

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





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24. Flore Célestine Thérèse
Henriette Tristán y Moscoso
[Flora Tristan]
7 April 1803–14 November 1844

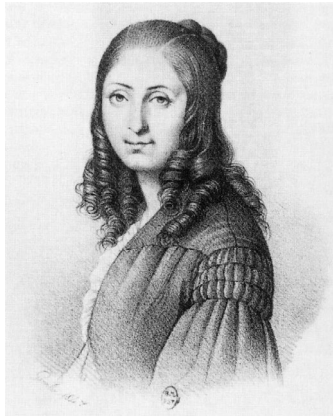


Fig. 24. Flore Célestine Thérèse Henriette Tristán y Moscoso [Flora Tristan], by J. Laure. Photo by FreCha (2018). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/80/Flora_Tristan_par_Jules_Laure.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Pérégrinations d'une paria

Péruviens,

J'ai cru qu'il pourrait résulter quelque bien pour vous de ma relation : c'est pourquoi je vous en fais hommage. Vous serez surpris sans doute, qu'une personne qui fait si rarement usage d'épithètes laudatives en parlant de vous ait songé à vous dédier son ouvrage. Il en est des peuples comme des individus : moins ils sont avancés et plus susceptible est leur

amour-propre. Ceux d'entre vous qui liront ma relation en prendront d'abord de l'animosité contre moi, et ce ne sera que par un effort de philosophie que quelques-uns me rendront justice. Le blâme qui porte à faux est chose vaine ; fondé, il irrite ; et, conséquemment, est une des plus grandes preuves de l'amitié. J'ai vécu parmi vous un accueil tellement bienveillant, qu'il faudrait que je fusse un monstre d'ingratitude pour nourrir contre le Pérou des sentiments hostiles. Il n'est personne qui désire plus sincèrement que je le fais votre prospérité actuelle, vos progrès à venir. Ce vœu de mon cœur domine ma pensée, et, voyant que vous faisiez fausse route, que vous ne songiez pas, avant tout, à harmoniser vos mœurs avec l'organisation politique que vous avez adoptée, j'ai eu le courage de le dire, au risque de froisser votre orgueil national.

J'ai dit, après l'avoir reconnu, qu'au Pérou, la haute classe est profondément corrompue, que son égoïsme la porte, pour satisfaire sa cupidité, son amour du pouvoir et ses autres passions, aux tentatives les plus anti-sociales ; j'ai dit aussi que l'abrutissement du peuple est extrême dans toutes les races dont il se compose. Ces deux situations ont toujours, chez toutes les nations, réagi l'une sur l'autre. L'abrutissement du peuple fait naître l'immoralité dans les hautes classes, et cette immoralité se propage et arrive, avec toute la puissance acquise dans sa course, aux derniers échelons de la hiérarchie sociale [...]

Le Pérou était, de toute l'Amérique, le pays le plus avancé en civilisation, lors de sa découverte par les Espagnols ; cette circonstance doit faire présumer favorablement des dispositions natives de ses habitants et des ressources qu'il offre. Puisse un gouvernement progressif, appelant à son aide les arts de l'Asie et de l'Europe, faire reprendre aux Péruviens ce rang parmi les nations du Nouveau-Monde ! C'est le souhait bien sincère que je forme.

Votre compatriote et amie,
Flora Tristan
Paris, Août 1836.¹

1 Flora Tristan, *Pérégrinations d'une paria*, 2 vols (Paris: Indigo, 1999), I, pp. 7-8.

Translation: Peruvians,

I thought some good could come for you from my narrative: that is why I make you an offering of it. You will doubtless be surprised, that a person who so rarely makes use of laudative epithets in speaking of you might think to dedicate her work to you. It is with peoples as with individuals: the less they are advanced, the more susceptible is their vanity. Those of you who will read my relation will at first feel animosity against me, and it will only be by an effort of philosophy that some of you will do me justice. Blame which goes awry is a vain thing; founded, it irritates; and consequently, it is one of the greatest proofs of friendship. I received among you so benevolent a welcome, that I would have to be a monster of ingratitude to nourish hostile sentiments against Peru. No person desires

Flore Célestine Thérèse Henriette Tristán y Moscoso [Flora Tristan] was born in Paris and died in Bordeaux, daughter of Mariano de Tristán y Moscoso, a Peruvian aristocrat, and Anne Pierre Laisnay, a Parisian bourgeoisie who had emigrated to Spain during the Revolution. The couple were married by a refractory priest, but Mariano never took the time to regularize his marriage. He died soon after their return to Paris in 1807, a blow which affected Flora's existence. She notes in the *Pérégrinations* (1838): "Mon enfance heureuse s'acheva, à quatre ans et demi, à la mort de mon Père." Absent a civil marriage, Flora's mother was unable to prove her right to the family's home in Vaugirard; they were expelled from it and the property was seized by the state. Flora imagined herself a descendant of Moctezuma II or a daughter of Simón Bolívar, a frequent houseguest. Bolívar however left Bilbao over nine months before Flora's birth, making his paternity unlikely. Mother's and daughter's financial hardship helped precipitate her marriage at seventeen to André Chazal, for whose brother she worked as a colorist. The idyll ended quickly: he was jealous, mediocre, and violent. Flora read Rousseau, Lamartine, and above all Staël, managing to escape in 1825 while pregnant with their third child Aline, future mother of Paul Gauguin. She obtained a separation of goods in 1828, living thereafter under assumed names to escape her husband. For ten years, she

more sincerely than myself your current prosperity, your progress to come. This wish of my heart dominates my thought, and seeing that you were on a false path, that you were not thinking, above all, to harmonize your customs with the political organization you have adopted, I had the courage to say it, at the risk of offending your national pride.

I said, after having recognized it, that in Peru, the upper class is profoundly corrupted, that its egoism leads it, in order to satisfy its cupidity, its love of power and other passions, to the most antisocial attempts; I also said that the stupidity of the people is extreme in all the races of which it is composed. These two situations have always, among every nation, reacted the one to the other. The stupidity of the people gives birth to the immorality of the upper classes, and this immorality propagates itself and arrives, with all the power collected in its course, at the last steps of the social hierarchy [...]

Peru was, of all America, the land most advanced in civilization, at its discovery by the Spanish; this circumstance must make for favorable presumptions as to the native dispositions of its inhabitants and the resources it offers. May a progressive government, calling to its aid the arts of Asia and Europe, allow Peruvians to resume this rank among the nations of the New World! This is the quite sincere wish I form.

Your compatriot and friend,
Flora Tristan
Paris, August 1836.

traveled, working as a lady's companion while completing the education she had missed as a child. The period features in her 1840 *Promenades dans Londres*. Her maternal family however sided with Chazal, so Flora placed Aline at an institution and left for Peru hoping to be recognized by her paternal family. She there presented herself as single. Her uncle in Arequipa, who lodged her, denied her her father's full inheritance, granting her just one fifth of the estate as a natural child and agreeing to pay her a pension for some years.² Flora then returned to France after a short stay in Lima, with her first book in the making, *Pérégrinations d'une paria*. It was to appear in 1838; her uncle suppressed her pension, but the funds she had already received let her live free from financial worry. Meanwhile, reaching Paris in 1835, Flora was located by Chazal, who abducted Aline. Years of custody battles ensued, with Aline fleeing her father after a second abduction to rejoin her mother amid allegations of violence and incest. Chazal was released after some months in prison: Flora obtained a French 'separation of body' in 1838. That year, Chazal punctured her lung with a pistol shot. He returned to prison for twenty years, and Flora was at last able to use her name Tristan. She committed herself to organizing the working classes, in a religious framework alien to Marx or Engels. She published *L'Union ouvrière* in 1843. Proudhon knew her, Marx cites her. Today, Tristan increasingly appears to be a major and tireless fighter in the history of socialism and of women's rights. Paid subscribers to her work included Béranger, Victor Considérant, George Sand, Eugène Sue, Agricola Perdiguier, Paul de Kock, Desbordes-Valmore, Louis Blanc and others. She died of typhoid fever in Bordeaux, perhaps aggravated by the bullet wound. André Breton wrote of her, "Il n'est peut-être pas de destinée féminine qui, au firmament de l'esprit, laisse un sillage aussi long et aussi lumineux."³

"L'affranchissement des travailleurs," writes Tristan, "sera l'œuvre des travailleurs eux-mêmes." This is a ringing, revolutionary formulation, as is the following formulation, also her work: "L'homme le plus opprimé peut opprimer un être, qui est sa femme. Elle est le prolétaire du prolétaire même." Tristan's life was ruined by her marriage

2 Flora Tristan, *Pérégrinations d'une paria* (Biarritz: Transhumance, 2014), pp. 234–239.

3 Flora Tristan. *La Paria et son rêve*, ed. Stéphane Michaud (Paris: Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2003), p. 8.

at seventeen to a man who eventually shot her in the chest; in France from 1816 to 1884, divorce was illegal, and the best Tristan could do was see him imprisoned for twenty years, after his early release the first time. She fled the country more than once, hence her 1840 *Promenades dans Londres* and her 1838 *Pérégrinations d'une paria*, dedicated to the people of Peru. The word *paria* was given to French by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in *La Chaumière indienne* (1791); few words are, one might argue, more quintessentially Romantic. In Jean Valjean, in Heathcliff and Jane Eyre, in Faust and Don Giovanni, Europe's Romantic writers celebrated the outcast, the Promethean rebel, the pariah. Tristan's arresting title was thus well-chosen for a Romantic age. Her writings, however, are generally shelved with politics, not with literature, and it is as an uncompromising socialist that she is remembered today. Not a Marxist—her framework is mystical, and she died four years before the *Communist Manifesto* (1848)—but a precursor, she is part of the current of mystical socialism in France that included Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Lamennais, not to mention the later Victor Hugo, chronicled in Frank-Paul Bowman's *Le Christ des barricades* (1987). Tristan, in short, made something of her life.

In this opening dedication, Tristan appeals to the people of Peru, once the most advanced civilization in all America, she writes, now groaning under the dead hand of civil and religious corruption. Tristan, like the excommunicated Lamennais, is no friend of the established church. The book caused a scandal in newly independent Peru—Tristan had known the Liberator Bolívar as a child in Vaugirard—and it ended her pension from her uncle. Tristan might have guessed as much, but that likely would not have stopped her: she saw her role as Messianic, speaking and fighting on behalf both of the working classes everywhere and of the proletarian's proletarians: the women of the world. Tristan's accident of ancestry—her father was a Peruvian aristocrat—turned her gaze to the developing world as it did few others in that age: Garibaldi, prior to Rome and Italy, fought for Uruguayan independence. This gives Tristan's writing a specific modern energy, a sort of authenticity rarely matched by the writers of the period, of either gender. One might find something analogous in the works of Gouges, who went to the guillotine

for what she wrote. It is no surprise that Marx chose to cite Tristan in his writings.

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