

Caryatids!

Madeleine Vernet

1905

Magnificent arms raised over their heads,
Half-naked, bent-backed, faces furrowed in distress,
The caryatids, bearing weight, bearing contempt,
Seem to join their grace to an athlete's strength.

For days, for months, for years, in ranks
They have stood there, fixed in that granite façade
Where the sculptor had molded their beautiful bodies,
The shapes of their breasts, the curves of their flanks.

There have they been passed by the years and days
While they bear up the weight of the tragedy
That pins them to the rock, as in antiquity
The conqueror's chariot trailed slaves in chains, —
Slaves! — for such they are, in spite of the hand
Of the Artist who carved them in stone to be loved;
Those arms are oppressed by the weight of the roof
That has nailed them down upon this pillory of pain!...

And are these not pictures of you, woman? Yes,
As old as the world is the yoke that you know;
You, for whom yesterday's slavery stays new,
You, who are pinned in a shameful arrest

In the dreary, implacable rock of the past! —
— In vain to sing you have the artists and poets
Made their lyres resound at countless feasts,
In vain by their love is your body caressed;

In vain they proclaim, in their songs, their mistress;
You are nevertheless still the slave who was carved
By a Master's self-love: woman, whom he subdued
By drowning you slowly in false tenderness.

— Long centuries of error, of ignorant night,

The vacuous preachments of hypocrites,
Draining and dwindling you, blanching your face,
Have shaped you well to suit his might.

– The beauty of life within you has grown warped:
The sparkle of jewels that fascinates your eyes
Has robbed you of the serene splendor of skies
Where an insubordinate thought goes to soar.

Heavy dresses have encumbered your steps;
Corsets, iron fists that wound and oppress,
Have muted the harmony of your suppleness –
And bracelets of gold have shackled your arms...

– And because they told you that you were not made
To act and think; because they praised
The sweetness of your heart, the beauty of your flesh;
Because they heaped roses on your head; –

Because they caught you with sentiment,
Because they set a halo on your head,
And because you have been told your part is servitude,
Obedience in duty, patience in punishment;

You then bowed to the decrees of Man
That crushed you under their authority,
O woman! – O Caryatid of Humanity! –
That made you a luxury – or a beast of burden...!

But how suddenly do we hear freedom's name,
How, in this keener air, the fever is undone,
O Woman! – and by the light of a new sun
The edifice that crushes you shows its age.

– “No, we would be neither masters nor slaves,”
So the peasants in revolt once declared; –
Well! Woman, in your turn, make your wishes heard,
Break your shackles, proclaim your rights.

Proud sisters have pointed the way to go;
Dare to follow their road of wrath and hate,
– For love cannot be where there are chains –
Forsake love, O sisters – until tomorrow!

And dare to follow Revolt where she's headed,
Through clouds and thunder, through ruddy skies,
To conquer your share of clear air and light,
O Woman: lay your burden down, Caryatid!

– Madeleine Vernet (1905)

Translator's comments: What strikes me as interesting about this piece is the way that a didactic poem – which, trained to read by modernists, we tend to see as heavy-handed, overdone, clumsy, crude, simplistic – actually incorporates a good deal of complexity. The overall idea absolutely can't be missed: it's meant to condemn sexism. Beyond that, though, it's also putting its finger on some of the terrible ironies of life for women under patriarchy: you can be both overvalued and devalued at the same time, treated as a kind of living prop “supporting” the social edifice that weighs down on you (by dutifully reproducing it), and at the same time aestheticized to the point of absurdity, so that your life is made into a kind of work of art, a decorative “luxury,” to be regarded as superfluous and ornamental, socially prized (by men) but also fundamentally worthless (without them). It does most of this work of thinking through the contradictions of patriarchy using a single image, which is really pretty economical (not in the spirit of modernist terseness, but in an effort not to waste any of the effect). There are also ideas in play here about sexuality as a field for political struggle – the suggestion not only of a grève des ventres, a “birth strike,” as was not uncommon in the anarchist and syndicalist press, but also of a kind of emotional strike, a refusal to accept the false coin of male romantic sentiment, that presages things like Adrienne Rich's notion of waging resistance against “compulsory heterosexuality” by ceasing to draw most of one's emotional sustenance from relationships with men. Much as Proudhon, as a real patriarch, would have hated to admit it, this is a Proudhonian strategy, too.

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