

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 69

**Jacques Dalarun**, *Robert of Arbrissel: Sex, Sin and Salvation in the Middle Ages*. Trans. Bruce L. Venarde. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2006. xxxi + 188 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$ 24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 0-8132-1439-4.

Review by Fiona Griffiths, New York University.

This English translation of Jacques Dalarun's *Robert d'Arbrissel: fondateur de Fontevraud* (Paris: A. Michel, 1986) is the most recent indication of the enduring magnetism of Robert of Arbrissel (d. 1116), a charismatic figure who won both praise and condemnation in his own time and who continues to both fascinate and frustrate contemporary scholars. In the last five years alone, Robert has been the subject of three books (not including the one under review). The first, a collection of essays edited by Jacques Dalarun, emerged from a conference in 2001 commemorating the 900th anniversary of Robert's monastic foundation for men and women at Fontevraud; the second, a collection of primary sources selected and translated by Bruce Venarde, made available for the first time the essential sources concerning Robert's life; and the third, a trilingual collaboration soon to appear from Brepols, promises to unite the Latin texts of all known medieval sources concerning Robert with translations and new interpretative essays. [1]

Two scholars, Jacques Dalarun and Bruce Venarde, are largely responsible for the richness of recent scholarship on Robert and it is no surprise, then, that the translation under review is a product of their collaboration. Jacques Dalarun began work on Robert as a graduate student under the supervision of Pierre Toubert in Paris. His thesis, defended in 1984, centered on his groundbreaking discovery in the Bibliothèque Nationale of a late medieval French translation of the second of two Latin Lives of Robert, a discovery that increased the length of the known text more than two-fold. Published the following year as *L'impossible sainteté: la vie retrouvée de Robert d'Arbrissel (v. 1045-1116), fondateur de Fontevraud* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1985), Dalarun's first book was soon followed—in 1986—by *Robert d'Arbrissel: fondateur de Fontevraud*, a biography of Robert composed for a learned (although popular) French audience. Shortly after its publication, Dalarun's *Robert* appeared in German (1987), Italian (1989), and Portuguese (1990), although, curiously, not in English until now.

The belated appearance of Dalarun's biography in English at this point, some twenty years after its original publication, is due to the efforts and enthusiasm of Bruce Venarde, an American scholar who has almost single-handedly ensured Robert's place in English-language university courses and scholarly discourse. Venarde's interest in Robert stems from his early work on female monasticism in England and France, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215*, published by Cornell University Press in 1997. Seeking to determine the fate of female monasticism in the central Middle Ages—a period traditionally associated with decline for religious women—Venarde compiled a vast database of women's monastic foundations in select dioceses, demonstrating conclusively that these foundations actually multiplied during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. A central focus of his argument related to the vibrancy of female monastic life as evidenced in houses associated with Fontevraud, the only monastic order of the middle ages that maintained its focus on women's spiritual lives. Venarde linked Fontevraud's tremendous success and rapid growth with the charismatic appeal of its founder, Robert of Arbrissel, whose spiritual experiments—particularly his mixing of the sexes—brought him the ire of contemporary churchmen.

The nature of the relationship between the men and women of Fontevraud, Robert's original intentions

when founding the community, and his spiritual purpose in joining men and women together in a relationship that was bound to attract scandal (as extant letters to Robert from Marbode of Rennes and Geoffrey of Vendôme make clear) are questions that have intrigued scholars for generations and continue to provide rich fodder for debate. These questions, too, are central to Dalarun's biography, making the book's appearance in English especially welcome. Indeed, the English subtitle of the translated biography—*Sex, Sin and Salvation in the Middle Ages*—hints at the reasons behind Robert's recent prominence in English language studies: the presumed intersection of sex (or, rather, abstinence) and salvation in Robert's thought.

For the most part, the translated text is rigorously faithful to the French original. Changes to the body of the text are few, although readers will be grateful to Venarde for his index and explanatory footnotes (both absent from the original) as well as the greatly expanded and updated bibliography. In addition to these, the volume includes a helpful new introduction in which Venarde places Dalarun's original work within the context of more recent scholarship on Robert, as well as a new preface in which Dalarun reflects on the circumstances under which he composed the original work, his concerns at that time, and his reflections on the work and its conclusions at a distance of twenty years.

The lag between the original publication and its appearance in English has meant that parts of the volume are now somewhat dated. Indeed, Dalarun himself states in his preface that, were he to have rewritten the book, much would have changed (p. x). When he composed the original French text, he believed that the second Latin *Life* of Robert, most likely written by his chaplain Andreas, had been censored intentionally. This supposed censorship of the text offered a neat explanation for the precipitous conclusion of the second Latin *Life*, as well as the more extensive French translation that Dalarun had discovered as a student in Paris. Dalarun's hypothesis, set forth in his thesis and first book, was that Petronilla, the first abbess of Fontevraud, had been responsible for suppressing the latter part of Andreas's *Life*, ostensibly in retribution for Andreas's implicit criticisms of her and of the circumstances surrounding Robert's burial. Dalarun's confidence in this theory colored his understanding of Fontevraud in the years after Robert's death and, in particular, of relations between the male and female parts of the community. The fact that Robert was never canonized seemed to him the outcome of a careful campaign engineered by the female members of Fontevraud to suppress the memory of their controversial founder. The result, Dalarun argued, was conflict between the men and women of the community; he concludes that "the order of Fontevraud echoed with the noise of quarrelling" (p. 152).

During the twenty years that have elapsed since the original publication of Dalarun's *Robert*, much in his thinking has changed, as he freely admits. Above all, he now believes that Petronilla was not the villain of the story as he had at first supposed. While still arguing that Petronilla suppressed the full Latin version of Andreas's *Life* of Robert, Dalarun now suggests that she did so not to bolster her own position, but as a bid to see Robert canonized by omitting those elements in his biography that would not gain favor with the papacy. From his more recent work on the earliest statutes of Fontevraud, Dalarun further judges Petronilla to have been faithful "in her way" to Robert's intentions for the community (p. xv). A second shift in Dalarun's thinking has to do with the way in which power relations between the sexes were arranged at Fontevraud. In 1986, Dalarun was not optimistic concerning relations between the men and women of the community after Robert's death, describing the brothers as the "defeated" (p. 160) and locating deep fissures behind the ostensibly peaceful façade of Fontevraud. Arguing that the women served only as a means to salvation for the men, Dalarun concluded that Fontevraud did not promote women's own spiritual lives. Now, he sees things quite differently, writing that Fontevraud did manage "a real inversion of values and positions" (p. xv).

The evolution in Dalarun's thinking concerning these questions does not negate the value of the English translation; on the contrary, exploring Dalarun's original ideas in conjunction with Venarde's translated sources concerning Robert will enable students (for whom both volumes are primarily

intended) to draw their own conclusions regarding the complex interplay of gender and spirituality within medieval monasticism. Indeed, Dalarun's biography of Robert remains valuable precisely because the ideas that he presents remain so controversial, whether or not he now finds them persuasive. As Dalarun rightly observes, there can be no one truth about Robert. Since Robert left so little of his own writings and did not elaborate on his attitude toward women, questions concerning his motivations, desires, and expectations must remain open. Dalarun's provocative work, now available for English-speaking students, will certainly reinvigorate debates concerning Robert's life and legacy. For that, and for his beautiful translation, we are greatly indebted to Bruce Venarde.

## NOTES

[1] *Robert d'Arbrissel et la vie religieuse dans l'ouest de la France: actes du colloque de Fontevraud, 13-16 décembre 2001*, ed. Jacques Dalarun (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004); *Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Religious Life*, trans. Bruce L. Venarde (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003); *Les deux vies de Robert d'Arbrissel, fondateur de Fontevraud. Légendes, écrits et témoignages/ The Two Lives of Robert of Arbrissel, Founder of Fontevraud. Legends, Writings, and Testimonies*, eds. J. Dalarun, G. Giordanengo, A. Le Huërou, J. Longère, D. Poirel, B. L. Venarde (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007).

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*H-France Review* Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 69

ISSN 1553-9172