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# Strange Figures: The Female Founders at the Margins of Hannah Arendt's Theory of Political Beginning

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## Abstract

Without females included in the ranks of political founder, Hannah Arendt's theory of political beginning looks dangerously romanticized. Arendt's founder is someone who rises to the challenge of their times, diverting history and renewing public spirit in the process. But despite a methodology that called for recovering the "rich and strange" from the past Arendt does not address the female founders that populate the myths and traditions she cites as instructive. These figures exemplify the unsettling forces and relationality she associates with beginning, but they also signal the high cost of action for the marginalized, including the difficulty some actors face in being recognized at all. If, as she suggests, the founder's persona provides an avenue of recall for the perplexing experience of beginning, then female founders support this recall magnificently while adding a tragic and troubling note that Arendt omits. Their reintroduction into her theory of political beginning takes the shine off her otherwise heroized and happy account.

Reading Hannah Arendt on political founding one would be forgiven for concluding it is an exclusively male activity. Although she identified birth as the condition that best prepares humans for beginning, she never seriously addressed the role of women founders, either as biological birth-givers or the pivotal actors behind political change. This is not to say that she ignored women entirely. Her study of individuals like Rahel Varnhagen, Rosa Luxemburg, and Isak Dinesen recorded their struggles against the burdens of gender and difference.<sup>1</sup> Yet while each enjoyed a degree of public stature none is remembered as a founder and Arendt never indicated they should be.

The omission of women from the ranks of Arendtian founders is puzzling in a thinker who was sensitive to the way women's lives can illuminate their times. It is doubly perplexing when many of her favourite founding examples contain some reference to a pivotal female figure.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the epic she cited as among the best resources for understanding political beginning, Virgil's *Aeneid*, contains not one but two founding figures: Aeneas who founds Rome and Dido who founds Carthage. Moreover, the

work was developed in honor of Emperor Augustus *and* his wife Livia, who like her husband counted among the empire's founding figures. In fact, Roman founding repeatedly rested on the positionality, personality, and bodies of women, from the rape of Rhea Silvia who birthed the city's founders Romulus and Remus, through the mass abduction and rape of the Sabine women in its earliest days, to the rape of Lucretia at the dawn of the Roman republic.

The disappearance of these figures from Arendt's Roman-inspired theory is striking and leaves her work curiously one-sided, focused on a heroic and collaborative narrative of beginning. For this reason, it's important to understand what happens to the absent feminine haunting her work. Although relatively rare in modern politics, female founders are a feature of the ancient works to which Arendt turned for inspiration where they evoke two critical elements of beginning. First, they are highly relational and act by acting upon or with other figures, including through refusal. Second, they foreground the perplexities of beginning that Arendt identified, largely because female founders appear as formidable but ambiguous figures, wily shapeshifters who burst forth from a situation of diminished agency to become the central force transforming the political order.

Despite having almost "nothing to say about feminism" directly, Arendt's work is now taken as essential for rethinking how women as a category and feminism as a theory relate to questions of freedom and beginning in modern politics (Zerilli 2005, xi). The tension between her disregard for the "woman question" and the recognized value of her work for those working on this question demands a resourceful approach to considering her contribution, including exploring the marginal and marginalized figures in her work.<sup>3</sup> There are good reasons for undertaking this effort, as a theory that rests on an exclusively masculinized idea of political beginning is *prima facie* incomplete, as history *does* include women whose actions changed the course of events. That raises a question about what Arendt left out of her theory by overlooking women founders.

Reclaiming the female founders at the margins of Arendt's theory is also consistent with her celebration of the "rich and strange" in public life (1971a, 212). She says foundation legends are the best resource for understanding beginning, and that the *Aeneid* is an outstanding example of the type.<sup>4</sup> Turning to that work to contemplate "the deeds and the sufferings of exiles" is therefore exactly what she recommends (1971b, 203, 206) as her own theory calls for the repeated return to history to unearth what appears unfathomable to today's eyes. Under the conditions of modernity, she explained, the relationship of present generations to the past transformed from passive inheritance to active salvage. That makes us responsible for the history we preserve but also for recovering that which can renew our thinking. She called this practice "citation" because it involves "tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh" to create a jolt of awareness in the present. She cautioned that those who scavenge through history in this manner should be "careful not to destroy" its fundamental strangeness in the process (1971a, 212; 1968b, 193, 202). Foregrounding the female founders in her work may seem like a strange project, but that's precisely the point. As an act of recovery, it is inspired by the technique she made central to her own approach.

This article begins by looking at Arendt's relationship to feminist theory and then uses her concept of natality to profile the figure of beginner. It next considers the classic founders she identified from Roman and American history to see why they receive special attention in her work. Strictly speaking, all acting is a kind of beginning insofar as it is characterized by freedom. Yet even the most brilliant actions fade with time. Founders are those who overcome this perishability by forging new compacts or

conventions that age into venerable traditions or institutional orders. By creating a home in the world where fresh action can unfold, such efforts establish a beachhead against the degradations of time, making the founder both an action-multiplier and a historical reminder of our capacity to begin again.

The discussion then turns to examples from Arendt's work that contain some association with female founders and asks what these figures reveal. They include Dido of Carthage, Aeneas' female equivalent in the *Aeneid*; Lucretia, the central woman of Roman republican founding; Livia Augusta who presided with Augustus over the birth of the Roman empire; and finally, the supernatural females behind the "fata morgana," an image that Arendt used to analogize the appearance of beginning. Taken together these figures communicate the disorientation that Arendt insisted was inherent in all beginning and suggest there is always something a little unsatisfying or unsettling about those who enact it. This feature of her theory, however, tends to disappear behind a comforting story of political beginning based in mutuality, promises, and constitutionalism. Without the female founder included among its ranks the memory of political beginning captured in the founder's story remains troublingly incomplete and the fuller theory of founding she builds upon it looks dangerously romanticized.

### Rethinking Arendtian theory

Efforts to address the "woman question" in Arendtian theory started with early works that framed Arendt as overtly hostile to the feminist tradition and "indebted to a culture of masculinity and hero worship" steeped in "androcentrism" and "*machismo*" (Dietz 1994, 231, 243; Pitkin 1981, 338). A chief area of concern was her "phenomenological essentialism" that divided masculinized politics and the public sphere from the feminized labors of private life, creating a "blind spot" in her thinking when it comes to the experience of individuals caught on the wrong side of the divide (Benhabib 1993, 104). This structuring cast issues of the body as "pre-political ugliness" best kept out of politics proper (Kristeva 2001, 68).

Early disappointment with her overt approach gave way to efforts to identify the value of her thinking for feminist theory. The desire to identify a submerged Arendtian feminism drove efforts to cull conceptual resources from her theory and apply them afresh. For example, Seyla Benhabib found Arendt's associative public sphere provided "an essential beginning point" for a feminist critique of late capitalism (1993, 110). Maria Markus found the discussion of belonging surrounding her pariah/parvenu/conscious-pariah categories suggested ways to nuance troublingly monolithic gender identities (1987). Amy Allen argued that Arendtian solidarity offered a way to break the log-jam between essentialist gender identities and fragmented post-identity approaches that threatened to paralyze feminist activism (1999, 98–99, 112). And Kimberly Maslin identified the gender-neutral framing of Arendt's work as a bulwark against developing a "shared victim" status of binary biological identity (2013b, 586–88).

The reclamation of Arendtian thought was accompanied by continued critique and thinkers like Adrienne Cavarero suggested that her central concept of natality, while rich and powerful, is perplexingly disembodied and demands reconstitution to reach its full potential. The problem may have its roots in political theory itself, which tends to conceive of actors as "universal, homogenous, and orderable subjects" kept "frozen in an immobile presence" by the mind's eye. The urge is therefore to "expel the plural and relational" aspects of politics as theoretically "uncontrollable."

Cavarero finds Arendt's work helps counter this drive by incorporating what others expel: the "undisciplinable" uniqueness that makes "boundlessness and unpredictability" central to politics (2002, 508–14). Arendtian theory requires neither a foundational identity nor its resistance, she maintains, but helpfully insists on an understanding of the bonds that form around a unique "someone" with their own face and story. The value of Arendt's work is that it sensitizes us to such uniqueness, which otherwise appears as "disorder and chaos" from the point of view of order-obsessed politics and theory (Cavarero 2002, 529–30). This feminist reconstitution of the Arendtian body then makes room for new modes of relationality like vulnerability (Söderbäck 2018).

Not all such critique proved constructive however, and Mary Dietz identifies a line of feminist theorizing gone wrong she calls the "gynocentric Arendt." Building on her concept of natality or birth as the primary event in political freedom this approach uses Arendtian theory to center women's experience as birth-givers, projecting a static gender binary into the heart of Arendt's theory (2002, 127–28). Bonnie Honig, for instance, reads Arendt's thought as "a cycle of anxious repetition" with binary distinctions "heaped, one upon another" (1992, 223). But Dietz insists the divide in Arendt's work is tripartite rather than binary. The divide is not the polarized one between feminized household and masculinized agora, but between labor, work, and action. Since Arendtian action, in Dietz's view, remains ungendered it can release theory from an unproductive obsession with "the generic-genderic force of the familiar bifurcation" and can "revivify" a feminism committed to the "spontaneity and unpredictability" of shared action. Like Cavarero, in other words, Dietz finds in Arendt an antidote to the problems of theory itself, because her work destabilizes categories that thinking tends to reify. She explains that the static category of woman "disintegrates" in the flux of Arendtian action and "manifests itself in a multitude of different answers to the question, 'Who are you?'" (2002, 115, 131–32).

This shift from biological or standpoint identity to action, or rather to a contingent identity that is an "epiphenomenon" of action (Borren 2013, 201), is a recurring theme in Arendtian commentary. Standpoint feminism may have certain affinities with Arendtian thought including a focus on pluralism and perspective-shifting (Winant 1987) but focusing on lives lived or a "unique biography" is still seen as a preferred starting point for emancipatory politics because it avoids the dangers of essentialism and preserves the uniqueness that underpins freedom. If natality is "being thrown into history," biography is a practice that "preserves and enacts this capacity." This in turn highlights the way that some figures, by living their story from the margins, "uncover the ambiguities and paradoxes of the norm from which they are excluded" transforming shame and stigma in the process (Locke 2007; Zebadúa Yáñez 2018, 100, 107). Biography also halts the spiral of deconstruction that threatens to leave feminism without an identifiable group for which to advocate. Any given story may be contingent, cohering only via the moment of action, but insofar as the identity it yields up is "a function of audience" it provides a starting point for political conversation and thereby for fresh action (Adams 2002, 12). The moral interpretation and perspective-shifting that biography demands combats the corrosive individualism and "numbing behavioralism" that drain away the capacity for political freedom (Drexler 2007, 8–9).

But a focus on action cannot entirely close the gulf between Arendt and feminism and Linda Zerilli cautions that efforts to "normalize" or "rescue" Arendtian theory for feminism should not go too far. Instead, she uses Arendt's work to push back on demands that gender be treated as "the primary, already given category for thinking about the human body." The value of Arendtian theory for Zerilli lies in its capacity

to uncork the unwieldy elements of bodily life, including the “grotesque, mute, oral, desiring and engulfing” qualities that cannot be suppressed or reasoned with through any theory. The potent but tidy distinctions Arendt proposes between labor, work, and action mean that something is still being driven into the margins until the embodied Arendtian subject “haunts the notes and margins of the very text that seeks to exclude or shelter it in a privacy that is dark but also sacred.” She credits Arendt with understanding that this sacredness was connected to the body’s role in beginning, a quality that continues to haunt conventional public life and conditions the disclosure of the self. Regrettably, Zerilli believes Arendt’s “horror” at “the hermaphroditic body” held in check the more radical implications of her thinking (1995, 174, 177, 184). If so, then revisiting these aspects of her work by looking for the marginal figures and unique biographies that fall beyond Arendt’s perspective should be a priority for political theory.

In this spirit Julian Honkasalo suggests that Arendt can be claimed as an ally for queer theory because her work addresses how certain groups become marked for marginalization, shaming, and abuse. When public inclusion means assimilation to the category of “exotic, perverse, repulsive and monstrous,” he explains, Arendtian theory tells us resistance must follow the same lines of demarcation (2014, 184). This is not the familiar heroics of Arendtian history where a recognizable public identity counters an absolute sovereign but rather a struggle between different modes of embodiment with different costs of belonging and action. This new pluralism is not just between different kinds of identity but between different *possibilities* for action, including the different levels of accessibility or liability that are attached to those who seek entry into the public sphere. The observation changes the stakes of Arendtian feminism because, as Joanne Cutting-Gray observed early in the debate, “a genuine feminist politics of alterity” is one that “responds to all who have shared the historical condition of otherness” and therefore “cannot be limited to feminism” (1993, 49). In effect, Arendtian theory means knowing that the “who” in “who are you?” will always turn out to be more than anyone bargained for.

### Natality and the beginner

Although central to her theory of freedom, Arendt’s concept of beginning is somewhat opaque and her chosen analogies shift from one context to another. This is no accident as she felt some constitutive element of beginning remains unfathomable so that its best representations take the form of a riddle or mirage. Still, there are some identifiable features of her theory that give context to the founding figure.<sup>5</sup> First, beginning manifests as a uniquely human process and the analogy she uses for this is birth. Second, it involves a perceived gap or interruption in time, a disjunction or redirection that changes everything. And third, it is a kind of treasure or inheritance, one that is easily lost and only vaguely remembered, which is why legends or riddles are among the best ways to capture it.

Arendt believed that humans are prepared for political founding because they “appear in the world by virtue of birth” (1963, 203). Since birth is the continual introduction of new actors into the flow of history, beginning is less an intentional act than it is endemic in the human condition. If the argument stopped there, however, beginning would hardly rise above a raw fact of the natural world and Arendt felt such “necessity” fell below the standard for real politics. Birth may condition humans for political beginning but true natality doesn’t emerge until “the new” exceeds natural conditions,

signified by a “second birth” as an actor within the political order. While mere biology is insufficient Arendt maintains that this second birth does not require any higher authority than itself because simply to be born is already to be thrown into the process of changing the world. We are “doomed to be free” she says, “by virtue of being born” (1958, 176; 1963, 191; 1971b, 217).

Although existentially ensured, beginning is still something of an ordeal because it manifests as a gap or pause in ordinary time, an “interval” or “hiatus” where the course of history is suspended and reworked. Virgil’s *Aeneid* captured this experience as a story of exile where the years its hero spends on the high seas symbolize a gap in time between the “no more” of a lost past and the “not yet” that lies ahead (1968a, 9). The epic therefore communicates the disorientation that a founder must weather. The “thought of an absolute beginning,” she maintained, means “there is nothing left for the ‘beginner’ to hold on to” and the experience thoroughly “abolishes the sequence of temporality” (1971b, 208). In an even more rarified account of beginning, Arendt cited a vignette by Kafka that tells the story of a man named “He” who is beset from fore and aft by adversaries and must stand his ground on a line between the two. The line represents time “broken in the middle” by the presence of the man, and the adversaries represent past and future. Humans spend their lives caught between the inward force of these two foes, she explains, and their fighting keeps the gap of freedom alive. Arendt suggested this is a viable representation for the “thought event” associated with beginning (1968a, 10–13; 1971a, 205–9).

There is an important tension between the image of time in Kafka’s vignette and the shared and living world where, Arendt said, “gaps in time do not occur.” Kafka’s gap is a product of the “thinking ego” where the coherence and unity sought after in solitary reflection is pitched against outward experience (1971a, 202, 210). Beginning therefore appears in thought as a departure from the normal course of affairs that lasts until ordinary time resumes in a form that resecures the temporal order. This is why the challenge or “riddle” posed by foundation is “how to restart time” (1971b, 214; Frost 2021, 135–43). Arendt believed the Romans were particularly adept at this challenge, contextualizing founding in a manner that stabilized and saved it. Because it happens within a given historical setting without being entirely a product of that setting, we could say that Arendtian beginning is *in* but not *of* history. This separateness, marked by the disorienting tumble out of historical continuity into the unstructured world of the new, explains why so few authors come close to capturing it.

Because theorizing beginning requires “thinking the unthinkable” (1971b, 208) it leads Arendt into challenging representational territory. As it carries “an element of complete arbitrariness” and “bewildering spontaneity” the understanding of beginning “cannot be inherited and handed down” whole and the concept evokes “haunting obscurity” until “nothing seems so shrouded in darkness and mystery.” The “best we can do in the quandary” she suggests is turn to riddles and legends that preserve its strangeness (1971b, 202–11; 1968a, 13). For this reason, the “riddle of foundation” can best be understood as a “lost treasure” that surfaces unexpectedly to mesmerize witnesses, who experience it as something abrupt and unexpected. She calls this vision a “fata morgana,” using the term for an ocean mirage that appears and disappears under “mysterious conditions” (1968a, 4–5). The illusion takes its name from the Arthurian shapeshifter Morgan Le Fay who in turn has roots in the Celtic sovereignty goddess the Morrigan.<sup>6</sup>

As this is the first time a feminine term appears in her discussion of beginning it's worth pausing to consider how Arendtian natality is overtly or subtly gendered. There are at least three dimensions where gender shadows her account as it concerns the body, memory or imagination, and mystery. To begin with, political natality rests on biological birth, making the reproductive body a powerful force that threatens the stability of the political order with its powers of change. The body that Arendt associates with such reproduction is primarily female—though not exclusively so as slaves are also assigned to the pre-political realm of the household (1958, 72).

Beginning subsequently enters politics with figures like Virgil's Aeneas or Kafka's He, or rather their real-life counterparts in Roman and American history. In Arendt's work these are all male. Their stories frame the beginner as someone who, in her words, takes "the initiative upon themselves" and thereby comes face to face with the "burden" of public affairs (1968a, 4). Kafka's lone fighter is an especially striking character because Arendt insists that political founding arises from promises and constitution-making by small councils or revolutionary groups that conduct what Hannah Pitkin called the "endless palaver in the *agora*" (1981, 336). If the "thought event" of beginning is conceived of as a solitary activity conducted by a "He" against impersonal forces, it suggests there is already something a little off about the way we think about beginning. It lacks both the diversity and the body-count that politics demands. Even if we explain this mismatch as the tension between solitary thought and shared action it poses a problem for Arendt's famous advice that we must "think what we are doing" (1958, 5). When it comes to political founding either we *cannot think* what we are doing or, given the stark isolationism of beginning as it appears in thought, we *shouldn't do* what we are thinking.

Thinking demands withdrawal from the complexities of lived politics, Arendt believed, so it's hardly surprising that the founding figure encountered in theory or history is a poor shadow of their flesh and blood inspiration. The best one can say for such figures is that, like other artifacts of history and politics, they support the recall of beginning in memory. But if what defines this figure is their struggle, is there any reason they must be a "he?" If the beginner operates beyond traditional categories, why would gender survive where other conventions did not? Thrown out of normal time the beginner finds themselves "visited" by an "apparition of freedom" so that they encounter themselves in their own "nakedness" (Arendt 1968a, 4). If this raw experience is the "lost treasure" she wants us to rediscover, and the founder's persona is like a treasure map pointing the way toward it, misconstruing the gender content of that moment produces a misleading map.

Which brings us to the third appearance of gender in Arendt's work. While both the thought event and history of beginning are figured as male, when it came to the dimensions of beginning that she felt escaped both thought and memory she turns again to the feminine. The "fata morgana" is her image for the "apparition of freedom" that would-be beginners encounter (1968a, 4–5). It may be sheer coincidence that she chose such imagery, yet she clearly felt the need to fill out her account with something different than her usual male exemplars. When she reached for an emblem to express the riddle or mystery that a beginner must confront, she settled on a shapeshifting feminized illusion. More will be said about this figure in the discussion below. For now, it is fair to say that Arendt's efforts to theorize natality suggest a complex relationship to women as beginners.



### Arendtian founders

Before turning to the female founders that Arendt omits it's helpful to consider what makes someone a founder in her account. The classic Arendtian founder comes in two main varieties: ancient Roman and modern American, with the latter inspired by the former. Arendt offered qualified praise for American revolutionaries who confronted the raw experience of the new like few before. In contrast, Romans stabilized their beginnings through cycles of return and restoration, which explains why the Augustan restoration could be narrativized as a repurposed Homeric tale in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

What distinguished founders like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson for Arendt is that they conceived of the American Revolution as an act of absolute novelty—a “*novus ordo saeculorum*.” This required them to place their faith in their own untested actions over any other absolute from which authority might be (wrongly) derived, although it took a certain amount of self-deception to make this work, evidenced in their “blind worship” of the early constitution, which provided a reassuring distance from the magnitude of their actions (1963, 19, 159, 190). The focus on constitution-making is thus a blessing and a curse for the new republic. It was a blessing insofar as it enshrined a collaborative effort at the heart of the American founding that reawakened public happiness and an appreciation for political life. Arendt explained that only the making and keeping of promises can save action from futility, creating stability “in the ocean of future uncertainty.” Covenanting is “the means by which power is kept in existence” so that where “men succeed in keeping intact the power which sprang up between them ... they are already in the process of foundation.” This amounts to “the world-building capacity of man” (1963, 166).

This reverence for the founding and its founders ultimately dimmed the spirit of action. The problem seems to have been that the founding fathers were *too* concerned with stability until an obsession with permanence reduced the constitution to a hollow exercise. The idea that the actions of beginning “should remain the privilege of the generation of the founders,” Arendt said, has misled thinking ever since (1963, 117, 166, 224). In this case the American founding fathers are not only reminders of what political action can achieve. They also highlight the dangers of aggrandizing those who conduct it.

Arendt notes that the American founding was heavily indebted to Roman tradition and that its founders “ransacked the archives of antiquity for paradigms to guide their own actions” (1971b, 204). What they encountered there was a complex mix of tradition, piety, and raw innovation that shaped a figure like Aeneas. The hero of the *Aeneid* spends the epic as a Trojan refugee sailing the Mediterranean seeking a new home and his many trials show that renewal is hard won. Only Aeneas’ refusal to “stay defeated in defeat” opens a new future (Virgil 2006, 223; Frost 2018). By centering “men of action,” Arendt observes, Virgil’s work makes clear that founding arises in the arbitrariness of free conduct and the salvation of shared commitment rather than any special constitutional expertise or political wisdom.

Behind all the action, however, is a psychological narrative that echoes the lonely struggle Kafka envisioned. There is a lot less “public happiness” on display in Virgilian founding and the primary theme of the Roman story is the effort to combat despair. Although he travels with a company of refugees, as leader Aeneas must face into “the abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed” executed outside the normal flow of things, an isolating experience that bespeaks the “perplexity” baked into the experience of beginning (Arendt 1971b, 204–16). Indeed, this most classic of founders



ends emotionally dysregulated by his ordeal to the point he slaughters a surrendering rival, embedding not only violence but an outright crime at the origins of the new order. If there is a message about the founding figure here it is a cautionary one. In the end no single figure is sufficient and the war of conquest Aeneas all but single-handedly conducts ends with the arrival of mutuality in the form of new laws and treaties.

Arendt never addressed Aeneas' role as an icon of founding violence, and she gives little if any consideration to the responsibilities of American founders as slave owners who willingly institutionalized an inhumanity.<sup>7</sup> In this regard there is a certain difficulty surrounding the founding figure that she seems reluctant to unpack. Yet Arendt did acknowledge that foundation legends testify to a deep connection with violence. Referring to the Cain and Abel story she says, "whatever political organization men have achieved has its origins in crime." Adding: "no beginning could be made without using violence, without violating" (1963, 10). If crime is *not* a disqualifier for the founding figure, do they really deserve the special attention her work affords them?

To put it another way, with plurality secured by birth and natality, and promises grounded in mutuality, does an individual founder matter at all? Arendt's discussion of these figures suggests the best of them arrive at the task ill-prepared and are frequently over-awed by their experience. Their understandable anxieties drive them to focus on stability, occasionally to a fault. Moreover, the heroism and happiness she considers the rewards of political life are only part of the story, as violence touches all beginnings. There is something instructive about these figures all the same. Because while beginning may be impossible to retain in mind, the *beginner* is not, and their successes and failures are often the best guide we have available. There is a sweet spot to the work of founding it appears, and it is navigated through the founder's own persona. Too little stability and the temporal exile of the new becomes unbearable, leading to the anguish and evasion that Aeneas and the American founders displayed. Too much, and beginning is extinguished in the pursuit of single-minded ideology of the kind that led the French Revolution into disaster.

The significance of founders therefore doesn't lie in their individual greatness. These men, "taken by themselves, are not wise" Arendt says, even if "their common purpose is wisdom." We pay special attention to the founder because their story serves as an "artifact" of actions that otherwise prove fleeting (1958, 8, 173; 1963, 219). The figure of the founder is a memory device in which we store something rare and precious: the experience of unmitigated freedom and the capacity to build the new together. These figures constitute what Nietzsche called "monumental" history, reminding us that the great was "once possible, and may thus be possible again" (1997, 69). Since the intention is not to over-awe later generations with a glorious past but to point the way to something valuable, the single most important quality of the founding figure is their capacity to communicate a spirit of freedom. Whatever trace of the experience of founding remains imprinted on these personas acts as an icon to our capacity to begin. When Arendt selects exclusively for male founders it shapes this memory in particular ways. Ironically then, what her pantheon lacks is plurality. Turning to the female founders that haunt her political universe is one way to address that gap.

## Female founders

This discussion addresses at least three and as many as seven female figures that are in some way tied to Arendt's work on founding. A precise count is difficult because, as will

become apparent, these figures are defined by their fluidity, to the point where some show up as more than one personality while others could be collapsed into a single archetype like the “good wife.” These women are occasionally the central figures in the dramas of political beginning they inhabit. In other cases, their relationship to a male-dominated order provides the fulcrum of change. But in every case there is a certain constitutive strangeness to their story. They exceed the boundaries of their assigned or conventional identity in ways that mark them as uncanny or excessive, and their founding story is inevitably marked with violence.

### Dido

Dido of Carthage is a case in point. The North African Dido myth predates Virgil’s account by several hundred years and tells of her flight on the high seas from a murderous brother-king who slew her husband. Virgil’s Dido is, like Aeneas, characterized by devotion and piety (in this case to her late husband) and her resolve supplies the driving force for Carthaginian founding. The name Dido is likely an honorific meaning “wanderer” reflecting her exile experience. Other features of the original story do not translate, however. For example, the original Dido wins the right to settle in Tunisia by guile. She strikes a bargain to buy as much land as can be covered by an ox hide. She then cuts the hide into thin strips until it encircles a small hill upon which the city is founded (Haegemans 2000, 284–87). Her actions in shifting from devoted wife to sly and resourceful leader cast a shadow over her gender identity which is no longer simply the “good wife.” In fact, the original Dido was in part defined by her refusal to remarry a local king. When marriage seemed unavoidable, she built her own funeral pyre and impaled herself on a sword for good measure—an especially unwomanly death that Virgil re-enacts. By reimagining Dido as a passion-addled woman pining after the departed Aeneas, Virgil diminishes the transgressive power of the original account and leaves Dido a tarnished woman.

Virgil’s Dido was still an extraordinary innovation for Roman literature. As the foil to Aeneas’ plans she represents an obstacle or counterweight that threatens to pull the prophesied foundation off course (Connolly 2010, 406–07). Carthage was Rome’s ancient enemy and no Carthaginian was likely to come off well in an official epic. But Dido comes surprisingly close even with her reduction to lovesick victim, because even in defeat her actions express an unsettling power. When Aeneas slips away by night Dido’s suicide delivers a message he cannot ignore. Her actions not only call the hero on his betrayal, they also defy the divine order of things as it was not her time to die. The wily Dido of Tunisian origin was already a founder going into Virgil’s story. Her transformation in the epic from amiable widow to cold-blooded virago goes one step further. In Virgil’s hands she threatens the order of fate itself, showing that a female founder can prove especially disruptive. Regardless, Dido gets no serious attention in Arendt’s work, although her bard gets a mention (1971b, 214).

### Lucretia

Perhaps Arendt could be forgiven for overlooking the power of the Dido myth given its deflationary treatment in Virgil’s hands. But for a theorist who made Rome their prime inspiration, and republicanism their preferred political form, the rape of Lucretia narrative surely merited some attention. Melissa Matthes speculates that Arendt’s focus on birth over death may have led her to neglect Lucretia’s story, grounded as it is in

another defiant suicide. But for Matthes, Arendt's insistence on political action as relational—performed with or before one's fellow citizens—is epitomized in Lucretia's tragic tale (2000, 8). The virtuous wife of a nobleman in early Rome, Lucretia submits to rape by a member of the ruling Tarquin family after he threatens to frame her for adultery. The next day she summons her husband and male relatives and kills herself while testifying to her innocence and demanding revenge. Inspired by her story Romans unite to unseat the Tarquins and the republic is born.

In the Lucretia story the good wife becomes a founding force by making herself a living sacrifice. Her actions evoke masculine honor while exposing the failures of male relatives in the face of Tarquin tyranny. This makes Lucretia another strange and transgressive woman. The quiet helpmate at her loom transforms under the influence of violence into a voice of commanding authority. Her combination of submission and revenge is a “political stratagem” and a “politically canny one” at that. Jennifer Thompson argues that rape had a different meaning for Romans before Christianity recast it as an exercise in personal anguish and shame. For early Romans rape changed the material conditions of the world, leaving a taint on the victim's body that had to be expunged by the death of both victim and perpetrator. It's easy for moderns to misread Lucretia as a woman refusing to live in shame, Thompson says, but that's an anachronism. For Romans her actions expressed something closer to “valor,” signaling the kind of virtues that are associated with manly resolve (2004, 4–5). The transformed Lucretia is revealed as a potent political actor, disturbing the gendered peace of the household and the polis.

As with Dido, Lucretia's story signals something important about the female founder. A man can write laws that initiate a new order because, as Matthes explains, “his words have effect,” whereas for a Roman woman “only her body does.” Lucretia uses her body to become a “female *pharmakon* ... both the source of disruption and of the return to order.” This duality makes her “paradoxical”; she institutes the break in normality while demanding others address it. Her actions are relational not only because status and violence shape her story but because her “*virtù* is a demonstration for others.” She knows what she is doing when she acts and that makes her suicide “generative” (Matthes 2000, 30–31, 35, 39).

This suggests there is nothing excluding women from the ranks of founder, although the price the politically voiceless pay to become beginners can be disturbing. Even then a new regime may re-enact the original silencing, leaving women like Lucretia symbolically “entombed in the foundation.” This reburial of the female force formed part of the Roman formula for renewal because it meant its unsettling power could be returned to and re-enacted as necessary. Depending on how it's retold the Lucretia's story can “personify founding” in a manner that will “ignite rather than forestall political action.” Matthes suggests this deeper “spirit of foundation” might prove more consequential than any specific event because it indicates the power of renewal (2000, 43, 50).

### *Livia Augusta*

Whereas Dido and Lucretia are figures of myth and legend, Livia Augusta is a figure of concrete history. As the other half of the imperial couple that led the Roman restoration she was a pivotal actor in the transformation that Arendt considered a quintessential example of political beginning (Angelova 2019, 66–107). And as Augustus' wife and matriarch of the imperial family she provided both the audience and inspiration for Virgil's *Aeneid*. It might be argued that her role as wife and mother kept her close to

household issues that Arendt was keen to exclude. But her presence in Roman affairs was never limited to the household. She is the only Roman woman to receive the title of “Augusta,” placing her on par with her husband’s status as divine founder, and was the first living Roman woman to be named and depicted in public art and sculpture (McAuley 2015, 47). The Roman Senate repeatedly voted her more honors than could be allowed and there was even a suggestion that the month of October should be renamed for her (Barrett 2002, 158). She is, quite literally, a major figure in the Roman public sphere, and a recognized builder of the new Roman order.

She is also another “good wife” turned abductee, having been taken from her first husband, already pregnant, to marry Augustus. By embracing her new life as imperial wife and mother she becomes the “anti-Lucretia,” ultimately rising to the status of “mother of the nation” and protector of the state. But she doesn’t come off entirely unscathed either. Her unprecedented role in Roman politics made her a suspect force and later historians portrayed her as a “sinister and malicious” schemer ready to murder and poison for ambition (Strunk 2014, 127, 140). Her battle for influence with her son Tiberius, Augustus’ heir, suggests she remained an unpredictable force in Roman politics throughout her life. She was worshipped as an icon of Roman womanhood during life and spawned a popular cult after her death. But it was the “sheer unaccommodated strangeness” of her stature in Roman public life that distinguishes her story as founder (McAuley 2015, 48) and this may account for her disappearance from Arendt’s traditionalist reading of the Roman restoration.

### *Morgana/Morgan/Morrigan*

Here the discussion turns away from Rome to explore the associations surrounding the “fata morgana,” the waterborne illusion that Arendt used to analogize the appearance of the new. In doing so she evoked a long tradition that uses femininity to symbolize the perplexities of beginning. The Arthurian Morgan Le Fay and the Celtic Morrigan that lie behind Arendt’s imagery have two features in common. First, they are both shapeshifters. Second, they exhibit a malicious or monstrous form of female power centered on political authority. Arendt’s analogy draws on the first association—an illusion that appears and disappears at random, causing the world to shift before our eyes. But that fluidity has its roots in the second association: a strange and menacing womanly force that appears out of nowhere to reshape the political order. The Morgana/Morgan/Morrigan complex embodies not just the enigmatic and ephemeral aspects of founding but also its destabilizing and threatening dimension. Rather than woman as founder then, these stories represent founding as a woman—a woman whose transformative power evokes the strangest of the strange.

While Morgan Le Fay is the scourge of Arthurian ambitions in early English tales, the Morrigan appears in ancient Irish sagas as a figure that tests regal candidates and confers authority on a new king through sexual liaison, signifying the rebirth of the land (Hebert 2013, 5; Martins 2015). She has a compound personality combining three alter-egos with various responsibilities for war, healing, fertility, change, intoxication, and death, making for an extraordinarily complex and shifting character. Her body is identified with the land and in keeping with this scale first appears to candidates as a gigantic misshapen hag.<sup>8</sup> Those who flee the spectacle disqualify themselves for rule; those who embrace her demonstrate their fitness. The challenge is intended to unnerve all comers and there is “ambivalence, even hostility” in the engagement between this spirit and their male counterpart (Herbert 1997, 143–44; Mac Cana 2000). Final reconciliation is signaled by the Morrigan’s transformation into a beautiful woman and wife.

Using a term from Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Kempton calls the Morrigan a “shifting knotwork of identity” because her power arises from her complex relationality. She is an instructive figure for modern sovereignty and gender dynamics, Kempton believes, because her manifestations (crow, cow, crone, etc.) are always female yet she has no true form. This fluidity “challenges the sense of subjectivity that might be linked to a single self-contained body” (2017, 25–27). Despite her central role in political renewal, she resists binding relationships and the kingship she validates is based in marriage to the land not ownership over it. Since in early Ireland marriage indicated a dissolvable partnership with significant wifely rights, the sovereignty that results is far from absolute. Even her distorted sexuality may not be entirely about sex. Her presentation tests a candidate’s ability to grasp that things are not always as they seem, while her grotesque features affirm the kingly responsibility to meet the needs of sick and abject community members (Eichhorn-Mulligan 2006, 1049).

### Constitutive strangeness

How might the reintroduction of these female figures change our view of Arendtian beginning? Although she never addressed these figures herself, their stories illuminate critical elements of her thought. Taken in an Arendtian light, their lesson is not that women make shifty or self-destructive founders. It is that all politics has some defect at the start. The acts of founding they feature are unsettling, raising the “suspicion that political life is an aberration in nature” and “continually at risk from the vicissitudes of all things human” (Matthes 2000, 7). Because she must rise above her social context to become a fully fledged actor this vulnerability is especially apparent in the case of the female founder. Beginning renders the actor larger-than-life, signified in the gigantic and grotesque body of the Morrigan, the disturbing actions of Dido and Lucretia, or the extraordinary stature of Livia Augusta. This monstrosity is a reminder that being marginal, elusive or identity-shifting carries its own transformative energy. Like water caught behind a dam, such fluidity can deliver with awesome force.

Despite her apparent disinterest Arendt addressed the “woman problem” on at least one occasion. In her writings on Rahel Varnhagen she characterized it as “the discrepancy between what men expected of women ‘in general’ and what women could give or wanted in their turn” (1974, xviii). This ever-present expectation gap suggests a deep failure of mutuality plagues the gendered landscape of political action. Women’s absence from the ranks of founders in Arendt’s writings might therefore reflect a general difficulty in remembering actions that the prevailing mentality already struggles to grasp. Remembering male beginners is a straightforward matter of turning to history or myth populated with the standard quotient of great men and their heroics. This recognizability makes them useful for Arendt’s theorizing but tells only half the story. The other half appears as riddle and mystery.

The tendency to not only forget, but actively suppress, the disorienting strangeness of beginning may help explain why it has been assigned to the female side of a gender binary in the examples considered here. There’s no reason a male figure couldn’t evoke the same associations because what’s being suppressed is what is paradoxical or perplexing about the actions of beginning. It’s simply that women come to represent “that which must be banished or denied” in order for a “new normal” to be instituted (Matthes 2000, 3). While male founders are elevated to the public pedestal figures like Lucretia end entombed in the history they create. Both responses reflect the

transition from the unstable and unsettling conditions of beginning back to ordinary time, just as the Morrigan's reversion to "good wife" marks the return to normalcy.

These examples show that peculiarity and ambiguity cannot be removed from political founding without suppressing something critical. If Arendtian beginning is understood as the special province of pre-anointed actors operating in a recognizable world and making promises and pacts in the old familiar way then the radical potential of her account is lost. What about those to whom no promises are offered? To whom no mutuality is extended, no seat at the table? Other relations remain available to these actors including resistance and refusal, testing or confrontation, canny misdirection, or outright violence. Even the death curses of Dido and Lucretia serve to change history although the price of such agency is steep. In a world where gender puts everyone in some form of relationship or another few bodies have the luxury of truly being pre-political and the appearance of rape in these stories reminds us that not all founding relations are happy or collaborative.

If as Arendt suggests, exiles and refugees are among the best ways to represent those who begin it's hard not to see marginality as a constitutive quality.<sup>9</sup> And if beginning is the work done in the strange in-between that springs up when normal time runs out, then Arendt's founding figures prove misleading. Because their pre-presence in the public sphere suggests action starts within this favored space. Female founders, on the other hand, show that it can equally well begin beyond it, suggesting a political world whose boundaries are disconcertingly elastic. For a thinker who did so much to turn our minds toward the perplexities of beginning Arendt's narrow account of founders endangers her own achievement. Politics is both more capacious and more extraordinary than a masculinized framework suggests.

Recalling the perplexities of beginning requires us to see past standard appearances. Yet Arendt seems to side with a view of beginning that initially acknowledges this difficulty only to cast it off in favor of a narrative that externalizes the strange and generative. In trying to account for how the "riddle of beginning" first appeared as feature of political life Arendt cited Virgil's characterization of the pre-Roman world as one that produces "all the wonders of nature" but "no tales worth telling." Those who "sing" of that Saturnian prehistory, she says, are "chanting of a fairy-tale land and are themselves marginal figures." Dido's bard is among them, signaling that her story belongs to a pre-political order where the problems of ruling and authority are delightfully absent. This fairyland was thought of by Romans as being "beyond the scope of action" (Arendt 1971b, 2014–15), conveniently excluding figures like Dido and her Celtic counterparts from the ranks of beginner.

Lucretia and Livia Augusta arise not from misty prehistory however, but from the pre-political Roman household. Yet they too are assigned to a world beyond action and so disappear from Arendt's view. While their gender marks them as marginal and disempowered their role in transforming Roman history tells a different story. Could it be that the most transformative actions appear to come out of nowhere because the actor has been artificially disappeared from history? The riddle of foundation, under this scenario, arises from the challenge and shock of rediscovering that part of political life otherwise driven from view.<sup>10</sup> Both Kafka's He and Virgil's Aeneas show that the refusal to stay "defeated in defeat" is the very hallmark of beginning. In which case, marginalization disqualifies no one so long as fresh action is possible. Even consigned to the fairyland of prehistory or the pre-political household, there is no reason to count female figures out of political founding and very good reasons to count them in.

### Expanding Arendtianism

This exercise shed light on the female founders at the margins of Arendtian theory in an effort to expand her work using her own conceptual tools. It takes the “rich and strange” lives that lie beneath her conventional sources as a resource for retheorizing the challenges of political birth. The familiar heroics of Arendt’s Roman or American foundings harden the identities of its actors, embedding the formula for agency so firmly in a particular political order that its spirit of freedom drains away. Female founders, in contrast, inhabit a “no man’s land” of the defeated, marginalized, and excluded. This makes them especially well placed to help us think about Arendtian beginning because they arise from the same mysterious and obscure depths as beginning itself. Arendt even names the phenomenon for one of them.

By the end of this exercise it’s clear that femininity is not what powers the revolutionary agency of these figures; it’s their capacity to become *unwomanly*. They inhabit and mobilize their identity while exceeding it in important ways. There is no need to recast Arendt as a feminist thinker then, so long as her work can be used to theorize the potency of gender without essentializing its bearers. Indeed, her neglect of the “woman problem” might signal a principled refusal to render legible a sphere of political action that is pre-emptively defined as incomprehensible and strange. Where this leaves figures like Varnhagen, Luxemburg, and Dinesen is less clear. Unlike their state-building brethren, their fate *does* make them wise and at a minimum they signal a potency or latency to be reckoned with. Perhaps they are like Aeneas’ excessive violence, a reminder that new worlds are often built at someone’s expense.

If beginning makes the world unsettlingly strange, the Arendtian founder is someone who rises above their situation to see a world of possibility and then, with others, brings it to life. In Adriana Cavarero’s terms they surge forth to become a body you cannot ignore and the plurality this introduces into the political world first appears as something incoherent or unknown. This “surging” into appearance—“this beginner’s pride” as Cavarero puts it—is the true root of public happiness because it partakes of the growth and “germinal” creativity of natality (2021, 12, 26, 37). This happiness is not limited to a gap in time and it’s not just about the stabilizing work of promise-making or the constitutions that close the gap up again. It also involves the sometimes mind-bending work of growing the community within which such promises are even possible.

No one is excluded from this larger story because free action is available to all. In fact, as Virgil understood, those who begin from a place of diminished agency manifest the greatest narrative arc. Yet for all Cavarero’s optimism, the cost to those who surge forth in this way should not be underestimated. The utopian quality she identifies in Arendt’s work can spill over into denial if the violence and suffering of the beginner is not also acknowledged. If the best option we have for remembering beginning is to tell the stories of those who partake in it then female founders should be in that list, precisely because violence and suffering are never far from their story. Even their burial into the foundations of a new order can be seen as a kind of memory device. It reminds us that beginning can always emerge from the margins and may prove the most explosive when it does.

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## Notes

- 1 Varnhagen, for example, was an introspective Jewish *salonnière* who deployed the “magic of personality” to fascinate her admirers but ultimately retreated into the role of conscious pariah when society proved inhospitable (Arendt 1974, 22; Maslin 2013a). Luxemburg cut a similarly “marginal but brilliant” figure as an unorthodox leftist thinker who was denied success and buried “in oblivion” by her own comrades. And the writer Dinesen played the role of an egotistical “Scheherazade,” a would-be “queen of the faeries” who all but succeeded in reclaiming her own story until repeated losses made her wise (Arendt 1968b, 34, 55, 102, 109).
- 2 Because the discussion includes supernatural entities that move in and out of the category of “woman” I use “female” rather than “women founders” in the discussion. Since even the humans discussed here transcend traditional concepts of “woman” and “feminine” the term “female” indicates a broadly encompassing symbolic category rather than a restrictive biological marker.
- 3 Seyla Benhabib explains that taking up the “woman question” in the work of any theorist necessitates a shift in approach: “We begin by searching in the footnotes, in the marginalia, in the less recognized works of a thinker for those ‘traces’ (*Spurren*) that are left behind by women’s presence and more often than not by their absence” (1995, 7).
- 4 With “nothing comparable” except in the Old Testament.
- 5 Arendt uses the terms beginner and founder interchangeably but there’s an important distinction between them. The beginner is someone who fights for a new future; the founder is a memory. They are the beginner glimpsed in retrospect after the timeline is restored, which means the beginner can only be experienced instantaneously and the founder can only be identified historically. To put it another way, beginning is something we do, founding is something we remember.
- 6 Arendt understood sovereignty as an absolute ideal that drove totalitarian politics. The original Irish term associated with the Morrigan and commonly translated as “sovereignty” is more flexible and can address the act of governance, the location of politics (a realm or kingdom), or the persons involved in leadership (Bollard 1986, 46).
- 7 Arendt’s blindness to issues of race and slavery in the American founding is occasionally dumbfounding. For example, she describes the colonies as being spared the “misery and want” blighting Europe at the time, a view she could only maintain by ignoring the condition of enslaved and Indigenous peoples (1963, 58).
- 8 Later versions of the story incorporate a riddle challenge, drawing an even closer parallel to Arendt’s representation of beginning as a type of riddle (Aguirre 1993).
- 9 The American founding, for example, produced its own refugees in the form of fleeing loyalists whose arrival in a new land (Canada) transformed its political order (Jasanoff 2011). Focusing on the happy mutuality of the remaining revolutionaries therefore tells only half the story. Less than half if we consider the fate of Indigenous populations displaced by the entire exercise.
- 10 This would make it akin to Rancière’s “part of those who have no part” because it goes beyond the tangibly “excluded” to signal an ever-expanding demos, or what he calls “the count of the uncounted,” which enumerates “not the wretched, but the anonymous” (Rancière 2010, 70, 142).

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