

## Faux Catholic: A Gothic Subgenre from Monk Lewis to Dan Brown

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*Victoria Nelson*

“God is dead. Meet the kids.”

—Neil Gaiman, *The Anansi Boys*

We’ve seen it on the big screen any number of times: the possessed woman writhing, screaming, face morphing (courtesy of computer-generated imagery) into a hideous leer as despairing relatives edge prudently away from the imminent prospect of projectile vomiting.

Demon possession, open-and-shut case. Who you gonna call?

Not your rabbi, imam, or Methodist minister. No, you want that Roman Catholic priest with his collar, cross, holy water, and Vulgate Bible—all the papist trappings that Protestant Americans shun in real life but absolutely demand for a convincing on-screen exorcism. A mild-mannered Episcopal reverend, a Southern Baptist preacher in a Men’s Wearhouse suit reciting the Lord’s Prayer in English over that tormented soul? I don’t think so. Nothing less, or other, than the sting of holy water, the hiss of the cross against burning flesh, will make the demon wail in agony.

Thanks to the *boundary 2* reviewers and Robert Geary for valuable comments and corrections to the text.

And what about that secret office, always housed deep in the bowels of the Vatican, laboring over the centuries to keep the parchment containing secrets threatening to orthodoxy from falling into the wrong hands or stop an incarnation of a rebel angel, even Satan's own child born to a mortal woman, from wreaking havoc on the world? What a letdown, and certainly harder to accept, if the headquarters of this agency so crucial to the salvation of humankind were located down the corridor from the bingo room in the local Lutheran church basement.

After the incense clears, this is the central paradox in movies and books like *The Exorcist*, *Stigmata*, *The Omen*, *End of Days*, and countless others<sup>1</sup>: that an exoticized, patently fictional, and some would say anticlerical fantasy about Catholicism strangely empowers and elevates the very denomination it seems to slander. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights decries these movies and novels but fails understandably to appreciate their implicit subtext: first, that this fantasy pop culture religion I like to call faux Catholicism provides the *only* effective defense against the forces of evil as embodied in the Judeo-Christian figure of Satan, and second, that the battle between good and evil is most effectively waged not with the church's real-life theological doctrine but with its perceived magical talismans—talismans that continue to exert a (shall we say) unholy fascination on Protestants and other non-Catholics. And furthermore, as we will see in the case of Dan Brown, that even an idea heretical to all Christian denominations—that Jesus was only mortal, mated with Mary Magdalene, and had human descendants—is one seen by his readers as well as the author himself to be most effectively combated by the institution of the Catholic Church.

Why the implicit bestowal of greater authority and power by mostly non-Catholic writers and filmmakers on a denomination they don't belong to or believe in? First and most obviously, Roman Catholicism is the only church besides the Orthodox that provides full historical continuity from the beginnings of Christianity and that also, not coincidentally, possesses the most elaborately developed mechanisms for keeping its dogma consistent over the centuries. Other reasons for this ambiguous valorization may be found in the literary source of this fare, the Protestant anticlerical Gothic novels of the eighteenth century that initiated this enduring and endlessly reinvented genre into international popular culture.

I take as my foundational text Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, pub-

1. Along with "Action" and "Family," the online DVD rental service Netflix offers a major category of movies called "Satanic Stories."

lished in March 1796, when its author was not quite twenty-one. By the usual standards, *The Monk* belongs to the “middle” period of the original Gothic—with Horace Walpole and his *Castle of Otranto* (1764) marking the genre’s beginning, followed by the novels of Ann Radcliffe, most notably *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). It was Lewis, more than any previous Gothic writer, however, whose work took England and Europe by storm. Like *The Da Vinci Code* two centuries later, *The Monk* created an international sensation and made its author an overnight celebrity. Like Brown, “Monk” Lewis, as he came to be known, was accused of copying other sources; by its fourth edition, *The Monk* had also been expurgated of some of its more scandalous sexual material.<sup>2</sup>

Precociously astute about human nature and the temptations of ambition, Lewis fashioned a narrative whose mad eroticism and pell-mell pace keep *The Monk* a lively read even today. In the course of a long and convoluted plot set mostly in Madrid, two young gentlemen, Lorenzo and Raymond, lose their lady loves to evil clerics—Agnes, Lorenzo’s sister and Raymond’s lover, and her baby to the wrath of the abbess of the convent where she has been unfairly confined (but from which she, but not the baby, is eventually rescued), and Antonia, whom Lorenzo hopes to marry, to the lust of the ambitious and newly fallen abbot Ambrosio. We also meet a third young woman, Matilda, who masquerades as a male novice to gain access to Ambrosio and is the first to tempt him down the path of perdition. She tells Ambrosio she has made a pact with the beautiful “fallen angel” Lucifer, and eventually the proud abbot does too, so that he may fulfill his lustful desire for the innocent Antonia after murdering her mother lest she expose him. Once Ambrosio has killed Antonia, as well, to conceal his crime, then made a pact with Lucifer (in his less attractive winged, horned, and taloned form) to escape further torture from the Inquisition, Lucifer lets Ambrosio know that Matilda is not human but an agent of Hell, and that Ambrosio’s two victims, Antonia and her mother, were his own sister and mother. Then he flies the hapless monk into the sky and drops him thousands of feet onto a rocky precipice where, after six days of eyeball pecking, flesh biting, and blood draining from various natural predators, Ambrosio expires, only to be catapulted into eternal damnation.

2. Lewis F. Peck, “A Note on the Text,” in *The Monk*, intro. John Berryman (New York and London: Grove Press, 1959), 30. Matthew Lewis earnestly declares sources for the story of the Bleeding Nun and a few of the ballads, ending plaintively, “I have now made a full avowal of all the plagiarisms of which I am aware myself; but I doubt not, many more may be found, of which I am at present totally unconscious” (32).

Though Lewis serves up the obligatory moldering vaults and gloomy medieval atmosphere of earlier Gothic tales, this faux Catholic story focuses obsessively on the Roman clergy's sexual transgressions, abuses of power, and hypocritical cruelty toward confessed sinners. *The Monk* is all about sexual repression unleashed. Ambrosio's Faustian pact with Satan is voluntary and does not involve "possession" in the modern pop culture understanding of the term. This theme stands in contrast to today's mainstream faux Catholic films and books, which, in an interesting reversal of focus, studiously avoid cleric-lay sexuality in spite of (or perhaps because of) ongoing revelations about sexual abuse of minors by priests and concentrate instead on involuntary possession and heretical doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its faux Catholic trappings, the original Gothic is generally regarded by its critics as the first Western literary genre operating implicitly in the vacuum left by the departure of religious belief. "Viewing Gothic mystery as a substitute for discredited religious mystery," says Joel Porte after Maurice Lévy, "we may consent to recognize that, despite its wild extravagance and puerile heresies, le genre noir represented for its producers and consumers alike a genuine expression of profound religious malaise."<sup>4</sup> Victor Sage has widened the definition of Gothic from the narrow genre featuring "a decorative metaphysical or graveyard feeling" to "a whole complex of popular theological ideals of a predominantly, if not exclusively, Protestant variety."<sup>5</sup> Robert Geary sees the Gothic novel in its beginnings not just as an expression of Protestant anticlericalism or as a simple reaction to eighteenth-century rationalism but as part of the process of the secularization of literature in which the supernatural moves out of the traditional religious framework to be cultivated as a sensation in itself.<sup>6</sup> Other commentators have also noted in the Gothic what I have called the transition

3. The discussion of the modern faux Catholic Gothic does not include the films of Luis Buñuel, which carry some strong echoes of their eighteenth-century Protestant counterparts. *The Monk* was translated into French by Antonin Artaud and became an important text for the Surrealists; Buñuel wanted to make a movie of it (and did write a script, with Jean-Claude Carrière, that was made into a movie *Le Moine* [1973], directed by Adonis Kyrrou).

4. Joel Porte, "In the Hands of an Angry God: Religious Terror in Gothic Fiction," in *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, ed. Gary Richard Thompson (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1974), 43.

5. Victor Sage, *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1988), xxi-xxii.

6. Robert F. Geary, *The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction: Horror, Belief, and Literary Change* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 11, 16.

from “full of awe” to “awful,”<sup>7</sup> the cultivation of feelings of terror or dread as a flawed vehicle to the transcendent—a transcendent shorn of the larger metaphysical context that includes the divine as well as the demonic.

Demonization of the supernatural, along with its exclusion from the everyday world, had already begun in seventeenth-century Western Europe with the Protestant Reformation and the scientific revolution. If divine intrusions into our lives such as miracles—so the new thinking went—ended with the age of the patriarchs (around the sixth century CE), and if natural wonders such as lightning, earthquakes, and floods were not God’s punishment but had their causes in the material world, then anything perceived in the material world that could not be explained rationally must belong to the dark side. In *The Monk*, God doesn’t manifest in the physical world, only Satan does. By the end of the eighteenth century, this shaky metaphysical split had been abandoned by scientists and theologians but had become entrenched in the Western popular imagination, where it happily took up residence for the next two hundred years.

Over the nineteenth century, the rapidly proliferating Gothic sensibility divided into separate strands emphasizing either anticlericalism, supernaturalism, or romance (the sentiment, not the genre). On the European continent, the anticlerical Gothic carried on in England by works such as Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) flourished within predominantly Catholic countries. In Eugene Sue’s *The Wandering Jew* (1844), in which an evil Jesuit covets the Wandering Jew’s fortune (collecting interest all those centuries since the death of Jesus), the clerical transgression is not lust but covetousness.<sup>8</sup> In Italy, both Giuseppe Garibaldi in the nineteenth century and Benito Mussolini (in his prefascist socialist phase) in the twentieth wrote anticlerical Gothic historical romances.<sup>9</sup> Anti-Catholic exposés masquerading as nonfiction but cast in Gothic fictional conventions—such as the Montreal prostitute Maria Monk’s lurid account called

7. In Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 9.

8. In a fictional foreshadowing of Pierre Plantard’s fraudulent claims of his Merovingian ancestry that form the basis of Brown’s principal source, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Sue styles a French family as the direct descendants of the Wandering Jew’s sister, Herodias.

9. Garibaldi’s *Clelia, or Of Government by Priests* (1867) and Mussolini’s *The Cardinal’s Mistress* (serialized 1909, published 1929). I am indebted to Massimo Introvigne for directing me to these two works. The complicated nuances of the anticlerical Catholic Gothic are perhaps best embodied in Buñuel’s famous declaration: “I remain Catholic and atheist, thank God!” (“Pessimism,” in *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, trans. Garrett White [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 263.)

*Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal* (1836), a best seller in New York<sup>10</sup>—were popular in nineteenth-century America.

The second Gothic thread, supernaturalism, survived in nineteenth-century post-Romantic ghost and horror stories featuring the menacing spirits of individuals who survived death. In these tales, notably English but also widespread on the Continent (such as the French *contes fantastiques* of Charles Nodier, Prosper Mérimée, and others), Satan is absent (he will reemerge, both as a satiric and a serious character in popular literature and film of the twentieth century), as is any openly slanderous depiction of Catholic clerics, though the church figures in the ruined abbeys of Victorian Protestants like Sheridan le Fanu or the Edwardian M. R. James's ghostly tales with their rigorously historically accurate contexts.<sup>11</sup> Irish Protestant Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), set in Catholic Eastern Europe, trumped earlier Gothic vampire tales to become the archetype for this "imaginative inversion of the Roman Doctrine of the Eucharist."<sup>12</sup> In America, the genealogy of supernaturalism runs from Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne through Edgar Allan Poe (in whose stories the apparent presence of the supernatural is almost, but not quite, dispelled by a mad caricature of rationalism) and H. P. Lovecraft. Through the twentieth century, the great tidal bore triggered by dime novels/penny dreadfuls and swelled by pulp fiction, comic books, and movies swallowed all these popular genres and spit them out downriver in a range of new media from animated cartoons to videogaming to virtual reality.

The third strand, the "Gothic romance" written by and for women, still enjoys enormous popularity today. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) remains the founding model for the tale of a young woman, always told

10. The Know-Nothing sentiment lives on in some corners of the American psyche, as witness this brief excerpt from a lengthy and vituperative reader's comment on Amazon .com: "Monk was slandered by the Catholic Church: Any born again Christian recognizes that the Catholic Church is full of pagan rituals that are evil and satanic. Read the Bible and the truth will set you free. May God bless Maria Monk for her braveness in telling her story in the face of evil," [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/155753134X/qid=1147716654/sr=1-4/ref=sr\\_1\\_4/104-4488947-5855938?s=books&v=glance&n=283155](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/155753134X/qid=1147716654/sr=1-4/ref=sr_1_4/104-4488947-5855938?s=books&v=glance&n=283155), posted May 12, 2005 (accessed May 15, 2006).

11. After Jane Austen's contemporary satire *Northanger Abbey* (finished by 1803; published posthumously in 1818), the definitive Victorian parody of the by then dated Gothic conventions remains Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which presents seemingly supernatural scares (killer ghost animal roaming the lonely moors, etc.) only to expose them as the props of a cunning murderer.

12. Sage, *Horror Fiction*, 51.

from her point of view, who meets an irresistibly charming older man with a very bad reputation to whom, in the secular-psychological shadow of Satanic temptation, she is powerfully attracted against her will. After various plot contortions the bad man is revealed to be good, and she marries him, effectively domesticating the demonic. Through the mid-twentieth century, Gothic romances often presented, just as Poe did, the teasing hint of haunting or the supernatural—the iconic paperback cover illustration typically presented a young woman in distress before a looming mansion under a full moon—but the mystery was always revealed, by story’s end, to have a rational explanation. Along with the striking addition of explicit sexuality and a certain amount of feminist updating that bestows professions and financial independence on its heroines, present-day Gothic romances often forgo the spooky ancestral mansion but have a mystery at their core and remain focused on love relationships successfully consummated in marriage.

Today the dynamic, ever-expanding Gothic (along with its contemporary lifestyle cohort “Goth”) includes not only the latest versions of these three strands but a huge array of subgenres, most notably endless permutations of horror stories linked with supernaturalism, including stories of vampires, werewolves, and other denizens of the supernatural dark side first introduced in the nineteenth century. The globalization of popular culture has also blurred the boundaries between Protestant anti-Catholicism and traditions of anticlericalism in predominantly Catholic European countries. Side by side with the anticlerical thrillers of the Spanish writer Arturo Pérez-Reverte<sup>13</sup> stands my favorite example of Protestant anti-Papism from the underbelly of American pop culture, a self-published but fairly widely circulating novel with many sequels called *The Last Days of Christ the Vampire*, in which that secret department deep in the bowels of the Vatican is dedicated to concealing just this central fact about Jesus’s true identity. In

13. *The Seville Communion*, for example, features computer hackers sending secret messages to the pope, arcana of the Swiss Guard, and the negative political currents of Vatican bureaucracy under Pope John Paul, elements that are echoed in Brown’s *Angels & Demons*. “Our Holy Mother the church,” a young priest says to the main character, a priest with no beliefs whatsoever, “So Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman that it’s ended up betraying its original purpose. In the reformation it lost half of Europe, and in the eighteenth century it excommunicated reason. A hundred years later, it lost the workers, because they realized it was on the side of the oppressors. And now, as this century draws to a close, it’s losing the young and the women. Do you know how this will end? With mice running around empty pews.” See Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *The Seville Communion*, trans. Sonia Soto (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 133. Originally published as *La piel del tambor* (Madrid: Santillana, 1995).

the context of the shape-shifting, genre-crossing Gothic, Christ as vampire is the essential consequence of the substitution of the demonic for the divine.

New Christian evangelical fiction also draws from the deep well of American popular fiction generally and the Gothic in particular. A case in point is the twelve-volume apocalyptic *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye (“renowned prophecy scholar, minister and educator,” as the cover states) and his cowriter Jerry B. Jenkins. Far from being a literalist version of the Rapture (itself a rather Gothic creation of nineteenth-century American evangelism), the theology of their novels shows the influence of Gothic narrative conventions at every turn. Especially interesting is the authors’ depiction of the Antichrist in the figure of Nicolae Carpathia (his surname referencing the fictitious Count Dracula’s homeland), an evil Romanian who becomes head of the United Nations and preaches a seditious message of ecumenism and global community. Nicolae dies but, “resurrected and indwelt by the Devil himself,” returns to rule the world briefly before the Second Coming and the thousand years of peace on earth occur. The tremendous sales of these books (sixty-five million, another ten million in children’s and graphic novel versions) are another indication that evangelical Christian doctrine itself is being reshaped by the conventions of genre fiction and film—and specifically by the ubiquitous figure of the vampire.<sup>14</sup>

Looming over it all like the proverbial nine-hundred-pound gorilla is the Dan Brown phenomenon. Of his two faux Catholic novels, *Angels & Demons* (2000) belongs more closely to the classic Monk Lewis Gothic tradition of the Luciferian rise and fall of a supremely ambitious, power-mad Roman Catholic cleric. This novel also marks the first appearance of the main character Robert Langdon, the Harvard “ymbologist”<sup>15</sup> who makes a return appearance in *The Da Vinci Code*.

In *Angels & Demons*, Langdon is flown to a top-secret Swiss research laboratory when one of its chief scientists is murdered. Langdon’s task is to decode the word *Illuminati* branded on the dead man’s chest, which he authoritatively asserts is the name of a centuries-old but now defunct anti-Catholic secret society of philosophers and scientists, including Galileo,

14. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Nicolae: The Rise of the Antichrist* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1997), 380.

15. Brown coined the term *ymbology* to indicate the study of symbols in the same way that some people use *phraseology* when they mean “wording” or “syntax”: to sound high-toned. Similarly, in a preamble to *Angels & Demons* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), he declares that the brotherhood of the *Illuminati* is “factual.”

that gradually morphed into “the world’s oldest and most powerful satanic cult.”<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the scientist’s adopted daughter, Vittoria, herself a scientist, has discovered that a portion of the antimatter her father has succeeded in isolating has disappeared. When the news comes that the Vatican is being threatened by an anonymous caller who has stashed the antimatter somewhere in its bowels, Robert and Vittoria rush to Rome on the lab’s private jet. The bomb threat has come just as the cardinals, with the death (actually murder) of the previous pope, have convened to elect a new one. But now the four main candidates have disappeared, and one by one their murdered bodies appear in locations across Rome as Robert and Vittoria vainly attempt to decipher the Illuminati-laden historical clues the caller phones in. As the body count climbs, the truth finally emerges: the real terrorist is not the Illuminati but a high Vatican official possessed by a mad desire for power.

In the character of Carlo Ventresca, a.k.a. the camerlengo (the cardinal who functions as the pope’s private secretary), we clearly see the shadow of Lewis’s spectacularly sinful monk Ambrosio. Cardinal Ventresca is described as having “the air of some mythical hero—radiating charisma and authority,” but also proves to be the novel’s villain.<sup>17</sup> Following the conventions of the modern faux Catholic, Ventresca commits no sexual crimes, but in his murderous quest to become pope he shares the monk Ambrosio’s overweening ambition, justifying his assassination of the four cardinals in line for the papacy on the grounds that they were too liberal. When death comes, Ventresca’s soul is not carried away by Satan, but there’s a whiff of brimstone in the air when he sets himself alight on a high balcony overlooking Vatican Square and burns to death.

*Angels & Demons* also features a racist, stereotypical portrait of a Middle Eastern “Hassassin,” a dark creature with “an appetite for hedonistic pleasure . . . bred into him by his ancestors.”<sup>18</sup> The Hassassin believes he is taking his orders from an “ancient brotherhood,” when all along he has

16. Brown, *Angels & Demons*, 34. Robert Langdon (and Brown) seriously misdescribe the Illuminati, a Bavarian political-esoteric society modeled after the Freemasons and founded by Adam Weishaupt that operated between the years 1776 and 1790. See Massimo Introvigne on the CESNUR (Center for the Study of New Religions) Web site, [www.cesnur.org/2005/mi\\_illuminati.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2005/mi_illuminati.htm), for a useful discussion of conspiracy-theory notions about the Illuminati circulating since the mid-nineteenth century. Introvigne pinpoints the trilogy of novels collectively titled *Illuminatus* (1975), by Robert Joseph Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, as the vehicle for the more recent mainstreaming of these notions.

17. Brown, *Angels & Demons*, 145.

18. Brown, *Angels & Demons*, 35.

been under the control of the rogue cardinal Carlo Ventresca. Much like the Hassassin, however, readers are more likely to take away the impression they labored under for most of the novel—that the murders were orchestrated either by the so-called Illuminati or by the organized bureaucracy of the Vatican itself—than to remember the last-minute revelation of the true villain.

Brown employs the same time-honored tactic of bait and switch among “Manichaeans others” (to use Umberto Eco’s useful phrase) in his next novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), which belongs to a newer tributary of the faux Catholic Gothic spawned by the 1983 nonfiction book by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln titled *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (first published in the UK as *The Holy Blood, The Holy Grail* in 1982). The first two of these authors unsuccessfully sued Brown for plagiarism, though they did not, to my knowledge, sue Lewis Perdue, author of the novel *Daughter of God* (2000); Katherine Neville, author of the novel *The Magic Circle* (2002); Stuart Urban, writer-director of the film *Revelation* (2001); or any other of the less spectacularly successful fictions before and after *The Da Vinci Code* that incorporate their pseudohistorical thesis: that Jesus was a mortal man who married Mary Magdalene and whose descendants founded the Merovingian dynasty of France.<sup>19</sup>

The story of *The Da Vinci Code* goes briefly like this: The night before he is to meet with Jacques Saunière, senior curator at the Louvre, Robert Langdon is summoned to the museum by the Paris police. Saunière’s murdered body has just been found, ritually posed, in the museum’s Grand Gallery, but the curator has managed to leave a string of coded enigmatic clues that hold the secret of his death and much more. Both Langdon and Saunière’s granddaughter, cryptologist Sophie Neveu, become suspects as a tangled story unfolds of an ancient society called the Priory of Sion, of which Saunière was grandmaster, and the great secret the society has guarded against millennia-long assaults by the Catholic Church: documents revealing that Jesus was mortal, not divine, that he married Mary Magdalene, who escaped to France with their child, and that the bloodline of Jesus and King David has carried through via the founding dynasty of France, the Merovingians, to the present day. Unraveling two thousand

19. Lewis Perdue is engaged in a long-term plagiarism suit against Brown for appropriating material from *The Daughter of God* (Seth Mnookin, “The Da Vinci Clone?” *Vanity Fair* [July 2006], 100ff.). The novel’s plot points bear little resemblance to the *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* thesis, however.

years of suppression of the “sacred feminine” by the patriarchal church, Robert and Sophie leapfrog across England and Scotland seeking the answers to the coded messages left by Sophie’s grandfather, Leonardo da Vinci, the Knights Templar, and assorted others while being pursued both by law enforcement and the blind albino assassin monk Silas, who seems to be working for his Opus Dei masters but turns out to be, like the prelate who heads Opus Dei himself, the dupe of the wealthy English grail scholar Leigh Teabing. By the novel’s end, Sophie herself and her brother are revealed to be the direct descendants of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and she and Robert enjoy a romantic tryst.

Notable similarities between this novel and *Angels & Demons* include the following: Langdon hooks up professionally and romantically with the granddaughter (*A&D*: adopted daughter) of the murdered wise man, a museum curator (*A&D*: priest-turned-scientist), who is also head of a secret society, and the two must follow a path of coded historical clues across France and England (*A&D*: Rome). In both, four wise men are murdered (here, higher-ups in the Priory of Sion instead of Roman Catholic cardinals). In both, the murders are committed by a simpleminded or crazed assassin and appear to be the work of a secret society (Opus Dei, Illuminati) but turn out to be masterminded by a single person operating entirely on his own (Cardinal Ventresca, Leigh Teabing). But even though, as Robert Langdon declares at the end of *The Da Vinci Code*, the Vatican and Opus Dei are “completely innocent,” once again I suspect this last-minute plot reversal may be lost on the vast majority of readers, who take away with them the idea, foregrounded for most of the story, that Opus Dei was really behind it all.

On his Web site, Brown affirms that he is a Christian and says that his mother was a “sacred musician,” but he doesn’t specify which denomination.<sup>20</sup> He says that he doesn’t read much fiction except the “classics” and the works of Robert Ludlum, whose low-grade, densely plotted thrillers have obviously influenced his work. As displayed in *Angels & Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown’s knowledge of church history, art history, and Western esoteric societies has the stretched-thin feel of an undergraduate term paper. You don’t see a sophisticated understanding here, but rather some earnest and copious note taking from various secondary sources delivered with the sort of emphatic assurance only a Harvard symbologist can muster. (In *The Da Vinci Code*, Robert Langdon’s scholarly bibliogra-

20. [http://www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci\\_code/faqs.html](http://www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci_code/faqs.html).

phy for his new book is proudly described as containing no fewer than fifty entries, “many of them academic best-sellers.”)<sup>21</sup>

*The Da Vinci Code* contains an echo or two from Pérez-Reverte’s novel *The Flanders Panel* (1996), which also featured an Old Master’s painting (fifteenth century, Flemish) that conceals a murderer’s identity in coded chess-game visual symbols and a hidden written message revealed in ultraviolet light. Among other fictional sources, Brown may have drawn some inspiration from Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) without recognizing that this novel was intended to be a parody of occultist conspiracy theory, including that found in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (whose main thesis is even rendered as one of *Foucault’s Pendulum*’s later chapter headings). There is a resonance between the opening of Eco’s novel, in which a ritual murder is about to be enacted in a famous historical space in Paris (the vault of the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, St.-Martin-des-Champs, where the pendulum of Léon Foucault is located), and a murder with ritual overtones in the Louvre, followed by a second murder in the Church of Saint-Sulpice (which contains another artifact of early science, an astronomical sun marker that Brown misidentifies, intentionally or not, as the “Rose Line,” a so-called older version of the prime meridian that also supposedly runs through the Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland and the Louvre). *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* each proceed—one sophisticated and tongue in cheek, the other in deadly and somewhat plodding earnest—with a manic and completely specious connect-the-dots romp through two thousand years of Western esotericism. Eco, a fervent anti-occultist, conflates too much of the esoteric tradition into one punching bag, but he is dead on in his satiric take on those whose paranoid desire to find connections overwhelms their common sense and ability to deal fairly with the historical record. Taken in the context of *Foucault’s Pendulum*, the garbled occult history presented in Brown’s novel reads like the good semiotician’s worst nightmare.

None of this pattern of influences constitutes anything like copying. Like most genre fiction writers, Brown made these elements his own and added some new ones. The case of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* is a bit different, however. Though it is clear Brown believed he paid his primary source sufficient homage by playfully introducing two of its authors’ names in anagrammatic form as the villain “Leigh Teabing” and including an afterword in later printings explicitly citing the book, readers of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* under-

21. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: BCA, 2003), 163.

stand that its authors were correct in asserting that Brown did appropriate, in considerable detail, what they called the “architecture” of their theory about Mary Magdalene and the Merovingian line. The awkward point for a lawsuit is that Brown took their ersatz scholarship at face value as historically true, and a historical fact cannot be plagiarized, only transmitted. But the relationship of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* to fact was already extremely problematic. In 1993, Pierre Plantard, the supposed direct descendant of the Merovingians (hence of Jesus) prominently featured in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, confessed that he had made up the whole genealogy and deposited the “secret documents” himself in the Bibliothèque Nationale.<sup>22</sup>

The authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* may have already had their suspicions about Plantard’s veracity when they first wrote their book, which was based on an earlier BBC program. It doesn’t seem, though, as if Brown knew of Plantard’s confession when he wrote *The Da Vinci Code*—and in any event he gave the Merovingians (and Jesus) a different line of descent with his character Sophie Neveu. Since the litigants (Baigent and Leigh) could not possibly win if their book were judged entirely factual and could equally not confess to a hoax, Baigent tried to backpedal by saying their book presented “evidence, not proof.” The judge was having none of this, however, and ruled against them, even to the point of concealing a *Da Vinci Code*-like secret code of his own devising in his written judgment.<sup>23</sup> A subsequent appeal was turned down.

The industry of more than ninety books on the subject of all the things Brown got factually wrong will not be examined here simply because *The Da Vinci Code*’s power operates in a realm—that of mythmaking and religious speculation—where the factual is irrelevant. The Gothic subgenre spawned by *The Da Vinci Code*, its predecessors, and imitators is unique among contemporary faux Catholic fictions in making the tenets of Christianity an explicit topic and proposing a new religious mystery to take the place of the discredited old one.<sup>24</sup> The stated goal of the murdered curator

22. A good summary of the hoax is found in Laura Miller, “The Last Word: The Da Vinci Con,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2004 (accessed on cesnur.org, May 25, 2006). “The only thing more powerful than a worldwide conspiracy,” Miller comments, “is our desire to believe in one.”

23. Among widespread coverage of the case, see [http://www.boston.com/news/local/new\\_hampshire/articles/2006/04/07/excerpts\\_from\\_ruling\\_on\\_the\\_da\\_vinci\\_code\\_lawsuit/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/new_hampshire/articles/2006/04/07/excerpts_from_ruling_on_the_da_vinci_code_lawsuit/) (accessed November 5, 2006).

24. One of the new wave after Brown, Kathleen McGowan, author of the initially self-published *The Expected One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), has declared herself a direct descendant of Jesus and Mary Magdalene based on personal visions

Jacques Saunière, and of Brown himself, is the restoration of the principle of the “sacred feminine.” As Robert Langdon explains to Sophie Neveu, the Priory of Sion “believes that Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion forever.”<sup>25</sup> In one of many interviews, Brown elaborated further: “Prior to 2000 years ago, we lived in a world of gods and goddesses. Today we live in a world of God. I simply wrote a story that explores how and why this shift might have occurred, what it says about our past and, more importantly, what it says about our future.”<sup>26</sup>

At first glance, it might seem that *The Da Vinci Code* has indeed mainstreamed the notion of the “sacred feminine” out of the margins of New Age pop culture, and at a culturally auspicious moment for doing so. In a context in which the “Goddess Mary” is featured on a *Time* magazine cover with an accompanying article devoted to the new “Protestant Mary,”<sup>27</sup> along with the trickle-down effect of popular works on the Gnostic Gospels and newly discovered texts such as the Gospel of Judas that chip away at the façade of the New Testament, “people are looking for a different kind of religious understanding,” says Karen King, Harvard professor of ecclesiastical history, of *The Da Vinci Code*. Women, King believes, “find comfort in the idea of a married woman with a baby as an alternate figure to the polarized female models of virgins and prostitutes in Christianity.”<sup>28</sup>

*The Da Vinci Code*, however, presents no real goddess or representation of a divinity. We are told that the Priory of Sion worships Mary Magdalene as “Goddess” and “Divine Mother,” but this happens offstage, taking a backseat to the dominant point of Jesus’s nondivinity. What’s more, if Jesus is a mere mortal, how precisely is Mary Magdalene divine? What-

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and family genealogy research in France. Carol Memmot, “Is This Woman the Living Code?” *USA Today*, July 18, 2006, [http://www.usatoday.com/liffr/books/news/2006-07-17-magdalenebook\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/liffr/books/news/2006-07-17-magdalenebook_x.htm) (accessed July 18, 2006).

25. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 124–25. Theodosius, not Constantine, made Christianity the official imperial religion.

26. Lisa Rogak, *The Man Behind “The Da Vinci Code”: The Unauthorized Biography of Dan Brown* (Kansas City: Andres McMeel, 2005), 110, 138n.

27. David Van Biema, “Hail Mary,” *Time*, March 14, 2005, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com) (accessed April 25, 2006).

28. Karen King, “Ruffling Religious Feathers,” *Harvard Crimson*, [www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=357405](http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=357405) (accessed April 26, 2006).

ever her iconic links to goddesses like Isis, Mary Magdalene is portrayed in the novel as a woman who marries, bears a child, and dies; she is given no “ascension to heaven” moment. There is also very little mention of Jesus’s mother Mary, who, some would argue, has served, far more than in any Protestant denomination, as the Catholic Church’s own female principle. The story is told from the perspective of the traditional thriller’s male protagonist, and the Priory of Sion’s hilariously fictitious list of grandmasters taken from *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (which includes Victor Hugo and Jean Cocteau) has not a single woman in it. The only inadvertent whiff of the goddess in either novel occurs in *Angels & Demons*, when the statuesque scientist Vittoria Vetra provokes outrage by striding through the Vatican in her short shorts.

*The Da Vinci Code*’s greatest attraction for its readers, I believe, is not goddess culture or the sacred feminine, but rather the assertion that Jesus was no divinity but a man like everybody else. For those coming across the Arian heresy for the first time, packaged as “fact” in a very palatable fictional form by an enthusiastic popularizer, it’s heady stuff. Yet as recently as twenty years ago, Martin Scorsese’s 1988 film adaptation of the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis’s mid-century novel *Last Temptation of Christ*, which did no more than assert the human side of Jesus and his doubts about his divinity, generated an enormous outcry from Christian groups and was more or less buried by the protest.

Why, then, was *The Da Vinci Code* able to bulldoze the opposition of organized religion at every turn? Not all the reasons for this novel’s staggering success, it turns out, had to do with its content. It was a canny top-of-the-line marketing plan, not the book’s controversial theological content, that initially put *The Da Vinci Code* within reach of the maximum possible number of readers. Since Gutenberg printed the first Bible, mass printing has altered forever the nature of scripture and transmission of religious doctrine—and so, from the twentieth century on, has the theory and practice of marketing. A notable exception was *The Celestine Prophecy*, a faux Catholic novel-cum-spiritual manifesto presenting a New Age meditative discipline purportedly recorded on “parchments” dating from 600 BCE discovered by Catholic priests in Peru. Initially published by the author, this *Da Vinci Code* of the 1990s eventually sold upwards of twenty million copies.<sup>29</sup>

29. See James Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy: An Adventure* (New York: Warner Books, 1997).

*The Da Vinci Code* had been groomed for best-sellerdom long before it ever saw print. Determined to hit it big with this book, Brown put a tremendous amount of work and energy into his initial proposal to the publisher. He was also rightly convinced of the need to compress this rather complicated historical argument and accompanying narrative into very short sound-bite chapters that a much wider audience than habitual book readers would be able to digest easily and understand. Unlike Kazantzakis's deeply literary work, *The Da Vinci Code* is full of zingy one-liners, like "The greatest story ever told is the greatest story ever sold," and throwaway references to such personages as Walt Disney, who, Brown tells us, "had made it his quiet life's work to pass on the Grail story to future generations."<sup>30</sup> For the two-hundred-page detailed plot synopsis he submitted, Brown received a two-book contract and an advance of \$400,000, an amount that basically signals a publisher's commitment to do everything necessary to make a book a best seller. After the book's success proved even greater than projected, this figure was quickly renegotiated upward. Three months before publication, 10,000 advance reader copies of *The Da Vinci Code* were sent to booksellers (a larger number than the first print run of any of Brown's previous three novels), and the book had a first printing of 230,000.<sup>31</sup>

Yet it is equally clear that neither Brown nor his publisher was at all prepared for the juggernaut that followed. After ten weeks, a million copies were in print. The book sold 6.5 million copies in the United States in its first year; after the second year, the total was 10 million.<sup>32</sup> As of the end of April 2006, the book had sold over 40 million copies in hardback and over 1 million in the recently released paperback.<sup>33</sup> The release of the movie version the following month spiked those numbers even higher.

In the meantime, objections from Christian leaders were immediate and vociferous, though the first official denunciation by the Catholic Church did not come until March 2005, two years after publication, when Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, archbishop of Genoa, spoke out against the book and urged Catholics not to buy or read it.<sup>34</sup> Though Opus Dei refrained from boycotting the movie, bravely declaring it would "generate interest

30. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 267, 262.

31. Rogak, *Man Behind "The Da Vinci Code,"* 93–95.

32. Rogak, *Man Behind "The Da Vinci Code,"* 98.

33. [www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com), April 25, 2006 (accessed April 29, 2006).

34. Tracy Wilkinson, "Vatican Seeks to Discredit 'The Da Vinci Code,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 2005, [www.latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com) (accessed March 17, 2005).

in Christianity,” a few weeks before the film version’s release Archbishop Angelo Amato, the second-ranking official in the Vatican’s doctrinal office and a close associate of Pope Benedict XVI, called on Roman Catholics to boycott the film, declaring the novel to be “full of calumnies, offenses and historical and theological errors regarding Jesus, the Gospels and the church,” according to Reuters. “If such lies and errors had been directed at the Koran or the Holocaust, they would have justly provoked a world uprising,” the archbishop said. “Instead, if they are directed against the church and Christians, they remain unpunished.”<sup>35</sup>

But nobody listened. Promoted in the United States by no less than ten History Channel programs exploring aspects of the novel with the help of dubious experts (including Baigent and Leigh) and kitschy soft-focus reenactments, the movie opened to record box-office profits worldwide, including predominantly Catholic countries. As Thomas Doherty noted in the *Washington Post*, this outcome would have been unthinkable for a previous generation of American Catholics who formerly exerted a real influence by observing the church’s boycott and proscription orders. Hollywood’s first Production Code of censorship, written in 1930 by a Catholic publisher and a Jesuit priest, inspired the establishment of the Legion of Decency, the forerunner of today’s Catholic League for Religious Rights. “When the Catholic hierarchy lost the power to energize millions of parishioners for some real Catholic action,” Doherty notes, “when American Catholics responded to calls to boycott Hollywood blockbusters with approximately the same obedient deference they accorded the Vatican’s advice on birth control, then Catholic dominion over Hollywood lapsed.” Today, he concludes, “the only Code that Hollywood adheres to is the kind authored by Dan Brown.”<sup>36</sup> Tellingly, after the record opening (only surpassed, ironically, by Mel Gibson’s conservative Catholic *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004), the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore* dubbed the movie “much ado about nothing” and the uproar around it nothing but a clever marketing strategy designed to promote interest in a dull movie and a dull book.<sup>37</sup>

The multiplatform success of *The Da Vinci Code* occurred in a realm

35. Ian Fisher, “Vatican Official Urges Boycott of ‘Da Vinci’ Film,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2006.

36. Thomas Doherty, “The Code Before ‘Da Vinci,’” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2006, A3.

37. “Vatican Newspaper Reviews Da Vinci,” [www.religionnewsblog.com](http://www.religionnewsblog.com), Item 14748, posted May 24, 2006 (accessed May 30, 2006).

that is simultaneously a fertile field and an intellectual vacuum—that curious ahistorical, apocalyptic world of American pop culture, in which Brown can be called “one of the best-selling authors of all time,”<sup>38</sup> just as Elvis is the greatest rock-'n'-roll star of all time and Hank Aaron/Barry Bonds is the greatest home run hitter of all time. This shadowy region I call the sub-Zeitgeist is also, depending on one's point of view, either the crucible or the compost heap of new religious movements, where a certain kind of low-level but potent theological rumination is constantly taking place. At least two world religions, Mormonism and Christian Science, were cooked in this cauldron by leaders whose religious manifestos were best sellers mass printed in the nineteenth century and partially shaped by the conventions of popular literature, both fiction and nonfiction (the romance of gold tablets written in a secret celestial language and the self-improvement tradition begun by Benjamin Franklin, respectively); so was a third, Scientology, in the twentieth. Just as Scientology's deviser, L. Ron Hubbard, moved seamlessly from writing science fiction novels to founding a science fiction religion, other new religions have blossomed from notions that conflate the fictional extraterrestrial with the formerly celestial.<sup>39</sup> As part of the same trend, magic cults and quasi religions have sprung up around fantasy and science fiction, including the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and H. P. Lovecraft and the television series *Star Trek*,<sup>40</sup> which brings us back again to the Gothic.

If the absence of the religious transcendent is its defining feature, then *The Da Vinci Code's* function considered within the Gothic tradition is the unmaking of a godhead rather than the putting forward of a goddess or any other deity in its place. The supernatural is not present as an active agency in any of Brown's four novels, all of which, including his two techno-thrillers *Digital Fortress* (1998) and *Deception Point* (2001), belong to the conspiracy theory genre. Despite their professed theses, both *Angels & Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code* are profoundly secular books, to which Peter Brooks's comment on the radical Gothic message of *The Monk* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* equally applies: that “the Sacred in its tradi-

38. See the discussion in my *Secret Life of Puppets*, 74.

39. See, for example, James R. Lewis, ed., *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, SUNY Series in Religious Studies (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), for a look at twentieth-century extraterrestrial religious movements.

40. Victoria Nelson, “Who Likes Lovecraft” (paper presented at the Association for the Study of Esotericism conference, Michigan State University, Lansing, Michigan, June 13, 2004).

tional Christian form, even in the more purely ethical version elaborated by Christian humanism, is no longer operative.”<sup>41</sup>

Even so, the fact that Gothic fiction of two hundred years ago did not include a married Jesus indicates just how much closer Christianity stood to Western intellectual life then, when heresy was a much more taboo subject than fornicating monks and nuns, than it does today. The Catholic Church has reason to be upset about *The Da Vinci Code* because the function it serves in secularizing Jesus is not really to promote a dialogue about Christianity, as both Brown and its apologists have rather ingenuously argued, but rather to help deliver a death blow to the Christian Trinity as it has been understood by all denominations, not just the Catholic Church.

On this issue central to all Christianity, we return again to the question, Why construct this fictional heresy around the Catholic Church in particular? As all writers of exorcism movies know, it is easier to tap into a long-established tradition of anticlericalism and show a Christian denomination other than your own engaged in scheming, suppression, and conspiracy across the ages. Clearly, Brown and others take the easy way out. A plot point that would provoke far greater outrage in U.S. audiences, for example, would be to identify close associates of Billy Graham and John Calvin in the historical cover-up around Jesus and Mary Magdalene. More than simply deflecting criticism away from Protestant Christianity, however, in Brown's hands the faux Catholic genre still reveals its supremely unconscious deference to the Catholic Church as the most enduring and powerful standard-bearer of a Christianity that no longer seems entirely relevant.

Though it is hardly likely to spawn a new sect on its own, the *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon has shown that the traditional belief system of Christianity, notwithstanding the evangelicals and religious right, no longer exerts the power over the hearts and minds of the majority that it formerly possessed. Despite all the polls showing that this or that number of Americans regularly attends church, believes in the Rapture, and so forth, many Americans who profess to be Christian believers are simply *imaginatively* distant from the precepts of the religion they grew up with. An elderly mid-westerner once told me that he and his wife were raised Methodist but had started attending the Catholic church across the street from their retirement home because the choir was so much better. He considered this a moment. Then, brow furrowed, he leaned forward and whispered: “You

41. Peter Brooks, “Virtue and Terror: *The Monk*,” *English Literary History* 40 (1973): 249–63.

know, the Catholics and the Protestants—which came first?” And he still seemed troubled after I told him, as if some larger, more important question behind this one had been left unanswered. As, indeed, it had. I warrant that a considerable number of people in this country fall into this same gray middle area.

Statistics, themselves a kind of peculiarly American secular scripture, always constitute a dubious proof, but sometimes they can accurately reflect certain of these dissonances in belief. One recent poll that records 78 percent of people in the United States as believing in the resurrection of Jesus also shows the rather astounding number of 13 percent now believing that Jesus’s death on the cross “was faked” and, as represented in *The Da Vinci Code*, that Jesus was married and had a family. The Canadian pollster himself expressed shock at this result in such a religiously conservative country as the United States.<sup>42</sup> A similar poll in the United Kingdom (commissioned, notably, by Opus Dei), where no fewer than one out of five adults has read *The Da Vinci Code*, revealed that 60 percent of people who had read the book believed Jesus had children by Mary Magdalene, as did 30 percent—a significant figure in itself—of those who had *not* read the book.<sup>43</sup>

In short, the populace has a strong appetite for heresy that *The Da Vinci Code* and other works of popular fiction help to feed. This is no new phenomenon under the American sun, where transcendental movements and Great Awakenings war ceaselessly with pragmatic empiricism for hegemony in the national spirit. The crowd searches, restlessly, for religious ideas that capture its imagination. What the secularization of Jesus (and the eventual elevation of assorted female gods) will mean in terms of the sub-Zeitgeist of popular culture, where fantastic literature and religion building have a long history of cross-fertilizing each other, is that the gradual departure of the Christ figure from the category of the divine leaves room for something else to move in and take its place. We are unlikely to be swept away any time soon by a New Age goddess religion—recall that Balzac’s mystical potboiler *Seraphita* took Paris by storm in 1835 yet failed to produce a country of Swedenborgian converts—but we should expect other

42. Agence France-Presse, “‘Da Vinci Code’ Affects Christians in North America,” [www.inq7.net](http://www.inq7.net) (accessed April 30, 2006).

43. Paul Majendie, “Reading ‘Da Vinci Code’ Does Alter Beliefs: Survey,” [http://www.rhccsmallgroups.com/rhcc\\_small\\_groups/2006/05/reading\\_da\\_vinc.html](http://www.rhccsmallgroups.com/rhcc_small_groups/2006/05/reading_da_vinc.html), May 16, 2006 (accessed August 23, 2007).

forms of religious speculation packaged in fictional form (most probably Gothic/thriller/science fiction/fantasy) to keep arriving on our doorsteps.

In another ten years, *The Da Vinci Code* will have faded from memory as completely as *The Celestine Prophecy* already has, but it counts as one of a number of faint tremors indicating that the ground of orthodoxy is shifting under our feet. Even as the walls of various Christian temples show no signs of being able to bend with the unexpected movement produced by these works, elements of conservative Protestant Christianity are imitating radical non-Christian new religious movements by producing their own popular fiction scripture. At first glance, works like the *Left Behind* series may seem a clever vehicle for marketing traditional Christian tenets to a wide audience. But as Dan Brown discovered the hard way, this trickster genre has a way of breaking free of its practitioners and creating its own compelling reality. Once the vampire is in the door, he doesn't go away—and he changes everything.<sup>44</sup> In Western societies today, and especially in the United States, not places of worship or seminaries but dog-eared paperbacks and the Web are the true early warning signals of religious upheavals to come.

44. See Laurence Ricketts's *The Vampire Lectures* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) for an extended social-psychological meditation on this popular culture phenomenon.