

**Sheila Delany, *For and Against the Bible. A Translation of Sylvain Maréchal's Pour et Contre la Bible (1801)*. Brill, 2020. Pp vi + 200.**

Sylvain Maréchal (1750—1803) described himself as “the enemy of gods”. This erudite Frenchman, praised by contemporaries for his generosity, modest nature and delightful conversation, experienced a loving and sexually fulfilling marriage to a younger Catholic woman. When Maréchal died of natural causes in his early fifties he was given a Catholic burial in a Catholic graveyard. His anti-religious views were less extreme than those of some other eighteenth-century atheists, such as the British-American radical Thomas Paine, the scholar Baron d’Holbach, or the novelist the marquis de Sade. But Maréchal’s name was well known to literate elites in France whose covert reading tastes have long been a focus of cultural historians’ investigations. Sheila Delany has researched the background of this French revolutionary writer and helpfully contextualises Maréchal’s life and work in the Introduction (pp. 1—20) to her English-language translation of the original French publication, *Pour et contre la Bible* (1801). Maréchal’s book was one among several anti-religious texts of different genres that he penned in parallel with his editorship of the journal *Révolutions de Paris* and contact with the proto-communist journalist François-Noel (“Gracchus”) Babeuf during the 1790s. In it he expressed a revolutionary patriotism characterised by abhorrence for the wealthy and corrupt institution of the Catholic Church, disdain for Jews, and scorn for the female sex.

“The liberty to think and write what one thinks is a sacred thing”, remarked Maréchal in his preface to *Pour et contre la Bible*. Taking full advantage of such “liberty”, the author structured his text as a satirical commentary that moves systematically through each of the Biblical books from the Old Testament and New Testament. The resulting publication has

been closely studied by Delany alongside the extant copy of Maréchal's own personal copy of the Bible (*La sainte bible*, 1712) that Maréchal filled with hundreds of handwritten marginal notes conveying scorn, cynicism, obscene observations, and scatological humour. During his formative years studying law and working as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris Maréchal had access to publications in the field of critical Biblical scholarship. His main source in compiling *Pour et contre la Bible* was a French translation by Isaac-Louis Le Maistre de Sacy (1613—1684). "What a miserable translator is Isaac de Sacy!" he expostulates in a passage about the book of Judith. Drawing also on a seventeenth-century Latin version of the Bible (1664 Vulgate), Maréchal grappled with the multi-layering of translations that presents a complex challenge to all Biblical scholars.

*For and Against the Bible* is itself rather like a *millefeuille* — that multi-layered puff pastry, cream and custard dessert which tempts gourmands in a French patisserie. To make sense of this provocative text, undergraduate students who are unfamiliar with the subject of the French Revolution would benefit from first reading Robert Darnton's *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789* (1995) as an "entrée", then follow up with some "main course" reading about anti-clerical violence in social histories of the revolutionary period. Postgraduates in Divinity and Religious studies might find this book a complicated puzzle to interpret, but it offers an instructive primary source for exploring the topics of atheism and eighteenth-century attitudes on Jews and on women. Thanks to Delany's English-language translation, *Pour et contre la Bible*, is now more readily accessible to academics for adding to reading lists and university library collections.