

Jun-2005

# The Royal Abbey of Fontevrault: Religious Women & the Shaping of Gendered Space

Gabrielle Esperdy

---

## Recommended Citation

Esperdy, Gabrielle (2005). The Royal Abbey of Fontevrault: Religious Women & the Shaping of Gendered Space. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 6(2), 59-80.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol6/iss2/5>

## The Royal Abbey of Fontevrault: Religious Women & the Shaping of Gendered Space

By Gabrielle Esperdy<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article examines the religious and architectural history of the Royal Abbey of Fontevrault, in the French province of Anjou, investigating the active and deliberate role women played in shaping the physical and symbolic space of this female monastic community. Founded in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century and active until the French Revolution, the abbey was a rare institution in which administrative power was in the hands of women, enabling them to exert almost complete control over the built environment. The nature and impact of this control is examined by tracing the development of the abbey from an initial settlement of rough dwellings into a large monastic complex comprising five distinct communities. By exploring the planning and building of Fontevrault in the context of typical monastic design as well as contemporaneous Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque architecture, the article reveals the extent and significance of this gendered construction of space.

*Keywords:* gender, architecture, monastery

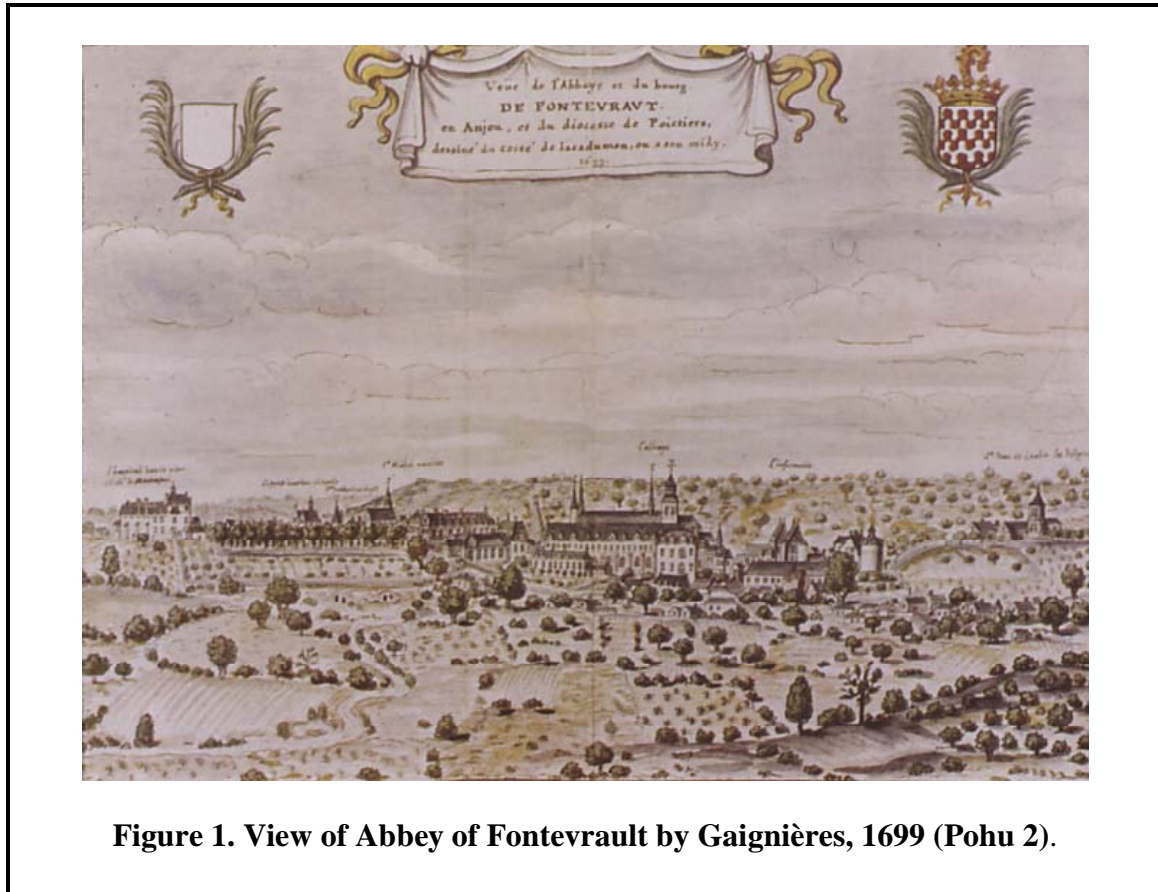
The Abbey of Fontevrault, located in the *departement* of Maine-et-Loire in the historic province of Anjou, has a rich and complex religious and architectural history spanning nearly eight centuries of continuous use. Founded in 1101 by a Breton preacher named Robert d'Arbrissel, the abbey quickly developed from an initial settlement of rough dwellings into a large monastic complex, eventually comprising five distinct communities for women and men.<sup>2</sup> A nearly unbroken cycle of construction, expansion, and renovation followed Fontevrault's foundation, ensuring that the abbey's buildings would reflect both

---

<sup>1</sup> Gabrielle Esperdy is an architectural historian whose main area of interest is architecture and urbanism in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Much of her work examines the development of a modern architectural vernacular, especially in the commercial landscape before World War II, and pays particular attention to the minor or everyday buildings that constitute much of the urban and suburban fabric. As a scholar she is particularly concerned with the ways in which social, economic, and political issues shape the built environment, both historically and today; these interests have led her to investigate how such issues as consumerism, gender, and public policy are brought to bear on architecture and architectural discourse. Her work has appeared in *Perspecta*, *Architectural Design*, and *History of Photography*, among other journals. She has conducted field work and research on 20<sup>th</sup> century landscapes for HABS/HAER and has taught at Pratt Institute. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor at the New Jersey Institute of Technology where she teaches the history and theory of architecture.

<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology: I use *nun* and *nunnery*, *monk* and *monastery*, only as the most convenient means of differentiating between a community of women and one of men. The adjective *monastic* is used in interchangeably with reference to women and men. Sadly, the English language has no words comparable to the gender specific but nonetheless equivalent French terms *religieuse* and *religieux*.

the changing needs of the religious communities and major architectural developments as well.



**Figure 1. View of Abbey of Fontevrault by Gaignières, 1699 (Pohu 2).**

Despite this singular heritage, the existing architectural historical literature gives little critical attention to Fontevrault beyond formal investigations of its major 12th century buildings, namely the abbey church and kitchen.<sup>3</sup> And while endeavors tracing the development of a distinctly *Fontevriste* style or the provenance of the abbey's Byzantine domes are undoubtedly important, they provide only a partial, and therefore distorted, view of Fontevrault's contribution to the history of monastic architecture (Melot, de Verneilh). For beyond style, the significance of Fontevrault lies in the unique organizational structure of the order itself, a structure in which the hegemony of women over men was one of its most salient characteristics. Through careful studies of both the rule and charters of the order, historians of medieval religious women have clarified this structure and explained its influence on the relationship that existed between Fontevrault's male and female monastic communities (Gold, Male/Female). However, as they are not concerned with architecture,

---

<sup>3</sup> This neglect is not necessarily the fault of historians: after its conversion into a prison by Napoleon, access to Fontevrault was strictly limited until it was turned over to the *Service des Monuments Historiques* in the 1960s.

these studies reveal nothing of the impact that Fontevrault's organizational structure had on the built environment of the abbey itself.

To formulate a more complete picture of the abbey, it is necessary to bring formalist architectural history and medieval monastic history together in a single contextual study. While this study usefully reveals the degree to which architecture and monasticism are inseparable at Fontevrault, even more significantly, it shows how the design of the royal abbey was shaped as gendered space and marked by the operation of women's power and authority over the course of 700 years. Fontevrault was shaped by gender at its very foundation as a female monastery—a community of women who have consciously chosen to live apart from men, albeit one in which men were present within the complex in a distinct community of their own.<sup>4</sup> There are many examples of such monasteries throughout the Middle Ages; what was unusual about Fontevrault was the fact that the motivating force behind the order's foundation was to provide for the spiritual and material needs of the female followers of Robert d'Arbrissel.

Having gained a reputation as a dedicated reformer, a disciplined ascetic, and a powerful preacher, Robert attracted a large group of disciples while in contemplative retreat in a deserted part of Anjou known as Fontevrault. According to Baldric, Robert's earliest biographer, by 1100 the group had grown to include "many men of every condition," as well as a large number of women "both poor and noble, widows and virgins, young and old, whores and those who spurn men" (Gold, *Lady* 95). To maintain control over the large numbers of men and women around him, Robert formalized the loose gathering into several communities that became the order of Fontevrault around 1101. Of the original communities, three were for women and one was for men. The central community at Fontevrault accommodated noble women, widows and virgins; two secondary communities provided for reformed prostitutes and poor women and for lepers; the fourth community at Fontevrault housed men, both clerics and lay.

From the outset Robert made it clear that the order was to be woman-centered and even on his deathbed he declared that everything he had built at Fontevrault was for the sake of the nuns (Gold, *Lady* 96).<sup>5</sup> The women of the order were assigned to a silent contemplative life within the cloisters. Men, on the other hand, were to devote themselves to a life of labor: spiritual for the clerics and physical for the laymen. The sole purpose of their labor was to serve the spiritual and material needs of the women of Fontevrault, which included the celebration of the mass as well as clearing land, filling in salt marshes, and working the fields (Broqulet 103). Robert incorporated this service role directly into the rule of the order, making each monk pledge, for the sake of his soul, to remain loyal to the "handmaidens of Christ" (Broqulet 103).

The relative position of the nuns to the monks was reinforced by the conscious choice of appropriate patron saints for the monastic communities: the principal monastery for women was dedicated to the Virgin (*Grand Moutier*); that of the monks was dedicated to St. John the Evangelist (*St. Jean de l'Habit*); the community for reformed prostitutes was dedicated to Mary Magdalen (*La Madeleine*); the cloistered hospice for sick and lepers was dedicated to Lazarus (*St. Lazare*). While it is unclear if Robert alone was responsible for

---

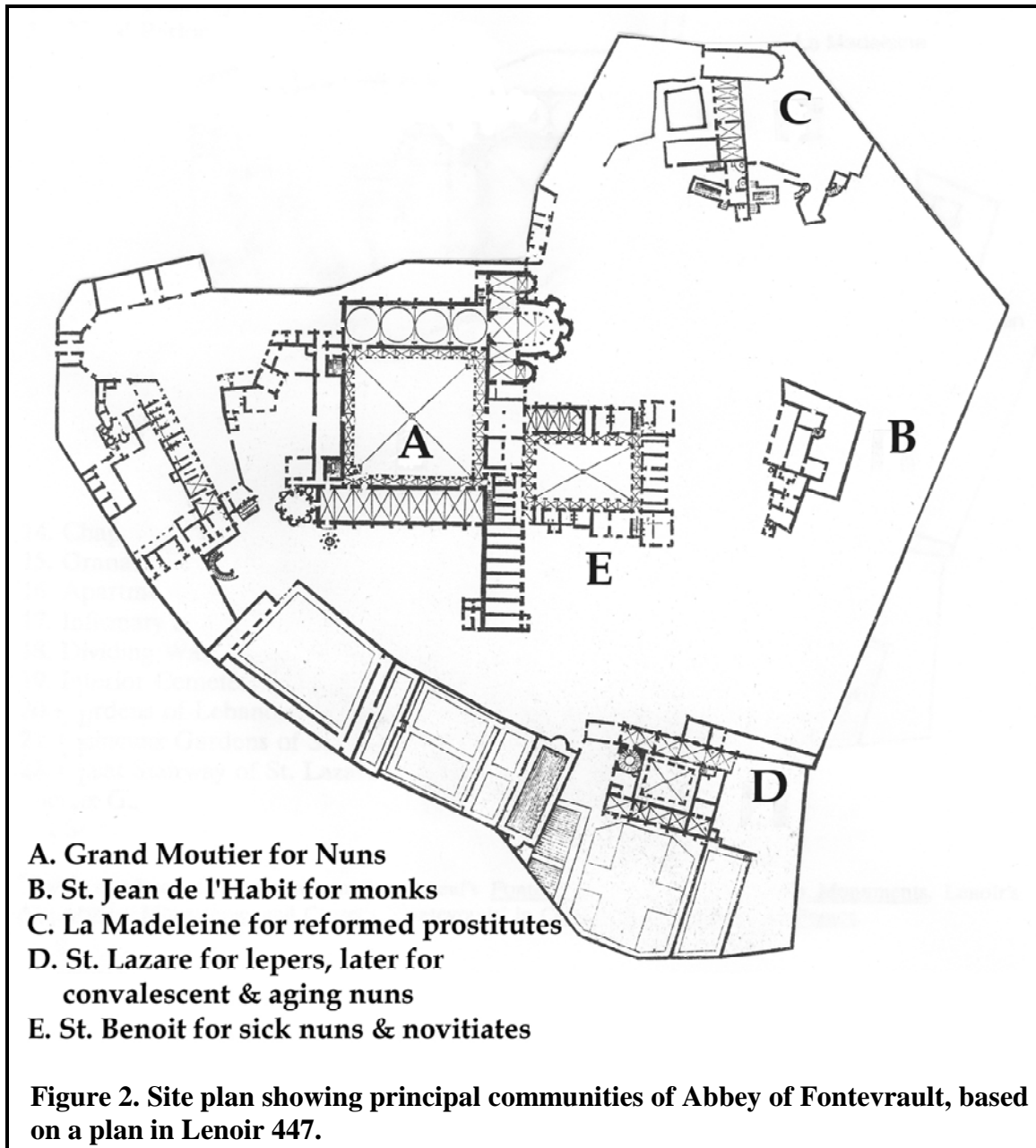
<sup>4</sup> This notion of gendered space is informed by diverse critics and historians. See for example, Erlemann; Ehrentzen; and Rendell, Penner and Borden.

<sup>5</sup> This, according to Robert's second biographer.

these dedications or if he sought the counsel of his grand prioress and procurator, both women, the dedications were obviously intended as spiritually powerful reminders of the motivation for Fontevrault's foundation.<sup>6</sup> The dedications of the Grand Moutier and St. Jean were intended to evoke the relationship that existed between Mary and John after the death of Christ, and sanctioned by Christ from the cross in John 19:26-27: "Woman, behold, your son! Son, behold, your mother" (Joubert 11, Smith 180). Corresponding to their expected subservient role, the monks of St. Jean acted metaphorically as the devoted, unquestioning, and loyal sons of the "mothers" and "virgins" of the Grand Moutier.

---

<sup>6</sup> The dedications were clearly in place by the time of the abbey church's consecration in 1119, but by this date Robert had been away from Fontevrault for nearly a decade; whether he had chosen the dedications previous to his departure is uncertain, but likely.



The patron saints of the two other communities also symbolically represented their inhabitants since Mary Magdalen was herself a reformed prostitute and Lazarus, once sick and dying, had been attended to and brought back to life by Christ. While it seems highly likely that these dedications were meant to be legible to the inhabitants of their respective communities, in the case of La Madeleine the dedication had a political motive as well. Robert had come under increasing attack from high level clergy in the region, due in part to the number of prostitutes in his ranks (Smith 176).<sup>7</sup> By organizing the prostitutes, who were

<sup>7</sup> He was especially criticized by Marbod, Bishop of Rennes, and Geoffrey of Vendôme.

also known as repentant daughters, under the patronage of Mary Magdalen, Robert sought to emphasize their current virtues over their past offenses, thus avoiding the taint of scandal. The model was obvious enough: once her “demons” were expelled by Christ, the Magdalen went on to live a virtuous and religious life.<sup>8</sup>

Robert also took more concrete action to ensure that the woman-centeredness of Fontevrault would remain intact: within the organizational structure of the order he placed the supreme authority over the abbey’s four communities in the hands of a woman. The abbess, with the grand prioress as second in command, had complete control over the governance of Fontevrault. All members of the communities, men as well as women, were obedient to her. Robert displayed no little business acumen in purposefully writing the position and job description of the abbess into the rule: he was fully aware that a challenge to her authority could well occur after his death. Thus, Statute 5 of Rule II:

[the abbess] is to have and maintain the power of ruling the church of Fontevrault and all the places belonging to that church, and they are to obey her. They are to revere her as their spiritual mother, and all the affairs of the church, spiritual as well as secular, are to remain in her hands, or to be given to whomever she assigns, just as she decides (Gold, Lady 99).<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Robert’s belief in the abbess as the chief executive of Fontevrault was underscored by his insistence that she be a woman brought up outside the cloister, having the worldly knowledge, experience, and education necessary to run the daily operations of a large monastic community. As several historians have pointed out, Robert’s decision to have a woman succeed him, as well as the stipulations of the rule and choice of patrons saints, served to institutionalize female control at Fontevrault (Smith 176, Gold, Lady 98). From the beginning, this female control had a direct and profound impact on the development of Fontevrault, including, as one of the abbess’s most important “secular” affairs, its architecture. In the coming centuries, as each succeeding abbess took office, she would exercise this powerful authority when commissioning, approving, and supervising new buildings throughout the monastery.

Characterizing the importance of the abbot in monastic design, architectural historian Wolfgang Braunfels writes: “At no other time in the history of architecture does the client so overshadow the builder” (11). How then, did the first abbess/clients of Fontevrault shape the work of their builders? Shortly after the first permanent monastic buildings were begun around 1105, Robert left Fontevrault to return to the life of a wandering preacher. Apparently more concerned with his salvation, “than with finding a mason to build his church,” Robert willingly entrusted the oversight of construction to his grand prioress, Hersende de Champagne (Joubert 11). Until the appointment of the first abbess in 1117 (at the time of Robert’s death), Hersende was the sole authority in matters of building. According to Baldric, after the regularization of the order, the huts and crude dwellings of the original settlement proved inadequate for Fontevrault’s rapid growth. In

---

<sup>8</sup> For a complete discussion of Robert’s invocation of the Magdalen see Dalarun (1151-1154).

<sup>9</sup> This version of the rule (c. 1116) is thought to be closest to Robert’s original.

addition, there was an increasing need for buildings that were stable and secure, as the abbey had been frequently attacked by marauders from the countryside (Smith 182). Further impetus for new construction came with the ever greater number of noble women seeking refuge at Fontevrault who, though admittedly leaving worldly comfort behind, still expected to maintain a certain standard of living. Under Hersende's supervision, the much-needed construction campaign progressed quickly.

By 1119 the choir and transept of the abbey church were completed and work on the four cloisters, including the central kitchen, refectory, and dormitory of the Grand Moutier, seems to have been well underway. Contemporary accounts indicate that construction of chapels at La Madeleine, St. Jean, and St. Lazare was well-advanced as early as 1117, since Robert's remains were on display in each following his death the same year (Crozet 429-30). Under the first two abbesses, Pétronille de Chemille and Mathilde d'Anjou, the major 12th century building campaign was concluded with the completion of the abbey church possibly in the 1160s, including the installation of the tombs of the Plantagenets, the erection of the chapel of St. Benôit for the abbess's private use beginning in 1180, and the construction of most of the convent buildings of the Grand Moutier and the dependent monasteries (Bosseboeuf 73).<sup>10</sup> The buildings of St. Jean date from 1166-1180, according to a notice issued by Mathilde's grand prioress promising graces to all those who aided in the construction; those of St. Lazare date from 1170-89, according to records of funds donated by Henry II in expiation for the death of Thomas Becket (Crozet 459, Joubert 12). By the end of the 12th century Fontevrault's major buildings were in place.<sup>11</sup> Constructed of local limestone in an austere, but elegant, Angevin Gothic style, these buildings would retain their 12th century aspect for roughly the next two hundred years, during a period of decline in the abbey's fortunes.

The next significant building activity occurred in the 16th century, spearheaded by the reform movement of the abbess Renée de Bourbon and her successor Louise de Bourbon. Though their renovation and reconstruction efforts were largely cosmetic, they nonetheless had a critical impact on the abbey's evolution. The 17th century saw the construction of a fifth community at Fontevrault, the Gallery of St. Benôit, which contained a new novitiate, infirmary, and apartments for the grand prioress. The final phase of construction at Fontevrault prior to its dissolution during the French Revolution occurred in the first half of the 18th century with a new house for the abbess, apartments, chapels, and gardens for the daughters of Louis XV (sent to the abbey to be educated), and the reconstruction of numerous outbuildings such as stables and quarters for the lay servants.

From foundation to dissolution, Fontevrault grew into a substantial abbey under the careful supervision of each succeeding abbess in her role as *la conductrice des travaux*. As it grew, its cloisters and convent buildings formed what medievalist René Crozet has called "a true monastic city in the pure tradition" of western Christendom (Crozet 432). This tradition refers to the norms of monastic planning and design that developed in the west during the

---

<sup>10</sup> This date is indicated by records of a donation given specifically for the construction of the chapel (Bosseboeuf).

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the 12th century abbesses were able to conduct the building campaign so successfully because of the tremendous financial, political, material, and labor resources at their disposal. Church bishops sanctioned the order's foundation; the counts of Anjou, and later the king himself, pledged monetary support; local building materials, especially limestone, slate, and wood, were abundant; the lay men among Robert's followers provided a large construction workforce.



Carolingian period and reached their apogee in the great monastic complexes of the 12th century, such as Cluny and Citeaux. In many ways, these norms represent functionalist architecture at its best, as monastic buildings were designed to directly serve the everyday needs and activities of their primary users (Stoddard 20-29). Thus, from kitchen to refectory, from dormitory to choir, from cloister to chapter house, form logically followed function in the arrangement of interior spaces and circulation between those spaces. Within the highly efficient design of the cloister, monks or nuns were free to follow their rigorous schedule of prayer, worship, and contemplation.



The buildings of Fontevrault display a profound awareness of the typical monastic plan, particularly in the disposition of the Grand Moutier, the central community of the abbey. A comparison of the Grand Moutier with both ideal and real monastic plans reveals striking, but not surprising, similarities. As in the 9th century St. Gaul Utopia, Fontevrault's abbey church is laid out with an eastern apsidal end while the cloister is arranged along its southern flank.<sup>12</sup> The chapter house is the central structure of the eastern cloister gallery, which it shares with the warming room and a second floor dormitory. The nuns' parlor opens off the cloister's western gallery, while the refectory opens off its southern gallery and the kitchen occupies its southwest corner. Aside from the arrangement of buildings directly surrounding the cloister, there are other similarities with the St. Gaul Utopia. For example, Fontevrault's noviciate and infirmary of St. Benoît are placed to the east of the abbey church, forming what Wolfgang Braunfels in his description of similarly-placed buildings of St. Gaul called "a whole complex, a separate monastery in miniature" (Braunfels 43). Finally, while the services and miscellaneous service buildings comprise the precinct southwest of the Grand Moutier, gardens, *les Jardins de Liban*, occupy the precinct to the southeast, as in the St. Gaul plan. Additional correspondences can be located by comparing Fontevrault with other monastic plans. The chapel of St. Benoît, for example, occupies a site that precisely coincides with that of the Lady Chapel of Cluny II, while the 12th century noviciate, which forms an extension to the eastern gallery of the cloister, corresponds to the novices' rooms found on the plan of an ideal Cistercian monastery prepared by Aubert and Dimier (Braunfels 55, 75). The situation of Fontevrault near a natural spring likewise corresponds to the Cistercian ideal of placing monasteries as close to a water supply as possible.<sup>13</sup>

These similarities make clear the extent to which Fontevrault, like many other orders, relied on existing models for the planning of its monastic complex. But, unlike other orders, Fontevrault, as discussed above, was founded for, operated by, and devoted to women. Having noted the influence that Fontevrault's woman-centeredness had on the order's organizational structure, it is appropriate to examine the influence it had on the abbey's physical structure. Put simply, as a monastery for women, does the architecture of Fontevrault differ appreciably from a monastery for men, and what differences can be attributed to gender? Fontevrault is a compelling subject for this investigation since, as a double monastery, it contained communities for women and for men within one complex.<sup>14</sup> The proximity of Fontevrault's female and male communities thus allows the historian to

discount certain geographic, economic and stylistic variables that would otherwise unduly effect the outcome of the analysis.

---

<sup>12</sup> This comparison is based on the St. Gaul Utopia redrawn and translated by Braunfels and reproduced in his *Monasteries of Western Europe* 39.

<sup>13</sup> The name *Fontevrault* is derived from this spring, known locally as "Font Evraud" or Evraud's fountain.

<sup>14</sup> The term *double monastery* is somewhat misleading as it applies to Fontevrault, for several reasons. First, *double monastery* implies, I believe, an equality in the relative positions of the male and female communities. At Fontevrault, as we have seen, the male monastery of St. Jean was clearly subservient to the female monastery of the Grand Moutier. In addition, "double" is inappropriate because in fact there were four original communities at Fontevrault; perhaps *quadruple monastery* would be more accurate.

Through close readings of descriptive accounts and examinations of ground plans some discernable differences do emerge within the individual arrangements of Fontevrault's communities.<sup>15</sup> The abbey's two subsidiary female communities, La Madeleine and St. Lazare, had the same basic configuration as the Grand Moutier, though on a much smaller scale. While chapels replaced the abbey church, the cloisters and adjacent buildings were laid out, as expected, to the south. In contrast, the layout of St. Jean was different: rather than following the heretofore standard practice of placing the cloister to the south of the compound's church, the cloister of St. Jean was placed to the north (Crozet 459). Braunfels has noted several similarly disposed Cistercian monasteries, such as Eberbach and Maulbronn, but their northern cloisters seem to have resulted from the spatial constraints of the site (Braunfels 78). In the case of St. Jean, however, plans clearly reveal that space was not a problem at Fontevrault. Since there was more than adequate land for the cloister to have been built to the south, one must assume that there was another reason for this idiosyncrasy. Most likely, this northern cloister represents one dimension of the structural hierarchy governing the architectural disposition of the entire abbey—a hierarchy dictated almost exclusively by gender.

Numerous critics and historians have explained how such a hierarchy operates in architectural terms, none more explicitly than Jos Boys in her essay, "Is There a Feminist Analysis of Architecture?": "Architecture makes a physical representation of social relations in the way it organizes people in space. It does this both symbolically--through imagery and 'appropriateness of place' for a particular activity--and in reality--through physical boundaries and the spatial relationships made between activities" (25).<sup>16</sup> As discussed above, the use of patron saints *symbolically* represents the social relations that existed at Fontevrault. In a similar way, the spatial placement of each monastery *physically* represents these social relations.<sup>17</sup> The main entrance to Fontevrault is located at the westernmost edge of the complex. As a visitor would have originally approached the abbey, after passing through this entrance, the church and flanking Grand Moutier were the first buildings seen in the near distance (Hallet 101). Both visually and physically linked, the church and the main female monastery are thus presented as the principal focus of the abbey. The two other original female communities are arranged on a vertical axis east of the Grand Moutier, La Madeleine to the north and St. Lazare to the south. An approaching visitor would have clearly seen them as well—at least until the southwest precinct was built up in the 18th century. Physically smaller in scale than the Grand Moutier, La Madeleine and St. Lazare are further diminished as they appear to recede into the distance beyond it, a visual illusion

---

<sup>15</sup> Because the monasteries of St. Jean and La Madeleine were destroyed after the French Revolution, one must rely on descriptive accounts and ground plans, rather than on extant buildings, even though the information found in Bosseboeuf (48-93) and Lenoir (477), for example, is sometimes contradictory. Happily, more recent archeological investigations have helped clarify some of the confusion, as in Prigent (66-71).

<sup>16</sup> See also Friedman 40-61.

<sup>17</sup> My spatial analysis of the placement of Fontevrault's buildings is based on a model by planner Kevin Lynch, who argues that "paths"--the channels along which environmental elements are arranged and observers customarily move--provide a degree of legibility through which the hierarchy and meanings of built form can be perceived (46-48). This analysis does not include the novitiate and infirmary of St. Benoît since they were not part of the original configuration of the abbey.

that reinforces their secondary position. But, diminished or not, these woman-centered buildings are still instantly perceived as part of the abbey complex.

By contrast, the male community of St. Jean, occupying a site due east of the Grand Moutier, is completely occluded by the main female community, further emphasizing the organizational structure of the order itself. Obviously, this placement had a practical function relating to the monks' role of service. In many Cistercian monasteries, the *conversi* were relegated to the physical location from which they could best serve the needs of the monks, the vicinity of the kitchen and refectory (Braunfels 79, Broquelet 103).<sup>18</sup> To this status-based *classism*, Fontevrault added sexism (though one favoring women over men), relegating the monks of St. Jean to a location which afforded them easy access to the abbey church in which they would perform their main function for the nuns, the celebration of the mass. Returning again to the placement of St. Jean's cloister north of its own chapel, it becomes obvious that it occupies a traditional position, though slightly removed, south of the abbey church. Since, as stated in the rule, the monks owed their allegiance and service to the abbey church and not to their own chapel, the northern placement of the cloister is thus an appropriate visual reminder of their own pledges of obedience and the founding mandates of Robert d'Arbrissel.

One of the basic tenets of monastic architecture is that the design of a monastery is derived from the rule of order it follows. The monastic rule thus serves as a sort of blueprint for living in which the arrangement of monastic buildings are central.<sup>19</sup> At Fontevrault the most important stipulation of the rule, the one which differentiated it from so many other monasteries, was the hegemony of women over men. As originally conceived by Robert, the rule of Fontevrault included seven rules for women based on the rule of St. Benedict and seven for men based on that of St. Augustine. Religious historians have shown that the main differences between them were the contemplative and service roles to which the nuns and monks were respectively assigned (Gold 1984, 156-157). As discussed above, the service role of the monks was clearly reflected in the physical disposition and scale of St. Jean relative to the Grand Moutier.

Turning, then, to the contemplative role to which the rule assigned Fontevrault's nuns, it is difficult at first to discern what stamp it left on the abbey's architecture. If one searches in vain for significant differences between the Grand Moutier and monasteries for men, this is because ultimately the contemplative function of the monastery was not one defined by gender. Away from the social constraints of the medieval world outside the cloister walls, the nuns of Fontevrault, like the monks of countless monasteries, were free to pursue spiritual perfection. In the very nature of their religious struggle they found equality with the monks of Cluny, Fontenay, and Citeaux, and this equality found expression in the architecture of Fontevrault as evident in the sanctified models of monastic planning and design that the community followed so closely.

But the fact that the abbesses developed Fontevrault according to the prescribed modes of monastic planning and design does not imply that these women did not leave a distinctive mark on the architecture of Fontevrault. Indeed, many struck out on their own, so to speak, using their subjective counsel and judgment to dictate the architectural direction

---

<sup>18</sup> At Fontevrault, women not of noble birth were charged with caring for the sick and carrying out household chores like the *conversi*.

<sup>19</sup> Braunfels describes the monastic rules as "designs for living" (11).

that Fontevrault would take. In the middle ages, as historian Penny Gold has suggested, monastic life was “one of the few non-domestic outlets for women’s capabilities and talents” and to some women the autonomy that life in the cloister offered may have been just as appealing as prayer and contemplation (Lady 76). At the time of Fontevrault’s foundation, though, women who hoped for *more* than mere autonomy were in a difficult position, given the structure of the feudal system in 12th century France in which women, even of nobility, were all but denied access to power. It was, therefore, a bold and even audacious gesture for Robert to place Fontevrault in the hands of a woman. For the first abbesses of the order, the challenge of living up to Robert’s expectations, and thus validating his belief in women’s abilities, was a catalyst for growth as they oversaw the development of the monastic complex during Fontevrault’s formative years.

After Robert’s death in 1117, abbess Pétronille secured her position as the founder’s chosen successor through a series of pious acts which commemorated Robert’s life and work. She commissioned his biography, initiated a campaign for his canonization, and ordered the construction of a high altar, featuring a *gisant* of Robert raised on four columns, to be placed in the abbey church and dedicated to him (Crozet 430). Even the stylistic appearance of work completed in the church under Pétronille might have been a conscious decision by the abbess to pay homage to Robert. It is easy to see his exacting discipline and asceticism, considered by some to be his greatest virtues, reflected in the austerity and simplicity of the choir under the transept dome (Joubert 10). Because Fontevrault was so well-funded during this period, Pétronille could have undertaken an extensive decorative program had she wished. Instead, she put in place a great round colonnade of towering, yet slim baseless columns surmounted by totally unadorned capitals. Robert, who favored wearing a hair shirt and sleeping on the exposed ground, would undoubtedly have approved.

Pétronille also carried on Robert’s work by directing the foundation of Fontevrist monasteries throughout southwest France. This activity had a significant impact on the architecture of Fontevrault, since it afforded contact with Byzantine architectural influences which were strong in the region. Numerous historians have traced the route by which these influences eventually arrived in France from the east by way of Venice, manifesting themselves most clearly in the unique conjunction of the aisle-less longitudinal church plan with a series of domes, covered in turn by a pitched roof--the exact configuration of the abbey church of Fontevrault (de Verneilh 275-283). Had Pétronille not expanded the order into the Southwest, it is quite possible that the abbey church would have a very different appearance today.



**Figure 4. West façade of Abbey Church, c. 1104-1150, altered 16<sup>th</sup> century (Pohu 14). See also Figure 3 (Key Number 5).**

Pétronille's successor, Mathilde d'Anjou, completed the interior of the abbey church, including the Tomb of the Plantagenets in the southern transept chapel, and built the chapel of St. Benoît for her personal devotion towards the end of the 12th century. Both church and chapel display a limited but ornate decorative program in which engaged columns and piers carry historiated (i.e., figurative and narrative) capitals depicting lively saints, mythical creatures, and all manner of flora and fauna parading under abaci richly sculpted with checkerboard and zigzag patterns.<sup>20</sup> In the chapel of St. Benoît the nervous energy of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Some of the church capitals are reproduced in Crozet (445-47) and they are described in Bosseboeuf (59) but neither author offers an explanation of their iconography.

sculpted figures is seemingly transmitted to the architecture itself with clustered columns appearing distorted and splayed from their attenuation. A far cry from the restraint and sobriety of work supervised by Pétronille, this architecture is nonetheless appropriate. For in the first century since its foundation, Fontevrault had grown into an abbey of significant power and resources, due in large measure to the largess of Mathilde's nephew, King Henry II, and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine. A little flashiness was simply a sign of the abbey's good fortune, though some writers have suggested that it marked the beginning of an "aristocratic bias" that would result in a subsequent lapse into architectural ostentation (Joubert 11). I would argue that the exuberance of Mathilde's buildings does not represent aristocratic ostentation but rather her confidence in her role as abbess. The spirited architecture of her personal chapel displays this well, as does the fact it is dedicated to St. Benedict and seems to have once contained frescos depicting the saint's life (Bosseboeuf 73). When Mathilde turned to the father of western monasticism for guidance and inspiration, she did it with exceptional conviction and self-assurance.

The abbesses who followed Mathilde in the 13th and 14th centuries were likely uninspired by the model of St. Benedict, as the abbey experienced a prolonged period of decline, both in the number of nuns and monks and their adherence to the rule. If Fontevrault was to survive, reform was needed. Several abbesses did, indeed, try to reform the order during the 15th century, but they were unsuccessful. It remained for abbess Renée de Bourbon, who took office in 1494, to bring the reform movement to a head, and by the time of her death in 1534 its success was guaranteed. While Renée's first task was to revise Fontevrault's rule, including in it a new profession of obedience, she realized that she had to give her reforms a concrete shape if they were truly to take hold. Thus, she undertook a series of renovations that show her to possess a remarkable sense of the didactic power of architecture.

Undeterred by the abbey's dwindling financial resources, Renée sold her own silver dishes and gold jewelry (as a member of the House of Bourbon, these were considerable) and hired two architects, Antoine Rousseau and Yvon Heurthault, and a master stone mason, Bastien François (Bosseboeuf 82). The first stage of her reconstruction campaign was the erection of a wall in 1504 between the Grand Moutier and St. Jean. This wall, some 1200 meters long, was a physical and symbolic bulwark of the intentions of Renée's entire reform: the separation of men from women. At the same time, she began to renovate the cloister and convent buildings of St. Jean, which seemed to have been greatly neglected over the years. She commissioned a cycle of frescos to be painted on the walls of the cloister depicting the life of Robert d'Arbrissel--a subject chosen no doubt to encourage the monks to reform their ways in emulation of the pious life of Fontevrault's founder (Crozet 474).

Renée's major rebuilding effort was the renovation of the cloister of the Grand Moutier, though only the southern gallery of 1519 was completed during her tenure. She purposefully chose a historicizing style which she felt would recall Fontevrault's golden era of the 12th century. The heavy buttresses of the exterior and the ribbed vaults of the interior give the gallery a Romanesque/Gothic appearance. Both rustic and elegant, it was meant to evoke the cloister in its original state. The pilasters separating the gallery's arches are decorated with delicately carved medallions bearing the instruments of the Passion and Renée's monogram. Clearly, the renovation of the gallery was intended remind all who passed by that Renée de Bourbon, like Christ, was responsible for the redemption of Fontevrault. This is even more obvious in the small house, known as the *Logis de Bourbon*, which Renée built for herself, nestled against the north transept of the church. The



significance of its placement within the bosom of the spiritual center of Fontevrault is so apparent that location could hardly have been unintentional. An elegant little pavilion built in a flamboyant Gothic style, it has one major decorative feature: a large sculpted monogram, “RRR,” which stands for “Renée, réformée, réformatrice.”

The greatest projects of the reform period were carried out during the 40-year administration of Renée’s niece and successor, Louise de Bourbon. Under her supervision, the vocabulary of Renaissance classicism first entered the architecture of Fontevrault, demonstrating not only Louise’s interest in current architectural fashion, but her transformation of the abbey into a thoroughly modern expression of aristocratic power. The renovations she completed were extensive: most of the Grand Moutier was overhauled, including the cloister, the chapter house, the refectory, and the dormitory.

Louise took up the rebuilding of the Grand Moutier cloister where her predecessor had left off, completing the exterior in a style exceptionally different from the intentionally rustic Romanesque of Renée’s southern gallery. The arches, each with a decorative keystone, are separated by paired ionic columns sharing a single capital and raised on high plinths. Above, the upper story is punctuated with lunette windows and restrained classical molding. On the eastern gallery, however, this restraint gives way. At either end, the ionic columns now carry paired Corinthian columns supporting a full entablature. The central arch of the gallery is scaled up to nearly twice the size of the others and surrounded by an imposing frame which supports an over-sized and richly sculpted dormer window. Carved into the frame and window are Louise’s own monogram, as well as the coats of arms of the House of Bourbon and François I--Louise had requested and received a special dispensation from the Pope which allowed her to place these coats of arms at abbey (Bosseboeuf 49). Turning this simple arch into a grand Renaissance portico recast the whole eastern gallery into a triumphal entrance way. If Louise’s cloister seems more suited to the court of a king than to the monastery of an abbess, this was precisely her intention.



**Figure 5. Cloister of Grand Moutier, eastern gallery, rebuilt c.1545 by Louise de Bourbon (Hallett 216). See also Figure 3 (Key Number 8).**

Passing through this triumphal archway one immediately encounters the entrance to the chapter house, rebuilt by Louise around 1545. In keeping with the Gothic style of the cloister interiors, the chapter house portal is executed in an exuberant High Gothic style.<sup>21</sup> Five ranges of ornament surround the portal's pointed arch, including the evangelists, various religious symbols, floral motifs, and most significantly the monogram and coat of arms of Louise and the King of France. Having already received her papal dispensation, Louise used it with a vengeance, asserting her personality into the decorative program of every renovation she undertook. Inside the chapter house itself, Renaissance and Gothic elements are juxtaposed as dramatic ribbed groin vaults play against barrel-vaulted double windows with ionic and Corinthian columns and coffers carved with the signs of the zodiac. For the walls of the chapter house Louise commissioned frescoes depicting the passion of

---

<sup>21</sup> It is unknown whether Louise would have liked to change the cloister interiors to reflect the Renaissance appearance of the exteriors. It seems likely that the renovations begun by Renée were already too near completion for Louise to have reasonably changed them.

Christ and the life of the Virgin, with, not surprisingly, herself along with past abbesses of Fontevrault portrayed as attendants at the various scenes.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 6. Chapter House of Grand Moutier, interior west wall, rebuilt by Louise de Bourbon, c. 1545 (Pohu 35). See also Figure 3 (Key Number 7).**

---

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed description of the frescoes see Bosseboeuf (51-57). Subsequent abbesses followed Louise's lead and had themselves painted into the scenes, though without regard for composition or subject.

The last of Louise's imposing projects was the enlargement of the staircase leading from the refectory to the dormitory in the southeast corner of the Grand Moutier. Now known as the Great Stairway, it dates from the late 1540s.



**Figure 7. Great Stairway of Grand Moutier, leading to dormitory built by Louise de Bourbon, c. 1542 (Crozet 471). See also Figure 3 (Key Number 11).**

The stair is composed of two flights which display the same conjunction of Gothic and Renaissance seen in the chapter house. The first flight, emerging from a single original 12th century Romanesque arch, carries a barrel vault with coffers and rosettes; the second flight has groin vaults and is flanked by two double bays with Corinthian columns and oculi. Grand staircases such as this were not uncommon in the great Baroque monasteries of the Counter Reformation era but they were firmly rooted in a 17th century architectural tradition and were more for public ceremony than function (Braunfels 212-213). In contrast, here at Fontevault, in the middle of the 16th century, in a completely private part of the monastery, Louise constructed a magnificent stairway, at once processional, ceremonial, and functional. It is a stairway that would seem more at home in a Loire Valley chateau than in a contemplative monastery where it served only to conduct the nuns from the dormitory to the refectory.

If it is hard to imagine the humble sisters of the 12th century coming down this grand staircase, it is equally difficult to imagine the self-assured noble sisters of Louise's abbey processing down the restrained Romanesque stair which preceded it. The Great Stairway, then, served as a both a symbolic and visual connection between Fontevault's past and present: as the nuns passed through its three stylistic progressions, they likewise passed through a historical progression from the abbey's modest origins to its current aristocratic state.

What then is the intent of all this architectural pomp? Clearly, the moralizing content of Renée's buildings is missing, but the message is equally unmistakable. Louise was consciously remaking the built environment, changing it into both a personal statement and one which represented the whole of order of Fontevault. Since the reforms begun by her aunt were an unqualified success and the abbey was once again a favorite of the king, Louise likely could think of no reason not to display her prosperity and the order's good fortune. Of course, the splendor of renovations just described seems less for the greater glory of God or his Mother, to whom the abbey was dedicated, than for the greater glory of the house of Bourbon and Louise herself. In this self-aggrandizement, though, Louise was no better or worse than her male contemporaries, be they the kings, dukes, or abbots.

Before her death in 1575, Louise appointed her niece, Eleanor de Bourbon, as her successor. Around 1600 Eleanor began to develop the land east of the Grand Moutier into the Gallery of St. Benôit, building a new noviciate and an infirmary. Though it was an extensive undertaking, very little is known of its history.<sup>23</sup> Possibly the development of St. Benôit, named after the chapel which it borders, was a response to the success of the 16th century reform movement, since the noviciate quarters of the eastern cloister extension were probably inadequate to house the new nuns. This, however, is speculation. St. Benôit as it appears today is a great quadrangle anchored by huge blocky pavilions cloaked in stripped-down Renaissance stylings with high mansard roofs, shallow dormers, and simplified string courses. Architectural historian Michel Melot has compared St. Benôit, particularly its interior covered arcades, to those of the contemporary Place des Voges in Paris (Melot 15). This is an intriguing conjunction, especially since more than anything else St. Benôit resembles a great hôtel, an appearance further emphasized by the newly introduced parterres which echo the landscaping motifs of French Renaissance urbanism (Melot 7).

---

<sup>23</sup> St. Benôit was apparently completely inaccessible from the time of the penitentiary occupation until the 1960s (Crozet 469). The most recent work on and at Fontevault is concerned with reconstructing the abbey's past more distant than the early 17th century.

Eleanor carried on well her aunt's aristocratic tradition, as did the abbesses of the 18th century, particularly Louise-Françoise de Rochechouart and Thimbrunne de Valence. At the request of King Louis XV, who wished his three youngest daughters to be educated at Fontevault, Louise-Françoise built a small complex in the 1740s that seems to have been in the western precinct of the abbey (Bosseboeuf 85, Crozet 474).<sup>24</sup> It contained apartments, classrooms, and two chapels, one of which opened onto a terrace shaded by lime and chestnut trees. It also included extensive gardens and an orangerie. As a whole, this complex must be seen as a royal estate in miniature.

The renovations Thimbrunne carried out at mid-century, though not as extensive as those of her predecessors, completely transformed parts of Fontevault into textbook illustrations of the official neo-classicism of the day. She built new lodgings for herself clearly based on the hôtels of Paris then being turned out by the likes of Antoine, Soufflot, and Chalgrin. She also renovated St. Lazare into a home for aging nuns, adding a monumental stairway rivaling that of the Grand Moutier. The great spiral stair took advantage of advances in the constructional use of wrought iron, and as such it constituted an example of the most modern architecture possible (though perhaps not the most practical: one wonders how aging nuns made it up and down). A nearly exact contemporary is the spiral staircase Le Camus de Mézières designed for the Halle au Blé in Paris, which opened to great acclaim in 1762.

Throughout the 18th century, the rebuilding of Fontevault in an ever more secular aristocratic style continued unabated. Ultimately, it was the very aristocratic nature of Fontevault's architecture, consciously cultivated since the time of Louise de Bourbon, which became the abbey's downfall. After the dissolution of the monasteries during the French Revolution, Fontevault's fate was uncertain. But when rioting townspeople stormed the abbey sometime in the 1790s, it was not the religiosity of Fontevault which so offended them, but its clear associations with the king and nobility. The buildings most obviously associated with aristocracy were the first to be ransacked and destroyed—the Tomb of the Kings and the apartments of the daughters of Louis XV. When, in the early 19th century, Napoleon turned Fontevault into a state penitentiary, one cannot help but think that it was a final insult, a last rude gesture, towards the abbey which, since the 12th century, had proudly carried the epithet *royal*.

For over seven centuries, the ruling abbesses of Fontevault shaped the monastery's buildings to reflect their administrations' specific needs, requirements, and aspirations, be they spiritual, political, or aesthetic. The worldly, educated women whom Robert stipulated should oversee his abbey were well aware of the propagandistic power of art and architecture. They exploited this power forcefully, developing forms that, while not wholly original, were ultimately successful in codifying the unique position of their gendered authority within the monastic realm. And if the architectural forms that developed at Fontevault over the centuries were influenced by the individuality of each abbess, they were likewise influenced by the zeitgeist of each abbess's era; for as Wolfgang Braunfels has noted, "those fleeing the world could still not escape their time" (9).

---

<sup>24</sup> Though destroyed during the Revolution, the details of the complex are known from mid-18th century maps.

## Works Cited

- Bosseboeuf, L.A. Fontevrault: Son Histoire et Ses Monuments. Tours: Louis Bousrez, 1890.
- Boys, Jos. "Is There a Feminist Analysis of Architecture?" Built Environment 10 (1984): 25-34.
- Braunfels, Wolfgang. Monasteries of Western Europe: The Architecture of the Orders. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972.
- Broquelet, A. Nos Abbayes. Paris: Librairie Garnier Frères, 1921.
- Crozet, René. "Fontevrault." Congrès Archeologique de France 122 (1964). 429-430.
- Dalarun, Jacques. "Robert d'Arbrissel et les Femmes." Annales Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations 39 (1984): 1151-54.
- Ehrentzen, Sherry. "The F-Word in Architecture: Feminist Analyses in/of/for Architecture." Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. 71-118.
- Erlemann, Christianne. "What is Feminist Architecture?" Feminist Aesthetics. Ed. Gisela Ecker. Trans. Harriet Anderson. London: The Women's P, 1985. 125-134.
- Friedman, Alice T. "Architecture, Authority and the Female Gaze: Planning and Representation in the Early Modern Country House." Assemblage 18:8 (1992): 40-61.
- Gold, Penny Schine. The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.
- . "Male/Female Cooperation: The Example of Fontevrault." Medieval Religious Women: Distant Echoes. Ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1984. 151-168.
- Hallett, Cecil. "The Last Resting Place of the Angevin Kings." American Architect and Building News 77:9 (1902): 101-102.
- Joubert, C. "L'Abbaye de Fontevraud: Historique." Les Monuments Historiques de la France 3 (1973): 10-16.
- Lenoir, Albert. Architecture Monastique. II-III. Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1856.
- Lynch, Kevin. The Image of the City. Cambridge: The Technology P and Harvard UP, 1960.
- Melot, Michel. "L'Abbaye de Fontevraud: Existe-t-il une architecture fontevriste?" Les Monuments Historiques de la France 3 (1973): 2-9.
- Prigent, Daniel. "Trois Abbayes Angevines." Histoire et Archeologie June 1986: 66-71.
- Pohu, Joseph. The Royal Abbey of Fontevrault. Angers:n.p., 1961: 14.
- Rendell, Jane, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden. Gender Space Architecture. London/New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Smith, Jacqueline. "Robert of Arbrissel: Procurator Mulierum." Medieval Women. Ed. Derek Baker. Oxford: The Ecclesiastical History Society, 1978.
- Stoddard, Whitney S. Art and Architecture in Medieval France. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
- Verneilh, Félix de. L'Architecture Byzantine en France. Paris: Librairie Archéologique de Victor Didon, 1851.