

Natalie Zemon Davis (1928-2023). A Remembrance

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ABSTRACT · It is difficult to summarise in a few pages the stature and scholarly output of Natalie Zemon Davis, who passed away in Toronto on 21 October 2023. This contribution aims to broadly trace the intellectual profile of the great scholar starting from the generous testimony of herself that she offered in the famous interview with Denis Crouzet *L'histoire tout feu tout flamme* of 2004. Tracing her scholarly interests and militant engagement in the field of history and historiography, a portrait emerges of a curious historian, pioneer and teacher in the field of social history, attentive to the marginal actors and actresses of history as well as to multiple identities: Martin Guerre, Leo the African, and 'her' *Women on the Margins* are the best-known figures among those she investigated with acumen and, at the same time, with a taste for narrative invention, expressed in a kind of direct dialogue with those personalities from the past. In between the review and the homage, we look, again, at the experimentation in historical writing and the language of cinema that have made Zemon Davis an absolute protagonist in the analysis and storytelling of both the early modern age and our global contemporaneity.

KEYWORDS · Natalie Zemon Davis, Social History, Intellectual Biography, Historical Method, Storytelling.

ON October 21, 2023, Natalie Zemon Davis, one of the most influential figures in the field of world historiography, passed away at her home in Toronto. She was 94 years old, lived with full intensity until the last, between master classes, prologues, testimonies, and interviews given with generous participation. A month later, on November 22, Emmanuel Le Roy-Ladurie passed away, more quietly and at the same age (he was born on July 19, 1929), he too a master of generations of scholars and a strong innovator of

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the historical method, having acutely inaugurated valuable studies in the still unexplored field of Environmental History (his is the celebrated, evocative *Histoire de climat depuis l'an mil*, Paris: Flammarion, 1967; first Ital. ed. 1982).

We will keep our eyes fixed on Zemon Davis here, but the loss of two giants of historical studies equally induces questions about the seminal vitality of a long season of research aimed at changing heuristic, thematic and methodological approaches. Each of the two, in fact, belonged in her own way to the school and tradition of the *Annales*, but she knew how to rework its canons with originality and just as much curiosity toward forms of expression other than just written production. Ladurie – may we allow this last reference – in 1973, fifty years ago, laconically sentenced: “The historian of the future will either be a programmer or not at all”.¹ One senses the flavor of the somewhat provocative *boutade*, yet there is no doubt that the Digital Humanities have made their appearance in various areas of historiography by amplifying both the number of sources available on intangible media and the possibilities of interrogating them (with the ontological and deontological issues that follow from this).

In this, Zemon Davis can perhaps be said to have maintained an ‘adherence’ to the more traditional archival data, except for then fully grasping the visual power of the stories extrapolated from the papers, to the point of delivering them to the moving narrative, and thus to cinema and fiction. We will come step by step to the analysis of this aspect, which may even appear contradictory at a time when the borderline between history and fiction remains clear, with respect to the rigor of the historical method. First it is necessary to retrace the stages of a dynamic, successful, justly exceptional career.

Natalie Zemon Davis was born on November 8, 1928, in Detroit to a Jewish family of Polish-Lithuanian descent. Thanks to her jovial ability to tell about herself and her unfiltered dialogue with Denis Crouzet in a volume with an effective original title, *L’histoire*

¹ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l'historien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 11. He had uttered a similar sentence back in '68, in an article in *Le Nouvel Observateur* of May 8 entitled “La fin des érudits”.

tout feu flamme,² we know from her own voice about her studies in France, especially in Lyon, during her doctoral years, beginning in 1952, and her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1959. Intense years, during which were born the three children she had with her husband Chandler Davis (died on September 24, 2022), a mathematician always present in the acknowledgments of her books and often evoked in the interview with Crouzet, especially about his involvement in an FBI investigation, which significantly marked their professional lives: in '53 Davis was questioned by the U.S. Congressional Committee about the publication of *Operation Mind*, a radical booklet that came under the crosshairs of the McCarthyists. This resulted in the otherwise innocent scientist's "appearance in court in 1954, as well as exclusion from the University of Michigan"³ as well as five months' imprisonment between January and May 1960, and favored their relocation to Toronto without, however, them experiencing "a rejection to the United States".⁴

From her husband, at any rate, during the 1957-1958 academic year Natalie Zemon was introduced to the environment of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, to which he belonged within the School of Mathematics, while the doors of the School of Historical Studies founded in 1949 opened for her. She would always be its animator and inspiration. Also in the U.S., Zemon Davis began her work as a decenter and in 1968 experienced the youth protest movement in Berkeley, where she was temporarily a visiting professor.

² Natalie Zemon Davis, *L'histoire tout feu tout flamme. Entretiens avec Denis Crouzet* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004). In Italian it has been rendered as: *La passione della storia. Un dialogo con Denis Crouzet*, ed. by Angiolina Arru and Sofia Boesch Gajano (Rome: Viella, 2007). I have focused my attention on the book-interview and profile of Zemon Davis in relation to self-narrative in "Some Subject that Catches your Eye": la passione della storia e altre interviste di Natalie Zemon Davis", *Nello specchio della scrittura. Autobiografia e storia dell'arte tra Otto e Novecento*, ed. by Jennifer Cooke, Laurence Roussillon-Constanty and Franca Varallo (Rome: Carocci, 2023), 38-50.

³ Zemon Davis, *La passione della storia*, 150.

⁴ Zemon Davis, *La passione della storia*, 153. True, the experience, traumatic as it was, suggested, however, to Zemon Davis cues for questioning about violence, not just judicial violence: from the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 to the Holocaust, what mechanisms had led politics and people to reach that mark?

Thanks to her early scholarly achievements, she was president of the Society for French Historical Studies from 1970 to 1977, then holder of the chair of modern history at Princeton University from 1978 to 1996; upon her leave, she was conferred the title of *emerita* of the Athenaeum. She then continued her research activities at the University of Toronto, where Chandler Davis had moved in 1962. Until the end of her life, in fact, their country of choice was Canada, which in 2012 bestowed on Natalie Zemon the rank of Companion of the Order of Canada. Speaking of positions and awards, the historian was a member of the American Academy of Art and Science of the British Academy and, in 1987, president of the American Historical Association (AHA).⁵

Between 1977 and 2000 she was awarded twenty-five *honorary* degrees, among which it is significant to mention at least that of the University of Lyon in 1983, Harvard in 1996, Cambridge in 1998, and finally the last one, the one conferred on her by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.⁶ Between 1995 and 2000 she was First Vice President of the International Commission for Historical Sciences (ICHS) and in the same year 2000 she also received the Toynbee Prize. In 2013 U.S. President Barack Obama pinned her with the prestigious National Humanities Medal, and on that occasion Zemon Davis said of herself: “I have tried my best to be not only a truth-teller about the past, but also to be a historian of hope”.⁷

“Historian of hope” is an apt definition, affectionately taken up by Joan Scott, among the initiators of the most militant gender historiography, in a short editorial in 2019, where it is revealed that as early as 1980 the scholar had adopted that expression for herself.⁸

⁵ A brief bio-bibliographical record is now in: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/natalie-zemon-davis/> (last accessed on January 9, 2024).

⁶ For a complete list of awards, see Zemon Davis’s personal file prepared by the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton: <https://www.ias.edu/scholars/natalie-zemon-davis> (last accessed on January 9, 2024).

⁷ This can be read in the remembrance of the staff of the University of Toronto, which conferred an honorary degree on Zemon Davis in 1991: <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/rememering-u-t-s-natalie-zemon-davis-renowned-social-historian> (last accessed on January 9, 2024).

⁸ Joan Wallach Scott, “Natalie Zemon Davis, Historian of Hope”, *H-France Salon*, 11, 15/3 (2019): 1-6, 5: “In her very first interview (with Judy Coffin and Rob

And indeed, strong in that resolve and with an eye to the future, Zemon Davis has sketched the lives of women and men on the margins, traversed winding paths, and peered into the ambiguities of the human soul in the dense period of the Reformation's affirmation and the social transformations that followed.

Her studies in France had led her in the footsteps of popular conflictuality, examined in the archives of Lyon, Marc Bloch's City of Resistance, with immediate sensitivity to two aspects: the radical turn imprinted by the Reformation (here the obligatory reference is also to Lucien Febvre of *The Problem of Unbelief*)⁹ and for the presence of women in urban rituality. Both themes innervate a series of essays written between 1965 and 1975, collected in 1980 in the volume *The Cultures of the People. Knowledge, Rituals and Resistance in Sixteenth-Century France*.¹⁰ Strikes in prosperous sixteenth-century Lyon, where not only merchants and weavers or small artisans were active, but printers who were very receptive to the Lutheran and Calvinist message, reveal the strong social tensions on the eve of the Wars of Religion. And practices such as assistance to the poor ended up being questioned (to whom did it fall, Catholics or Protestants? To the clergy or the laity?) and the management of wealth; the position of women within families and public life, as "the Protestant women were going to liberate their souls from the domination of priests and doctors in theology";¹¹ the holidays. *Women Rule* and *The Rites of Violence* developed these arguments and paved the way for much European research now on women's participation in ritual events such as *charivari*, now on ritualized forms of confessional insubordination (iconoclasm, exemplary chastisements, etc.).¹²

Harding, published in 1980 in the *Radical History Review*), Natalie declared her ambition: "I want to be an historian of hope".

⁹ Lucien Febvre, *Il problema dell'incredulità nel secolo XVI. La religione di Rabelais* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978; or. ed. 1942).

¹⁰ *Le culture del popolo. Sapere, rituali e resistenze nella Francia del Cinquecento*, trans. by Sandro Lombardini (Turin: Einaudi, 1980).

¹¹ *Le culture del popolo*, 104 (the title of the chapter and the essay related to it is *City Women and Religious Change*).

¹² The two essays, constituting Chapters V and VI, can be found there, pp.

Then came the time of Martin Guerre and one of those books destined to deeply mark historiographical production and even custom. *Le retour de Martin Guerre*, published in a first version in Paris in 1982 by Laffont and soon transposed in Italy by Einaudi with an afterword by Carlo Ginzburg,¹³ tells the story of a certain Arnaud du Tihl who, in 1548, pretended to be the peasant Martin and took his place, his wife and his property. A story already known to sixteenth-century jurisprudence and Montaigne, it came to the general public by means of a motion picture film, the making of which involved Zemon herself, prompting her to wonder more deeply about the “definition of the self in sixteenth-century France” when – unaware, admittedly, of the controversy of the last months – she admired the performance of Gérard Depardieu, the interpreter and ideal face of the ‘impostor du Tihl’.¹⁴

The importance of this volume, and of the method it proposes, is well known to specialists in modern history, especially of those who frequent it from the perspective of social and gender studies. So seminal was it that in 2023, forty years after its appearance in the Harvard University Press catalog, it merited a special *Forum* in the journal *Studi storici*: it was discussed by Pasquale Palmieri, Lisa Roscioni, Fernanda Alfieri, Fabio Dei and Ottavia

175-209 and 210-258. See also, in this regard, the review by Gianclaudio Civale, “From ‘the Rites of Violence’ to ‘the Rights of Violence’: la storiografia anglosassone, l’insegnamento di Natalie Zemon Davis e la questione della violenza nella Francia delle guerre di religione”, *Bollettino della Società di Studi Valdesi*, 214 (2014): 139-152.

¹³ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Il ritorno di Martin Guerre. Un caso di doppia identità nella Francia del Cinquecento*, trans. by Sandro Lombardini, on the 1983 Harvard University Press edition (Turin: Einaudi, 1984). In the Introduction to the book, dedicated to Chandler Davis, the author declares that she is inspired not only by Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms (Il formaggio e i vermi)*, but also by the study of the Cathar community of Montañou conducted by Le Roy Ladurie in 1975. There is a recent Italian edition: *Montañou. Storia di un villaggio occitano durante l’Inquisizione*, trans. by Giovanni Bogliolo (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2019).

¹⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, *La storia al cinema. La schiavitù sullo schermo da Kubrick a Spielberg. Con una nota di Alessandro Portelli*, trans. by Nicola Pizzolato (Rome: Viella, 2007), 12. *Le retour de Martin Guerre* inspired a more glossy Hollywood remake of sorts, signed by Jon Amiel in 1993: is titled *Sommersby*, starring Richard Gere and Jodie Foster, and is set in Tennessee during the American Civil War.

Niccoli.¹⁵ Tracing the ambiguous affair of Martin Guerre, his supposed substitute du Tihl, his abandoned wife Bertrande, and her family, the tangles of those social, confessional and patrimonial tensions toward which Zemon Davis has always shown a peculiar sensitivity emerge. Microhistory; truth and fiction; individual and collective identities; gender relations; the peasant world; coeval legal sources but also massive doses of additions by the historian (“If what I offer is partly of my own invention, it is nevertheless firmly anchored in the voices of the past”):¹⁶ these are the knots, in the end still unresolved and always challenging, around which we continue to debate.

Perhaps a couple of observations can be added: the first is that, if among the criticisms levelled at the book (not many but sharp), the main one concerns the adoption of narrative technique, the literature of those same years has sometimes taken the opposite route, ‘contaminating’ itself with history. Already Manzoni with *I promessi sposi* (not surprisingly evoked in the *Forum*), had accomplished, and how happily, such an operation.¹⁷ But one thinks of the at once severe and intimate writing of Marguerite Yourcenar and her 1977 *Archives of the North*, which contains a journey backward among the branches of the family tree of her parents’ families;¹⁸ one will find some contiguity with the sensitive (feminine?) way of understanding women and men of the past that belongs all to Zemon Davis’ works as well. Secondly, the choice of Martin Guerre, a Frenchman who ended up a soldier in the ranks of Philip II’s army at San Quentin, refers back to the theme of enlistments in modern-age Europe and almost recalls, in its clueless confusion, Thackeray’s formidable literary character whom a director dear to

¹⁵ *Forum. Il ritorno di Martin Guerre di Natalie Zemon Davis: quarant’anni dopo*, ed. by Pasquale Palmieri, *Studi storici*, 64, 2 (2023): 437-473.

¹⁶ Thus the author in her foreword, as recalled by both Palmieri and Roscioni (*Forum. Il ritorno di Martin Guerre*, 440 and 444).

¹⁷ Again from Palmieri, in the wake of Ginzburg’s Afterword (*Forum. Il ritorno di Martin Guerre*, 440). On the point, then, see now Roberto Bizzocchi, *Romanzo popolare. Come i Promessi sposi hanno fatto l’Italia* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2022).

¹⁸ Marguerite Yourcenar, *Archivi del Nord* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982; or. ed. Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

Zemon Davis would extol as an admirable portrait of the fortune-seeking adventurer: Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975).

Hot on the heels of Martin Guerre's single and striking case, and again on the subject of the ambiguity between fact and fiction, from 1987 is *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, where a number of cases of involuntary or self-defense-induced murder, followed by a request for a pardon from the sovereign, are addressed. The protagonists and protagonists of those chronicle cases, mostly of humble origins, made themselves narrators of their own story of violence, and it is on this, that is, on the ability to offer, more or less manipulated, a personal version of the facts, that the scholar lingers, confronting them with the judicial authorities of the time, thus with the constituted power.

It is likely, however, that the majority of Italian readers came to know Zemon Davis through the important editing, shared with friend and colleague Arlette Farge, of the third volume of the *History of Women in the West (Storia delle donne in Occidente)* edited by George Duby and Michelle Perrot. In 1991 appeared for Laterza types the fundamental *Dal Rinascimento all'Età moderna* that for many and many was a viaticum to gender studies, still little practiced in the peninsular context. Beautiful and important is the *incipit* of the Introduction signed by the two historians: "Wherever one looks, she is there, present, infinitely present: from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, on the domestic, economic, intellectual, public, conflictual and even playful scene of society, woman is there, present".¹⁹ An exordium which, as can be guessed, was followed by the realization of how and how much those roles, mostly relegated to the lower ranks of society, had been yes discussed in the Old Regime, but then largely neglected by historiography. Equality, parity and the "social construction of the differences between the sexes" were then to become privileged terrain of study, not so

¹⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, "Introduzione", *Storia delle donne in Occidente*, dir. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, vol. III, *Dal Rinascimento all'Età moderna*, ed. by Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1991), 3.

much or not only to understand how and how much women had influenced ‘the everyday’, but to grasp the problematic junctures of the relationship between the genders and the forms of ‘resistance’ put in place by the female sphere to escape submission and discrimination.²⁰ Here, then, are paraded by typology some figures of women, mostly marginalized: the witch, the criminal, the journalists, the subversives, but also the many virgins and mothers who carved out spaces for themselves within the various worlds of faith. Divided into sections – “Le opere e i giorni” (The works and the days); “Di lei, si parla molto” (About her, much is said); “Dissidenza a parole e a fatti” (Dissent in word and deed) – the book hosts a decisive contribution by Zemon Davis herself entitled *Donne e politica* (*Women and Politics*). In these dense, footnote-free pages, the author questions the legal consideration given to them beginning with the stern statements in Jean Bodin’s *Six Books of the Republic* (1576): “that they should attend only to their womanly affairs”.²¹ It was a matter of unequal treatment (of ‘asymmetries’) that found their foundation in the very essence of being citizens (and female citizens) of the modern state in a Europe that assured men alone the control of political power almost everywhere, but sometimes granted women some margin for “public or semi-public action”.²² Focusing on the sovereigns that had most aroused the indignation of magistrates and theologians including John Knox, thus on Elizabeth I, Mary Tudor, Mary Stuart and Mary de’ Medici, Natalie Zemon Davis thus dwells on the formation of a female kingship that is, by its very nature, contested *ab origine*, playfully ‘muliebre’. Yet, she tells us with historiographical insight, sharp personalities such as Madame de Sevigné and Madame de Maintenon had well understood that women indeed could have a great deal of influence in politics, according to what we now designate as *soft power*. And then they enjoyed other spaces for maneuvering: some representa-

²⁰ The short quotations come from Zemon Davis and Farge, “Introduzione”, 6, 7 and 10, respectively.

²¹ *Storia delle donne in Occidente*, vol. III, *Dal Rinascimento all’Età moderna*, 201. Zemon Davis’ chapter runs from here to p. 219.

²² *Storia delle donne in Occidente*, vol. III, *Dal Rinascimento all’Età moderna*, 204.

tive assemblies, the press, the courts, confessional debates within English Presbyterian radicalism, all the way to Mary Wollstonecraft's writings "ahead of time".²³

Such indications – germinated already in *Astrea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (1975) by another long-lived historian to be remembered as a pioneer, Francis Amelia Yates (1899-1981) – have inspired several subsequent studies: think of Fanny Cosandey's research on the active role of the queen of France as mother and guardian²⁴ and to the prolific strand on women's government, which has yet to be exhausted at the planetary level.

As has been pointed out by the alumni community, the academic jubilation in 1996 coincided with a new productive phase in Zemon Davis's scholarly career, marked by research conducted, yes, in the wake of earlier work, but under the banner of an even broader and more experimental vision. Dating from that year was the Italian translation of *Women on the Margins*, published at Harvard the previous year.²⁵ *Women on the Margins. Three Lives of the Seventeenth Century* remains a rather surprising book. The author plumbs in it the biography of three figures at once exceptional and typical of the Old regime: exceptional because of the destiny they lived and because of their ability to recount it in first person; typical, however, insofar as they were expressions of a global, moving modern world, within which others and others had similarly original paths, of which, however, there is no trace in the sources. Here we are talking about Maria Sibylla Merian, who moved to Surinam where she was an entomologist and insect designer; Marie de l'Incarnation, born Marie Guyart, of Tours, who became foundress of the first Ursuline convent in Quebec; Glikl bas Yehudah, daughter of a Jewish merchant from Hamburg, author of an early autobiography with cultured and devout accents. Backwards the sections are entitled *Discussing with God*; *New Worlds* and *Metamor-*

²³ *Storia delle donne in Occidente*, vol. III, *Dal Rinascimento all'Età moderna*, 219.

²⁴ Fanny Cosandey, *La reine de France. Symbole et pouvoir, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

²⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (London-Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); *Donne ai margini. Tre vite del XVII secolo*, trans. by Maria Gregorio (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1996).

phosis. Through their work, all three displayed extraordinary skills. In his life in France, Guyart had had a son, and it was he, Claude, a Benedictine friar, who published in Paris in 1677 *La vie de la venerable Mere Marie de l'Incarnation*: here, as in other writings of the woman, we learn how she, endowed with a “universalizing vocation”,²⁶ did not limit herself to apostolate among the Amerindian peoples, but learned the rudiments of Algonquian, Iroquois and Uronian and helped translate and make known those idioms. Glikl changed her life by moving to Metz and began drafting her memoirs not only for her children but to overcome the melancholy that plagued her. Merian, wife of the Nuremberg painter Joachim Sandrart, published between 1679-1683 *The Wonderful Metamorphosis and Peculiar Flower Food of Caterpillars* and in 1705, in Amsterdam, the seminal treatise *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*; this in defiance of social conventions and then educating her daughters in the same profession as artists and naturalists.

But beyond the poignancy of such human parables, what is striking is the historian’s participatory approach: “I met the three women in this book for the first time in 1971” she first declares, and in the Prologue she then establishes a kind of dialogue with them in the form of an interview (indignant at being confronted with each other on the same pages, “I wrote the book. Let me explain” Natalie tells them).²⁷ The depth of the research, which stirs multiple sources, in multiple languages, of different natures, is lightened by a remarkable narrative wisdom. In these pages as dense as they are sensitive, the conveyance of historiographical assumptions – the ties to the culture of origin, women’s education, the mother-child relationship, women’s spirituality, women’s artistic and scientific sensibilities – does not come across as programmatic.

The mature fruit of full scholarly maturity is undoubtedly also the acclaimed *Trickster Travels. A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* of 2006, in Italian rendered, perhaps less charmingly, as *La doppia vita di Leone l’Africano*.²⁸ To investigate Hasan Muhammad

²⁶ Zemon Davis, *Donne ai margini*, 121.

²⁷ Zemon Davis, *Donne ai margini*, VII and 4.

²⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis, *La doppia vita di Leone l’Africano*, trans. by Maria Gregorio (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008). The original edition appeared in New York,

al-Wazzan's life and his major work – the 1526 *Descriptio Africae* – is to immerse oneself in another peculiar biography and at the same time in those *Connected Worlds* probed later, among others, by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, albeit with a gaze “less optimistic than Zemon Davis”.²⁹ A traveler and diplomat originally from Fez, captured by Spanish pirates in 1518, living in Italy for nine years, he became famous for his description of Africa filtered through Giovan Battista Ramusio's mid-sixteenth-century translation/interpolation. An author frequented by specialists in Arabic literature, he was also featured in a novel, *Léon l'Africain*, by Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf (1986). However, Zemon Davis takes up his story from his family roots, his education in law, his missions to Istanbul, Egypt, and Saharan Africa, and shows how the idea of his continent of origin (“Concepire l’Africa”/“Conceiving Africa”) matured in confrontation with Europe and the entire Mediterranean basin. She follows the few traces of it through those who knew him while Leo, converted to Christianity, lived in Rome and was an indirect witness of such sensational events as the sack of the city; this is the case of his friend Alberto Pio di Carpi, ambassador for Francis I king of France, or Paolo Giovio who had assimilated his geographical work. Returning to Morocco and to his native faith, which was more elastic in terms of morality, al-Wazzan died later in 1554. As with the women on the margins, for Leo Zemon Davis imagines a final confrontation, this time with Rabelais, a free spirit lover of intellectual syncretism.

It was the author herself, later, who punctuated some of the book's themes by adopting the specific and richly meaningful

Hill and Wang, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Like many of Natalie Zemon's other books, this one is dedicated to her husband, her first reader (“to Chandler Davis, again—as always”).

²⁹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Mondi connessi. La storia oltre l'eurocentrismo (secoli XVI-XVIII)* (Rome: Carocci, 2014). Already in Editor Giuseppe Marcocci's Introduction, it is noted that for the Indian historian, in al-Wazzan's time, encounters and intellectual exchanges were less easy than Zemon Davis supposes, “since a state of ‘contained conflict’ remained, however, between different cultures”. On that conflict, Subrahmanyam returns on p. 185 of the volume, downplaying both al-Wazzan's role as “trickster” and the tone of “uplifting narrative” proposed by Natalie Zemon.

prism of translation as a cultural tool for transmitting and interpreting content and concepts. As a diplomat and traveler, in fact, al-Wazzan had to contend with languages to the point of changing his name and being renamed as John Leo, in homage to Pope Leo X who welcomed him to Rome. He knew Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin (with notions of Spanish and Italian) and was therefore, in his opinion, a “‘functional’ translator” or, adopting a definition used in historiography by Serge Gruzinski, a *passseur culturel*. In reasoning about this dimension of Leo the African, Zemon Davis realized how “central the issue of translation has been to the kind of social and cultural history I’ve been doing for 60 years”.³⁰ Within that variegated cultural transference, the thorny aspects (“delicate matters”) are, according to Davis, at least two: the religious and the sexual. The same, indeed, as in the Martin Guerre case, but declined in a different way, since it is now, with al-Wazzan, a matter of confrontation between monotheistic religions and of more or less tolerated allusions to homosexuality among the peoples facing the Mediterranean basin. And on the crucial node of languages, a reminder is also reserved for two of ‘his’ women on the margins: Glikl Hamel, who translated from Yiddish to German “for women and for men who are like women”, and Marie de l’Incarnation who wrote in Algonquian.³¹

The extended look at the Braudelian ‘liquid plain’ traversed by merchants and captives becomes even more expansive in the examination of the global phenomenon of slavery, filtered, however, through cinematography. *Slaves on Screen* is from 2000.³² In the Acknowledgments Zemon Davis mentions her friend and colleague at Princeton Toni Morrison, the Nobel Laureate in Literature (1993)

³⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Leo Africanus’ and His World”, *Translators, Interpreters, and Cultural Negotiators. Mediating and Communicating Power from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era*, ed. by Federico M. Federici and Dario Tessicini (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 62-80.

³¹ Zemon Davis, “‘Leo Africanus’ and His World”, 62; references to “religion” and “sexuality”, 75-77.

³² Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen. Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). In Italian edition: *La storia al cinema: la schiavitù sullo schermo da Kubrick a Spielberg* (Rome: Viella, 2007).

whom she had the opportunity to interview about the novel *Beloved* and the film that was made from it to be directed by Jonathan Demme. Her interest in film and the world of historical documentaries, also shared with her husband Chandler, had remained undiminished since the time when “in 1980-1982 I found myself serving as a historical consultant to director Daniel Vigne and screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière for *Le retour de Martin Guerre* [...]. It was then that I began to consider historical film as a ‘thought experiment’”.³³ The films reviewed here are inherent to slavery, with references to the sphere of colonialism, as in the case of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (*La battaglia di Algeri*) (1966) mentioned in the introductory pages. There are, however, five films specifically examined in the essay, in light of the treatment in them of the historical datum: Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960); Pontecorvo’s *Queimada!* (1969); Cuban director Tomas Gutiérrez Alea’s *La última cena* (1976); Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997); and finally Demme’s *Beloved* (1998). Already the chronological trend makes clear how much and how social and historiographical debates on the issue of slavery have changed. They range from the rebellion against power and the differences between social classes, as in the case of *Spartacus* (according to Zemon Davis not entirely successful because of some Hollywood excesses imposed on the director, but nevertheless capable of fine psychological traits, for example in sketching the bond between slaves and their children) to the question of British imperialism in the nineteenth century; from African-American rituality to the imposition of European ceremonialism; from the theme of the charismatic *leader* to the problem of motherhood in a segregated regime.

La última cena and *Queimada* are set against the backdrop of the Brazilian slave revolts of 1835 and Morant Bay, Jamaica, in 1865, and in both films extensive use is made of historical texts and sources in order to make the reconstruction credible, but also to condemn without appeal all forms of colonialism, both prior and instrumental. In *Queimada* Marlon Brando plays Englishman William Walker, who attempts to foment an insurrection against the Portuguese

³³ Zemon Davis, *La storia al cinema*, 12.

on a (fictitious) island in the West Indies, and slyly confronts revolutionary José Dolores, according to dynamics not dissimilar (Zemon Davis notes) to the Haitian revolution of the early nineteenth century. But to make the story of *La última cena*, which is a color film, adhere to those events, Gutiérrez Alea chooses to anachronistically anticipate some of the Jamaican episodes in the late eighteenth century. The result, however, is good and especially correct in the information pertaining to material culture (sugar culture, its processing, Spanish and indigenous devotional practices, etc.).

With Spielberg's *Amistad*, the focus shifts to the mutiny that occurred in 1839 on the eponymous slave ship off the coast of Cuba headed by the slave Cinqué. The intent is to put in pictures "a true story",³⁴ that took place during the prolonged U.S. Supreme Court debates on abolitionism and the rights of "colored Americans", but "some of the inventions, perhaps intended to heighten suspense or character development in the film, seem arbitrary and superfluous";³⁵ successful, however, are the rendering of the meeting between Cinqué and former President John Quincy Adams, which really took place in 1840, and the somber ending, despite the protagonist's return to Africa.

As for *Beloved* – like for Elsa Morante's *La Storia* (1974) now back in vogue – it was a newspaper clipping that had awakened in Morrison the inspiration for a dramatic tale based on a true story: in 1856 a slave girl had killed her little son in order not to let him live in that unbearable condition. In *Beloved* it is clearly about a little girl, but the underlying motif is the practice of infanticide in a world that made it impossible for slave families to hold on to their lives without rights or escape routes. In the face of the growing consciousness of the African American community and prior to Black Lives Matter, well-known television host Oprah Winfrey launched the idea of making a film from the novel, which appeared in 1987 to immediate public acclaim; after all, two years earlier, she had starred in Spielberg's *The Color Purple* based on Alice Walker's book of the same name (1982). Zemon Davis lingers on the plot

³⁴ Zemon Davis, *La storia al cinema*, 84.

³⁵ Zemon Davis, *La storia al cinema*, 91.

of *Beloved*, showing particular interest in the painful relationship between Sethe, the infanticidal mother, and Paul D, the slave who falls in love with her, a relationship in which the ghost of the murdered child creeps in: another affair of apparitions and false identities (as in Martin Guerre) that Demme rendered with the use of soft lighting and rarefied atmospheres much appreciated by Natalie Zemon.

For all the productions examined, the question applies as to how much historical truth or verisimilitude should be expended so that the result is correct, evocative, and cinematically successful. And it is clear, Zemon Davis concludes, that the historian can and should assist the makers in creating a work of fiction while respecting its scenic requirements, but never deflecting from professional ethics: "The historian may well make mistakes, but deliberate falsifications and tendentious dissimulations break the historian's commitment to his readers, present and future, to speak honestly about the past".³⁶

That said, there is no doubt that, as noted by Ottavia Niccoli, Zemon Davis was from the beginning in possession of "a cinematographic mind"³⁷ which guided her in the very construction of her works, making up for the "imagination" (a term used by both of them) in the absence or reticence of sources.

All this historiographical material, hybridized with alternative methods, but never explicitly condensed into an autobiography other than in the Crouzet interview, is basically like an autobiography composing. And if "gli storici autori di autobiografie sono come i barbieri che si tagliano i capelli da soli" (historians who write autobiographies are like barbers who cut their own hair),³⁸ Zemon Davis, with her elegant, inseparable short mop, was perhaps no different. Through her analysis of women and men of early modernity, the historian did not stop studying herself as well,

³⁶ Zemon Davis, *La storia al cinema*, 23.

³⁷ Ottavia Niccoli, "Martin Guerre e Natalie Zemon Davis, fra storia e cinema", *Forum*, 466.

³⁸ Thus, with Talmudic metaphor, Edoardo Tortarolo, "Uno specchio indulgente? Riflessioni sulle autobiografie degli storici italiani nel Novecento", *Nello specchio della scrittura*, 11.

almost in a psychoanalytic form. She was well aware, for example, of being fascinated by archival sources, to the point of running the risk of identifying with the individuals examined or empathizing too much with them:

I constantly felt the sense of this intimacy with the past, and I have retained it to this day. But once again I say: "Danger!" I am aware that it is the impression of having encountered, touched, grasped the past. And I do not stop repeating myself: "Natalie, beware, you are grappling with a somewhat romantic ghost!"³⁹

Or again:

For me, direct or indirect sources are not a prison. They are a magical thread that binds me to people who have been dead a long time, whose experiences are scattered in the dust. The sources set in motion my reflection and imagination, I remain in dialogue with them – and I love this relationship with the past: it is at the heart of my vocation as a historian.⁴⁰

It is a fact that the importance of such approaches and her energetic presence on the scene of world historiography, especially through her leadership of and participation in the work of IAS, earned her numerous honors, awards, mentions and a polyphonic tribute in the symposium *Dialogues with the Past*, held in her honor in Boston in November 1990. The results of the papers presented there flowed into the volume *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800). Essays in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis*, edited by students Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse, and accompanied by a complete Bibliography (up to that time) of the books, editorships, essays, articles, and reviews due to her pen.⁴¹

Still, on the occasion of her 90th birthday, April 26, 2019, friends Joan Scott, Francesca Trivellato, and Trustee Lorraine Daston, along with other IAS colleagues and fellow IAS members, celebrated her with the *Celebrating Natalie Zemon Davis* workshop: beyond the heartfelt tributes that can be heard on YouTube, the invitation card that sees the historian dressed, thanks to a photomontage, as

³⁹ Zemon Davis, *La passione della storia*, 7.

⁴⁰ Zemon Davis, *La passione della storia*, 27.

⁴¹ Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Bertrande de Rols next to Martin Guerre in a frame of the film, raises a smile.⁴² After all, her ability to explore and use different languages has made her a unique personality in the field of historiography, as also acknowledged on that occasion by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, a privileged interlocutor of microhistorians, who – about *Trickster Travels* – remarked on curiosity as a focal ingredient of his investigations.

A teacher of many and to many, directly or by inspiration, Zemon Davis was thus remembered in numerous obituaries. Impossible it will be here to enumerate them all and organically, but one must at least mention the accurate Obituaries that appeared in the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*. In the former, on October 23, 2023, Elsa Dixler devoted an intense portrait to her as “historian of the marginalized”, dwelling in particular on the fortune of *The Return of Martin Guerre* and on the intense academic activity accomplished between the United States and Canada.⁴³ In his editorial in the *Guardian* of December 21, 2023, Alex Drace-Francis argues that the scholar “inspired a generation of historians” and expresses regret for the incompleteness of the latest work announced under the title of *Braided Histories*. As explained by the University of Amsterdam historian and again by Scott and Trivellato, Zemon Davis had in fact reserved her last energies for the socio-economic reflections of slavery already investigated through the lens of cinema. In the long-awaited ‘intertwined histories’ she had set out to observe the “experience of European plantation owners-both Christian and Jewish-and enslaved people of African descent in the Dutch colony

⁴² Please refer to <https://www.ias.edu/news/workshop-natalie-zemon-davis> and <https://www.ias.edu/news/in-the-media/essays-natalie-zemon-davis-90th> (last accessed Jan. 10, 2024). Celebratory speeches were recorded and published here: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=tvX19Ffvnmhw&list=PLdDZb3TWPZ7SfTqzLMi8BL526MfY1G7o> (last accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

⁴³ See https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/23/books/natalie-zemon-davis-dead.html?unlocked_article_code=1.5Ew.NWQb.q9QS_SrV9BZC&smid=url-share (last accessed on January 11, 2024). An October 24 errata makes it known that Zemon Davis was not the first woman hired by the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley, as Dixler asserted, but the second, after Professor Adrienne Koch.

of Surinam, in South America”,⁴⁴ thus returning as well to the land to which the Dutch Merian of *Women on the Edge* had landed in the late seventeenth century.

In turn, scholarly societies and research institutes have reserved space for thoughts that may be brief but are always moving, as in the case of the Faculty of History at Oxford University, which salutes her by quoting some verses written for her by Chandler Davis in 1975 : “Born abroad, she longs for you, companions/ ... four hundred years away”.

And again, in a statement dated October 24, 2023, Antoon De Baets, chairman of the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography (ICHTH), highlighted the words of Marnie Hughes-Warrington, co-secretary general of the institute (“We have lost a champion and an incredible person”), and referred, in addition to the obituary in the *New York Times*, to a brief portrait in the Newsletter. Here Zemon Davis is praised especially as a “pioneering scholar of women’s history” and an expert in “cross-cultural communication”.⁴⁵

In Italy, on *Il Foglio* of October 30, 2023 Lucetta Scaraffia paid tribute to her as an intellectual “nonconformist and free”, with beautiful words and an appropriate reminder of the gentle but vibrant feminism that animated her work:

In the late 1980s, we young historians all wanted to be like Natalie Zemon Davis, the U.S. scholar who died a few days ago at age 94. We liked her vivacious air, smart eyes, short hair, and offbeat elegance – that is, her new air, even though she was the age of our mothers. But most of all we liked how she revolutionized the historical method and the way of writing history, starting from her condition as a woman and a Jew. A living and creative example of that feminist proposal of starting from the private.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ <https://www.ias.edu/ideas/natalie-z-davis-1928-2023> (last accessed on January 11, 2024).

⁴⁵ <https://www.ichth.net/news/9.pdf> (last accessed on January 5, 2024).

⁴⁶ Lucetta Scaraffia, “Anticonformista e libera. Un ritratto della grande storica Natalie Zemon Davis” (Nonconformist and free. A portrait of the great historian Natalie Zemon Davis), <https://www.ilfoglio.it/cultura/2023/10/30/news/anticonformista-e-libera-un-ritratto-della-grande-storica-natalie-zemon-davis-5849267/> (last accessed on January 10, 2024). The original Italian texts is: “Alla

On one aspect the chorus of tributes is unanimous, namely on the impossibility of exhausting in a few pages the scholarly profile (and human trait) of such a vital and multifaceted scholar. So, to close this recollection among many, we choose to resort to the words given by Natalie Zemon Davis at one of her many public lectures and interviews (there are over 400.000 results under the heading ‘Zemon Davies interviews’ typed into Google and YouTube strings): doing history – she explained in 2017 at the University of Toronto – means identifying “some subject that catches your eyes”, being touched and touched (“moved”) by that topic or person, wanting to explore the different identities (political, religious, sexual...) that connote the life of an individual or a community, always driven and impelled by curiosity: “The best research starts with curiosity”,⁴⁷ especially in the field of *Humanities*. “Fire and flame for history”, then.⁴⁸ And as obvious as it is, this teaching remains a valuable antidote to the dryness to which historical research should never be subjected.

fine degli anni Ottanta noi giovani storiche volevamo essere tutte come Natalie Zemon Davis, la studiosa statunitense morta qualche giorno fa a 94 anni. Ci piacevano la sua aria vivace, gli occhi intelligenti, i capelli corti e l’eleganza anticonformista, cioè la sua aria nuova, anche se aveva l’età delle nostre madri. Ma soprattutto ci piaceva come aveva rivoluzionato il metodo storico e il modo di scrivere la storia, partendo dalla sua condizione di donna e di ebrea. Un esempio vivente e creativo di quella proposta femminista di partire dal privato”.

⁴⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eolvz_FvR-I (last accessed on January 12, 2024).

⁴⁸ Thus is well rendered by the original title of the interview with Crouzet in the Foreword by editors Arru and Boesch in Zemon Davis, *La passione della storia*.