A Contemporary Version of the Grail Quest: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and its failed appropriation of the mythic legend.

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Abstract: *Myth can often be seen to supply a response to the yearning of the world, and the legend of the Holy Grail is no exception. The latest version of the quest, Dan Brown's novel* The Da Vinci Code*, reveals the two sides of the coin that make a mythic symbol mysterious, unattainable, and yet so tantalisingly real. On the one hand, the goal must inspire us to reach beyond the everyday world toward a greater reality, where mystical qualities and moral certitude rest alongside abundance and healing. On the other, this very 'sacred space' cannot actually be realised in material terms, as the very nature of the mythic realm impels the goal to be continuously shifted beyond the grasp of we ordinary mortals. Sadly for readers whose interest may have been piqued by the plot of Brown's telling of the age-old romance, this quest stumbles over itself in an attempt to over-subscribe to its facet as material fact, and is thereby dissolved of any real power in its other aspect, that of inspiration. For Brown's premise, tying as it does the idea of the Grail to the specific historic moment of Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus Christ, ultimately empties the quest of any real hope at all. Unless, that is, we are actually willing to believe not only that they shared wedlock and a child, but that their descendents may offer some kind of political challenge to an oppressively patriarchal religious regime on our behalf.*

When the good knight and his lady are propelled into the adventure and romance of the contemporary Grail Quest that is Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code,* they perpetuate both the vitality and pitfalls of this timeless tale. Brown's version of the quest utilises an amalgam of techniques that have existed from the earliest written records, including the suggestion that his information comes from privileged and secretive sources. In Brown's contemporary version, secret societies are revealed in all their intricacy and intrigue, just as Wolfram von Eschenbach referred to the Oriental Kyot as a mysterious source for his Romance; and Chretien de Troyes attributed authority for his Perceval to his patron Count Philip of Flanders. In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, this technique was an accepted fashion that not only presented the author in the humble light that was felt to be suitable to their station – inevitably meanwhile elevating some more highly placed official, or exotic or archaic source, who could impart added mystery and possibly plausibility to the tale – but it also honoured the fact that such tales had been passed on by generations of troubadours, and before them oral historians.[1] Accepting personal

authority for the tale, in medieval times, could be considered presumptuous in light of these conventions.

Brown's tactic, however, is aligned with the general conceit of his novel, which utilises a double-edged quality of the Grail mystery to its advantage, but without doing either 'edge' justice. The Grail in this telling is both material fact – the possibility that quickens the pulse, the opportunity for attainment in physical terms that has sent so many countless 'knights' out into the world after its bountiful treasure – and metaphorical truth, the 'grand idea…a glorious unattainable treasure that somehow, even in today's world of chaos, inspires us'.[2] Although the Grail has consistently been imagined in both these ways across the centuries, and in spite of the fact that such readings are not mutually exclusive, the literal and metaphorical readings in Brown's novel undermine each other in ways that dissolve any real dramatic tension. As Mahoney points out, it is the 'very indeterminacy of the Grail [that] allows for multiple interpretations'; and it is this archetypal quality that is lost when Brown equates his symbolic 'quest for the divine and forbidden femininity' (as Marino characterises it) with its one and only embodiment in Mary Magdalene.[3]

The Holy Grail as a mythic vessel

The Grail is first mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code* when Sophie Neveu admits to being one of the naïve who believe that the Holy Grail is the Cup of Christ, 'the cup that Jesus drank from at the Last Supper and with which Joseph of Arimathea later caught His blood at the crucifixion'.[4] The dangerous truth, however, is soon revealed by our hero Robert Langdon: the Holy Grail is none other than Mary Magdalene, who is bestowed with her honorary title due to the fact that she carries 'royal blood'.[5] This theory rests on a questionable philological analysis of the term *sang/real*.[6] A reliable critique of Brown's convenient linguistic assumptions, as well as the history behind the term, can be found in Norris Lacy's article '*The Da Vinci Code:* Dan Brown and the Grail that never was', which points out that the earliest form of the term was simply '*graal,* a common noun referring to a serving dish'.[7] The idea that 'holy blood' had anything to do with the Arthurian myth is a relatively recent invention, arriving with Henry Lovelich's inventive

translations of the *Lancelot-Grail* versions of the *History of the Holy Grail* and *Merlin* into English verse in the mid-fifteenth century.[8] The philosophical problem that accompanies such convenient interpretations as those favoured by Brown, and upon which rests the entire romantic thesis of his novel, thus relies on the pretence that Mary carried the child, and therefore lineage, of Jesus Christ. This idea suggests that a messianic hope could undermine the religious authority that supposedly oppresses us, just as it has suppressed the concept of the sacred feminine across history. In seeking to align his novel's politics with an alternative to conventionally organised religion, however, he unwittingly perpetuates the kind of psychological dependency upon a saviour that the Catholic Church has benefited from since its inception.

In order to outline the way that Brown stumbles into this self-defeat, it is useful to explore ways in which the Grail has been thought about over the last century or so of academic research and conjecture (at least of an educated variety). It goes without saying that, in the first instance, it is best to maintain any idea of what the Grail may or may not be as purely suggestive. Following this, it seems sensible to admit that the Grail is as much a matter of psychological, as it is of historical, import. In any age, and despite the complexities of cultural circumstance in the time and places of its telling, Grail legends speak of a yearning, a lack, a hope, as much as they do the concrete political and cultural realities that may impel such desires.[9] Rather than consider the idea that the Grail may exist as a physical object at all, then, this paper will treat it is a metaphor that may eloquently, if subtly, cohere a certain set of social contradictions, conflicts, and tensions in any given moment. In line with contemporary studies into this rich and suggestive field, I define myth as the mode of cultural story telling that outlines a world-view, representing deep patterns that inform us, often unconsciously, as to the way we relate to life in the world.

Thus the exact nature of the supposed historical, and material, Grail, is of concern here only in the sense that it may be interpreted for symbolic value. Cup, dish, stone, cornucopia, or royal blood, the Grail itself consistently conjures up images that confirm an association with the sacred feminine. In line with the argument of this paper, the important questions to be asked here are: what is the author of any one version claiming

the Grail actually is, and why? Brown finds royal blood where he's looking for it, as befits his agenda; others disagree. The way he adopts the spurious interpretation (or invention) of the word/s *'sang/real'* alert us to the fact that Brown's quest is not informed by any depth of research into the history behind his material. Rather, the way he historicises the Grail both reveals its enduring psychological and symbolic usefulness and concomitantly empties such possibilities of value by robbing the image of its archetypal quality. If contemporary yearning toward a concept of the sacred feminine is to find an adequate vehicle, it hardly seems to be realized in the figure of Mary Magdalene. Our 'Holy Grail' must respond to the needs of the times if it is to carry the meaning for which it is formed. In asserting that the Magdalene *is* the Grail, Brown accepts an apolitical idealism of the sacred feminine. The supposed wife of Jesus carries a truth, as a lineage, that could threaten the very foundations of the Catholic Church, inspiring them to suppress the potential of this controversial truth by executing the 'greatest cover-up in human history'.[10] Because of the sensitive nature of the accusations Brown supports, they have supposedly been communicated, across history only in allegory, in 'channels that supported metaphor and symbolism' Enter Da Vinci's 'code', as it is interpreted in *The Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa*, but also in other forms of art, including Celtic myth, European opera and even Walt Disney cartoons.[11] The holes in Brown's argument here become apparent. This is not to say he is necessarily wrong when he states that the Grail represents the sacred feminine, but that he is clearly reading history in a particular way when he emphasises that all this evidence comes from the one event, or life – and of course it is upon this very premise that the thriller component of his novel depends.

Celtic and Christian histories

When Brown claims that such tales as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Arthurian legends in general all tell the tragic tale of Mary Magdalene, he is overstepping the bounds of decent research. There is bountiful evidence that Grail legends have at least some of their roots in Celtic mythology that predates the life and times of Christ by many centuries.[12] When we look into the original texts, multifariously dated and varied as they are, we find heroic knights with a great range of similarities to the Celtic heroes of old, implications of abundance and healing that formed a central part of ancient Celtic beliefs,

magicians, mysterious places that appear and disappear at whim; many of the themes in Grail romances are shared with Celtic myth, not to mention the locale, generally being situated in Britain.[13] There is also the matter of the constellation of symbols involved in visions of the Grail, which read more like a virtual reality version of the Tarot than they do resemble Christian icons: a cup, a sword, a lance, possibly a stone, and an associated cornucopia of goods. Looking into the early texts, we find a sword that needs fixing, a symbol not found in any other Christian text but one that speaks eloquently of Celtic concerns, and that can be found elsewhere in their mythic records. I want to make it clear here that I am not claiming the quest for the Holy Grail is a specifically Celtic rite, but that the background to the legend is a little more interesting than a purely Christian agenda would have us think (and this stands whether or not one believes that the Grail is the Cup of Christ or the relics of Mary Magdalene).[14]

Neither should it seem particularly strange to us that Celtic symbols are recorded in Continental Romances – the Celts, after all, were settled on the European mainland well before they colonised the British Isles, and the Celtic Breton people continued to exert a real cultural influence in the time and place of the earliest written records of the Grail legend (in Continental Europe of the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries).[15] When reading the early texts, it also seems as though knightly concerns of chivalry take precedence over the religious demands of the Church, indicating that they quite possibly form an earlier framework upon which specifically Christian interests are stamped.[16] Although Chretien's *Le Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* abounds with the idea of a glorious God, it is the adventures of knights that carry the narrative. From the day young Perceval initially meets a group of knights and believes them to be angels, to the winning of his arms and knighthood, and from the Grail adventure itself to its unfinished ending, it is chivalrous conduct that reigns supreme.[17] Perceval's failure at the Grail castle also inspires a quest that seems to have no specifically Christian roots, as he promises to attempt any perilous passage and do combat with any great knight on his way to uncovering the secrets of the Fisher King.[18] The inter-mixture of Christian and non-Christian elements is constant in all versions and seems to indicate that specifically non-Christian traditions are being subsumed in an all-round compromise that nevertheless places the Christian God at its head.

It should not be surprising that the organisation responsible for the spiritual welfare of Christian Europe shows an influence in the written records of the Grail legend, especially given their popular appeal. Examples of the way that Christian elements infiltrate these compositions alongside other sources are included in even the most recognisably Christian versions of the Romance, such as *L'Estoire du Graal* written by Robert de Boron around 1200-1210, where we meet the decidedly non-orthodox Merlin the Magician. In one of the later 'continuations' to Chretien de Troyes' unfinished version we find the fairytale-like story of twelve maidens being poorly used, an abuse which begins the Grail adventures as an act of gentlemanly reconciliation, and Wolfram's version reveals a noticeable Eastern flavour. The idea that these colourations signify a series of consciously imposed political stamps is simply unnecessary, when the cultural *lingua franca* of any community or epoch is considered. Storytelling, at whatever level, is filtered through a myriad of contemporary concerns and patterns, themes and stylisations. To assume that the Catholic Church sought to stamp out any and all references to alternative ideas about magic and the sacred feminine, or that secretive cult members aligned with some of those alternatives were creating ways of passing on their knowledge with designated codes designed for the initiated few, reveals the kind of paranoid agenda that dilutes 'popularist' gambits like Brown's.

Tainting the sacred feminine

Part of the reason for the runaway success of Brown's novel, it seems to me, is due to a latent yearning in today's world for a representation of the sacred feminine. For, despite the great variety in versions of the Grail romance, a common factor in most traditions does seem to be a recognition that the Grail represents, or is at least related to, an idea of the feminine quality of the divine. Any good Sir Knight knows that he acts on behalf of his Lady, and if Christ's cup refers to both his final taste of sustenance and his flowing blood, then even the most patriarchally predisposed Christian thinker would have to allow that something of the feminine persists in this symbology. We know that the Christian relationship with women has not always been entirely comfortable (to say the least), and that historical characterisations of them often fell within the limiting polarity of

either 'good virgin' or 'bad temptress'. Biblical myth often justifies patriarchal misogyny by initiating a binary code that pits man, as good, against woman, as bad, meanwhile proving to the faithful that the purity of their transcendental religion is threatened by the taint of woman, the body, and the earth in general.[19]

But Christianity is far from alone in this bad habit. Symbols of the feminine had been suffering from a 'demotion' for millennia before the time of Christ.[20] The alleged cover-up of Mary Magdalene's status would not have single-handedly spelled the end of goddess mythologies or cultural veneration of a sacred earth, as Brown claims it did. Rather the goddess in early Western culture had a long history by the time written records began, much of which can only be pieced together by investigating the way her iconic status was disparaged by the dominant patriarchal cultural complex. In ancient Mesopotamia, where the process of building civilisations on the proceeds of new agricultural technologies began some millennia before, the emergent masculine god Marduk slew the goddess Tiamat and made the world, including humans and their arts, out of her body.[21] Athena, one of the most prominent of the Greek goddesses, was said by the Hellenic patriarchs to have been born fully armed out of the temple or forehead of Zeus; it's less well known that she was earlier considered a traditional mountain mother goddess of nature to the previous country folk, or pagans.[22] Civilisation always builds over the previous cultural complex by authorising a new official version of the world order, and in this sense we need to read myth for its political and material context. Brown is picking up on a deep and broad sentiment in the civilised soul that something is missing within, that our 'pre-historic' shift away from an identification with nature and into the relative security and order of our patriarchal settlement lifestyle has left us bereft of an intimate relationship with nature, the feminine. The danger of gendering the environment in this way has been pointed out by Westling in her *The Green Breast of the New World*.[23] This romantic notion is commonly found in the mythology of our agriculturally-based settlement civilisation: the mythic image of 'mother nature', used in an association with the idea that we have distanced ourselves from her to our spiritual disadvantage, can be traced back to the rising domination, in Western sociocultural terms, of agricultural development. The negative and positive associations attached to a mythic figure of the feminine along this trajectory have been investigated by Neumann,

while the archaeological analyses of Gimbutas and Biaggi help us to understand the primal fascination of early European culture with the mother goddess figure.[24]

Where Brown points out Christianity's transmogrification of pagan symbols of a lost nature worship associated with the sacred feminine, he takes a step forward to see the way symbols can be manipulated; but then he takes two steps back by reducing the whole field of Grail potential to one historical circumstance.[25] In this sense he wants to have it both ways – he draws on a romantic yearning we can all recognise, if not identify with, but at the same time he needs to be able to claim that this inspiration is condensed into the one figure – so that he can 'sell' us the idea that he is privy to a secret mystery, the exact details of which we simply must find out. Mary Magdalene *may* be seen as a representative of the sacred feminine, if we wish; but the inspiration behind the proliferation of goddess or nature worship, and the associated symbols of her bountiful gifts so often bound up with water, blood, containers and fertility, as well as with death, serpents, nature spirits and darkness, does not need to be reduced to a consideration of the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ. It exists, according to many readings, in much of the ancient and orally-transmitted historical records, and continues to represent what Joseph Campbell called a 'counterplayer' in the unconscious of our civilisation.[26]

Here we are introduced to the problem of reading myth literally (as Brown does) instead of metaphorically (which he attempts to do, briefly, before immediately recapitulating to his selling-point). Claiming that the Grail is one thing and one thing only, and that this thing is a material and historical fact, can be a useful kind of argument in some ways. It can help us to sort through lots of romantic notions to find that folklore is often actually a repository of wisdom about reality, and not just a collection of irrational stories that seemingly explain a mysterious universe, before the enlightening discoveries of the scientific method displaced them with a more secure understanding. Such theorising also releases us from certain romantic notions about the context within which we read myth, returning us to the realisation that it is about exacting physical moments and circumstances – issues such as world-view, behavioural patterns, and definitions of reality – and not just about an idealistic realm that we might like to entertain in our

daydreaming. However in this case the idea Brown supports is working in the opposite direction, by attempting to historicise concretely a theme that actually *does* have romantic and symbolic value in the bigger picture and across eras, as well as in specific, historical circumstances.

Archetypal patterns

I would argue that the Holy Grail is an archetype, an iconic symbol that contains an entire pattern of themes that remain meaningful to a range of people across cultural and temporal divides; not timeless, but persistent within a certain type of social organisation (such as patriarchal civilisations built out of agricultural settlements). Jung made the term 'archetype' famous as a tool of reading myth (as well as dreams and other psychic phenomena) from the psychological standpoint as well as the historical. The archetypal form, for Jung, is a mythic pattern that brings a certain range of characteristics together into a cluster, and that can be represented in a symbolic image that lets us interpret it from a wide range of perspectives. It is composed to satisfy the psychic version of a physical instinct, an irrepressible urge toward which we are predisposed.[27] Thus, the sacred feminine, the questing knight, the ailing king; such symbols transcend the specificity of any time and place, so we can read the way they are represented, in any given format, as a reflection of their historical context. If the archetype of the sacred feminine can be seen in the figure of Mary Magdalene and her relationship to Jesus Christ, Jung would argue that this is because it fits our predisposition to look for such things, just as much as the couple can also be seen to represent the idea of the sacred marriage. He believed that we crave this balance as a matter of course, and if we don't find it in our culture, we'll create it.

In his landmark study *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss showed how patterns or themes can be discerned in cultural products when they are compared, and their common elements can then be pinpointed. This methodology is still useful, although we have to keep in mind the historical context of both ourselves and the people we are studying when we choose the parameters within which we will consider our data. When applied to the Grail legends, structural analysis reveals a central theme in the

juxtaposition of cup and lance; an image that *could* point to either a secret code beneath the official conventions of the Catholic Church, or to a tradition from elsewhere altogether; or, to both. One of the other significant points made by Lévi-Strauss is that there is in fact *no* true or original version of a myth – each one should be regarded in its own right and the quest for a perfect original from which all others are copied is a mistake from the start.[28] Meaning is created in the act of the story-telling and we need not look any further for some kind of ultimate enlightenment; the Grail quest is here and now, just as it was in medieval times. Marino makes this point in his review and analysis of the way the Grail has been appropriated as 'a popular legend for diverse agendas. The legend survives because it is useful'.[29]

No matter what we may choose to believe in regards to the ultimate nature of the Grail, it seems to escape any particular definition, and in this it fulfils the qualities of an archetype. Early versions of the written Grail legend, although varied in many forms, do reveal certain distinctive similarities, including the ailing old king who requires healing, and whose land is laid waste until he receives it. Symbols of the Grail, paraded before the quester who has been successful enough to find the mysterious castle, do seem to indicate the kind of union of gender powers that Brown envisions: a possible balance between the sexes, or a sacred marriage, that involves a resurrection of the feminine. But is this a metaphorical way of telling the story of Mary Magdalene and the bloodline of Jesus Christ? Or are such tales renderings of an enduring and age-old myth told in the language of the times? The Grail hero may well seek to bow down at the feet of the sacred feminine, in order to return balance to the world and heal its ruler (the God/King, who represents the law or authority upon which social harmony relies). As Campbell intimates, 'the condition of the Church' in this time may give us a clue as to why 'a Christian knight' should 'ride forth questing for the Grail' when the sacrament of redemption was already offered at Mass.[30] Versions of the romance from this medieval era may reveal the strains of a conflict between the ongoing mythologisation of Christ's divine powers by Europe's official religious organisation and an alternative and persistent pagan version of history that refuses to die even while it is condemned. Again, Brown seems to want to have it both ways in *The Da Vinci Code.* On the one hand he revels in an archetypal rendering of the sacred feminine that has long proven to be

alluring and ensures a certain amount of popular sentiment will support his novel; whereas on the other, in order to keep the mystery that draws the questing knight and his lady along in true airport-thriller style, he needs to claim that there is a definitive secret so explosive that it will change the course of history (and so on as the promotional copy goes…). A little bit of critical distance reveals the mess into which this leads him.

The 'official Catholic version' of the Grail legend would apparently convince us that Christ's Holy Blood is so valuable that it began the greatest adventure and quest known to Western history: the Cup of Christ is the goal, and Brown's version certainly does come across as echoing this dominant discourse. An alternative reading claims that the prize sought at the culmination of the 'rebel' quest is almost the opposite, as the downtrodden sacred feminine is re-placed at the altar alongside the deified masculine authority, and this is the alternative version with which Brown would like to align himself. But if the symbol of this longed-for feminine victory is the simple material fact of Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus Christ, and their surviving bloodline, then this hope merely perpetuates the power of a sovereign ruling elite and the specific historical circumstances out of which their myth gathers its momentum. Do we really need to believe that Jesus Christ had intimate relations with Mary Magdalene, and that their offspring survived, in order to recognise the value that a concept of the sacred feminine offers us today? Would not pinning our hopes on this questionable historical conjecture limit the possibilities for affirmative belief and action in our own lives and times? Paradoxically then, do not the kinds of historical and materialist readings of the Grail legend that Brown supports actually maintain an idea of conventional organised religion similar to those that justify the authority of the Church?

Through his simplistic reading of the nature of the Grail, Brown is actually buying into the ongoing mythologisation of Christ, and the power structures of the Church, against which he would like to think he is rebelling. He really wants to see the Christian church paganised thanks to its crediting of Mary Magdalene as the true consort of Jesus Christ: *Hieros Gamos*, or the sacred marriage, as it occurred a 'long, long time ago in a faraway land'. When a classic fairytale opens by telling us that the events happened in this misty

time and place, it is not telling us not to take it seriously because it is a fantasy without relevance; it is asking us to interpret the tale as a wisdom story in a metaphorical language. When historicising tales, such as Brown's, imagine concrete facts in which their conjectures are grounded, they freeze the mythic tale behind it, holding it still as if it were of timeless import, but also keeping captive the meaning behind it.[31]

Pagan roots?

In order to further contextualise the limits of Brown's novel, I would like here to introduce the work of the Cambridge ritualists and their ideas of the ever-living/ever-dying king. The Cambridge ritualists, as they came to be known, were a school of thinkers who argued, around the turn of the twentieth century, that a kind of 'primitive ritualism' hides in transmuted form behind much of our religion, literature and art, and that vestiges of ancient ritual live on in our culture and imagination as mythic symbols.[32] Although often biased by an assumption of evolutionary progress from barbarism to our relative refinement, their ideas are still suggestive when we consider such long-lasting symbols as we find in the Grail legends.

Sir James G. Frazer begins the movement with his monumental tome *The Golden Bough* (1890), where he traces the practice of sacrificial kings across the world. The general idea behind this follows rituals wherein a king retains authority while he lives, but is hunted down and assassinated by the next in line (often a desperado with no other opportunity in life, apparently, and a favoured option for escaped slaves). Frazer began with a small Mediterranean village called Nemi, where the king represented the goddess Diana; but this practice turned out to be very widely spread, so the scope of his book kept expanding. Christ could be seen, metaphorically, as the last and ultimate sacrifice that ended this kind of barbarism, along with other pagan practices such as animal sacrifice and icon worship.

Jessie L. Weston drew on *The Golden Bough* to write *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), in which she claimed that remnants of vegetation ritual remain in mythic texts such as the Grail legends. She points out that Christ himself could be seen as an archetypal

sacrificial king, as could archaic examples such as the Egyptian Osiris and pre-Hellenic Adonis. Her theory rests on the fairly solid idea that myth and ritual are centrally concerned with regeneration and abundance, as well as with outlining a worldview. She points out the uncanny resemblances between Grail symbols and the rites of ancient Mystery cults devoted to vegetation deities, or gods of fertility.[33] In this context, the idea of a balance of gender powers is simply a kind of recipe designed to ensure that nature continues to provide for us, and this 'sacred marriage' is just one level of a rite that ensures not only material prosperity but what Weston also called 'the highest religious teaching'.[34]

Abundance and the New Age

To ensure fertility, a culture must work out a balance of sacrifice and exchange, and here we may see 'the vestiges of pagan religion' mentioned by Robert Langdon in Brown's novel.[35] Fertility, in our modern context, is ensured by improving technologies, and so we 'worship' a peculiar mix of distant god (if we are religious) and material wealth (if we are not). That our concept of the sacred is diminished in this scenario seems undeniable, and that the balance of gender powers likewise suffers in both religious and political (as well as psychological) terms seems equally clear. So the return to possible alternatives, such as New Age pagan goddess worship of the sacred feminine, should not be surprising as we face the environmental degradation of our world. Brown's assertion, however, that the sacred feminine needs to be restored to patriarchal Christianity, in the form of a renewed reverence for Mary Magdalene, simply creates a new religious elite.

The history of Western myth is replete with allusions to the earth as feminine, and as this seems to be another case of a lasting predisposition in our psyche, we can understand that the goddess should re-emerge out of contemporary concerns. The idea that Mother Earth is suffering under the heavy hand of the patriarchy, who have traditionally employed a masculine god of the sky to justify their brutal world order, makes the Church an ideal (if somewhat ineffective, in contemporary terms) target for this wrath. In the words of Sophie's grandmother, the movement Brown would like to

think he is supporting represents a case of the pendulum swinging back, as the Holy Grail symbolises the contemporary rise of the mysterious 'ethereal nature' of the sacred feminine.[36] Here Brown finally introduces a metaphorical reading of myth, as Marie Chauvel articulates the Grail's role as an inspiration. But even then the idea that the Grail is a physical object – the four chests of historical record – is reiterated, as it must be restored to honour by being returned to France and 'a resting place fit for a queen'.[37] By historicising the Grail thus, Brown robs it of the archetypal quality that gives it its psychological and symbolic usefulness.

The mystery, then – the adventure upon which this version of the Grail quest is based – is renewed, with a statement that supports the overall conceit of the novel. If we take from *The Da Vinci Code* a meaning or hope, some sense of 'the Holy Grail' that helps us to imagine a better balance in our lives and world, then that is a fine thing. But if we recognise that this realisation is a living force that is a part of us and our historic circumstance, and not some ancient hope of a messiah and his lineage that will challenge our authoritarian power structures for us – which in the end is what Mary Magdalene, as the Holy Grail, really represents to Dan Brown – then that is a better thing.

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[1] See Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Grail, from Celtic myth to Christian symbol*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1963, pp. 7-9. Although some of Loomis's linguistic analysis has come under question, the theme of oral traditions feeding the stories of the French men of letters in this time period remains convincing.
[2] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, Bantam Press, Sydney, 2003, p. 444.
[3] Dhira B. Mahoney in her introduction to *The Grail: A Casebook*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, New York, 2000, p. 77; John B. Marino, *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*, D. S. Brewer, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2004, p. 137.
[4] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 162.
[5] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, pp. 244-249.
[6] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 250.
[7] Norris Lacy, *Arthuriana* 14.3, 2004, p. 87, at http://faculty.smu.edu/arthuriana/lacy.pdf, accessed on 2 October 2006.
[8] Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 215.
[9] 'This view is symptomatic of a difficult spiritual crisis in modern humanity as Grail enthusiasts crave reasons to believe in the supernatural and at the same time have anxiety regarding belief. Mysticism that simultaneously reacts against, and adjusts to, scientific materialism makes an esoteric Grail a spiritual, not a physical, reality available to modernity'. Brown obviously misses this second point (which, as Marino points out, is not itself without problem). John B. Marino, *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*, p. 14.

[10] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 249.
[11] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 261.
[12] See for instance the aforementioned work of Loomis, amongst others such as Jean Markale, 'The grail, or the quest for woman', Chapter 7 in *Women of the Celts*, Gordon Cremenesi Publishers, London, 1975, pp. 173-200, which outlines Peredur as an archetypal Welsh model for the different versions of Perceval to follow.
[13] Service in the Grail Castle 'was fine and good', including 'all the dishes befitting a king or a count or an emperor', with 'fruit of the dearest kind' and 'no shortage of clear, delicious wine to drink, from golden cups'. Had Perceval asked the Fisher King the required questions about the bleeding lance and grail, he 'would have healed the good king who is crippled', see Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 35-39; Merlin makes important appearances quite often in Grail and Arthurian romances, especially in *Lancelot-Grail: the Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, edited by Norris J. Lacy, Garland Publishing, New York, 1966; The Grail Castle is preternaturally quiet and seemingly uninhabited when Perceval leaves it, although the bridge is raised eerily behind him, see: Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval*, pp.36-37.
[14] And anyway this would be an exercise fraught with danger, as the very idea of a single 'Celtic' cultural complex that implies 'too great a unity' between different collectives across various time periods 'can be misleading' (p. 119). Juliette Wood, 'Celtic Goddesses: Myth and mythology', in Carolyne Larrington (ed.), *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, Pandora, London, 1992, pp. 118-136.
[15] For some notes on the movements of the Celtic Bretons, see Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Grail, from Celtic myth to Christian symbol*, pp. 13-16.
[16] Although in essence it is integration that the mythic tale attempts: 'It is clear in general terms what Perceval is about: love, chivalry, religion, and the relationship between them'. Keith Busby, Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval (Le Conte du Graal),* Critical Guides to French Texts, Grant & Cutler, London, 1993, p. 87.
[17] Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant. The startled and deeply impressed youth Perceval sees the knights dazzling in their armour and cries, 'These are angels I see here!' (p. 2); Perceval's uncouth disarming of the Red Knight (p. 13); the Grail adventure (pp. 32-37); and the unfinished battle between Gawain and Guiromelant (p. 97).
[18] Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant, p. 51.
[19] Athalya Brenner characterises this as the 'failure in myth as well as in history' of a supreme Hebrew 'Father' deity lacking a feminine consort or element (p. 50), a lack that associates the feminine with negative imagery (p. 55). See Athalya Brenner, 'The Hebrew God and his female complements' in Carolyne Larrington (ed.), *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, pp. 48-62.
[20] See Gerda Lerner, on 'the demotion of female deities' in Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, Chapter 7, 'Goddesses', especially pp. 150-160.
[21] F. Guirand, 'Assyro-Babylonian Mythology', in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Hamlyn Publishing, London, 1990, pp. 53-54.
[22] Edward Tripp, *The Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology*, Meridian, New York, 1974, pp. 117-118.
[23] The author seeks to 'unravel the strange combination of eroticism and misogyny that has accompanied men's attitudes toward landscape and nature for thousands of years', wherein they perpetuate the 'cultural habit of gendering the landscape as female and then excusing their mistreatment of it by retreating into a nostalgia that erases their real motives, displaces responsibility, and takes refuge in attitudes of self-pitying adoration'. Louise Westling, *The Green Breast of the New World*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1996, p.5, and pp. 157-167.
[24] The goddess figure as an underlying strata of civilisation in general is well documented, for example, in Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1989; Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1963; and the archaeomythology of Christina Biaggi, 'Myths of the Goddess in Neolithic Island Cultures of Northwest Europe and the Mediterranean', *ReVision,* Vol. 21, No. 3, Winter 1999, pp. 36-41. Juliette Wood examines the way the notion of a Celtic mother goddess is transformed according to multiple functions as well as a multi-layered model, with the 'mother/fertility element' as its oldest level ('which may predate specifically Celtic culture'). See Juliette Wood, 'Celtic Goddesses: Myth and mythology', p. 131.
[25] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, pp. 231-234.
[26] Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, Penguin Arkana, New York, 1991, p. 70.
[27] Carl G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, Picador, London, 1978, pp. 57-64.

[28] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Jealous Potter*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, p. 189.
[29] John B. Marino, *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*, p. 150.
[30] Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*, pp. 507-508.
[31] Roland Barthes would say that the mythic image is 'frozen' in a moment of 'arrest'. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Jonathon Cape, London, 1974, p. 125.
[32] Vernon Gras in Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth (eds), *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1994, pp. 128-131.
[33] Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, Dover Publications, Mineola, 1997, pp. 141-154.
[34] Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p. 149.
[35] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 232.
[36] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 444.
[37] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 446.