as followers or as acted upon. I began with the printing workers of Lyon during the Reformation, then spread out to other artisanal groups and the urban

Heller u. a. Hg., *Reconstructing Individualism. Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, Stanford, California 1986, 53–63, 332–335 (dt. *Bindung und Freiheit. Die Grenzen des Selbst im Frankreich des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts*, in: dies., *Frauen und Gesellschaft am Beginn der Neuzeit. Studien über Familie, Religion und die Wandlungsfähigkeit des sozialen Körpers*, Berlin 1986, 7–18, 133–135).

6 Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History. A Study in Limitation and Possibility*, London 1945.

poor more generally, and finally to peasants. The lives of such people were shaped by their society, its structures of prestige and power, and its patterns of work and family. Their understandings of their world were drawn from traditions, information, and forms of argument and communication around them; their concepts of "choice", "duty", "gift", and "obligation", were influenced by the vocabulary, teaching, and social relations of the time. Such shaping processes set limits to lives in the past, but they also provided the tools and the practices by which people made choices and tried to figure out their world and weave a future for themselves. Sometimes their choices became "event-making", that is, became sources of transformation in behavior and/or thought, even though they took place distant from the recognized centers of power and learning. So the actions of the printing workers of Lyon had a real effect on the course of the Reformation in that city and on the rituals, demands, and argumentation of early French trade unions.

I had had a chance to think about women as "event-making" heroines already in my student days in the 1950s, when I had written a paper on "Christine de Pizan as the First Professional Literary Woman". Though I thought this early 15th-century figure was fascinating in words and deeds, I did not want to concentrate on an individual, especially one frequenting the high world of royal and ducal courts. I was not even attracted by Jeanne d'Arc, to whom Christine de Pizan wrote a last appreciative poem: it seemed to me then that the peasant-girl-turned-military-savior had already been fully treated as a Woman Worthy, "beyond her sex".

It wasn't till the late 1960s, with the new scholarship on the history of women, that I began to reflect on what it meant to be "beyond her sex", that is, on Hero/Heroine as a gendered concept, and not only a concept associated with class and political position. By the medieval period, there were heroic models for both men and women, some inherited from the ancient world, some added by Christianity, but men had a wider range of possibilities for greatness than women. A woman became a Heroine through the unusual expression of male virtue as a queen-warrior, a Judith slaying tyrannical Holofernes, or a courageous virgin defending her chastity and Christian truth. A distinctively female heroism emerged in self-sacrifice in the name of some wider family or civic value, as in Lucretia's suicide after being raped, but a male Hero was unlikely to follow this path. "Beyond one's sex" was a positive quality in only one direction. The most symmetrical notion of heroism grew in the fields of holiness: the ascetic, charitable, mystical, and pious achievements of saints had both male and female style, even androgynous style. If only male saints acquired greatness through preaching, a female saint like Catherine of Siena could use her voice for prophetic revelation.

I now returned to Christine de Pizan's "City of Ladies"⁷ with new eyes, and read it every year with my students. Back in 1405, she had constructed a pantheon of Heroines – mythical, biblical, and historical – in all fields of endeavor and illustrative of all virtues. Sometimes she presented women and men as alike in potential and achievement, sometimes as different, with the advantage accruing to women.

7 Christine de Pizan, *Le livre de la cité des dames*, aus dem Mittelfranzösischen übersetzt und eingeleitet von Éric Hicks u. Thérèse Moreau, Paris 1992 (dt. *Das Buch von der Stadt der Frauen*, aus dem Mittelfranzösischen übersetzt, kommentiert und eingeleitet von Margarete Zimmermann, Berlin 1986).

Could Christine de Pizan's book be an inspiration for my own research, I wondered? In its fresh rereading of ancient texts, yes. In its stress on women's initiative, yes. In its presentation of women active well beyond the household, the convent, and the court, yes. But only virtuous women were welcome in "The City of Ladies", that is, women who could be celebrated as exemplary. No mention of prostitutes, of saucy domestic servants, of vindictive wives (Christine's Medea, a model of female constancy, simply "turns despondent" in the wake of Jason's perfidy), of rebellious peasant women, or radical female heretics. This "City" of Heroines, so capacious in some regards, was too constricted for me in others.

I turned to another woman writer for an approach: the story-telling Queen Marguerite de Navarre. Her "Heptaméron"⁸ presented women and men of all kinds to her sixteenth-century readers. Rather than Heroines and Heroes, the "Heptaméron" casts women and men as protagonists of each tale. They achieve this centrality not necessarily because of remarkable achievement or "event-making", but because of a literary decision by Marguerite de Navarre that their stories (some of them taken from earlier writers, some based on events in her own day) reveal much about human behavior, feeling, and belief. The social range is not wide: there are some peasants and a number of cityfolk, but more of the women and men are well-born. The plot of the story usually revolves around love (including love between married people), desire, and sexuality. But the reader sees every kind of woman at the heart of a tale: loyal and loving women, angry and hateful women, jealous women, generous women, oppressive women, women disobeying mother-figures, resisting rapists, and enjoying lovemaking. Each story is debated by a circle of ladies and gentlemen, offering different ways of evaluating the central characters.

As I began my own writing on women in 1969, I took a leaf from "The City of Ladies" and the "Heptaméron" both. Like Christine de Pizan, I would search for unrecognized agency in women and, when the evidence warranted it, point to great achievement and an important legacy for the future. Like Marguerite de Navarre, I would center all kinds of women – and men – in my histories, and follow their struggle with life with various different outcomes. More than either author, I would follow the traces of women of the lower orders of society.

I started, as I had earlier with the printers' journeymen, with groups of women: the city women who joined the first generation of Protestants in France; the women who participated in religious riots on the Catholic and Protestant side; the women who protested the oppression of tax collectors or the marauding of soldiers and served as models for popular revolts of cross-dressed men; the urban women trying to make a living for themselves and their families by everything from prostitution to publishing. Once in a while, an individual figure would flash up with clear lineaments from the archives or martyrologies: say, a La Rochelle serving woman, arguing publicly with a Franciscan preacher about the Word of God and paying later with her life. These group portraits allowed one to see the uses of female Heroism in that hierarchical early modern world. It was all the more remarkable when a lowly and vulnerable woman

8 Marguerite de Navarre, *Heptaméron*, hg. von Renja Salminen, Genf 1999.

stood up to the priests or other authorities; such symbolic meanings inspired men to put on women's clothes and blacken their faces for their own uprisings.

I've still continued such group studies in more recent inquiries, comparing women's pardon tales with those of men and women's gift practices with those of men. Here, too, one can detect the implications of asymmetrical traditions in regard to Heroism. For instance, both the literary and folk traditions were filled with tales glorifying men defending their honor against other men; women's fights with other women were treated as comedy. A woman defending herself for killing another woman had difficulty in making a persuasive case for pardon, even when she felt her honor had been impugned.

By the mid-1970s, however, I was yearning for more evidence from individual lives within the popular classes. I wanted to find the equivalent of anthropological field work, where one could question people about feelings, beliefs, and hopes, and observe them in sustained relations with those around them. The Martin Guerre case filled the bill. These Pyrenean peasants were, on the one hand, responding to the most everyday issues of village life: property, fertility, children, inheritance. On the other hand, they were using means that were not routine, but drawn from the cultural margins – that is, available, but less frequently used patterns of behavior in their society: running away for a new life, as did Martin Guerre; taking on the identity of another man, as did Arnaud du Tilh; collaborating with a substitute husband, as did Bertrande de Rols.

Bertrande de Rols is one of the three figures around which "The Return of Martin Guerre" is centered, that is, she is one of the protagonists of the tale. In fact, I tried to construct the story without any thoroughgoing villains: if the weight of interpretation is sympathetic to the quest for possibility in the "invented marriage" of Arnaud du Tilh and Bertrande de Rols, I sought evidence to make the adventure-seeking Martin Guerre and the stern patriarchal Basque uncle Pierre Guerre understandable men within their sixteenth-century world. Bertrande de Rols has the agency of a Heroine as she extracts herself from the predicament of an abandoned wife bossed around by elders. As such, both our film "Le retour de Martin Guerre" and my book rescued her from her centuries-old status as a mere victim of a clever impostor. But Bertrande de Rols is also a crafty schemer, plotting strategies that might save the impostor as her "husband" but also that could save her life and reputation if he were found out. (This is pointed out much more accurately in my book; our film romanticizes and softens Bertrande in certain ways.) And the "invented marriage", however understandable and imaginative its goals in a difficult situation, was based on a lie.

Thus, Bertrande de Rols is not a full Heroine in the traditional sense, but rather a woman with initiative and the willingness to take risk in a peasant society full of pressure. Christine de Pizan would either have excluded her from "The City of Ladies" or rewritten her story as she did Medea's. Marguerite de Navarre, if she had lived long enough, would have included the whole story in her "Heptaméron", where the rights and wrongs of Bertrande, Arnaud, and Martin would have stimulated as much debate among the listeners to each tale as they do among historians, readers, and movie-goers today. My next venture with individual lives was "Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives", which I started to research in 1990. For twenty years I had been lecturing about the merchant Glikl bas Judah Leib, the teacher and missionary Marie Guyart de

l'Incarnation, and the naturalist-artist Maria Sibylla Merian in my course on Society and the Sexes. They seemed a perfect trio for further examination: they were all city women, they all had urban trades, they had all been married and had children, and they all left some body of writing – but they were of different religions. Glikl was Jewish, Marie de l'Incarnation, Catholic, and Maria Sibylla Merian, a Lutheran turned radical Protestant sectary and then Deist.

The Yiddish autobiography of Glikl bas Judah Leib and the spiritual autobiographies of Marie de l'Incarnation were especially precious sources. With Bertrande de Rols, the only first person-narratives were what she said to the trial judges, as reported through a notary's pen. The autobiographical writings of Glikl and Marie de l'Incarnation had their own conventions and intentional stresses and omissions, but they came from the women's own hand and presented a view of their lives from the start, which they wanted to pass on to children and others.

Assigning such importance to the autobiographical text as a source for life-history, I had to face the difficulty of one serious silence. The entomologist-painter Maria Sibylla Merian had left only a few direct glimmers in writing about her own life amidst considerable publication on the lives of insects and plants. What to make of this, especially since Merian must have gone through intense periods of self-consciousness as she left her husband and moved in and then out of the Labadist sect and community? I decided that in a period of increased autobiographical expression by women, the key to Merian's silence was not lack of introspection, but intentional concealment of a life marked by scandals. Secrecy was a policy, which allowed Maria Sibylla Merian to make her way in the world.

Were my three protagonists representative of their respective worlds? Perhaps in their work-styles they were, but Marie de l'Incarnation spent the last thirty years of her life teaching Christianity to Amerindian women along the Saint Lawrence River, while Maria Sibylla Merian made a risky trip to the Dutch colony of Suriname and pioneered in the ecological way she studied and wrote about its flora and fauna. These were clearly women of unusual achievement. Marie de l'Incarnation was categorized by the religious of her day as a "femme forte", that is, as a Christian Heroine. Maria Sibylla Merian was a ready candidate (perhaps with a few episodes effaced or explained away) for an early modern Dictionary of Illustrious Women. Even Glikl, similar in many traits to other well-off Jewish women of Hamburg and Metz, was a remarkable innovator in the structure and literary quality of her autobiography.

Yes, these three women were exceptional, but they were not insulated Heroines. In their inventiveness and courage, they drew on cultural resources, especially religious resources of their time. If they were located on "margins" – that is, far from centers of power and learning – they derived some benefit from the choices available to them in these fluid settings.

Sometimes readers of "Women on the Margins" tell me they have a favorite among the three women or that they are sure I have a favorite. In fact, I don't. Each woman's life stands on its own as a way of being, coping, creating, and suffering in the 17th century. In all their humanness and their daring, they can serve as encouraging models in our global city.