James Steen

**RP 8**

After my reading of chapter 4 in Flora Tristan’s *Flora Tristan: Utopian Feminist,* the question I individually came up with before meeting with my group was: “Why, if *Utopia Feminist* is intended as feminist literature, does Tristan spend so much of the book talking about other disadvantaged denominations?” Because of this, I was surprised when the other members of my group came up with the question: “How do the laws and the social structure of London work together to oppress women?” The basis of the question opposed the central assumption of interpretation of the reading- that Tristan talked less, in this section, about women’s issues than I had expected after the preceding chapters. This confusion prompted me to think further about the underlying themes of the reading and made me interested to my peers’ thoughts. Ultimately, the class discussion opened my eyes to a different interpretation of the reading and certain subtleties that now influence my comprehension of Tristan’s purpose.

My initial hypothesis about why Tristan spends so much time addressing non-female underprivileged groups was that she wished to highlight the struggles of women by focusing not on women alone but instead on the social classes in which women as well as men struggle. This, I thought, would also allow her to appeal to men who would otherwise be opposed to feminist thought in Tristan’s time by discussing issues that affect both genders. My opinion was changed, however, after a few students shared their thoughts on the question, and I realized that the chapter might have been subtly more feminist in its appeals than I had comprehended in my reading. For example, when Kat emphasized the that the size of London is a source of sexist oppression, another student pointed out that the three divisions of London that Tristan outlines seem to align with the three types of traveling women that she discussed in chapter 1. Each section of society in London is one that a particular type of traveling woman would find herself in. Given this connection, by describing the conditions of the various sects of London society, Tristan is also highlighting the conditions faced by different social classes of women traveling in London without blatantly connecting the two. By presenting a hypothetical representation of the struggles faced by the average traveling woman in the first two chapters, she is able to describe the settings that the oppressed women inhabit while the reader envisions how a woman might face such challenges in the setting.

With this in mind, I looked back through a section of the reading that I had felt particularly exemplified Tristan’s straying from a feminist focus: “A Visit to a Progressive Penitentiary” through the end of “The Jewish Quarter”. I was able to find instances in which Tristan spin the focus of descriptions of the hardships faced by prisoners and the working class towards the roles of women in these situations. For example, while discussion societal pressures that oppress people, Tristan briefly digresses to point out how these pressures effect women especially, claiming that “In the same way the barbarous and fantastic prejudices that pursue the unmarried mother sometimes make her a criminal. Finally, since women are excluded from nearly all the professions, when their children no longer have a father to provide bread they are forced to choose among infanticide, prostitution, and theft.” (Tristan, 74) While the concept of Tristan indirectly addressing feminist issues through descriptions of poverty as a whole was one that I certainly took away from the discussion, it did not cause me to give up on my belief that the author looks to appeal to a broader audience through her discussion of broader issues. My belief in this was reinforced by a quote shared by Jack, which reads, “Women are equal to men, not better not worse.” (Tristan 99)

Tristan, Flora, Doris Beik, and Paul Harold Beik. 1993. Flora Tristan, utopian feminist: her travel diaries and personal crusade. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

“I pledge that I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.

James David Steen.”