Introduction

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.¹

[Heracles] found in a cave a creature of double form that was half damsel and half serpent; above the buttocks she was a woman, below them a snake.²

After [Tanausis’s] death, while the army under his successors was engaged in an expedition in other parts, a neighboring tribe attempted to carry off women of the Goths as booty. But they made a brave resistance, as they had been taught to do by their husbands, and routed in disgrace the enemy who had come upon them. When they had won this victory, they were inspired with greater daring. Mutually encouraging each other, they took up arms and chose two of the bolder, Lampeto and Marpesia, to act as their leaders.³

Then Gambara went to Frea, the wife of Wodan, and asked that the victory go to the Winili. Frea gave the advice that the women of the Winili should let down their hair and tie it around their faces in the manner of a beard and they should gather at dawn with their men in that place where they would be seen by Wodan when, as was his wont, he looked through
the eastern window. They did this. When Wodan looked east he said, “Who are these Longibardi?” Then Frea added that he should give the victory to those to whom he had given a name.4

The youngest daughter, Libuše, was the most marvelous of the three . . . : wise in council, powerful in speech, chaste in body, outstanding in morals, second to none in her concern for justice, affable to all, a glory and decoration of the female sex . . . . But, since no one is in every way good, this praiseworthy woman—oh sad human estate—was a seer.5

. . . which most prudent and beautiful Judith the most powerful Count Baldwin joined to himself in matrimony. From her he engendered a son, giving him his own name, that is Baldwin.6

Heli begat Joseph; Joseph begat Joachim; Joachim begat Mother Mary, Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ.7

These texts, which span over a thousand years of time and an equally great spectrum of cultures and traditions, have in common that their authors, all men, are in some way writing about the beginnings: the beginnings of peoples, of families, of nations, of religions. They also share in common a need to fix the place of women in these beginnings. On the one hand, from the earliest accounts of peoples in Herodotus, to the genealogies in sacred scripture and later religious traditions, to legends of the founding of ancient cities, to early medieval accounts of the
peoples who displaced Roman political authority in the West, to
noble families’ genealogies constructed in the eleventh century
and beyond, women, while present, play usually at best a mar-
ginal role. Some are but names; wombs that make possible the
transmission of male virtue from generation to generation. Prominent women are often distinguished by their wickedness. Women such as Dido and Eve, some medieval Islamic versions
of Sarah, the Frankish princess Amalberga in the Saxon origin
story told by Widukind of Corvey or Rosamund in the story of
the Lombard hero Alboin, are the source of sin and conflict. But there are other, more complex women: magical women such
as Gambara, mother of the first Lombard dukes, and Libuše,
Kazi, and Tetka, the three magical sisters in Cosmas of Prague’s
account of the origins of the Czechs; women such as Lilith who
engender races of monsters by consorting with demons and the
Gothic witches from whom sprang the Huns; saintly women
like Clothild, wife of the Frankish king Clovis or Dobrava, wife
of the Polish Duke Mieszko who were responsible for con-
verting their husbands and thus their peoples in the tradition of
St. Helen. There were monstrous women like the mother of
the Scyths in Herodotus or Melusine, foundress of the Lusignan
family’s prosperity, who were part serpent and part human. And
there was Mary—in one Jewish tradition a fallen woman
who foisted off her bastard child by a Roman soldier on her
gullible husband, in Islam “above the women of all created be-
ings,” and in Christianity the Mother of all faithful.

The men who wrote about these women often held ambiva-
 lent attitudes toward them, attitudes that are evident in the con-
tradictory images produced and reproduced across the centuries. As the French historian Jean-Claude Schmitt has written con-
cerning the powerful but ambivalent images of Eve and Pandora,
when studying these accounts the historian must understand the
different meanings that they held for the societies that produced
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them, taking into account in particular the variants chosen or invented in the course of their reception. The representations of women in stories of beginnings, as Amazons or saints, monsters or troublemakers, are too complex to categorize. They remain problematic and contradictory figures. And yet they continue to fascinate, to tempt us to consider them, to ask what the place of women at the beginning tells us about women, about beginnings, and about the present and future.

The chapters that follow, originally given as lectures, first at Princeton University and then, in various versions at a number of other institutions, explore specific cases from this vast panorama of the European tradition from antiquity until the twelfth century of women at the beginning. While not intended as a comprehensive examination of women in origin legends, they suggest that writing about women at the beginning could be a means by which authors tried to come to terms with their ambivalences about women in their own worlds.

This ambivalence was much weaker in antiquity than in the Christian Middle Ages. Within the Greco-Roman tradition, women’s places in origin stories were marginal, when indeed they were present at all. Whatever may have been the complex roles of women in classical societies, women in the origin accounts that have come to us were firmly in the control of masculine ideological agendas. If present, women at the beginning tended to die violently so that proper, male civilization could develop. The complexities of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages complicated this situation considerably, both because of the ambiguous and paradoxical tradition of Christianity vis à vis Mary and because of the complexities of reproducing and transmitting power and authority in medieval society.

Rather than attempting a coherent narrative creating some putative linear development of women in origin myths from antiquity to the High Middle Ages, I have chosen to take specific
moments and specific texts that illuminate key aspects of this complex problem, to look at how authors struggle with received traditions, cultural norms, and their own experiences to make sense of the contradictions and revelations in prototypical stories of women, origins, and power. From the Amazons to the Virgin Mary, from magical prophetesses to Frankish noblewomen, we see some of the same issues, crossing boundaries, informing different registers of discourse, and producing, with powerful and creative tensions and contradictions, the complexities of a European tradition.

The chapters that follow examine different moments and clusters of texts but nevertheless explore a common theme: the tensions between ideological programs and lived experience. This approach attempts to engage some of the basic and ongoing debates in gender history as developed particularly among medievalists in the past decades. On the one hand, scholars such as Georges Duby, examining representations of women in some of these very texts, read them as evidence that women became progressively silent, marginalized in society, and virtually irretrievable to history. This reading of medieval women has been massively rejected by most historians who study women in the Middle Ages. Instead, more recent scholarship has pointed out not only the continuing prominence of women of power in public life in the twelfth century and beyond but also of the necessity to revise assumptions about structural changes such as the rise of primogeniture in Europe’s aristocracy and the transformation of the kindred from horizontal, bilateral kin groups to narrow, vertical lineages. But if this is so, what then is to be made of the literature explored by Duby? The essays that follow attempt to answer this question by suggesting that the literary texts that attempt to eliminate or circumscribe the place of women as foundational and thus as exemplary figures in constructed narratives of origins are less a reflection of women’s lack of power
than a reflection of the paradoxes of masculine ideologies that are forced to contend with the massive contradictions of lived experience. Unable to eliminate women from the practice of public power, perhaps even unwilling to do so, these clerical authors eliminate them from the only world over which they have full control: the world of texts.