INTRODUCTION

From a gender history perspective, the dawn of modernity for German Jews began with a series of scandals among the upper classes:

All of a sudden, it appeared as if young women from the best families, animated by "fashionable" discussions about an "enlightened" or enlightening Judaism, began to stray from the right path. They no longer observed the religious laws, and led a thoroughly immoral life. Ultimately, they abandoned the true faith altogether, parting ways with the religious community of their ancestors.

Let us take one of the most famous examples: At the age of fourteen, the young girl Brendel (1764–1839), daughter of a good Jewish family, was betrothed to an elderly banker, and married at nineteen. This clear parental decision stood in stark contrast to her otherwise progressive upbringing, to which she owed an education that was probably unique for the time. Along with her younger brothers and the two Humboldt brothers, she was taught by her father himself—none other than Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86). For the great Jewish scholar, it was probably unthinkable that a well-educated, curious, and intelligent young woman could become bored and even unhappy in a marriage to an unloved man. Mendelssohn thus died in 1786 believing that he had married off his eldest daughter to her best advantage. From the outset, this was by no means the case. Still, her husband, with whom she

had two surviving sons, gave her a comparatively high degree of freedom. The young woman could consequently fully indulge in Berlin's salon life, which by this time was already dominated by the young Romantics. The wildest and most romantic of them all, the eight-years-younger Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), became her lover. A year after they met, Dorothea, as Brendel now called herself, asked her husband for a divorce and, from then on, lived in a whirlwind marriage with Schlegel.

Schlegel wrote about the stormy, erotic start of their relationship in his famous novel *Lucinde*, which caused a scandal because of its permissiveness. Brendel-Dorothea first followed her lover to Jena, then to Paris and Cologne. They married in 1804, after Mendelssohn's daughter had been baptized a Protestant. In 1808, they both converted to Catholicism. Her mother, Fromet Mendelssohn (1737–1812), died in 1812 never having forgiven her daughter for any of this. Of the six Mendelssohn children, two became Catholic, two Protestant, and two remained Jewish. Nevertheless, for years, the scandal, public outrage, and ultimately the contempt of Jewish historiography focused on Brendel-Dorothea. That is, until the salon ladies were rediscovered by the non-Jewish German women's movement as role models for autonomous, self-determined female life paths. The significance of these different images will be discussed in more detail later. For now, it is important to note that the modernization impulses experienced as crises in recent German-Jewish history were—to a large extent—gendered, experienced, and processed. But what exactly was crisis-ridden about them and why? How did these waves of modernization affect both genders? What consequences, for example, did the embourgeoisement of the German Jews, so central to the nineteenth century, have for gender images and gender hierarchies? How were these affected due to discrimination and persecution in the twentieth century? Put another way: To what extent were the involvement, experience, and coming to terms with these processes different for Jewish men and women?

To appreciate this, it is necessary to first look at the preconditions that provided the backdrop for the much-described

"dawn of modernity." First of all, it must be noted in general that the German-Jewish premodern era never existed over the centuries as a static, culturally largely stagnant world isolated from the Christian landscape. As recent research has repeatedly shown, this image seems above all to have served later generations to emphasize as dramatically as possible the massive changes that began around 1750. Thus, regardless of how one evaluated them individually, the tendency was to underscore the rupture rather than the continuity, just as the image of the renegade Mendelssohn daughter suggests. Of course, the traditional Jewish woman was the exact opposite: devoted to her parents and husband, hardworking, pious, and family-oriented. It is hardly necessary, however, to point out that this ideal image had little to do with reality. We have all the more reason, then, to take a look at gender relations in the early modern period, which were not only more differentiated than the normative assumptions would lead us to believe, but also differed significantly from those of the Christian environment in a number of striking ways.