

**Sheila Delany, *The Woman Priest: A Translation of Sylvain Maréchal's Novella, La femme abbé* (The University of Alberta Press, 2016)**

'What is love?' asks Agatha, the heroine of French writer Sylvain Maréchal's fascinating novella, *La femme abbé* (1801). Love is many contradictory things in this compelling short tale. It is an incurable malady (9), 'a god who makes miracles' (30), 'indiscreet and reckless' (30), 'profane' (32), and above all, 'it is never satisfied' (33). In Sheila Delany's translation of Maréchal's novella, we trace Agatha's increasing self-delusion as she pursues her irrational love for a priest in the Catholic Church, Saint-Almont. Love becomes a deity in this story of deception that explores themes of religion and gender as well as human nature.

*The Woman Priest: A Translation of Sylvain Maréchal's Novella, La femme abbé* (2016) is the second in a set of three translations of Maréchal's work planned by Delany. The first was published in 2012, also by Alberta Press as *Anti-Saints: The New Golden Legend of Sylvain Maréchal*, a translation of *La nouvelle légende dorée* (1790). The third will be a translation of *Pour et contre la Bible (For and against the Bible, 1801)*. Delany considers these the most interesting among Maréchal's 'voluminous production, not least because their themes of religion, sex, and politics remain so current' (viii).

Maréchal (1750-1803) was an essayist, poet and political activist. *La femme abbé* (1801) tells of the extraordinary lengths Agatha goes to in order to be near the object of her love. This includes dressing as a man, at first in order to assist the priest in performing the mass, and then to gain entry into the seminary where she becomes Saint-Almont's private secretary, spending every day in his company while she trains to become a fully ordained priest. No good comes of this deception and obsession. Agatha reveals her identity and is banished from the seminary, eventually dying from grief in an underground cavern.

The novella takes an interesting form, combining letters with excerpts of dialogue and exposition from an external narrator. After a brief preface, there is a series of 27 letters that begins as an exchange between two women, the main protagonist Agatha, and her married friend Zoe. The two friends have opposite temperaments: Zoe is 'prudence itself' whereas Agatha is referred to (and indeed refers to herself), as imprudent (25). Zoe's five letters are pleas for her friend to see reason and not give in to her passions, which Agatha ignores. Part-way through the narrative, Zoe moves from Paris to the colonies (which turns out to be North America). Agatha decides: 'From tonight on, I am starting a journal of my life, and it will be addressed to you. I will tell you all my mistakes, I will recall your advice, and God will do the rest' (23). Agatha's journal reveals her deepening obsession as her deception progresses and she tries to justify her motives as stemming from a pure, selfless love.

Love (or Saint-Almont) becomes Agatha's object of worship rather than God, and religious ceremonies become sacrilegious performances as Agatha uses them not to glorify God but to revel in her love for the priest. Her fervour has erotic undertones, as Delany points out in her Introduction to the translation. Agatha occasionally admits to her guilt then just as quickly

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contradicts herself: ‘My God! Pardon me if I have dared to make sacred things serve a profane love; but it is you who have put the passion into our hearts; they are not crimes – I feel this in the purity of my intentions’ (32). There are interesting parallels between Agatha’s love for Saint-Almont and Christ as the bridegroom of the church, even to the point of having Agatha wait three days (the time the Bible says it took Christ to rise from the dead) on two occasions as she enters into another significant and deeper phase of her deception: after three days she enters the seminary, and on the third day Saint-Almont confirms her as his private secretary (35). In these ways, religion and the Catholic Church are critiqued through Agatha’s actions and her explanations of them, including recollections of the reactions of others to her apparent devotion to the Church.

The novella is also interspersed with dialogue that recounts exchanges between Agatha and the object of her love, Saint-Almont, and later, Agatha and Timon, the saviour who cares for her in her demise. Then, toward the end of the text, the narrator intervenes as the story reaches its denouement, claiming knowledge of events from ‘the publisher of [Agatha and Zoe’s] correspondence’ (44). In this way, we find out ‘what finally became of the unfortunate heroine of these Letters’ (44). Even as she is dying from grief Agatha still refuses to admit culpability for her actions, but neither does she renounce God: ‘I am not guilty, neither in men’s eyes nor before my God. I have committed only imprudence ... My God is just: in me he leaves an example from which young girls will be able to profit’ (50). These subtle comments on gender occur occasionally and although Agatha is ultimately the victim of her passions and delusory love, she is also a subversive figure who defies conventions.

It is through the external narrator that we meet Timon, the sensitive soul who has retreated underground due to his disillusionment with French society. Delany reads Timon as having similar characteristics to Marèchal, whose ‘faith was in nature and reason’ (x). Timon is described as a ‘misanthrope’ and seems connected to the Timon of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* (1607). He has retreated from a world that does not subscribe to his philosophy. He pleads with Agatha to stay with him in his underground sanctuary, saying ‘You have followed the voice of Nature, who never deceives, but your religions and your laws contradict her. It’s they that do all the evil’ (52). With the aid of Timon, Agatha and Zoe reunite and Agatha ‘expire[s]’ in Zoe’s arms (59). Zoe and her husband return to North America, taking Timon, whose misanthropic ballad concludes the novella: ‘return to the peaceful laws / Of Nature: only she is right’ (59). Thus, Marèchal ends the novella in North America with an uncanny (if trite) twist of events that bring the remaining characters together. According to Delany this could be a comment on the relative untaintedness of life in the colonies compared to France. Whatever the intention, *La femme abbè* is a cleverly constructed text and an entertaining read that contains layers and subtexts worthy of consideration for what they suggest about gender, society and religion. Delany’s task of translating the work so that it can reach a wide twenty-first-century audience is something to be celebrated.

## **Robyn Greaves**

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