

Suzanne Voilquin “The Two Mothers” and “The Justice of Men” from *Tribune des femmes*, in *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women’s History* (2001), 272-275.

99. Suzanne Voilquin *Tribune des femmes*

Suzanne Voilquin (1801–1877) was a writer, an activist in the utopian socialist Saint-Simonian movement in Paris in the 1830s, and a participant in the Revolution of 1848. As she recounts in her autobiography, *Souvenirs d’une fille du peuple* (1866; *Recollections of a Daughter of the People*), Voilquin’s interest in social justice and politics was inspired by her father’s participation in the French Revolution while her mother, a devout Catholic, imparted an interest in Christianity, an integral aspect of Saint-Simonian theories. Voilquin joined the Saint-Simonian movement in 1830 and subsequently became involved in a new women’s journal founded by two working-class Saint-Simonian women. Published between 1832 and 1834, the journal assumed various names, including *La Femme libre* (*The Free Woman*), *Apostolat des femmes* (*Apostolate of Women*), and *Tribune des femmes* (*Women’s Tribune*). Voilquin co-edited all but the first issues and contributed extensively to the journal, writing on a broad range of topics including her own unhappy marriage which made her a fervent advocate of women’s right to divorce. Reproduced here are two of her articles from the *Tribune des femmes*. In the first, “The Two Mothers,” Voilquin examines the class differences among women,

while in the second, "The Justice of Men," she critiques the provisions of the Napoleonic Code concerning relations between husbands and wives and parents and children. During the Revolution of 1848, Voilquin served on the daily women's newspaper, *La Voix des femmes* (*Women's Voice*), along with other women who had participated in the utopian socialist movements of the 1830s.

A. "The Two Mothers"

Since hours spent in observation are not always lost hours, and since, moreover, Paris is so beautiful at the beginning of each year, so adorned with all those pretty *nothings* that make so little profit for the ingenious worker who invents them, that the desire takes me to try out the profession of an idler today, and walk without *purpose*. . . . Let us stop in front of this store. This place will no doubt provide me with some useful observations. But you, poor woman huddled in that corner, what are you doing with your three poor little children by that door? You are not there out of curiosity. Oh no, no, in your lusterless eye, your pale face, and the rags that cover you, I see the reason. It is need, the cruel need to exist, that keeps you there. Let us see if I cannot perceive on all these rich faces that pass before me a compassionate movement that would indicate a soul. But it is not in evidence. This cold and disdainful expression is definitely theirs. Oh, rich people! since your souls are too narrow to understand association, then at least practice philanthropy. That is today's virtue. You, poor woman, do not lose heart. Here is an elegant young lady getting out of her carriage. She is also rich, that is true, but a woman's heart guesses so many things that, without having suffered, she may understand your grief. How brilliant her attire, what extravagant horses and carriage! Oh! with what servility her servants care for her! I believe I notice that this is not affection which gives nor the heart which grants, but rather wealth which is paying cupidity its wage. And would the honest merchant not feel himself obliged to bow reverentially to a woman who alights from a carriage to go into his shop! Certainly, in seeing his hurried manner, one can be assured that

he is far from wishing to leave Fortune waiting at the door. [. . .] Fortune! the sole divinity of the day. It seems, when we observe how she surrounds her favorites with attention, that they epitomize in their persons all the merit and happiness in life, and that to attain the favor of this capricious goddess, one must sacrifice everything, everything including one's human dignity. But why are you waiting, poor woman; don't you see by the servile but impertinent tone of her valets that their mistress's selfish and unfeeling heart is about to spurn your lament. What expressive looks you give this brilliant carriage and the tattered clothes that barely cover you; and then, raising your eyes to heaven, you seem to question the justice in the mystery of this inequality! Nevertheless, there is still hope. Like you, this woman is a mother. She must sympathize with your misery. Oh! oh! good merchant, your beaming air shows that your excessive civilities are not for naught. What trifles are brought from your shop to the wealthy carriage! Poor woman, hasten to present your mother's request. The elegant young lady is herself ready to get in with her children. Now insinuate yourself amongst them. Quickly. . . . Alas! only an outburst of anger answers your touching prayer, and she informs the servants and the merchant himself that they must hasten to push away the troublesome solicitor. . . . And I, watching this carriage roll off and flee with a wringing heart, need to think of eternal justice in order to breath more freely. *To each according to their work.*¹

¹A Saint-Simonian slogan, indicating their position against inherited wealth.

Yes, rich woman, your life will go on like that of the poor woman! You, mother, have not deigned to help end the sorrows of a mother. May God help you achieve progress and soften your soul by making you suffer through your children all the anguish of hunger, cold, and poverty that you have not prevented. Let me remind you, rich woman: *To each according to their work!*

B. "The Justice of Men"

Some time ago my interest in a case concerning a member of the popular class drew me to the criminal court. [...] By giving you the details of another case that was also being tried that day, I hope you will feel as I do how little we are protected by men, even *those* of the law.

A young woman first appeared before the court. She moved me by her pallor, her moral suffering, and a poverty she did not deserve. Before these cold, severe men's faces, this poor young woman recounted simply but truthfully how her husband, after promising her support and protection before all of *society* (represented in the person of *Monsieur the Mayor*), then sold everything they owned, so that the only material resources left to her were their common debts. And afterward he spent all this money with an immoral, degraded girl. Poor little *legitimate* wife!... You who religiously bent your head under the yoke of their laws. What consolation do these men bring to your broken heart when one of them destroyed your existence by abandonment, contempt, and poverty? [...] In spite of the all too just grievances this woman had against her husband, she appeared pained at the obligation to enter into all these details. It was not against him that she complained, but against the unfortunate girl who, not content to bring disorder into her marriage, had brutally hit her one day, so as not to endure from the poor abandoned wife a few all too just and deserved reproaches. There were proofs, medical certificates and another court had already sentenced her to six months of imprisonment and a fine. But vice of this magnitude is

audacious; this girl had appealed, and the court had appointed her a counsel. Oh! How can I explain to you the indignation I felt when I heard this lawyer playing on the emotions of the court and audience with his despicable argument: "You see, gentlemen, the plaintiff's jealousy prompted her to these insults, and my client retorted a little vigorously. Gentlemen, you will overturn the sentence for lack of cause, for, you see, this is *only a woman's quarrel*." (The accused was not completely pardoned, but her penalty was cut in half.) If a woman had been presiding beside the judge, such an important question as the relations between the sexes would not have been resolved so lightly as a *woman's quarrel*! What indecency for a lawyer to express himself that way! Where then is morality? Where then is the protection that one owes to the weak and unfortunate, if they do not find it in the sanctuary of justice? In this society with no *bonding*, there is only hurt for us, whether we follow or discard your laws. [...]

To prove to you, dear readers, that this [...] is not exaggerated [...], I will go back to the root cause, that is to say I will examine civilization's masterpiece, the code of laws that men impose upon us.

Whoever says "code of laws" speaks of the social regulations made in *everyone's* interest and approved and consented to by *everyone*; but who in truth are *we*? Humanity is not composed only of men. Legislators of all ages, tell me, if we are half of *everyone*, have you ever at any time admitted women among yourselves to uphold the rights of their sex? And if we have never had representatives to *discuss* and *prevent* the oppressive laws that you have drawn up against us, explain by what right you would have us remain forever submissive to these laws? Men! be therefore no longer surprised by the disorder that reigns in your society. It is an energetic protest against what you have done *alone*.

Frail woman that I am, I feel the strength and need today to *protest* boldly against what is arbitrary and depraved in your social system, as it is summed up in several articles of the law that I attack as the forced consequence of a bad

principle. For example, how can we in the nineteenth century listen with composure to a delegate under your authority who says in all seriousness to us: "The wife must obey her husband" (Art. 213). I have already asked *why* in another article, and my gauntlet remained on the ground. No one picked it up. Only *La Revue des Deux Mondes* joked about it, but *joking* does not *prove* anything. (Art. 214): "The wife is *obligated*" (emphasis in the text) "to live with the husband, and to follow him wherever he judges it appropriate to live." Does not the spirit of his laws establish our slavery, so that we cannot be ourselves? [...]

The spirit of your law is even more malevolent for the *mother* than for the *wife*. Against the wife there is the arbitrary despotism from which she escapes through a constant silent struggle. But it is the mother's heart that you wound and break by the mistrust and injustice which are palpable in the following articles. (Art. 373): "The *father* alone exercises authority over his children during the marriage." (Art. 374): "The child cannot leave the *paternal* home without the father's approval." What then is the mother in the family? *Everything*; her influence is immense. And her rights? *None*. Oh, justice of men!... (Art. 389): "During the marriage, the father is the administrator of the personal belongings of his children in their minority." More than once while reading this article I asked myself: But does the father alone then have innate knowledge? Does infallibility then find refuge in the little conjugal fortress? Probably so in the mind of the legislator. For if woman in her maternal love finds the strength to control her husband's acts, the *law of man* is there ready to tell her: *back!* usurper, this is a right that you have appropriated and do not possess. (Art. 390): "After the death of one of the spouses, the guardianship of minors belongs to the survivor." This article appears to establish too much equality between spouses; what follows serves as a corrective. (Art. 391): "Nevertheless the father will be able to appoint a special advisor to the surviving mother and guardian, without whose advice she will not be

able to execute any action over her ward." Since it is generally known that maternal love is the strongest and deepest of all feelings, why this mistrust? [...] Who more than the mother is in a position to supervise her children's happiness? Who more than she knows with certainty that they are definitely a part of *her*, definitely *her own*? If the law wants to prevent presumed misconduct by one of the spouses, then why does the mother not have the same right to consideration? Why not allow her tranquillity after death, by letting her consolidate *her* children's future. Cannot everything that can be prejudged about the subsequent conduct of women once widowed be applied in the same case to men? They do not have as we do a feeling for the intimate family; and besides, if a new love were to bring the woman new children, would they not *all* be drawn from the same *life* source that is common to them all? Does she not unite them all in her mind and maternal heart? And if, forced by this law of inheritance (which is impious since it is against nature)¹ to divide in an unequal manner the property among *all*, she at least does not disinherit them from any of her care or love. It is not the same for the man. The children from a first bed are almost always driven away from the father's house by the maternal selfishness of the second wife, and meanwhile the father *alone* has the right in dying to appoint a guardian-counsel. Oh, justice of men!...

Young mothers, chase such dark thoughts away from your mind, so that the love of your children may prepare you for years of happiness if marriage is only a long disappointment for you. Find refuge in your children's future, so that your imagination may embellish their existence with those things of which you have been deprived; for these children are assuredly yours, young mothers. Find joy in your daughter; watch how her charms unfold in adolescence, how her face blushes and grows pensive

¹An attack on inheritance was central to Saint-Simonianism.

when she feels her heart pound for the first time. Oh yes, tender mothers, become her confidante, for you know well the needs of a woman's heart. Prepare her from her earliest years for her first love, for it is often a woman's whole destiny. You know that the sentence your society hurls against you will still be the irrevocable sentence against us for a long time. Therefore, kind mother, do not mistakenly think that your child's heart *alone* will be consulted. (Art. 148): "To form a marriage the father's consent is sufficient." (Art. 150): "If the

father and mother are dead and there is a disagreement between the grandfather and grandmother, the grandfather's consent is sufficient."

Oh, justice of men! truly the time is near when you will be declared impious. Soon the mother will no longer be martyred in her spirit or her flesh. *God* entrusts the *certitude* of the family to the mother *alone*. In the young girl's bosom lies the *living bond* that links forever the generations to come with those that pass away. A mystery that realizes itself in *God's* bosom under the great name of *humanity*!

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. How does Chapter VI of the Napoleonic Code define the relations between husbands and wives? What are the legal and property rights of married women? What is the overall purpose of this chapter of the Code?
2. What is Suzanne Voilquin's critique of society in "The Two Mothers"? Why has she chosen an encounter between two mothers for this purpose? How does Voilquin scrutinize the Napoleonic Code in "The Justice of Men"? How does she fuse socialist and feminist concerns in these two articles?

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LIVES *and* VOICES

SOURCES IN EUROPEAN
WOMEN'S HISTORY

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON

NEW YORK

102 104 11
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Senior Marketing Manager: Sandra McGuire

Cover Design: Nina Wishnok, Dynamo Design
Cover Image: Museo Archaeologico Nazionale, Naples/Art Resource NY
Caption: *Idealized portrait of a young girl posing as a poet, perhaps meant to be Sappho. Pompeian wall painting.*

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 00-104431

ISBN 0-395-97052-0

4 5 6 7 8 9-CRS-04 03 02