Writing of her experience of motherhood "in the family-centered, consumer-oriented, Freudian-American world of the 1950's"—and of her own wrenching ambivalence—Adrienne Rich said: "I did not understand that this circle, this magnetic field in which we lived was not a natural phenomenon" (Of Woman Born, pp. 4–5). Rich made a vital contribution to the recognition of the historicity of motherhood, the ancient vocation that is also an institution. My work was inspired in part by that recognition, which challenges both scholars and activists and continues to produce questions and demand answers. As an institution, how is motherhood constructed? How are its ideologies developed and proclaimed? How have "good" and "bad" motherhood been defined and evaluated—by whom, and in what contexts? How is the work of mothers related to the political and economic institutions of a society? How are the language and imagery of motherhood related to other cultural symbol systems, particularly those of religion? With these and other questions in mind, I set out to extend the exploration of the history of motherhood into medieval Europe, where its roots are inextricably entangled with the history of Christianity.

A complicated project such as this touches several centuries and geographic areas and makes use of many kinds of materials: its scope is much too large to be confined to any "field." I have
accumulated many debts and depended very much on the learning and insights of others. Apart from works cited in the notes and bibliography, I have gained greatly from discussions with colleagues and friends. Constance Buchanan read every chapter, sometimes more than once, and suggested the title. I very much appreciate the excellent advice of Bernadette Brooten and Margaret Miles, the patience and good humor of my friends at Cornell University Press, and the persistence of Holley Atkinson in transatlantic negotiation. Rosemary Hale and Claire Sahlin generously shared their own researches into the lives and works of medieval holy women. I am especially grateful for the care, attention, and affection with which Kay Shanahan and Margie Thornton worked on the manuscript.

My dear friend and colleague, the late Nancy Jay, made wise and helpful comments on several drafts; her enthusiasm always inspired further effort. Her students and friends miss her very much.

I have the advantage of an interested and loving family. My sisters, Elizabeth Hogeland and Eleanor Shakin, are long-time boosters of me and my projects. The three people to whom the book is dedicated are responsible for my intense, sustained passion for the subject. Whatever may be said about the historical construction of motherhood, it has embodied rewards.

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