Women on the Margins

Three Seventeenth-Century Lives

NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS

AUTHOR OF

The Return of Martin Guerre

Maria Sibylla Merian

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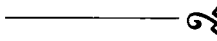

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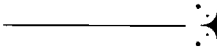

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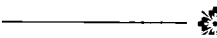

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TO THE MEMORY OF

Rosalie Colie
(1924–1972)

AND

Michel de Certeau
(1925–1986)

WOMEN ON THE MARGINS

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Illustrations follow pages 48, 122, and 156.

PROLOGUE

Place: Thoughtland
Time: October 1994, Heshvan 5755
Persons: Four women past sixty. Three of them stand near a well-thumbed manuscript, sometimes addressing each other, sometimes musing to themselves. The fourth listens for a time from the shadows.

Marie de l'Incarnation: I've read it. I'm scandalized. Imagine her enclosing me in a book with such godless women.

Glikl bas Judah Leib: What do you mean? God, may he and his name be praised, was always in my heart and on my lips. You can't understand a word I wrote.

Marie de l'Incarnation: I could have learned Yiddish if Our Lord had wanted me to. I learned Huron, didn't I? I read what she said about how you cared about money. You Jews are as hard-hearted as the Huguenots. I thank my Beloved Spouse that he called me to the Savages far from Europe.

Glikl bas Judah Leib: I read what she said about how you left your son before he was set in life. Never in all my trials and sorrows would I have neglected my children. I don't belong in a book with such a mother. And why should she put me together with non-Jews at all?

Maria Sibylla Merian: I am completely out of place here. These

women were not lovers of nature. They had no eyes for God's small creatures and their beauty. They didn't read the kind of books I did or talk to the kind of people I did. This is not my setting.

Marie de l'Incarnation: Listen to Mistress Proud and Haughty. But what can you expect from a woman who even began to doubt the adorable Incarnate Word? To think we are back-to-back in the same pages. I wouldn't have minded if she had put me with those who have tried to spread the universal kingdom of God.

Glikl bas Judah Leib: I wouldn't have minded if the author had just written about me and my stories for her Jewish children and grandchildren.

Maria Sibylla Merian: I don't object to being in a book with Jews and Catholics. In fact, I was pleased to discover that the learned Salomon Perez wrote a poem for the edition of my Suriname book that came out after I died. But I don't belong in a book about "women." I should be together with the students and painters of nature, with scholars of insects and plants.

Natalie Zemon Davis (stepping forward from the shadows): I'm the author. Let me explain.

The Other Three Women: You have a lot of explaining to do.

NZD: Glikl bas Judah Leib, you told stories in your memoirs about non-Jews as well as Jews. Mistress Merian, you mixed studies of butterflies with those of other insects. I put you together to learn from your similarities and differences. In my day it is sometimes said that women of the past resemble one another, especially if they live in the same kind of place. I wanted to show where you were alike and where you were not, in how you talked about yourselves and what you did. Where you were different from the men in your world and where you were the same—

Maria Sibylla Merian: That's better kept a secret.

NZD: To show how each of you wrote about relations with people outside your world.

Glikl bas Judah Leib: That's better kept a secret.

NZD: I chose you because you were all city women, the daugh-

ters of merchants and artisans—of commoners—in France and in the German states.

Glikl bas Judah Leib: You know perfectly well that among the children of Israel, however illustrious our families, we do not talk about commoners and nobles.

NZD: I wanted to have a Jew, a Catholic, and a Protestant so I could see what difference religion made in women's lives, what doors it opened for you and what doors it closed, what words and actions it allowed you to choose.

Marie de l'Incarnation: Choose? Choosing religion means becoming a nun—

Maria Sibylla Merian:—or joining a community of the repentant—

Marie de l'Incarnation: But worshiping God is a matter of truth and absolute obligation.

Glikl bas Judah Leib: With that last remark of the Catholic, because of our sins, I have to agree.

NZD: Mother Marie, the *Chronicles* of your Ursulines are full of women's struggles. I wanted to find out whether you three women had struggles with gender hierarchies.

The Other Three Women (indignantly): *Gender* hierarchies? What are gender hierarchies?

NZD: Look what happened, Mistress Merian, when you went to Suriname to observe its insects. If you'd been a man, some important person would have paid your way. You had to borrow the money to do it.

Maria Sibylla Merian: Yes, and I paid back every cent.

NZD: Glikl bas Judah Leib, you wrote of your husband Haim ben Joseph as a "shepherd" and he called you "my child."

Glikl bas Judah Leib: "Gliklikhen," "min Gliklikhen." What other words to use for a couple as dear to each other as we were?

NZD: Why did you always call your sons "rabbi," but never give your daughters any special title?

Glikl bas Judah Leib: That is the question of a wicked daughter at the Passover Seder.

NZD: But I didn't portray you three as merely long-suffering. I

also showed how women in your position made the best of it. I asked what advantages you had by being on the margins.

Glikl bas Judah Leib: Margins are where I read comments in my Yiddish books.

Marie de l'Incarnation: In my Christian books.

Maria Sibylla Merian: River margins are the dwelling place of frogs.

NZD (desperately): You *found* things on margins. You were all adventurous. You each tried to do something no one had ever done before. I wondered what the sources and the costs of adventure were—for Europeans and for non-Europeans—in the seventeenth century.

Marie de l'Incarnation: The Lord did not summon me to "adventures."

Maria Sibylla Merian: It sounds to me, historian Davis, as though *you're* the one who wanted adventures.

NZD (after a pause): Yes, it was an adventure following you three to so many different climes. And I wanted to write of your hopes for paradise on earth, for remade worlds, since I have had those hopes, too. At least you all must admit that you loved to describe your world. Glikl and Marie, how you loved to write! And Maria Sibylla, how you loved to look and paint!

The Other Three Women: Well . . . maybe, maybe . . .

NZD: Give me another chance. Read it again.

GLIKL BAS JUDAH LEIB

Arguing with God

IN THE LAST DECADE of the seventeenth century—the year 5451 by the Jewish reckoning—a Jewish merchant woman of Hamburg wrote down a story for her many children. It told of a father bird who lived with his three fledglings along a seashore. One day a fierce storm came up, sending huge waves over the sands. "If we cannot get to the other side at once we are lost," said the bird, and took the first fledgling into his claws and started over the sea. Halfway across, the parent said to his son, "What troubles I have to stand from you! And now I'm risking my life-strength for you. When I am old, will you also do good to me and support me?" The little bird replied, "My dear beloved father, just take me across the water. I will do for you in your old age all that you want of me." Whereupon the parent dropped the birdling into the sea and said, "So should be done with a liar like you."

The parent bird flew back for the second fledgling and halfway across said to it the same words. The little bird promised to do for him all the good in the world. Again the father dropped his young into the sea, saying, "You, too, are a liar." Carrying the third birdling across the water, he asked the same question. The little bird answered, "Father, dear father, all that you say is true, that you have had troubles and grief because of me. I am duty bound to repay you, if it is possible; but I cannot promise for

certain. This, however, I can promise: when one day I have young children of my own, I will do for them as you have done for me."

At this, the father said, "You speak aright and are also clever. I will let you live and will take you across the water."[1]

Glikl's story of the un-Learlike bird was not an immediate message to her offspring. Though some of her twelve living children were still fledglings when she wrote—they ranged in age from two to twenty-eight—she did not intend them to read or hear her narrative right away. Rather, the bird story was one of the opening tales in a carefully constructed Yiddish autobiography, which she would complete over the years and pass on to her children at her death. For the time being, as she strove to order the hopes, joys, and disappointments of her life, she was addressing herself as much as she was addressing her children. The resulting book, mingling Glikl's tales with Glikl's account of her vicissitudes, is remarkable. Not only is it a rich source for the social and cultural history of Ashkenaz and of seventeenth-century Europe; it is also an autobiography of unusual literary structure and religious resonance.

Michel de Certeau has given us much guidance on the unfolding of early modern spirituality in the course of autobiographical composition. Spiritual discoveries are made through dialogue. Pierre Favre, a Jesuit of the generation of Ignatius Loyola, reviewed his life when he was in his early forties, looking for signs of God's graces and recording his prayers and meditations in churches across Europe. The dialogue in his *Memorial* is between the "I" of himself and the "you" of his soul, the self imploring the reluctant soul to receive God's love. In her *Libro de la vida,* the Carmelite Teresa of Avila created two dialogues. One is between the ecstatic self who loves God to distraction and the authorial self who keeps the life on track by ordered writing. The other is between the learned men who have commanded her to write the book and who will judge it and the female readers who will understand it with a special love. In the autobiography of

the Ursuline prioress Jeanne des Anges (1605–1665), it is precisely the lack of dialogue which, according to de Certeau, sets a limit to spiritual advancement. As she describes her demonic possession and her cure, she puts on mask after mask, studying how to please all around her: her sister Ursulines, her demons, her Jesuit exorcisers, and the Ursuline authority who ordered her to write her book. There is no internal I and you, no *je* and *tu,* in the account, but only "I" and "me."[2]

Storytelling did not come up in Michel de Certeau's discussion of these three figures—these Catholics recounted only their visions and dreams, not traditional tales—but he did analyze the power of stories in his *Practice of Everyday Life.* Stories set up a special space for themselves with their "once upon a time." They are an economical instrument for making a point, for striking a blow, "for taking advantage of an occasion . . . by taking it by surprise." The storyteller can move into the way others remember the past and change it merely by introducing an unexpected detail into a familiar account. Everything depends on the skill of the teller, on how she or he takes the stories from the "collective treasury of legends or everyday conversation" and puts them into play.[3]

In this chapter I would like to explore the thematic structures in the autobiography of the woman known in published works since the end of the nineteenth century as "Glückel von Hameln" or "Gluckel of Hameln," the life events she thought worth describing, celebrating, or complaining about, and the surprises of her storytelling. We will listen for her dialogues, for the inner contention around which her life swirled, and for her account of why things happened to her and others as they did. We will see how Christians figured in the recital of this woman so identified with the religion that Teresa of Avila's grandfather and father abandoned many years before. How did Glikl locate herself and her people in a world where Christians thought Jews should be on margins or in ghettos or excluded altogether? And what cultural resources were available to a Jewish woman in seventeenth-

century Europe—resources that she could bend to her own use, that would supply the notes with which she could find her own voice?[4]

But first, some facts about Glikl, starting with her name. "Glückel von Hameln" was assigned to her in 1896 by the editor of the first published edition of the Yiddish memoirs, a good German-sounding first name and a last name with an aristocratic "von" that evoked her husband, Haim, born in the town of Hameln. But it was "Glikl" that circulated in the Yiddish accents around her and in the written name in the seventeenth century,[5] whereas a woman's signature in the Jewish mode associated her not with her husband but with her father. (This was also the case in seventeenth-century France, where the woman's last name was taken from her father and her marital status was indicated by the notary's added phrase "wife of so-and-so" or "widow of so-and-so." In Germany in the late seventeenth century, Christian women increasingly took their husband's name upon marriage, adding their maiden name under certain circumstances: "*geboren Merian.*")

So Glikl's daughters signed in Hebrew characters "Esther bas reb Haim," "Miriam bas reb Haim" ("Esther daughter of our teacher Haim," "Miriam daughter of our teacher Haim"), sometimes adding "Segal" to stress their father's origins in the house of Levi. If signing in a non-Hebrew script, a Jewish woman added one of the surnames her father had assumed for Christian recordkeepers and Jewish tax collectors: Glikl's married daughters wrote "Goldschmidt" for the Christian notaries in France (as we can see in the picture given in this book), whereas Glikl's sons in Germany used sometimes "Hamel" and sometimes "Goldschmidt."[6] Meanwhile, Jewish scribes might designate a woman's status through her husband, as Glikl was in the Jewish community tax book after Haim Hamel died: "Almone Glikl," "the widow Glikl" (but not "widow Glikl Hamel"). When she herself died

in France, the civil records identified her as "Guelic, widow of Cerf Levy" (Levy was her second husband), but the Jewish memorial book named her more traditionally by her father, as it did men as well: "Glik, the daughter of Judah Joseph of blessed memory from Hamburg."[7]

Jewish names slipped and slid about in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries much more than Christian names, rather to the enjoyment of their referents. I will call Glikl by the Jewish name that she is most likely to have used herself: Glikl bas Judah Leib, Glikl daughter of Judah Leib, the name she chose among her father's names to give to her son born after his death.[8]

Glikl was born in Hamburg in late 1646 or in 1647, one of the six children born to Judah Joseph, also known as Leib, a trader and notable of the German-Jewish community, and to the businesswoman Beila, daughter of Nathan Melrich of nearby Altona.[9] At mid-century the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg was a thriving cosmopolitan port of more than 60,000 people, a commercial center and financial market with connections to Spain, Russia, London, and the New World.[10] The Jews had been part of this expansion. In 1612 the Hamburg Senate had signed an agreement with the small community of Portuguese Jews (or Sephardim, as Glikl usually called them), many of them prosperous international bankers and merchants; the agreement allowed them to reside and trade in the city as aliens or "protected Jews" in return for an annual payment.[11] By the 1660s they numbered about 600 people and were trying to turn their informal prayer houses into a synagogue. When Queen Christina of Sweden visited Hamburg in 1667, she and her entourage stayed for more than a month in the fine house of her Jewish bankers, Abraham and Isaac Teixeira, not far from Saint Michael's Church.[12]

Not all Hamburg residents welcomed these developments. The Lutheran clergy fumed to the Senate about its tolerant policies toward the Jews. "In their synagogue there are loud murmurs and cries . . . They practice their own Sabbath not ours . . . They keep Christian manservants and maidservants in their employ . . .

Their rabbis dispute without fear against our Messiah."[13] The Senate, concerned to sustain the city's economic expansion, did what it could to keep the great bankers in the city, though in 1674 the Sephardim were ordered to close their synagogue. Their numbers began to dwindle, and in 1697, when the Senate demanded a high fee from the Portuguese Jews and reduced their distinctive status, Teixeira and others left for Amsterdam.

The German Jewish community then became the center of Jewish life in Hamburg—the *hochdeutsche Juden,* as the Senate called them.[14] Back in the 1630s and 1640s, a few dozen families of German Jews (among them Glikl's father) had filtered into the city without official permission, trading in gold and jewels, lending money, handcrafting small items, and preserving their insecure status by informal tax payments to the government. Whereas most of the Sephardim lived in the Old City, the Ashkenazim clustered to the west in the New City, not far from the Miller's Gate.[15]

This location was convenient for the German Jews, and not merely because it symbolized the possibility of a quick getaway. It shortened their walk a few miles west to the city of Altona, where Jews enjoyed official "protected" status under the tolerant eye of the counts of Holstein-Schauenburg and (after 1640) of the kings of Denmark. It was to Altona that the German Jews repaired when the Hamburg Senate, goaded by the Lutheran clergy and complaints from the Bürgerschaft (the town Assembly), expelled them in 1650.

In the next years, German Jews slipped into Hamburg to trade, braving attacks from soldiers and sailors as they passed through the Miller's Gate and risking arrest if they had not paid an escort fee. After the Swedish invasion of Altona in 1657, the Senate allowed the *hochdeutsche Juden* to reside in Hamburg once again, though they were not to scandalize Christians by practicing their religion in any way within its walls. To attend synagogue and bury their dead, the German Jews were supposed to go to Altona, and their community organization—their Jüdische Gemeinde—was based in Altona as well.[16]

By the last decade of the century, the population and prosperity of the German Jews had multiplied. If they could still arouse suspicion and violence among Hamburg journeymen and prompt theologians' outrage about, say, the blatant "superstition" of their Sabbath lamps, kept alight for twenty-four hours so as not to violate the Lord's command, they now had supporters from beyond the Senate: people who saw them as potential converts to Christianity or as valuable contributors to the economy. In 1697, when the Senate offered the *hochdeutsche Juden* a contract to regularize their status in return for a fee higher than that demanded of the Portuguese Jews, they agreed to pay. Finally, in 1710, they were allowed to have a Gemeinde of their own in Hamburg.[17]

Glikl's childhood in the 1650s was thus spent during the years of uneasy Jewish movement between Hamburg and Altona. She recalled that her father had been the first German Jew to get permission to resettle in Hamburg after the Swedish invasion, but as a parnas (elder of the Gemeinde) he had to cross back to Altona for community business and prayer whenever the risk of conducting illegal services in Hamburg was too great.[18]

Glikl's girlhood was brief. Before she turned twelve, she was betrothed to Haim, only a few years older, the son of the trader Joseph ben Baruch Daniel Samuel ha-Levi (or Segal), known also as Joseph Goldschmidt and Joseph Hamel, of the small town of Hameln.[19] She was wed to him two years later. This early age of marriage was much in contrast with that of the Christian women in Hamburg and elsewhere in western Europe, who rarely took their vows before they were eighteen, but it was not uncommon among better-off Jews in central and eastern Europe.[20] Among other uses, it guaranteed a Jewish marriage to the parents' liking and promoted the *mitzvot*—the command and the good deed—of progeny. And why wait when parents were endowing the young with credit connections and liquid capital rather than landed property or a craftsman's shop? Furthermore, the newlyweds could be shepherded through the first period of marriage by the Jewish custom of *kest*, or boarding, provided for in the marriage contract.