

## Eleanor Anne Porden's *Cœur de Lion*: History, Epic, and Romance

### Abstract

This paper examines the medievalist epic, *Cœur de Lion* (1822), by Eleanor Anne Porden (1795–1825). I read this poem not simply for the way it draws on exhaustive research but for the way it treats this research, invoking yet sidestepping the demands of historical accuracy. Specifically, Porden grapples with the challenges of representing Britain's chivalric past, exploring whether to adopt the feminised trappings of romance or to align herself with the objectivity of historical epic. In choosing the latter, Porden must struggle, further, with the challenge of transforming the historical Richard, moral blindspots and all, into an acceptable epic hero. Porden's struggle, heroic in itself, cannot help but work its way into the text. As such tensions come increasingly to express themselves as a conflicted relationship between poet and hero, Porden seeks resolution or, at the very least, relief in romance.

**Keywords:** Eleanor Anne Porden, romance, epic, history, chivalry, gender

Eleanor Anne Porden (1795–1825) published three major poems in her relatively short life—*The Veils* (1815), a chivalric romance whose scientific content apparently led to recognition from the Institut de France; *The Arctic Expeditions* (1818), whose meditations on Arctic exploration and science played no small part in her introduction and eventual marriage to the polar explorer John Franklin; and *Cœur de Lion* (1822), an epic about Richard I and the Third Crusade.<sup>i</sup> Although *The Veils* and *The Arctic Expeditions* have recently earned some critical commentary, perhaps the most remarkable of Porden's works is her last, for, among other things, its size and the scope of its ambition.<sup>ii</sup> The work runs to almost nine hundred pages in

two volumes, of which the historical notes alone, representing an impressive amount of research, occupy about 150 pages.

In this paper, I suggest that *Cœur de Lion* is significant not simply for the way it draws on such exhaustive research but for its complex treatment of this research. Specifically, Porden grapples, as did so many of her contemporaries, with the vexed question of how best to transform Britain's chivalric past into literature; Porden's choice (given that she preferred to work in narrative verse) is ostensibly between epic and romance. This choice is complicated by the gender questions imbricated in the chivalric code and in contemporary interpretations of it: put simply, would Porden adopt the trappings of medieval romance that had, by the end of the eighteenth century, become a peculiarly feminised space offering both advantages and disadvantages for the woman writer, or, would she, disregarding these, produce a martial epic that would offer up Richard to its readers as a national hero? Porden seems to choose the latter, but her dilemma is compounded by the way in which the historiographical record compromises Richard's heroic credentials. Not only did Porden as historical scholar have to deal with the challenge of conducting her research as a woman, but Porden as epic poet had to curb the moral waywardness of her hero. This authorial effort to transform Richard from historical figure into epic hero finds its way into the text. As the tensions between history and epic come increasingly to present themselves in terms of a love-hate relationship with Richard, Porden inevitably returns to the realm of romance for resolution or, at the very least, relief.

I deal first with the poem's attempts at historical accuracy, signalled both by the archival evidence of Porden's meticulous research and by the self-consciously historicist statements she makes in the preface to her poem. I then contextualise these within contemporary discussions about the chivalric past to explore Porden's response to the problematically feminised debates around romance and her privileging of the roles of epic

poet and historical scholar. However, as I then suggest, the tensions between historical fidelity and poetic licence, already implicit in the preface, come to the fore in a reading of the poem as epic; indeed, they erupt when the narrative is juxtaposed with its historical notes. Finally, I turn to the poem's curious inclusion of moments of romance, in which the narrative abandons the historical deeds of Richard to recount the fantastical exploits of the women of the crusade. These provide an opportunity to speculate on the extent to which, for Porden, the image of female heroism, courtesy of romance, reflects the achievement of the woman poet in rewriting history as epic.

## I

Porden's preface to *Cœur de Lion*, even as it reminds us that science was her other fascination, shows us how carefully she considered the treatment of history, particularly the challenge of representing the social codes and manners of the past:

A blind admiration of the Great of former ages, has been so often ridiculed, that we are now apt to run into an opposite extreme; they are like the fossil plants which we sometimes discover far beneath the surface; we know that our soil and atmosphere would not now support them, yet they once flourished there in appropriate use and beauty. (1: xviii–xix)

For Porden, historical representation runs from the extremes of “blind admiration” to something akin to ridicule. In partial response to this dilemma, she pleads the cause for historical accuracy—the keyword here is “appropriate”. In Porden's analysis, the reconstruction of history has its parallel in the excavations of geology, resembling a kind of archaeology. Yet, even Porden is aware that any (arte)facts presented unmediated to a

modern readership face decay and disdain in an unsupportive environment. As we shall see, although she valiantly advocates historical veracity, she must eventually acknowledge and circumvent the risks that it invites.

First, it is important to consider the extent of Porden's commitment to historical accuracy. The preface, as well as her letters and manuscripts, reveal the substantial amount of time and effort she devoted to *Cœur de Lion*. A letter to her friend, Henry Elliott, demonstrates that she began work on it in 1817: she remarks that "I have set to work in good earnest on Richard—am actually in the middle of the second book and greatly interested in the subject".<sup>iii</sup> In 1822, Porden had completed the poem, sending a manuscript copy to Elliott and requesting his candid assessment with this injunction, "Papa is so very apt to think that all which his little girl writes must be superlative, that if written with the frankness I expect from you, I should wish to have it to myself".<sup>iv</sup> In addition to giving us an accurate completion date for the poem, this letter reminds us that, in composing it, Porden enjoyed the constant encouragement of an indulgent and well-connected father. A prominent architect, William Porden counted amongst his friends and acquaintances the writer Isaac d'Israeli and the editors William Gifford and John Taylor; the memoirs of the last remember Porden as "a lady of high poetical genius and knowledge".<sup>v</sup> Through such good offices, Porden gained access to a range of rare sources: her preface thanks "Mr. Gifford, for the benefit which I have derived from his friendly criticism; and to Mr. D'Israeli, and Messrs. Longman and Rees, for the loan of many valuable books".<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, the wonderfully well-preserved notebook kept during the poem's composition provides evidence of the immediate fruits of such reading.<sup>vii</sup> Porden's careful jottings and drawings (Figure 1) record her interest in such details as medieval dress, warfare, and music, both European and Islamic. They prove, too, that she was able to read many of her sources in their original languages, from the twelfth-century Latin manuscript, *Itinerarium Regis Ricardi*, attributed to Geoffrey de Vinsauf, to the

profusion of French historiographical studies of the crusades, including Louis Maimbourg's *Histoire des Croisades* (1682), François Marin's *Histoire de Saladin* (1758), Jean Mailly's *L'Esprit des Croisades* (1780), and Joseph Michaud's *Histoire de la Première Croisade* (1812–17), all of which are cited in the poem's notes. In addition, the letters Porden wrote to eminent scholars further demonstrate the extent to which she went to develop and to clarify her reading; her correspondence with the antiquarian Francis Douce, for example, includes her thoughts and questions on Vinsauf.<sup>viii</sup>

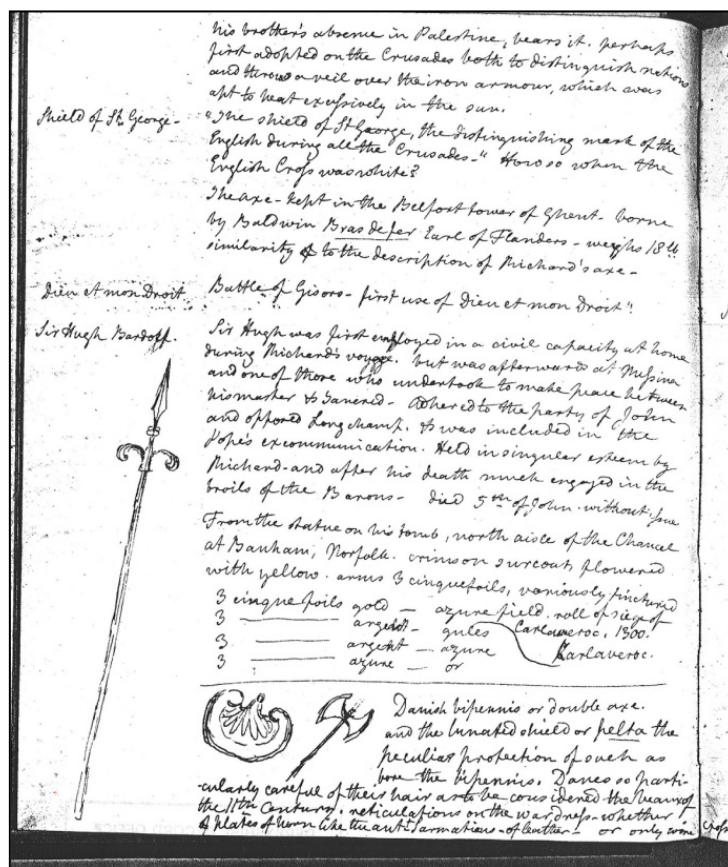


Figure 1: From Porden's historical notes for *Cœur de Lion*, D3311, Derbyshire Record Office. Reproduced by permission of Gell of Hopton Trustees.

Yet, as Porden's prefatory remarks suggest, despite—or perhaps because of—this careful research, she was anxious not so much about the degree of her text's veracity, but about the problems raised by the very idea of historical accuracy. These anxieties reflect a wider contemporary debate about representing the chivalric past in modern Britain. As Karen

O'Brien puts it, the late eighteenth-century view of itself and its manners involved "a growing attention to the connection between the social mores of the past and the social reflexes and habits of the present, as well as a speculative interest in the deep roots of those habits in Britain's distinctive ethnic heritage".<sup>ix</sup> This growing interest was expressed in a "new age of chivalry", inspired largely by Richard Hurd's *Letters of Chivalry and Romance* (1762), consolidated by Thomas Percy, with his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) and his edition of Paul-Henri Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* (1770), and at "its literary high-water mark in the 1820s" with Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) and *The Talisman* (1825).<sup>x</sup> In other words, this trend was as much about literary form as it was about social manners: romance was its vehicle. Indeed, Scott's astonishing success in this area—from his antiquarian collections of folk romances to his original verse compositions and his novels—exemplified what Clara Reeve had propounded in *The Progress of Romance* in 1785, that a genealogy could be traced from the ballad to metrical romance to the novel.<sup>xi</sup> Moreover, given that the romance could be construed as insistently British (whether Celtic or Germanic), it was distinguishable from the neo-classical impulse of epic. As Fiona Price reminds us, the developing interest in chivalric romance is definable in broad terms as a shift in cultural emphasis "from the classical to the indigenous literary heritage" (18). For a proponent of the form such as Reeve, certainly, romance's lineage may be traced to a split from epic: "they spring from the same root,—they describe the same actions and circumstances,—they produce the same effects, and they are continually mistaken for each other", but, "according to the different circumstances of the Author's genius and situation they become Epics or Romances" (1: 16). Thus, the romance might be said to offer itself as a specifically home-grown and natural history of manners, underpinning "a growing British ethnic self-awareness" in a way in which epic could not.<sup>xii</sup> Scott alludes to this sense of the comparative genuineness of romance when he complains of epics in a letter of 1806 that they

“present us with heroes when we would rather have a display of real men and manners”.<sup>xiii</sup> It is also just discernible in his definition of romance in the preface to his poem, *The Bridal of Triermain* (1813), as “a fictitious narrative, framed and combined at the pleasure of the writer [and] free from the technical rules of Epee”.<sup>xiv</sup>

Crucially, for Porden and for our reading of her poetic depiction of Richard, the relative freedom of romance coheres with its potential as a feminised space. O’Brien’s detailed analysis demonstrates that chivalry was both historicised as uniquely British and interpreted as a social code whose rigour was derived from its preservation of female honour; “the woman of chivalry” thus became a convenient sign, not only that British society was enlightened, but that its norms were very much inherent to Britain (136). Such an attitude is crystallised in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), with its lament that the events across the Channel—including, infamously, the mistreatment of Marie Antoinette—meant that “the age of chivalry is gone”, usurped by “that of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators”.<sup>xv</sup> Further, as Price shows, Reeve constructed not so much the ideology of romance but the writing, reading and critiquing of it as a set of specifically female practices that could only enhance the collective moral good (17–26). One might imagine that it would have been convenient for Porden to align herself with such expectations, combining the subject positions of writer, reader and honourable woman of chivalry as she went about transforming Richard into a national hero for a modern readership.

Yet, the embrace of romance was not necessarily so appealing. Porden’s preface betrays her acute awareness that romance, precisely in this vein, could be equated with a “blind admiration” of medieval manners that had already begun to provoke a backlash (“the opposite extreme”). She could not be completely easy with a romantic rehabilitation of Richard, when, as O’Brien points out, “the idea of the woman of chivalry had many detractors before, and especially after, Burke’s *Reflections*” (149). Indeed, against the tide of

the popularity of chivalry, several historical studies since the mid-eighteenth century had heavily criticised the fanatical nature of the medieval crusades. These include what Elizabeth Siberry describes as “the three most familiar accounts of the crusades available to the English speaking reader” at the beginning of the nineteenth century—David Hume’s *History of England* (1761), William Robertson’s *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769), and Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89).<sup>xvi</sup> As Siberry suggests, Hume’s famous description of the crusades as “the most signal and durable monument of human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation” sums up the historiographical verdict nicely.<sup>xvii</sup> Against such authorities, Porden’s preface attempts a spirited defence of Richard in the name of historical sensitivity, but her discomfiture is evident in the extent of her protest. Concerned that “The character of RICHARD has, I think, been a little unfairly delineated”, Porden asserts that “It is absurd to try the justice or the prudence of the Crusades by the feelings and opinions of the nineteenth century” (1: xiv). She insists, “He has been accused of shewing more of the brutal courage of a soldier, than the skill of a leader; but personal prowess was then esteemed as the noblest quality of a hero” (1: xvii). Further, she argues, “Hume, in his History of England, has stigmatized RICHARD as a bad son, a bad husband, and a bad king; but let us compare him with his contemporaries” (1: xviii). In other words, for Porden, a sense of historical context must obtain throughout. She states simply, near the start of the preface, “It is needless to say, that in a poem, much of fiction is necessarily blended, but where I have drawn from history, I have endeavoured to be correct” (1: xxvii).

Of course, what is at stake in Porden’s use of her historical research as a defence is gender. Accusations of chivalric infatuation were easily refracted through the feminised dynamics of romance. This is evident in Charles Mills’s *History of the Crusades* (1821), which Porden makes a particular point of mentioning. Mills provides precisely the kind of



harsh anachronistic interpretation of Richard to which Porden strenuously objects. He characterises the crusades as having “retarded the march of civilisation, thickened the clouds of ignorance and superstition, and encouraged intolerance, cruelty, and fierceness”; for him, Richard is “sanguinary and ungenerous”, and possessed of a “detestable” avarice.<sup>xviii</sup> Further, Mills takes to task just the kind of retrospective romanticisation of Richard carried out by Burke. He complains:

There is a charm in the expression “the days of chivalry” which is felt and acknowledged even in “times of sophisters and calculators, and œconomists”. The fancy dissipates a cloud of selfish and ignoble passions, and, transporting itself to those remote ages which it gilds with the virtues of honour and courtesy, beholds the stately and polite cavalier, plated in habiliments of war, and bearing in his crested helm the glove of his mistress. (2: 352)

Predictably, Mills genders such a nostalgic return for entirely pejorative purposes. Not only does such “fancy” encounter the knight in shining armour, it catches that knight in the sexualised act of displaying his lady’s favour. To imagine the “selfish and ignoble” Middle Ages as “the days of chivalry” is, tellingly, to fall foolishly in love with its “charm”. While the immediate aim of the mockery is, it would seem, to emasculate Burke, such ridicule is facilitated by the female recipients of romance—the women, both within and without the bounds of the text, who respond to its appeal.

Yet, in this case, the woman who has been captivated and charmed by the romance of Richard is also the woman who goes on to write about him. Porden constructs herself as someone who, far from being enthralled by the appeal of the knights of romance, must

actively overcome the bounds of gender. Insisting on her status as a historically accurate poet, her preface explicitly refers to her incursion into masculinised domains:

If, in attempting to celebrate the heroic achievements of RICHARD CŒUR DE LION in Palestine, and the events of the Third Crusade, I have ventured beyond my strength, I can only say that my fancy was captivated by the chivalrous and romantic spirit which breathes from every page of their history, and that in the wish to see them poetically treated, I forgot my own deficiencies, and also that much of the necessary information was to be derived from sources almost inaccessible to a female. (1: xv)

One might suggest that the passive mood of Porden's preface—the “wish to see them poetically treated”—only serves to heighten the sense of emotional entrapment by Richard and helps to efface the activity of researching and writing his history. However, as soon as Porden conjures up the passive lady of romance (whether the woman who watches and waits for her knight or the woman who reads of him), she shifts position to locate herself as woman poet. While the fancy—so dismissively feminised by Mills—may have been passively “captivated”, the poet has actively “ventured beyond my strength” in a learned woman's effort to prove her scholarly ability. The paragraph ends, after all, with the pointed reminder that most of the available sources are “almost inaccessible to a female”. Further, Porden's prefatory acknowledgements of the assistance granted her by gentlemen publishers consolidate her position as an active participant within a realm of masculine discourse. While a twenty-first-century reader might consider (as perhaps Porden did) that the good fortune of class had facilitated such privileged access, one must grant her the recognition that the task of collating, reading and even translating such material required an impressive negotiation with the strictures of gender.

Thus, I would argue that, in negotiating the slippery gender dynamics of chivalric romance, Porden was aware of what Price describes, in relation to Reeve, as the “flexibility of roles” that it gave “women readers and critics” (and, I add here, women writers), along with the potential “element of trickery in adopting them” (Price 25). Yet, in her anxiety over the risks that inhere in “blind admiration”, she rejected both flexibility and trickery in the first instance, plumping for the masculinised role of historical poet. There is no shortage, amongst Porden’s contemporaries, of female poets revelling in the liberties from a historical master-narrative afforded by romance. Such poems as Eliza S. Francis’s *The Rival Roses* (1813) and Margaret Holford’s *Margaret of Anjou* (1816) self-consciously blend fact and fiction into romance, not only in imitation of Scott but in order to foreground the actions of women against a background of the events of history; indeed, Francis’s inclusion of Edward of York in her romance plot explicitly echoes Scott’s conceit of involving the historical King James with the fictitious Ellen in *The Lady of the Lake*.<sup>xix</sup> In contrast, although Porden’s poem trades in the material of romance, it adopts all the conventions of epic (the “technical rules of Epee” so disdained by Scott), which it shores up with the authority of history, in an over-generous application of scholarly notes.

Strikingly, the motif of female struggle and attainment—a result of this adoption of the masculinised roles of epic poet and historical scholar and the concomitant rejection of the feminised personae afforded by romance—places Porden the scholar-poet in a curious dynamic with Richard the hero. Both are engaged, in some way, in questing and striving. Little wonder that, despite the objectivity one might associate with her responsibilities as scholarly poet, Porden displays an affective, solicitous stance toward her poem and her hero. For example, in sending her manuscript to Elliott, she asks for “a critique on Dicky, as I will maintain my right to call him”, thus eliding Richard the story with Richard the man, and—albeit jokingly—personalising her relationship to both.<sup>xx</sup> Further, Porden’s quest as poet is

defined by her success in writing Richard's quest as hero. Thus, she must not only empathise with him but exercise some control over him; she "will maintain my right" to use the diminutive appellation of "Dicky".

Yet, Richard proves to be a wayward hero, his recalcitrance stemming, perversely, from Porden's self-construction as historical poet. As a reading of the poem now demonstrates, in heroicising Richard while remaining historically faithful, Porden comes up sharply against the inherent contradiction in her poetic and historicist aims, a contradiction generated not so much by Richard as by the difference between Richard as historical figure and Richard as literary hero.

## II

A reading of *Cœur de Lion* provides ready evidence of Richard's status as epic hero; however, a look at the poem's notes reveals just how this heroism was constructed—often through omission, not violation, of historical fact. Porden strategically preserves her claim to historical accuracy by remaining silent on, rather than providing an alternative to, some crucial moments in Richard's story.

The poem displays all the hallmarks of epic, most obviously in its sheer size but also in its use of heroic couplets and its division into books, albeit there are sixteen of these rather than the more conventional twelve or twenty-four. The poem begins with the usual epic invocation to the muse. Here, the muse's function is to preside over the triangular relationship of bard, hero and nation, the poet being responsible for singing the warrior's praises in order to inspire their people:

Not for my own, but for my country's fame,

Oh! make me worthy of my theme, and bring,

Sweet Muse! thy noblest numbers, while I dare

To blazon RICHARD'S deeds, and RICHARD'S Holy War. (1: 3)

True to epic form, too, the poem begins *in medias res*. It commences in the midst of action in the Holy Lands, where the Christian forces, facing defeat at Acre, hold a council of war, another epic convention. Richard's arrival, which does not occur till Book V, is suitably heroic. When the "Hero of the West!" (V, 425) appears, the poem details all the trappings of his chivalric charm and power, describing:

... his sable hauberk's woven mail,

His brazen axe that crushed where'er it fell,

His silken mantle glorious to behold;

His saddle where the lions ramp'd in gold,

His lion shield, his helmet lion-crown'd,

And the gold broom-flower on its glittering round. (V, 426–31)

It should be noted, too, that, as epic, the poem employs a full array of supernatural machinery, in the demonic beings who preside over the Muslim forces and who therefore endow Richard's quest with the imprimatur of Christian righteousness. Notwithstanding its accommodation of such epic demands, however, the poem stays more or less true to historical accounts in its narrative arc, tracing Richard's triumph at Acre, his successful defence when attacked by Saladin at Arsouf, his victory at Jaffa, and his treaty with Saladin, whereby the Muslims maintain control of the Holy City while allowing Christians limited access to it.<sup>xxi</sup>

However, history renders Richard a troublesome epic hero. At least since Virgil's *Aeneid*, the epic tradition has supplied its readers with warriors who combine martial prowess

with moral uprightness. Thus, a look at both poem and notes reveals that Porden had considerable problems in poeticising the blackest episode in Richard's crusade —his murder of two thousand Muslim prisoners taken at Acre when negotiations with Saladin had broken down, despite assurances Richard had made to the contrary. Unsurprisingly, Mills's treatment of this incident condemns Richard for his cruelty and, indirectly, his ultimate responsibility for the Muslim ruler's vindictive response throughout the rest of the crusade: "Saladin did not forget this act of barbarity, and, in revenge, he slew all the Christians whom the chances of war threw into his hands".<sup>xxii</sup> Porden's poem, in contrast, mentions the massacre in passing. She makes sure to give equal weight to Richard's efforts to rebuild Acre after his victory and his apparently magnanimous decision to free any prisoners for whom a ransom was paid. Indeed, the blame for the massacre is then laid with Saladin for breaking the negotiations, whilst Richard is portrayed in positive, active terms:

Now with redoubled zeal he bends his care  
The walls to strengthen, and the towers repair;  
The ransom'd captives to their homes restor'd,  
While those deserted by their cruel lord  
Paid the dire forfeit of his broken word. (VII, 94–98)

Her note to these lines, however, shows that such an omission has not been made lightly:

This is the least graceful feature of King RICHARD'S life, and that which I have felt most difficulty in managing. To have passed over it entirely, would scarcely have been allowable, but after much consideration, I determined to touch it as slightly as possible. (1: 438)

Porden continues, in a passage worth quoting at length:

I could not hope to imitate Mr. Southey's extraordinary power of identifying myself and my feelings with those of the age or country of which I treated, neither could I expect or wish, in the nineteenth century, to obtain the sympathy of my readers in an attempted extenuation of the massacre. Yet it would surely have been as unjust to RICHARD, as it was inconsistent with a story of which he was the hero, to hold forth to the detestation of posterity, an act not only excused, but applauded by the fanaticism of his contemporaries. (1: 438)

The logic of this statement is tortured but certainly repays close reading, for it catches Porden in the midst of the dilemma between historical preservation and modern exposure that she had identified in her preface. The first option open to Porden is simply to celebrate Richard's cruelty by aligning herself completely with a medieval perspective, but she acknowledges that this takes an immense imaginative leap that would alienate her readers. Such an immersion in the Middle Ages is figured here not by the historian but by the poet, indeed, by Robert Southey, the most popular epic poet of the age. However, Porden concedes that she is unequal to such a task. The very opposite of this tack is, of course, the stance that, in her preface, she attributes to historians and criticises as "absurd"—the judgement of the past against "the feelings and opinions of the nineteenth century". This, it would seem, is what she considers next but also rejects, for it means simply criticising Richard and damaging his reputation. Crucially, this option is, for one thing, "unjust" to Richard and, for another, incompatible with her responsibility to heroicise him. Importantly, Porden has here almost unnoticeably introduced a third role in addition to those of historically immersed poet and

insistently modern historian, one that is marked by a personal sense of justice for Richard.

Neither the poet (masculinised here) nor the historian (masculinised in the preface) possesses that solicitous concern for Richard that Porden displays in this note and elsewhere.

Such a sense of obligation to Richard results in other extraordinary notes that strive to discourage any idealisation of Saladin alongside a demonisation of Richard. An episode in Book III—Saladin's beheading of Richard's ally, Rinaldo of Chatillon—is the occasion for one such note. It seeks to undermine the popular image of Saladin with details of his cruelty, and even to disable any general heroicisation of the East:

The humanity of Saladin, and the cruelty of RICHARD CŒUR DE LION, are phrases which must be familiar to many of my readers.—It is not my wish unduly to exalt the character of my hero, neither would I rob the Conqueror of Jerusalem of one well earned laurel. His conduct to the vanquished in the City deserves the highest praise, and is an instance of that generosity of which the history of the East offers so many striking examples, and which does not in those climes appear incompatible with acts of the greatest cruelty in the same individual. Rinaldo of Chatillon was the object of peculiar resentment to Saladin. (1: 401)

Similarly, after portraying Richard's victory at Acre, Porden describes in considerable detail Saladin's extreme despondency in defeat. She glosses Saladin's character in her notes by simultaneously conceding and asserting that:

The general suffrage of mankind seems to have established Saladin as the greatest man of the age in which he lived; yet in the power of supporting any reverse of



fortune, he shewed himself inferior to his antagonist, RICHARD CŒUR DE LION. (1: 408)

Such protestations and protectiveness over the memory of Richard uncomfortably call to mind that feminised reader/lover of romance so intent on preserving medieval chivalry, even as they foreground an active tirelessness in Porden's efforts to intercede on his behalf.

### III

This anxious interest in Richard is, I suggest, worth bearing in mind as one attends to the question of Richard's women, to whom Porden devotes a considerable proportion of the poem. In other words, Porden's solution to the conflict between history and epic is to ignore it—and to ignore Richard—in order to chart heroic stories outside these restrictions. In particular, she resorts to these alternative narratives of women overcoming the trammels of gender and redefining their relationship with Richard, just as she has striven to keep "Dicky", as poem and hero, in place. Her identification with such stories inevitably returns the poem to the world of romance.

The first of these female heroes is Richard's jilted lover, Alasia. Based on Alys, the French princess betrothed to Richard while still a girl, Alasia is transformed by Porden into an extraordinary woman warrior bent on punishing Richard for his betrayal of her. When, disguised as a Christian knight, she is captured and taken to Saladine, she reveals her true self, then assumes a Muslim name in order to join Saladine's forces against Richard. In relating her story to Saladine, Alasia makes clear that her motivation is to avenge Richard's rejection of her:

For this I sought thy camp, O Prince! and bring  
Hate deep as thine to England's perjured King.  
I fight, to force denial from his tongue,  
Or bid his kinder sword complete the wrong:  
Let me till then forget my injured name,  
And in Zorayda hide Alasia's shame. (IV, 572–77)

Alasia apologises for her warrior disguise as freakish—“How strange, how monstrous, must this sight appear, / A royal virgin clad in armour here!” (IV, 542–43)”—but, as further analysis of the poem will suggest, cross-dressing women are elsewhere readily tolerated. What is truly repulsive about Alasia, it seems, is her vindictive attitude to Richard. Through the shape-shifting from Christian soldier to Christian princess and thence to Muslim woman warrior, any core to Alasia's identity rests with her apparently twisted desire for vengeance. When she appears in battle at Arsouf, the bellicose imagery (which to a modern reader might seem almost insistently physical and parodically phallic) underlines this point:

And one whose limbs in Christian armour drest,  
Bore on the ruddy helm a sanguine crest;  
A naked sword the ruby shield display'd,  
And “Vengeance” glow'd around the threat'ning blade.  
Alas! Alasia, does that martial gleam  
Thy royal race, thy gentle sex beseem? (VIII, 534–39)

This extreme masculinisation is accompanied by a stern rebuke, which, because it follows an apostrophe to Alasia, seems to come directly from Porden:

But woman's courage needs not plates of steel,  
Its gentler office not to wound, but heal;  
To bear resign'd, to hide the starting tear,  
To speak the hope her bosom cannot share;  
O'er pain's cold brow a heavenly beam to shed,  
And watch, unfearing, by contagion's bed;  
These are its triumphs, which though Fame deny  
An earthly crown, she writes in gold on high. (VIII, 544–51)

This passage, with its editorialising intervention, designates Alasia and her version of female heroism as deviant, not because it is masculinised and not even because it is vindictive, but specifically because it defines itself in opposition to the man she loves and whom she should “heal” rather than “wound”.

True female heroism of the kind described here, then, is readily embodied by Richard's rightful wife, Berengaria. Not only are Alasia and Berengaria rivals for Richard's affections, they are placed on opposite sides of the war. The narrative is thus suitably contorted to provide a confrontation in battle between them. At Arsouf, Alasia kills the soldiers assigned to protect the king's entourage; the queen, thinking she is being attacked by male warrior, takes her defence into her own hands:

While Berengaria from a lifeless hand  
Snatch'd the broadshield, and waved the shining brand.  
“Death, not pollution for a hero's bride,  
For RICHARD's Queen!” th' intrepid beauty cried.

“For RICHARD’S Queen!” her ruthless foe replied;

“And who art thou that darest such rank assume?

False bird, this hand shall strip thy borrow’d plume.” (VIII, 824–30)

The showdown demonstrates nicely the poem’s conditional approval of female martiality.

The two women are marked through repetition as contenders for the identity of “RICHARD’S Queen” but contrasted as “intrepid beauty” and “ruthless foe”. Since both women take up arms, it is made evident that there is nothing wrong with such action *per se*, but there is everything wrong with Alasia’s attitude to Richard. As this encounter functions entirely to establish this point, it then collapses bathetically, as Christian and Muslim soldiers come to the women’s rescue and effectively take over their combat.

That Berengaria represents a sanctioned version of female heroism is further suggested when she embarks on a heroic quest of her own, replete with masculine disguise. This quest parallels and complements Richard’s quest; indeed, it defines Berengaria as the quintessential hero’s bride. When Richard is abducted and imprisoned by Leopold, Duke of Austria, at his castle at Trivallis (or Trifels), Berengaria, disguised as a (male) pilgrim, sets sail for France to inform Richard’s mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine. However, she is thrown overboard in a storm and finds herself washed ashore on the Northern shores of the Adriatic. Here, she is taken in by a fisherman and his wife, from whom she obtains yet another male disguise, a minstrel’s clothes, so she can continue her quest for Richard. On her wanderings from Italian into German forests, she hears of a mysterious prisoner at Trifels, who is—of course—none other than the kidnapped king. In this fantastical diversion, Porden adheres to historical accounts in at least one respect, by depicting Richard’s trial on the charges of murder that had prompted Leopold’s imprisonment of him. Thus, Berengaria does not

literally or singlehandedly save Richard, but her courage and intrepidity nonetheless mean that she is by his side as he fights for his release.

It would seem, then, that Berengaria's quest-within-a-quest functions to establish her as worthy of Richard. Although she, like him, demonstrates her ability to pursue a heroic mission to its end, crucially, her quest begins and ends with Richard and with her love for him. Throughout the poem, then, descriptions of Berengaria straddle the demands of heroic daring and wifely care. Early in the poem, Berengaria makes a promise to Richard that explicitly invokes her position as his helpmeet in war:

Why did I winds, and waves, and deserts dare,  
But to partake thy counsels and thy care?  
Oh, RICHARD! if my fragile frame must fail  
At every toil, and shrink from every gale,  
Why am I thine? ...  
And oh! what joy my inmost spirits stirr'd,  
To find myself by RICHARD'S choice preferr'd!  
Yet then I felt, amid my rapturous pride,  
What Heaven demanded of a hero's bride,  
Not with her foolish fears and puny frame  
To check his course, and clog his rising fame;  
Nor changing with each wild caprice of fate,  
Too soon dejected, and too soon elate.       (V, 533–37, 543–50)

Berengaria's argument, then, is that the position of "hero's bride" demands a physical and mental exertion as considerable as Richard's, but that the aim of such effort is purely to

facilitate “his course” and to enable “his rising fame”. Significantly, after Berengaria effects the role so dramatically with her remarkable adventure, Richard himself returns to the formulation:

... how her fragile form  
Bow'd like the reed, but broke not with the storm;  
And well redeem'd the boast of tender pride,  
In softness bold, indeed a hero's bride!      (XIV, 191–94)

It is worth noting that the phrase, “hero's bride”, is also the epithet assigned to Berengaria in her fight with Alasia, and thus it is adopted there in order to sharpen the conflict between the two women. Berengaria's heroic status is entirely defined by her willingness to support Richard; Alasia's, in contrast, is sought and attained in defiance of him.

Yet, these two women, in figuring two possible responses to Richard, are aligned as much as they are contrasted. There is more to Porden's representations of female heroism in Berengaria and Alasia than a simple dichotomy of whether it is better to love or to fight Richard. These alternative female heroes are shadowed by Porden's own troubled relationship with Richard, which, as her letters and her poem's preface and notes have indicated, is personalised in various ways. After all, Berengaria's and Alasia's places in the narrative both depend on a morally questionable episode in Richard's personal life, bringing to mind Porden's grappling with doubts over his integrity in war. In other words, in addition to his war crimes at Acre, there is yet another moral black spot in Richard's past, one that lies in his motives and actions in jilting Alasia and marrying Berengaria.

Significantly, Richard's earliest acknowledgement of his treatment of Alasia is one in which his chief concern—the maintenance of secrecy—unites both women. He instructs

Alasia's brother, Philip Augustus of France, to keep the subject a secret, for both Alasia's sake and Berengaria's: "But for thy sister, for my bride, beware / The sacred theme, I warn thee to forbear" (V, 626–27). Insisting "I loved Alasia once, I loved too well, / Who dared for her against my sire rebel" (V, 628–29), Richard emphasises, too, that his reasons for jilting her were honourable: "Thou know'st the cause, ah! bid me not reveal / What knightly honours would for ever seal" (V, 633–34). At this point, a footnote, rather than the usual endnote, provides the lightest of explanations, merely stating what the poem has already divulged, that "RICHARD rebelled against his father, for the sake of this Princess [Alasia] his affianced bride, whom Henry detained from him" (1: 302). Whether Richard's actions are defensible or not is, at this point, unclear.

When the story is returned to in Book VII, however, a justification for Richard's actions begins to emerge. This time, a note more fully explicates Alasia's part in the rebellion against Henry II. Porden refers her reader to historical accounts of how the young Alasia was betrothed to Richard and sent to Henry's court to be educated while she came of age, but was retained by Henry rather than given over to the young prince: "When the Princess grew up, RICHARD demanded his bride, but Henry would not yield her. RICHARD rebelled against his father, and joined with Philip Augustus, who espoused his quarrel" (1: 451). Crucially, Richard then discovered Henry's seduction of Alasia and rejected her:

RICHARD is however said to have given Philip a satisfactory reason for his change of purpose, in the discovery that his father had detained Alasia from him, on account of a criminal passion which he himself entertained for the young Princess. He gave proofs of her having even borne a son to Henry, and Philip was fain to close the quarrel; and to thank the knightly honour of RICHARD, which prevented him from making the scandal public. (1: 451)

Richard's change of heart over Alasia is then apparently fully justified, at least where Richard and her brother are concerned. Furthermore, Richard's "knightly honour" in remaining silent on the matter is reiterated and underlined.

In all this, however, Alasia is marginalised. Yet, rather than have her remain silent, Porden's poem writes Alasia firmly back into Richard's life. Indeed, it gives her the last word and, strikingly, throws doubt over Richard's version of events (which is, to say the least, at odds with Alasia's, who had vowed vengeance on "England's perjured King"). The final book of the poem sees her confrontation with Richard, who comes to her as she lies dying of the wounds inflicted by one of Richard's soldiers, Pardo. Pardo is revealed—in another entirely fictitious twist—to be Alasia's son. Thus, Richard and Alasia make peace in the presence of the young man who embodies her relationship with Henry and thus represents the contested grounds of Richard's rejection of her. It is at this point that any questions over the morality of Richard's treatment of Alasia can at last be resolved. Yet, Alasia describes Henry's seduction of her and its effect on her engagement to Richard in frustratingly opaque terms:

My parents bade him train me up in truth,  
He should have guarded, he abused my youth;  
That crime be his—'twas mine my guilt to hide,  
Bound as I was, his son's contracted bride.  
I listen'd vows that injur'd son preferr'd;  
I knew them impious, yet I heard, I heard,—  
And when his breaking heart, my falsehood known,  
Forbore reproach, intent to veil alone



My shame, and save my honour by his own,

My hate pursued him...

(XVI, 474–83)

Having apportioned blame to Henry, Alasia's statement then goes on to generate double meanings where she and Richard are concerned. The "vows" to which Alasia attends might have come from either Henry or Richard: if from Henry, then Alasia is hardly guilty, having submitted to the King who "abused" her; if from Richard, then Alasia is marginally more culpable, having deceitfully agreed to be his bride without revealing that she had had a sexual relationship with his father. That Richard's heart "Forbore reproach" implies either that Richard is beyond reproach, being the cuckolded lover, or that he refused to tolerate it, even though he might have deserved it for abandoning his bride-to-be. Finally, that Alasia seeks to "save my honour by his own" could mean either that she hopes to disguise her dishonour through being honoured in marriage by a match with Richard or that she seeks to recover her good name by casting doubt on his, particularly by getting him to deny his reasons for rejecting her; the one establishes her as victim and the other as avenger. What is significant, however, is that none of this conclusively absolves Richard; it instead enables sympathy for Alasia. Her death and the questions it raises establish only that Richard is a difficult hero in terms of both war and love, both epic and romance.

It is tempting to speculate on the extent to which the metatextual heroic aspiration of the woman poet as she writes and rewrites Richard is inscribed in the textual heroic diversions of Richard's women as they attempt to love him, defend him, or attack him. Certainly, these subplots of female heroism evacuate, if momentarily, Porden's much vaunted concern with accurately representing Richard's life. As entirely fictitious accounts of hero(in)es, they represent not just an alternative to the overwhelming presence of Richard but relief from the dilemma of how to reconcile the historical Richard with the heroic. Indeed,

Berengaria's quest explicitly violates any sense of veracity, since Richard's abduction, according to historical accounts, occurred after his return from the crusades and hence after the action of the poem. However, Porden defends this, her "one great anachronism", in her preface, by explaining: "it seemed to me otherwise impossible to preserve any unity of story without omitting the most romantic part of RICHARD'S life" (1: xxvii–xxviii). That Porden designates Berengaria's heroism as "romantic" is significant, for it is indeed romantic in at least three ways. First, it is more or less fictitious, even fantastical, for it greatly exaggerates historical accounts of the queen's role in helping to raise money for her husband's ransom. Unsurprisingly, then, the episode is entirely unsupported by historical notes, when, elsewhere in the poem, these are copious. Second, it foregrounds the poetic form of romance and its power over the epic quest. Berengaria's quest is validated by romance's predilection for dilation and deferral, and it marginalises Richard's epic quest for all of two books of the poem. Third, it is romantic inasmuch as it is about love, and therefore insists on the primacy of the affective over the realms of the rational, the scholarly, and the factual (and all the quibbling and debating contained within them). Berengaria's heroic quest—and the same could be said about Alasia's martial exploits—serves to emphasise female agency both textually and metatextually, not just displacing Richard's heroism but calling into question the masculinised infrastructure of epic and history that supports it.

Porden's *Cœur de Lion* represents a tortured negotiation with the Romantic and romantic problem of how best to excavate a chivalric past. Her averred solution, as we have seen, is a deceptively straightforward unearthing, carried out with all the care and attention signified by historical scholarship. Such a move entails a repression of the desires of romance, only to have them return. Porden's apparently historicist treatment requires, after all, a considerable mediation on her part, a transformation of the historical into the heroic.

Porden's frustrations with Richard are unavoidably implicated in an emotional and empathetic relationship between poet and subject, and find their release in romantic—in the fantastical, distracting, and erotic senses of the word—episodes. Despite its anxieties over the legacy of medieval history, this instance of historical and heroic epic is ultimately unable to deny the charms of chivalric romance.

Dr Adeline Johns-Putra  
Department of English  
University of Exeter  
Cornwall Campus  
Penryn TR10 9EZ

---

<sup>i</sup> Miss Porden, *The Veils; or The Triumph of Constancy* (London: John Murray, 1815); Miss Porden, *The Arctic Expeditions. A Poem* (London: John Murray, 1818); Eleanor Anne Porden, *Cœur de Lion; or The Third Crusade. A Poem, in Sixteen Books* (London: G. and W. B. Whittaker, 1822), 2 vols. Mention of Porden's membership of the Institut de France is made in E. M. Gell, *John Franklin's Bride* (London: John Murray, 1930) xii and in a letter from J. E. C. Bodley to Philip Lyttelton Gell, 30 November 1922, D3311/26/2, Derbyshire Record Office.

<sup>ii</sup> Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) 267–68; Jen Hill, *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008) 69–87; Adeline Johns-Putra, “‘Blending Science with Literature’: The Royal Institution, Eleanor Anne Porden, and *The Veils*,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 33.1 (2011): 35–52. *Cœur de Lion* is discussed briefly in Elizabeth Siberry, *The New Crusaders: Images of the Crusades in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) 63–64 and Johns-Putra, *Heroes and Housewives: Romantic Women's Epic Poetry and Domestic Ideology 1770–1835* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001) 79–82.

<sup>iii</sup> Letter from Porden to Henry Elliott, 1 March 1817, D3311/8/2/5, Derbyshire Record Office.

<sup>iv</sup> Letter from Porden to Elliott, 12 July 1822, D3311/8/1/1, Derbyshire Record Office.

<sup>v</sup> John Taylor, *Records of My Life* (London: Edward Bull, 1832) 2: 378

<sup>vi</sup> Porden, *Cœur de Lion*, 1: xxviii.

<sup>vii</sup> Porden, historical notes for *Cœur de Lion*, D3311/23/1, Derbyshire Record Office.

<sup>viii</sup> Letter from Porden to Francis Douce, 30 June, Douce MS d.31, fol. 61, Bodleian Library; letter from Porden to Douce, 26 May 1822, Douce MS d.24, fol., 47; letter from Porden to G. C. Haughton, Eng. lett. MS, C288, fol. 23–24, Bodleian Library.

<sup>ix</sup> Karen O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009) 110.

<sup>x</sup> O'Brien, 137; by 1820, Porden would have had before her several examples of fictional treatments of Richard, including not just *Ivanhoe* but James White's *The Adventures of King Richard Coeur de Lion* (1791).

<sup>xi</sup> Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (1785; New York: The Facsimile Text Society, 1930); see also Fiona Price, *Revolutions in Taste, 1773–1818: Women Writers and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) 18.

<sup>xii</sup> O'Brien, 137; see also Marc Giraud, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) 34–38.

<sup>xiii</sup> Walter Scott, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Herbert Grierson, vol. 12 (London: Constable, 1937) 284.

<sup>xiv</sup> Scott, “Preface to the First Edition”, *The Bridal of Triermain, The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott: With Memoir and Explanatory Notes* (London: Henry Frowde, 1890) 267; the preface and poem had been jokingly attributed by Scott to William Erskine.

<sup>xv</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 76.

---

<sup>xvi</sup> Siberry 1; see also Adam Knobler, “Holy Wars, Empires and the Portability of the Past: The Modern Use of Medieval Crusades”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48.2 (2006): 293–325 (309–10).

<sup>xvii</sup> David Hume, *The History of England: From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688*, vol. 1, chapter 6, qtd. in Siberry 2.

<sup>xviii</sup> Charles Mills, *The History of the Crusades, for the Recovery and Possession of the Holy Land* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821) 2: 378–79 and 42.

<sup>xix</sup> Eliza S. Francis, *The Rival Roses; or Wars of York and Lancaster. A Metrical Tale*, 2 vols (London: J. J. Stockdale, 1813) and Margaret Holford, *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem in Ten Cantos* (London: John Murray, 1816); both are discussed in Johns-Putra, *Heroes and Housewives*, 83–90, 216–220.

<sup>xx</sup> Letter from Porden to Elliott, 12 July 1822.

<sup>xxi</sup> I have adopted Porden’s spelling of ‘Saladine’ instead of the more conventional ‘Saladin’.

<sup>xxii</sup> Mills, vol. 2, 390–91.

Adeline Johns-Putra is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Exeter. She is author of *Heroes and Housewives: Women’s Epic Poetry and Domestic Ideology in the Romantic Age 1770–1835* (2001) and *The History of the Epic* (2006), and she is editor, with Catherine Brace, of *Process: Landscape and Text* (2010). Her research interests lie in Romantic-age women’s writing and environmental criticism; her current projects include a critical biography of Eleanor Anne Porden and a monograph on fictional representations of climate change.