David Beasley read this essay in a session entitled “Imagining the Crusades in the Nineteenth Century” sponsored by *Medievally Speaking, Studies in Medievallism* at the 47th International Congress on Medieval Studies on May 12, 2012 at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

THE UNDERMINING OF THE CRUSADER MYTH AND THE AWAKENING OF THE SEXUAL WOMAN. — David Beasley

I contend that the Crusader myth of valiant knights and submissive ladies was undermined in the nineteenth century and that woman was liberated sexually as a result. I shall use the symbolism of the literary critic Mario Praz that the first half of the century belonged to the Fatal Man and the latter half to the Fatal Woman. Lord Byron being the prevailing spirit early in the century, the Byronic hero became the flame that attracts and burns. The woman is sacrificed like a moth to the flame. The second half of the century was influenced by the fatal woman who sacrificed the man to her flame. To illustrate I shall refer to a major influential novel by an important author, lost in the mists of time.

We are in mid-century in New York City. The chivalric myth is embodied in William Henry Herbert, grandson of the Earl of Carnarvon. Arriving in New York City from England in 1831, proud of his aristocratic background and sensitive to criticism of England and himself, he became known for his sporting and fishing stories under the pseudonym Frank Forester and historical novels about chivalry under his own name. Quick to take offense, he was infamous for an attack on bar patrons whom he missed with pistol shots. He was liked for his generosity and warmheartedness but known for using coarse language and physical strength to win an argument.

A sentence from his *The Chevaliers of France from the Crusaders to the Marechals of Louis XIV* gives us his view of Crusading Knights: “‘Ay! indeed will you, Talabard Talebardin,’ returned the knight gravely. ‘Even if you would give me Paris, in lieu of your strong castle of Trequier, and all Guienne, Poitou and Brittany, in lieu of your twenty thousand crowns of the sun, you should hang under this blessed sun of heaven, and your carcass should lie in yonder moat until the day of judgment, when the archangel’s trumpet shall awaken it unto perdition everlasting!’”

He was exploiting the spirit of chivalry abetted by novelists glorifying the Crusades from Walter Scott to Benjamin Disraeli’s *Coningsby* of 1844. “Chivalry first raised love above

the passions of the brute," a popular historian wrote, "and, by dignifying woman, first made woman worthy of love."

Herbert helped start a handsome Sunday newspaper of large folio size *The Sachem,* under the auspices of the Order of United Americans, a native American movement formed to protect workingmen's jobs from the influx of cheap foreign labor. The paper's chief editor, Colonel Tom Picton, typified adulation for the crusading knight. He shed his father's last name to associate himself with his illustrious relative, Sir Thomas Picton, one of the Duke of Wellington's generals in the Peninsular War. He fought in the French army under Louis-Philippe, who knighted him into the Legion of the Stranger, in the Narcisco Lopez expedition to liberate Cuba, in William Walker's army that invaded Nicaragua, and led a company of the Union Army in the American Civil War.

The knightly bearing of the next editor to join the paper won Picton's admiration but was made of different stuff—a literary artist who exposed the fantasy of the Crusades under the hard light of realism, a believer in the high principles of chivalry but a strong critic of the motives of the Crusaders, and, paradoxically, a champion of chivalry for its altruism as against self-interested behaviour yet a critic of its abuses regardless of the danger to society should it fade away.

Major John Richardson, a Canadian journalist and novelist arriving from Montreal in the fall of 1849 to take part in the exciting birth of an original American literature, won renown for *Wacousta*, an historical novel depicting Pontiac's siege of Fort Detroit in 1763, which was widely read in America in a pirated edition and staged in theaters of the major cities continuously since 1833. Richardson, like Herbert, was quick to take offense and fought many duels in Europe and America, but, unlike Herbert, he was a dead shot with a pistol. He proudly wore in his lapel the red ribbon of the Legion of San Fernando, an award for bravery in the Carlist War in Spain, and had his books printed with KSF, Knight of San Fernando, after his name. He brought with him to the *Sachem* a young English poet and novelist, William North, whose first novel *Anti-Coningsby* criticized the blending of ancient chivalry with modern diplomacy in Benjamin Disraeli's *Coningsby*. They agreed with Edward Gibbon who wrote: "The principle of the crusades was a savage fanaticism.... The lives and labours of millions, which were buried in the East, would have been more profitably employed in the improvement of their native country." They were imbued with the countervailing spirit, sympathetic to the revolt of the outlaw, symbolized by Lord Byron, which captured the imagination of the young and helped one reassess the rightness of the Crusades. Historians of the Crusades

beginning in the 1820s described the licentiousness of the clergy and the refuse of European populations with all their vices pouring into the Holy Land in pursuit of gain.

Richardson adored Byron and would have read Byron's strictures on the Crusades in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "Now, it so happens that the good old times when "l'amour du bon vieux temps, l'amour antique" flourished, were the most profligate of all possible centuries." Richardson reflected this attitude in his poem "Kensington Gardens in 1830," written in Byron's favored terza rima:

We Christians, though, are inconsistent men
And ever tumbling headlong in extremes;
Some ages since we sought the Saracen
Beneath his native sun's meridian beams—
And why? Because we would thrust down our ten-
Ets into every throat, while ghastly dreams
Of lust and rapine filled us, and the sword
Alone proclaimed the glory of our Lord!

Twenty years later, in his *The Monk Knight of St John; A Tale of the Crusades,* Richardson described the knights as overconfident and contentious, who are outsmarted and slaughtered by Saladin, the Muslim leader of the Saracens, in the Battle of Tiberius on July 4, 1187, and the criminality of their followers. Richardson's novel creates suspense through the emotions of its characters in contradistinction to Herbert's stilted fiction. Appearing in 1850, it was read throughout the nation but condemned as "a moral miasma" by the establishment because of its embrace of another spirit, a liberating one, popular in France and invading American society. Its New York publisher, bowing to withering criticism, pretended to cease its publication while issuing it under the label "Printed for the Trade."

Charles Fourier, the French socialist and exponent of free love, influenced in particular Eugene Sue whose popular novels carried Fourier's message around the world. Richardson admired Sue's writings describing the poor of the cities and their exploitation by the rich in contradistinction to Herbert, who, hired to translate Sue's novels from the French, was so irritated by Sue's ethical and political views that he rewrote them and claimed, after the proofreader deleted his changes, that he had the right of moral supervision.

Fourier advocated a social system of mutual attraction and an economic system devised to promote health, luxury and peace. An emotional equilibrium in humanity would bring harmony between mankind, the environment and the cosmos. “If the dominant passions are repressed,” wrote Fourier, “they become warped and their development is perverse.” For him the conjugal couple was false because it lacked liberty; he recommended that groups for sex should be no less than three. In Richardson’s novel, the Monk Knight Abdallah is incited by his friend the Baron de Boiscourt to enjoy the beauties of his Countess if, surviving the battle which Saladin’s Saracens win, they return to Auvergne. Zuleima, Saladin’s favorite from his harem, represented Fourier’s ideal of free love; it is she who seduces Abdallah, who as a monk knight is sworn to celibacy, and sets him on the path to sensual pleasures. Believing Boiscourt to be killed in battle, the Monk pretends to be the Baron when he enters the Countess’s bedroom in the dark and they make torrid love. Months later when they are immersed in their passions, the Baron turns up. After they refuse to admit him into their pleasures, his fury prompts him to devise a cruel torture for them—the result of stunted passion.

The dominant wisdom until then was that women were passionless. Richardson demonstrated how truly passionate they were and showed sexual desire in all its guises —homosexual, polygamous and so on—after the philosophy of Charles Fourier.[1]

One woman stands out as the model for the sexually liberated woman in the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth; she is Colette whose novels reflected her life style and would meet Mario Praz’s requirement of a cliché to be called the Fatal Woman. Colette was shaped by her mother Sido, who was greatly influenced by Victor Considèrant, a disciple of Fourier’s utopian ideas. Considèrant championed the concept of total female emancipation.

Colette refined Fourier’s philosophy and exemplified the flame to which her men were sacrificed such as in her novels *Cheri* and *La Fin de Cheri*.

Richardson’s first two novels published in England and pirated in America described the Parisian gambling world of ruthless betrayals of innocents, confidence tricksters and unscrupulous women, prototypes for characters in the mid-century novels of George Thompson, George Lippard, Ned Buntline et al. The influence of Richardson’s works seems greatest on Thompson whose novels, like those of his contemporaries, vilified the vice-ridden “upper ten” and commiserated with the oppressed “lower million.” In Thompson’s *Venus in Boston*, a handsome, polished young man schemes to marry the

daughter of a rich man but is discovered to be a confidence man and murderer who goes by the name, ironically, of Chevalier. His secret wife is a beautiful woman who seduces supposedly respectable but licentious professional men and blackmails them. Thompson's novel *The Countess* begins with Messalina, a Roman nymphomaniac, who founds a society of insatiable women that went underground in the middle ages and resurfaces in the nineteenth century as a New York group indulging in sexual orgies. Woman's powerful sexual drive is a constant theme in his fiction.

These novels of the 1840s and 50s, depicting the powerless poor victimized by the hypocritical and criminal rich, encouraged the newly literate workingman to activism at a time of crushing economic depression and widening class divisions. The American poet and journalist George G. Foster, for example, portrayed Wall Street as a totally dehumanizing environment producing puppet-like people and universal misery cloaked by gentility.[2]

George Thompson, in an autobiography in 1854, devoted a paragraph to Major Richardson, the only personality to be so honored. He called *The Monk Knight of St John* "one of the most voluptuous works ever written," which, coming from him, was praise indeed. Richardson, he wrote, was "the victim of rapacious publishers": "Want, privation and disappointment finally conquered him; he grew thin, and haggard, and melancholy, and reserved, and discouraged the visits of his friends who used to love to assemble at his humble lodgings and avail themselves of his splendid conversational powers, or listen to his personal reminiscences and racy anecdotes of military life." Richardson was a "gentleman by birth, education and principle . . . with a bottle of whisky before us, we have condemned the world as being full of selfishness, ingratitude and villainy." In other words, chivalry fallen victim to self-interest.

Poorly paid for their book manuscripts, writers needed journalism to survive. Herbert in his anglophilia and violent reaction to any objection submitted an article to the *Sachem*, about the English role in Canada to which Richardson and North objected. Herbert, rather than challenge Richardson to a duel, resigned in a funk, the wiser part of valor. At the root of his antagonism lay a clash of personalities, the one holding to the fantasy of the Crusades, the other destroying the illusion.

Shortly afterward, in May 1852, before anyone earned a payment, Major Richardson died from starvation. William North committed suicide two years later, leaving twelve cents as his earthly possessions. Herbert lost his wife and daughter to consumption, became depressed, married again, struggled to make a living, and when his second

wife left him, he invited friends to a dinner party at which in the honorable and ostentatious manner of a chevalier he shot himself. The *Sachem,* remembered as “one of the ablest and most talented weekly journals ever published in the United States,” had a brief life.

Confusing a religion different from theirs with villainy, the knights of yore in their pride of chivalry overlooked the horrors of war they visited upon the Holy Land. The *Monk Knight of St John* undermined their myth of warring in a noble cause and gave expression to the liberated woman while grub street writers of the nineteenth century exposed chivalry as hypocrisy and the exclusive pretension of a criminal ruling class. They encouraged the emancipation of woman, whose ideas of sexual love were no longer dictated by a chivalrous code written by men. [3]

Did *The Monk Knight of St John* illustrate the transition from the Fatal Man to the Fatal Woman? The Countess is consumed in her passion for the Monk Knight which brings her to a fatal end while the Monk Knight is consumed in his passion for the Countess which is fatal for him.[4]

[1]. His protagonists who survive the Battle of Tiberias return to Auvergne, France and enjoy triangular love relationships.

[2] With George Foster to *The Sachem* came his English partner Madame Julie des Marguerittes, who had left her French husband the Baron for this bohemian poet and journalist. Julie had an adventurous career in Europe, sang opera in the states, and wrote for the New York and Philadelphia press. Julie who knew Anna Bishop, Nicholas Bochsa and Richardson from their years in London and Paris brought them into a circle of musicians, poets, novelists and critics in New York. George Foster and Julie des Marguerittes were followers of Fourier and helped Albert Brisbane and Horace Greeley, founder of the *New York Tribune* newspaper, spread his ideas. Julie, in particular, admired Richardson's writings. After the death of Foster, who was imprisoned for forgery and died after his release in 1856, Julie married a Philadelphia newspaperman, Rhea, and wrote plays for her friend Mrs John Drew of the Arch Street Theatre.

[3] Alfred Tennyson published *Idylls of the King* in the latter half of the century. His moral probing of King Arthur and his knightly court, when Arthur emphasized that the spiritual ideal must be realized on earth through moral action rather than in pursuit of the Holy Grail, was a loftier depiction of disillusion with the Crusader myth. He saw moral anarchy beginning with the individual, who is frequently unable to choose wisely when confronted with the conflicting demands of the spiritual and temporal, the personal and social; for instance, Queen Guinevere's sin with Lancelot and betrayal of her husband Arthur contributes to the downfall of Camelot. In that sense, Guinevere is one example of the Fatal Woman. Tennyson's approach was considerably different from Fourier's and his followers, yet they share a disgust with hypocrisy and evil; their perception of chivalry used by the unscrupulous as a cloak for perversion and mendacity is similar. [vide Violet Beasley's *The Role of Memory in the Poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson*.]

[4] The fatal woman appears in Richardson's *Matilda Montgomerie* [originally *The Canadian Brothers*] about the Beauchamp affair in Kentucky when a woman induces her young lover to revenge a wrong done to her. His first novel *Ecarte; or the Salons of Paris* demonstrates the power of the fatal man.