

Kapoor on Orr (2008)

Orr, Mary. *Flaubert's Tentation: Remapping Nineteenth-Century French Histories of Religion and Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. x + 352. ISBN: 978-0-19-925858-1

Sucheta Kapoor, *Techno India University*

La Tentation de saint Antoine, written in three versions (1849, 1856, 1874), is one of Gustave Flaubert's lesser known works, largely because it does not lend itself to immediate understanding and liking. Neither a romantic novel like *Salammbô* nor a comic farce like *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, *La Tentation* is often avoided by readers and critics for being unfamiliar, difficult, and alienating. Yet as Orr notes (3), Flaubert returned to the work thrice, flaunting the censure of his dearest friends, who advised him to consign his creation to the flames. Flaubert even called his dramatic account of the life of Anthony, a fourth-century Egyptian saint, "œuvre de toute ma vie." "Resilience is very much the watchword of the *Tentation*," Orr notes in her introduction (3), a spirit she recaptures and honors by celebrating the work's faith in itself as art on the one hand, and its fearless hereticism on the other. If *La Tentation* shows Antoine as tempted, it also demonstrates his resistance to temptation, his innate saintliness or innocence. Despite his rich hallucinations, Antoine is essentially an austere hermit in a desert landscape. Orr penetrates deep into this duality through the microscopic double lens of religion and science.

In order to make the religious and scientific strands embedded in the final version of the story comprehensible to the reader, Orr organizes her book into two parts connected by a lively dialogue that points out their paradoxical similarity, interdependence, even unity. Orr's critical method is similar to Flaubert's creative technique: each of Orr's seven chapters is devoted to a *tableau*. Orr takes the reader on a guided tour of Flaubert's *tableaux*, providing rich and rewarding close readings of them. She also sheds light on religious and scientific debates of fourth-century Egypt and nineteenth-century France.

Orr's textual analysis stands out for its eye for detail, both real and imaginary. She points out (53–55) that whether it is the desert setting (the Antoine of history indeed spent a part of his life in the desert area of lower Egypt) or the articles inside Antoine's cabin—the "cruche," "pain noir," "un gros livre," "deux ou trois nattes," "une corbeille"—the details are real or figurative "depending on the reader's inclination." Chapter two moves, in a similar vein, to Antoine's visions of two biblical figures, Nebuchadnezzar and the Queen of Sheba. While Nebuchadnezzar is a king who has been transformed by his excessive animal drives into a beast, Sheba is the enigmatic sovereign of Eastern myth, who tempts Solomon with her fine costume (gold brocade dress), jewels (pearls, jades, sapphires), and "cosmic" shoes—"one shoe with silver stars and a crescent moon, the other with golden droplets and a sun in the middle" (88). Chapter three shifts the focus to Hilarion, Antoine's disciple turned tempter. If Antoine's is the voice of "pure" faith, Hilarion's voice is that of "pure" reason (109). A "figure of interlinking substitutions" (96) Hilarion is also Sheba's servant as well as "Western substitute" (99). Her mocking laughter is reflected in Hilarion's name which in Greek means cheerful laughter (99). His name also evokes Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, the nineteenth-century scientist who (unlike his master and father of paleontology Georges Cuvier) joined Napoleon's scientific expedition to Egypt.

In chapter four, Orr moves seamlessly to the longest tableau, the tableau of heresies, where she draws attention, among other things, to the meticulous description of one of the sectarian leaders, Mani, who wears an Indian dress and sits like an archangel on a golden throne, carbuncles in his matted hair; in his left hand is a book of painted images, in his right hand, a sphere. The images represent creatures sleeping in the midst of chaos (133). Chapter five emphasizes the repeated death of gods. Monster gods such as Titans disappear along with their centaurs, empusas, and Stymphalian birds, swallowed by frost (184). In chapter six Orr traces the return of the dead: Becoming a "(post-) Enlightenment Devil" (192), God takes the form of a giant "pterodactyl seeking to devour Antoine" (202). In chapter seven, following Flaubert, Orr returns to the desert: "ceux qui traversent le désert rencontrent des animaux dépassant toute conception" (213). Though both the Sphinx and the Chimera are monsters, Orr contrasts the immobility and "rigidity" of the one with the travelling and "fire-breathing" circular-movement of the "dragon-like" other (217).

La Tentation is no conventional hagiography. Following its heretic spirit Orr has written a brilliant book which makes Flaubert's complex dialogues about science and religion accessible to a wide readership.

Volume: 44.1-2

Year:

- 2015