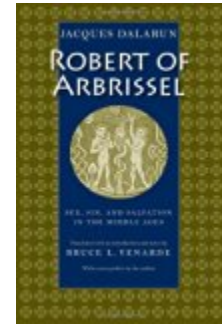


Jacques Dalarun. *Robert of Arbrissel: Sex, Sin and Salvation in the Middle Ages*. Venarde. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006. xxxi + 188 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8132-1439-9.

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A Controversial Ascetic: The Biographers of Robert of Arbrissel

It has been taken for granted that history is often written by the winners, and that the winners decide whom and what they want to include in the grand *récit* of history as they deem fit. As a subgenre of historical writing itself, biographies of historical figures, notably even lesser-known or less well-received hagiographies in our modern secular context, receive an ambiguous reception in terms of their intended scope of readership and audience. Jacques Dalarun, in his biographical reconstructions of Robert of Arbrissel's life, engages with the issues of authenticity and holiness at stake in the various original source materials he consults concerning this enigmatic figure. Bruce L. Venarde's English translation is easy to read, and yet retains a prosaic lyricality which is in the original French, and his annotations and notes alongside the main text of the biography further aid the reader in following the narrative of Robert of Arbrissel's life more lucidly.

Robert of Arbrissel, best known for resolving the question of *cura monialium* (the sacerdotal care of nuns) by establishing a religious community at Fontevraud in the Poitevin lands of France during the eleventh century, is portrayed in a holistic context. He is one ascetic who did not only seek gender equality by negating a patristic-medieval misogyny imbedded in its Christian culture. Rather, Dalarun also highlights him as a figure who, in seeking to live out the *vita apostolica* (the apostolic life) via the renunciation of sexual desires and sins, actually invited the temptation towards sex as a means of trial by fire. Robert of Arbrissel was shown to be in-

tentionally putting himself at unease in situations such as close proximity with the female sex in figures as varied as reformed harlots and married aristocratic women. Not shying away from the original sources which seek to attack the moral-spiritual authoritativeness of Robert of Arbrissel, such as the vitriolic letters written by Marbode of Rennes and Geoffrey of Vendôme, Dalarun's biography of this figure restores to us an acute sense of the controversy he elicited from his contemporaries, alongside the praise heaped upon him by his hagiographers.

As a historical-biographical re-construction of a medieval religious, this book takes immense care in situating the events illustrated in the French and Latin *vitae* of Robert of Arbrissel in the context of its literary antecedents such as Sulpicius Severus's *vita* of Saint Martin of Tours, the fourth-century religious athlete of Gaul, and the contemporaneous lives of Robert of Arbrissel's acquaintances, such as Vitalis of Savigny and Bernard of Tiron. Historical biography here treads the fine line between narrative re-construction and a mere archaeological unearthing of facts and details discovered in earlier medieval manuscripts of the *vitae* of Robert of Arbrissel. This *oeuvre* within the book by no means reduces the biography of Robert's life to a mere fiction, but demonstrates the very literariness with which an ascetic's controversial life unfolds, both akin to and distinct from those of his predecessors in the Egyptian desert and his contemporaries in the wooded forests of medieval France.

Dalarun's book also chooses to dwell on another area of controversy, namely the identities and social backgrounds of the various women whom Robert of Arbrissel ministered to and included within his religious community at Fontevraud. One of the greatest accusations which can be leveled at a figure of holiness is the unabated concupiscence of human lust for women, regardless of their social status. In lieu of producing a sanitized version of Robert's life, by obliterating this aspect of Robert of Arbrissel, Dalarun studies closely in this biography the women whom Robert authorized, such as Petronilla, who took over the reins of the abbey at Fontevraud upon his sick-bed despite her former marital status, and Countess Ermengarde of Brittany, whom he took into his community as a one-time guest. In its refusal to sanitize the details of Robert's life, this translation reprises Dalarun's tribute of integrity to the socio-historical milieu of Robert's time in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, bringing to the English-speaking world a text which will be immensely useful for the study of not only Robert of Arbrissel, but the idiosyncrasies of that historical period for a lay readership as well as an academic audience alike.

It also bears mention that in any hagiographical narrative, the life of the holy figure or saint has to proceed from birth through his life of ministry, right through death to his further canonization or beatification. Robert of Arbrissel marks an interesting figure of study for Jacques Dalarun, especially because of the fact that his life and death occurred in a period when canonization procedures were virtually unwritten in medieval canon law, and the sanctity of a person is in fact constructed by his hagiographers or biographers, and subsequently affirmed by local cults of veneration sprouting around him after his death as well as localized miracles pertaining to his relics. Bucking the trend of most historical biographies of religious figures or even hagiographies, the death of Robert of Arbrissel occurs on a comparatively anticlimactic note, where he is not only unmentioned in the records of Grande Cartulaire, a collection of documents pertaining to Fontevraud, but also passes into oblivion due to the isolated nature of his tomb in the

sanctuary of the nuns whom he housed. Dalarun's balanced approach to the subject matter marks a nuanced outlook on the issue of religious sanctity in the High Middle Ages, showing through the figure of Robert of Arbrissel how the various boundaries between ecclesiastically sanctioned holiness and individual appropriations of the apostolic life were often confused.

This translation, which retains the chapter division of the original French text, reinforces through its chapter titles the steps to ascetical purification of desire and perfection as desired within the saint or holy man's life, such as "Trial by Fire," "The Seventh Degree of Humility," and "The Disciple He Loved." There is a hint somehow in this structure of chapter division that Dalarun intended to draw a parallel between the life of Robert of Arbrissel and the *via dolorosa* (the dolorous path) undertaken by Jesus Christ in his scourging and crucifixion. It furthermore suggests that the ultimate goal of every ascetic or aspiring saint is towards the imitation of Christ, undertaken via extremes of eremitic withdrawal from medieval society to the pillars or the wooded forests. Keeping in mind this ascetic ideal, Venarde's introduction draws the reader into the religious world of the High Middle Ages in the twelfth century, alerting us to the radical ideals which characterized Robert of Arbrissel's world. It also sets in context Robert of Arbrissel criticism in its context of infantile development since the 1980s.[1] This translation (complete with the introduction, notes, and preface, as additional critical apparatuses) proves to be a valuable resource for students and advanced researchers, including college professors, researching the phenomenon of monasticism during the High Middle Ages in France.

Note

[1]. Cf. Jean-Marc Bienvenu, *L'étonnant fondateur de Fontevraud: Robert d'Arbrissel* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions latine, 1981); Jacques Dalarun, *L'impossible sainteté: La Vie retrouvée de Robert d'Arbrissel (v.1045-1116)* (Paris: Cerf, 1985); and W. Scott Jesse, "Robert d'Arbrissel: Aristocratic Patronage and the Question of Heresy," *Journal of Medieval History* 20 (1994): 221-235.

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