



Robert of Arbrissel: Sex, Sin, and Salvation in the Middle Ages

Jacques Dalarun

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Translated with an introduction and notes by Bruce L. Venarde with a new preface by the author

This book tells the fascinating story of Robert of Arbrissel (ca. 1045-1116). Robert was a parish priest, longtime student, reformer, hermit, wandering preacher, and, most famously, founder of the abbey of Fontevraud. There men and women joined together in a monastic life organized so that women ruled men and men served women, according to the founder's plan. As Jacques Dalarun shows in this biography, however, Fontevraud was for Robert only one stopping point in a restless and lifelong journey in search of salvation that took place in roads, forests, towns, and monasteries across France. Hard as the travel was, the spiritual search was more agonizing still. Consumed with a sense of his own sinfulness, sexual and otherwise, Robert lived out penance however he could. The many women who gathered in his wake became partners in his religious quest, and his frequent contact with them was, paradoxically, a centerpiece of his penitential regime. At Fontevraud, he encouraged others to adopt the practice of intense contact with and indeed subservience to women. This reversal of the standard gender hierarchy in the midst of the ongoing battle with sexual temptation has baffled and even enraged observers during Robert's lifetime and ever since.

Vividly narrating the course of Robert's life and his relationships with others along the way, the author hews closely to medieval sources, in particular two letters to Robert critical of his nonconformity and his relations with women, along with two admiring accounts written within a few years of his death. This translation by Bruce L. Venarde preserves the novelistic character of the original while updating and augmenting it with full notes, a bibliography, and an introduction both to the book and to scholarly interpretations of Robert in the past two decades. A new preface by Jacques Dalarun completes the reworking of the first full-length biography of Robert of Arbrissel available in English.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jacques Dalarun is senior researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris and the author of numerous books and articles on medieval religious experience in France and Italy. Bruce L. Venarde, associate professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh, is the author of *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society* and *Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Religious Life*.

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK:

"A marvelous translation of an important book that is much more than the biography of the remarkable holy man who founded the abbey of Fontevraud, where nuns ruled over religious brothers. Dalarun places

Robert's story in the larger context of a matrimonial crisis that placed women of this society at risk, while also treating with considerable delicacy Robert's self-testing, his urge to preach, and his ability to settle disputes. In his extensive annotation and clear translation, Bruce L. Venarde has made Dalarun's study accessible to English-readers at all levels."?Constance H. Berman, University of Iowa

"Of all the religious athletes of the twelfth century, Robert of Arbrissel?the son of a priest, a hermit, wandering holy man, preacher to prostitutes, and advisor to people of power?is one of the strangest and most interesting. This book brings together the foremost French historian of Robert with the foremost American as his translator. A prize for both students and teachers of the Middle Ages."?Fredric Cheyette, professor emeritus, Amherst College

"Beautifully translated and annotated, this biography offers a model historical study of a fascinating man and his times. Taken together with Venarde's collection of the primary sources connected with Robert (*Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Religious Life*), it provides the foundation for an ideal classroom experience in medieval

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