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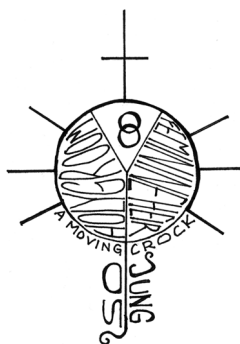
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The Da Vinci Code as Alchemical Rhetoric

Joshua Gunn & Thomas Frentz

*In this essay we argue that Dan Brown’s mystery novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, functions as an alchemical rhetoric in five basic ways, two of which are most conspicuous. First, the fictional narrative supposedly reveals a subversive “fact” protected for centuries by secret societies: Jesus and Mary Magdalene had children. Insofar as the alchemical genre attempts to communicate a supposed truth in a misleading fiction, Brown’s novel can be read as an exemplar of contemporary alchemical rhetoric. Second, the secret life of Jesus and Mary Magdalene turns out to be a ruse, a lure to catch Church apologists and offend others, while a far more blasphemous or radical truth is, in true alchemical fashion, hidden in a plain sight.*

Keywords: Alchemy; Genre; Jesus; Jung; Mary Magdalene; Mystery



Feminine heir, holy groom, a moving crock: so Jung!

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When Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* opened on August 12, 1988, approximately 10,000 Christians gathered outside of Universal Studios in protest ("Can Religion" para. 20). The film was banned by the Vatican and condemned as blasphemous worldwide because of a fantasy sex scene between Jesus and Mary Magdalene (Brooks para. 7). Until relatively recently, the movie was the most famous in a long line of blasphemous films condemned by religious groups and church authorities. As the debates over the "real" gospels are apt testament, textual suppression to affirm clerical power has always been a recurrent theme in the history of Christianity (Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln 10–22). In our time, however, the most well-known, heretical texts have been deliberate feats of fiction.

Before *Last Temptation*, William Peter Blatty's best selling novel *The Exorcist*, as well as William Friedkin's gut-wrenching filmic version in 1973, provoked charges of heresy from religious authorities (as well as catalyzed a full-blown exorcism-heavy religious trend, the deliverance movement; see Blatty; Gunn "Rhetoric of Exorcism;" Frentz and Farrell). Seven years after *The Exorcist* controversy, Umberto Eco's most unlikely bestseller *The Name of the Rose*—along with Jean-Jacques Annual's filmic version in 1986—reignited a popular obsession with blasphemy (Eco *Name*). Two things were common to all of these condemnation controversies. First, each book and/or film surfaced a close relationship between sex and spirituality, whether sexual relations were between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, Satan and little girls, or monks and peasants. Second, for many Christians and certainly the Holy See, the sine qua non of blasphemy is the sexualization of the sacred (Jesus, innocent children, and so on) and, consequently, these texts were condemned by biblical historians or Christian apologists without their having ever read or seen them (e.g., see "Da Vinci Code' Meets").

In light of these well-known controversies, when Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (hereafter TDC) hit bookshelves in 2003, few were surprised that critics would denounce the novel and then turn on Ron Howard's heavily hyped—and almost universally panned—filmic version even before it hit theatres in 2006. What apparently made this text so heinous was that Brown embedded a radical sub-text about the "real [sexual] life" of Jesus within a page-turning, puzzle-solving mystery. Yet unlike the previous novels, TDC has sold over 60 million copies worldwide. The sheer pervasiveness of the enterprise even led the Vatican to appoint an official TDC watchdog: Brown's book is the first ever to have "an archbishop dedicated to debunking its contents" ("Vatican Appoints" para. 1). As a representative of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone yoked the global ubiquity of the novel to its influence: "There is a very real risk that many people who read it will believe that the fables it contains are true. . . . It astonishes and worries me that so many people believe these lies" (para. 4).

Insofar as the suggestion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a family is not new, then, what are the "fables" and "lies" advanced by TDC? Brown argues that he did not make up the stories revealed in the novel, but culled (some allege plagiarized) them from two well-researched, controversial alternative histories of Jesus—namely, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's *The Templar Revelation: Secret*

Guardians of the True Identity of Christ. These works speak of more than just the oft-told tale of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and we think the most subversive secret in TDC is not the “lies” that Cardinal Tarcisio fears, but the subversive occult teaching hidden in plain sight. Few commentators have taken the time to explore or explain this subversive teaching, perhaps because it is so misleadingly simple, or perhaps because of soul-deep Western inhibitions. Regardless, in what follows we describe this most subversive truth and explain how it is advanced in a classically alchemical mode of public address.

To reveal the true secret of TDC, we first argue that the novel is an ingenious enactment of alchemical rhetoric, a genre of address that is rooted in the Western Mysteries tradition that simultaneously addresses two audiences: those who are invited to understand the deeper meaning of a mysterious cipher or strange rhetoric, and those who are misled to remain on the surface of things. Second, we show how the Jesus and Mary Magdalene story is actually a “faux truth,” a bait designed to catch the attention (and perhaps wrath) of TDC critics, leading them away from a more subversive secret teaching (Ansen 52–53; Bennett 1; Corless 70; Lane 76–78; and Martin E1). Third, deliberately working inductively (in part to model our argument), we reveal the “real” subversive truth to TDC both in reference to the scholars Brown consulted and by consulting C. G. Jung’s theory of alchemical enlightenment. Finally, we conclude by contextualizing alchemical rhetoric as an important, reemerging form of religiosity in our march toward or within postmodernity.

Alchemical Rhetoric

Cause you’re working
 Building a mystery
 Holding on and holding it in
 Yeah you’re working
 Building a mystery
 And choosing so carefully
 —Sarah McLachlan, “Building a Mystery”

Although Brown followed a basic Indiana Jones recipe in his previous book, *Angels & Demons*, he perfected the formula in TDC by changing his rhetorical strategy: Brown shifted from the basic generic features of the mystery novel to Western Mysteries themselves, moving the ground of his story-telling from the quaint safety of make-believe to the ground of true possibility. More than a fast-paced mystery, TDC soon came to be seen by many as the one “true story” of the Christian tradition, finally surfacing after 2,500 years of repression and deception by the Catholic Church. To better understand the appeal of this Christian secret to contemporary readers, it is helpful to see Brown’s novel as a unique, occultic extension of the mystery genre that is deliberately modeled on the ancient Western Mystery tradition.¹

But first, a word about the sadly underused methods of generic criticism: owing to disagreements about what a genre *is*, generic criticism has been on the decline among

rhetorical scholars.² The critiques of generic criticism generally reduce into two claims: (1) genre criticism promotes essentialism and reductionism and is formulaic (see Jancovich 23; Jameson 105); or (2) genre criticism leads to useless taxonomies (Conley; Patton). Although essentialist and taxonomic generic studies are not difficult to come by—and to a large extent these are responsible for the dismissals of generic approaches—a number of rhetoricians have argued against the static accounts of generic form, suggesting instead that genres should be understood as “what we collectively believe [them] to be” (Tudor 6–7; Campbell and Jamieson 294). In other words, genres concern the recognition of patterns that inhere, not in a given text, but in the minds of a given public or audience. This recognition of patterns predisposes audiences and rhetors to interpret meaning in a certain way, as well as predisposes them toward what Carolyn R. Miller has termed “typified rhetorical action” (151). Regardless, to characterize genre as a predisposition to interpretation or “social action” is to emphasize its psychical character: genre refers fundamentally to mental events in relation to some object or token of repetition, like a text (see Gunn, “Exorcism” 5–6).

Of course, recognizing the psychical character of genre should not detract from the concrete, material ways in which formal patterns are *cued and named*. Unquestionably genres are most conspicuous in highly commercialized modes of entertainment; readers are likely quite familiar with the film genre of the “romantic comedy,” for example, or the “hip-hop” genre of music. When the culture industries are directly involved, we should expect fairly rigid and formulaic generic conventions with little innovation. Generic criticism is the most interesting and insightful, then, when a fairly rigid and ossified (if not commercialized) genre is expanded, extended, hybridized, or modified in some way—when precisely those formulas and taxonomies decried by the critics of generic criticism are exploded. We submit that generic innovations in popular culture are indices of emerging forms and transformations in the popular imagination that merit closer scrutiny. Superficially, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is an example of the well-known and fairly rigid “mystery” genre, however, the controversy surrounding the novel indicates some “genre trouble,” as it were—some sort of expansion of typical patterns and rules that we believe both reintroduces an older, occultic rhetorical genre as well as demonstrates the utility of genre criticism.

The Mystery Genre

In general, the classic “mystery” film and novel feature a secret that a “detective” of one sort or another discovers at the end (Evans “The Mystery” 495–503; Wilson 231–237). In the classic Sherlock Holmes novel, for example, a “godlike detective . . . [is] charged with finding [a] killer.” Our task as readers, argues Verda Evans, “is to see how he brings it off. We match wits with him” (497). The pleasure of mystery is clearly its enthymematic invitation for projection, whereby the reader or spectator, identifying with the protagonist, experiences the pleasures of discovering clues and secrets

as the story unfolds. Whether the mystery is the pursuit of a killer, a clandestine cabal of Freemasons, or secret knowledge about the origins of a government, every mystery features the interplay of secrecy and discovery, frequently climaxing in some sort of dramatic and spectacular advent of publicity (e.g., the secret is revealed to the world, or the killer's capture becomes a headline on a newspaper, and so on).

As a mystery, TDC features the interplay of secrecy and discovery throughout via a series of mini-mysteries that draws readers into the plot. Brown's key device is the simplest kind of mystery: the puzzle. As the novel progresses, TDC readers are forced to contend with anagram after anagram as they are led on a treasure hunt with the protagonists, symbologist Robert Langdon and cryptologist Sophie Neveu. Consider, for example, one of the more famous puzzles from Brown's story, a message left by Neveu's grandfather, Jacques Saunière:

13-3-2-21-1-1-8-5
O, Draconian devil!
Oh, lame saint!

Eventually, Langdon realizes the numbers, the famed *The Fibonacci Sequence*, are out of order, and sees this as a sign that the words might be as well:

Without another word, Langdon pulled a pen from his jacket pocket and rearranged the letters in each line.

O, Draconian devil!
Oh, lame saint!
was a perfect anagram of . . .
Leonardo da Vinci!
The Mona Lisa! (97–98)

With this discovery the protagonists are led to look for more clues in the famous *Mona Lisa* painting, more puzzles that lead to more clues, and so on, over the course of 105 mini-chapters; there is even a puzzle deliberately embedded by the press in the dust jacket of the hardcover!³ By virtue of its plethora of puzzles, the detective protagonists, and the revelation of a secret, TDC is placed squarely within the mystery genre alongside other occultic, puzzle-laden novels like Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason's *The Rule of Four*, Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, and Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *The Club Dumas*. None of these kindred mysteries, however, is as alluring or successful as TDC, so we must locate the appeal of Brown's novel in something beyond its intriguing puzzles. What has Brown done with the mystery genre that has been so appealing to readers? We argue the answer has something to do with how TDC taps into the dramatic cultural patterns of the Western Mysteries.

The Western Mysteries

In the *Cratylus*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*, Plato argued that language taken literally could not express universal, spiritual truths. Only indirect allegory (*mythoi*) and dialectical speech—in other words, talking aloud to others back-and-forth and

indirectly through myth—could ever inspire one to intuit ultimate reality (and even then, only partially; see *Cratylis* sec. 439; *Republic* secs. 514–521; *Phaedrus* secs. 244–258). The Platonic belief that speech presences thought and is therefore closer to spiritual truth bespeaks the centrality of *drama*, or the physical interaction of people in a staged ritual or performance. For these reasons, some scholars have argued that the “secret societies” featured prominently in TDC are contemporary iterations of “The Mysteries,” which are either a descendant of Platonism or at least originally based on the same ideas Plato harbored about the divine and our access to it.⁴ Masonic scholar Rex Hutchens explains that

The Ancient Mysteries were secret ceremonies which [sic] used drama, symbolism, and mythology to transmit religious and philosophical knowledge to selected initiates. . . . The parallels between Freemasonry and the Ancient Mysteries are evidenced by their similar objectives and methods. Through symbolism, mythology and drama, the Mysteries taught that man’s [sic] soul was immortal and that virtue, not vice, provides the hope of immortality. (102)

Whether or not one can trace Freemasonry—or any other secret society—as a direct descendent of The Mysteries is not as important as reckoning with their common cause in the important function of secrecy/mystery as a route to spiritual knowledge. In one of the largest and most difficult works of Masonic philosophy, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, which is a collection of “lectures” about advanced Masonic degrees, Albert Pike stresses that the function of secrecy in the Mysteries was to create spiritual and intellectual curiosity, as well as respect for the teachings of the organization:

Curiosity was excited by secrecy, by the difficulty experienced in gaining admission, and by the test to be undergone. The candidate was amused by the variety of the scenery, the pomp and decorations. . . . Respect was inspired by the gravity and dignity of the actors and the majesty of the ceremonial; and fear and hope, sadness and delight, were in turns excited. (383)

For Pike, the excitement and “drama” of the ritual of the Mysteries is translated into the weirdness and obscurity of the prose written about them (also see Burke, *Philosophy* 103). What is key to the Western Mysteries is that their rhetorical excesses— weird symbols, allegories, and rites—are meant to gesture toward *Truth*.

Keeping in mind the performative and ritualistic drama so central to the Mysteries, we can say that the rhetorical significance of this tradition can be reduced to the central role of secrecy and the function of strange symbolism in imparting *Truth*. The more familiar detective mystery of contemporary popular culture is received as a titillating thrill and the truth that is finally revealed at the end is received nevertheless as “fiction.” The Western Mysteries deployed their secret narratives as a means of apprehending truth, like a kind of mnemonic springboard for spiritual insight. Yet, as with Plato, these narratives were also thought to be homologous to spiritual truths as well (see Gunn, *Modern* 34–52). As Kenneth Burke suggests in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, mystery as such is a consequence of the “inadequacy” of all symbol-systems, which is reflected in “the sexual dichotomy” as well as the various social hierarchies built

upon that basic mark of difference (e.g., “the king will be a mystery to the peasant, and vice versa;” 308). In this respect, the religious symbol—from the Christian Cross to the Star of David and everything in between—is fundamentally and primarily a reminder of mystery, of our alienation from each other (e.g., male and female, mother and child, and so on) as well as from the Godhead or some anterior and prior harmonic state.

Yet as the Western Mysteries died out and Christianity became a dominant way of thinking in the Middle Ages, those who continued to believe in the older “pagan” ways were forced to expand the function of secrecy: not only did secrecy preserve and promote the religious experience of mystery, but also the identities and lives of those who continued to practice its rites and ceremonies. In other words, because it became increasingly dangerous to worship the gods and goddesses of polytheism, the Mysteries went “underground” into various practices that housed their teachings in strange and difficult to decipher language. Because secrecy began to function as a mechanism for protection, again, little is known about the survival of the Mystery teachings (e.g., the claim that Freemasonry continues the tradition in some direct fashion is exceedingly hard to establish). Some scholars suggest, however, that the consequence of the Christian “suppression” of ancient religious practices was alchemy, both a materialist quest to turn baser metals into gold as well as a style of thinking and a mystical practice designed to make “base” men and women wiser and more spiritually enlightened (see Gunn, *Modern* 9–15). In this respect alchemical language and symbolism is the last, remaining vestige of the ancient Mysteries.

As one of us has argued elsewhere, occult rhetoric like that of alchemy is typified by “allegorical and figurative language” as well as the “frequent use of misleading, ironic blinds” (Gunn, *Modern* 26). In older alchemical texts this work is frequently accomplished in what was termed the “Language of the Birds,” often very simple, seemingly plain prose that harbored a deeper, magical meaning. The cipher of alchemy was also frequently accomplished in strange pictures, such as the schema of alchemy developed by Steffan Michelspacher in 1616 and known as “The Alchemical Mountain” or the “Mountain of Philosophers” (Walker 14). The image features a mountain upon which are arranged a number of Tarot figures. In the center of the mountain there is a palace, inside of which sit two figures in discourse. There are seven steps leading to the palace labeled “caltination” [sic], “sublimation,” “solution,” “putrefaction,” “distillation,” “coagulation,” and “tinctur” [sic] in ascending order. In the foreground of the picture, there are two figures: a blindfolded man on the right represents “the fool,” a figure indifferent to Enlightenment. Charles Walker explains that the man on the left

is using a ferret to dig his hare from the labyrinth beneath the magical mountain. This action symbolizes an arcane alchemical axiom, contained in a word from the Language of the Birds—VITRIOL. The word is made up from the first letters of an alchemical Latin adage, found in many occult texts: *Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificandoque Invenies Occultum Lapidem*. Some claim that all alchemical secrets are contained in this adage, which may be translated as: *Visit the interior of the earth, and by rectifying, you will discover the hidden stone*. The hidden STONE is

the PHILOSOPHER'S STONE, the secret stone which [sic] will heal all sickness, preserve youth eternally, and transmute dross matter into gold. It is the secret of life. . . . (24–25)

Of course, the intrigue of alchemical symbolism is that one should not take surface meaning literally: although some alchemists did believe in a literal, magic substance that would harmonize life, many understood the philosopher's stone to be a secret truth, perhaps a mathematical equation, that has nothing to do with a rock discovered in the ground, but rather with the soul to be found in the center of the Self. Understanding how the ancient Western mysteries lived on in the Language of the Birds of alchemists, we can now approach TDC as something other than mere entertainment. TDC can not only be read as a mystery novel about the Western Mysteries; insofar as TDC has, in a sense, resurrected interest in the cults of the past, it is an alchemical text itself.

The Faux Truth

Quod tacitum veils esse, nemini dixeris.

—Seneca (attributed), *Proverbs* (in Williams 34)

So far we have argued for a renewed interest in generic criticism inspired by an understanding of genre as a psychical predisposition for interpretation and action. We acknowledged that when genres are part of a commercial venture, they tend to be labels for formulaic and rigid patterns that prime audiences to interpret and/or behave toward a given object or text in fairly predictable ways. We argued that generic criticism is better employed for understanding texts that violate norms or that provoke unexpected or controversial responses, as TDC has done. TDC is successful and controversial, we suggested, because of the way in which it attempts to situate the genre of mystery within the context of the Western Mysteries, and this by using the alchemical rhetorical strategies descended from this ancient tradition. As a genre that tugs mystery—as Van Morrison might say—“into the mystic,” the key elements of alchemic rhetoric discussed thus far are threefold: (1) mysterious or strange symbols or narratives that are *prima facie* allegorical or equivocal; (2) the suggestion that there is a profound *Truth* behind these mysterious or strange symbols or narratives; and (3) the truth betokened by the strange, allegorical, or mysterious rhetoric is spiritual or religious in nature. Insofar as we argue that genres are psychical structures that inhere in people, not texts, we are now prepared to examine the relation between the novel and *responses to it* in order to detail its cultural labor.

For those readers who have not read the novel or are unfamiliar with the story, the supposed truth “revealed” in TDC is related in six uneasy pieces by an esteemed Holy Grail scholar, Leigh Teabing, to the young cryptologist Sophie Neveu. First, Jesus was not the literal son of God, but rather a very human yet charismatic prophet of a hybrid religion that was part pagan, part Egyptian, and part Jewish (231–236). Second, Mary Magdalene was not some lowly prostitute whom Jesus “redeemed,” but rather a wealthy, independent, pagan priestess (269–270). Third, Jesus and Mary

were intimate, either legally through marriage or spiritually through sacred sexuality (243–250). Fourth, after the crucifixion, a pregnant Mary fled to southern France to live out her life in a Jewish community (276). Fifth, Mary’s daughter, Sarah, was born in southern France, and eventually married into the Merovingian royal bloodline (255–259). Finally, the Holy Grail was not a cup—neither the one from the last supper nor the one that caught Jesus’ blood as he hung on the cross—but rather the royal bloodline of Mary Magdalene herself (248–250). In the novel, these six truths have been kept secret for centuries by the Priory of Sion, a group described in ways that resemble the Freemasons—but for one very important difference (which we will disclose shortly). In sum, the six pieces of the secret lure of TDC reduce to the “fact” that Jesus and Mary had a family and that true Christianity was a hybrid religious practice that celebrated the feminine.

Since its arrival in 2003, a host of historians and scholars have come forward to debunk and dispute TDC as an “errata bonanza.” “*The Da Vinci Code* is filled with all sorts of embarrassing—sometimes laugh-out-loud—factual blunders or historical misrepresentations,” writes Gregory Alan Thornbury for *The American Spectator*. “Perhaps the biggest whopper of them all relates to the Priory of Sion,” which Brown states existed as a fact in the preface of his novel but which was a hoax created in the 1950s (or by some accounts, merely group of political complainers that disbanded in the 1980s; 21).

Numerous critics are aghast that TDC has become a fetishized, religious object that seems to forward a serious spiritual message to so many readers. In concert with a number of Catholic apologists and apostolates, for example, Michael Novak has snidely referred to Brown as “Pope Dan I,” who has shepherded in “a new religion” that reduces to the slogan: “*Learn from me, ye Christians, that your faith is in vain. The religion of the Sacred Feminine is the coming attraction*” (43). Novak attacks the sacred feminine as an inherently misogynistic send-up of medieval romantic love. Although numerous feminist groups have embraced the novel, he argues that

the romantic/erotic and the gnostic [character of the “sacred feminine”] do not bear up well under long experience. They rely too much on delusions. They demean real, in-the-flesh, individual women, with all their common sense, faults, particular wants and tastes, and wonderful angularity. They ignore unique persons, in all their imperfection. In all their suffering. (42)

Similarly, in his exposé of the many inaccuracies of the TDC, Thornbury muses that Brown’s book speaks directly to a spiritual hunger, but only via “a very sneaky misdirection play,” which is the hallmark of alchemy, of course (24). Thornbury implies that TDC advances a kind of religiosity that can endure our “postmodern” cynicism:

In the case of Americans and Europeans, [Brown’s audiences] are postmoderns. Facts just are not important to them. They are taken more by emotions, such as resentment, anger, desire, and the like. *The Da Vinci Code* taps into some powerful feelings at work in culture, some of which have merit, and some that do not. These

include the sense that religious leaders have betrayed the public trust and have not been honest with us, and the impulse to question or abandon traditional mores. And yet, there is the persistent feeling that people still need spirituality, even ancient spirituality. Brown's entertaining and superbly written novel touches a nerve on all of the above. (24)

We think that Thornbury is partially correct: not only did TDC arrive in the wake the Catholic pedophilia scandal, but also as the world was learning that the United States went to war—and for the Bush Administration in the name of God—under false pretenses.⁵ Thornbury's assertion of a deep need for “spirituality, even ancient spirituality,” is particularly on the mark when we understand TDC as an alchemical extension of the drama of the Western Mysteries.

Negative reactions to the book are unquestionably responding to the key feature of alchemical rhetoric: that behind an allegorical surface there is a deeper spiritual truth. Novak's mocking description of Brown as the “New Pope,” for example, certainly speaks to a rejection of the idea that there is anything more to the novel than a clichéd, fictional mystery. Yet Novak's TDC blasphemy is also a response to a function of alchemical rhetoric that we have only briefly mentioned: the cultivation of respect for spiritual truths and their messengers through ignorance.

The Mysteries' teachings were secret in order to protect members, maintain its leadership hierarchy, and create bonds among cult members. Yet as Albert Pike observed, the Mysteries were also secret in order to inspire wonder and respect for the spiritual truths they presumably taught (383). In his masterful send-up of the English mystery cycles (a medieval Christian equivalent to the Mysteries) Kenneth Burke summarizes the authorial function of secrecy in a humorous dialogue between “The Lord” and “Satan”:

Mystery in itself will not be without its usefulness in worldly governance. For, once a believer is brought to accept mysteries, he will be better minded to take orders without question from those persons whom he considers authoritative. In brief, mysteries are a good grounding for obedience, insofar as the acceptance of a mystery involves a person in the abnegation of his own personal judgment. . . . That is, subjection is implicit in his [the follower's] act of belief. (Burke, *Religion* 306; also see Young 327–337)

Burke's observation that mystery and subjection go hand-in-hand helps us to make more sense of the public reaction to Brown's revival of this ancient form of drama. Understood in the context of contemporary modes of publicity, TDC is not merely a page turning mystery, but rather reintroduces the Mysteries in a way that seems to advance an underlying truth, thereby *threatening a conspiracy of subjection*.

Perhaps the best, emotionally charged representative anecdote of a negative response to the authorial dimension or subjection of alchemical rhetoric (it is one or the other depending on whether one is a true believer or not) is a review of both the film and the book by Anthony Lane, who writes film criticism for *The New Yorker* magazine. Witty, urbane, literate, and (usually) very careful to document his opinions with evidence from the film reviewed, Lane prefers films with richly textured plots, multi-faceted characters, and complex, non-predictable endings. Presumably

reflecting the tastes of his readers, Lane thinks that great films are visual forms of great literature. Conversely, he gives less time and has less sympathy for films that are based on popular, less literary books whose plots tend to collapse into word-puzzle tricks or whiz-bang action interludes. Given his reviewing tendencies, then, we did not expect Lane to review TDC positively. We did expect, however, that his review would continue his habit of careful documentation. A brief look at his atypical reaction to the film and the book is particularly revealing, for it underscores a broader, critical hostility toward the tacit truth-claims of Brown's brand of alchemy.

Lane begins with a plot summary, but by his third sentence, we realize that this will be no ordinary recounting: "[Jacques Saunière's] final act was to carve a number of bloody markings into his own flesh, indicating, to the expert eye, that he was preparing to roll in fresh herbs and sear himself in olive oil for three minutes on each side" (76). Although this joke is intended to make light of the serious mood Brown creates for the crime scene that opens the novel, in the context of the review it seems awkward. We later learn that some of Lane's malevolence comes from feeling manipulated by the film, strong-armed into believing the unbelievable. "One's natural reaction to arm-twisters of any description," he continues, "is to wriggle free, turn around, and kick them in the pentacles. So here goes" (76). And with this austere pronouncement, Lane leaves the film behind and takes off on the novel, obviously his first target. He gets right to the point:

No question has been more contentious than this: if a person of sound mind begins reading the book at ten o'clock in the morning, at what time will he or she come to the realization that it is unmitigated junk? The answer in my case was 10:00.03, shortly after I read the opening sentence: "Renowned curator Jacques Saunière staggered through the vaulted archway of the museum's Grand Gallery." With that one word, "renowned," Brown proves that he hails from the school of elbow jiggers—nervy, worrisome authors who can't stop shoving along jabs of information and opinion that we don't yet require. (76)

Although obviously hyperbolic, it is not a common critical practice to dismiss an entire book because of the first word of the first sentence. Lane encourages readers to do the same, and appeals to the fear of subjection to make the case: those of us with enough of a trailer-trash chutzpah to actually enjoy TDC and be intrigued by its subversive message are mindless. "Should we mind," he scoffs, "that forty [now over 60] million readers—or, to use the technical term, 'lemmings'—have followed one another over the cliff to this long and laughable text?" (76). Lane's remarks recall the Lord's remarks to Satan in Burke's notes on religion: "Mysteries are a good grounding for obedience, insofar as the acceptance of a mystery involves a person in the abnegation of his own personal judgment" (306). He lambastes fans of the book as feeble-minded:

Even as you clear away the rubbish of the prose, what shows through is the folly of the central conceit and, worse still, the pride that the author seems to take in his theological presumption. How timid—how undefended in their powers of reason—must people be in order to yield to such preening? . . . Despite repeated attempts, I have never managed to crawl past page 100. As I sat down to watch

'The Da Vinci Code,' therefore, I was in the lonely, if enviable, position of not actually knowing what happens. (78)

If one does not believe TDC is alchemical—that is, a fiction behind which some spiritual truth awaits—his or her reaction is likely akin to Lanes': those readers who enjoy this indisputably poorly written novel are like the brainwashed members of a new cult.

After criticizing the director, the screenplay writer, and all of the performers, Lane offers us one final vision of his insight:

The Catholic Church has nothing to fear from this film. It is not just tripe. It is self-evident, spirit-lowering tripe that could not conceivably cause a single member of the flock to turn aside from the faith. Meanwhile, art historians can sleep easy once more, while fans of the book, which has finally been exposed for the pompous fraud that it is, will be shaken from their trance. (78)

What *is* going on here? The intense anger, close to rage, seems way out of line. We suggested that, in part, the intensity of these indictments is a reaction to authorial function of alchemy, or alternately, the subjection implied by the way in which Brown has advanced mystery into the Mysteries. Yet Lane's wrath is beyond any other high-profile criticism of the film we have consulted; it is both personal and unsupported. No critical claim is *ever* buttressed with a single shred of evidence, either from the book or the film, save, of course, the credibility of Lane. Nor do we think this lack can be rationalized as space limitations (Lane has written much longer reviews) or by his unwillingness to give any more attention than is absolutely necessary to a text that has already been given way too much public press. His rhetoric reads like a classic, macho displacement of fear, but fear of what? Surely, it cannot be fear of the long-standing Jesus and Mary Magdalene story, so what else might it be? We think Lane's passionate reaction against TDC is the unconscious obverse of the passionate embrace of its fans in respect to the real truth TDC, which is also, not coincidentally, the fundamental teaching of alchemy.

The Quintessence, or, the Real Truth

The entire universe can thus become a crowd of beckoning symbols; for once speech is considered merely "symbolic," it is only one more step to considering action itself as symbolic. . . . This suggests a way of carrying symbolization far beyond the mere sexual symbolization of the Freudians, as the mystic would say that sexual yearnings are but the conventionalization of a still profounder yearning. . . .

—Kenneth Burke ("Auscultation" 103)

In the previous sections we argued that TDC can be understood as classically alchemical because of the way in which it promises a spiritual truth through a mysterious and misleading drama. Further support for TDC's alchemical character was located in the critiques of the novel, and more conspicuously, critiques of the novel's favorable *readers*. Fans of TDC are described as spiritually starved dupes in a manner that recalls the way in which the Western Mysteries were designed

to provoke wonder and respect from the aspirant and to frighten or puzzle the outsider. TDC is thus “alchemical” because it (1) is a mysterious and equivocal story rife with page-turning puzzles that (2) gestures toward a truth, which is (3) spiritual in nature and therefore lies beyond an allegory of two detectives in search of the Holy Grail. The conspicuously negative reaction of Novak, Lane, and other critics helped to underscore a fourth element to alchemical rhetoric, that historically it functioned to create respect for religious teachings and leaders on the one hand, and the fear of subjectification to the outsider on the other. Consequently, depending on the reader one consults, Dan Brown is either a spiritual guru in disguise or a charlatan hack.

These four elements, however, do not exhaust basic characteristics of the alchemical: like the final finger to open on an outstretched hand, there is a fifth element, a kind of Quintessence, and it is the most important one to *both* alchemy as a practice and alchemy as a rhetorical form.⁶ This fifth element is the secret truth of alchemy proper. This fifth element unites form (the larger province of genre) and content (a specific text or object). This fifth element is the central dynamic of the Western Mysteries and alchemy, is the climax of TDC’s plot, and is literally at the center of TDC as a physical text.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to approach this fifth and final element is obliquely: in Freud’s terms, the fifth element of alchemy is unquestionably “uncanny.” Belonging to the realm of the “frightening,” Freud links the uncanny to the work of Schelling, for whom the term signified “what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open” (132). He then gives Schelling’s definition a psychoanalytic twist by reframing it as the dynamic processes of repression, whereby the uncanny feeling emerges as a fear of something that was once familiar and conscious but was subsequently repressed. The uncanny thus becomes a symptom of the failure of repression, the return of the repressed (also see Royle).⁷

If we turn, then, to TDC, we are led to ask: What was once conscious, then repressed, and has now returned? Although Freud was more interested in primitive religious beliefs and practices, he again furnishes us with a helpful beginning. For Freud, ancient animistic views of the universe, views that feature a belief in human spirits, telepathy, and magic, dominated so-called primitive cultures:

It appears that we have all, in the course of our individual development, been through a phase corresponding to the animistic in the development of primitive peoples, that this phase did not pass without leaving behind in us residual traces that can still make themselves felt, and that everything we now find “uncanny” meets the criterion that is linked with these remnants of animistic mental activity and prompts them to express themselves. (147)

Bracketing the Lamarckism in this passage, we are left with the notion that what has been repressed and is returning in the uncanny experience is an animistic set of beliefs.⁸

Ostensibly, the repressed, primitive secret of TDC is the faux truth that Jesus and Mary Mags hooked-up, that the latter’s womb was the Holy Grail, and that the couple begot a bloodline. TDC is consequently “uncanny” because, although these claims

have been made before, it was only among scholars, conspiracy theorists, and secret societies. In our postmodern times, what was conscious only to some could now be disclosed to “the many” via the (supposed) ruse of fiction. The strange device that Brown used to hint that his text was functioning as an uncanny, alchemical vehicle is the opening statement that prefaces the novel, conspicuously headed in boldface as “**FACT**”:

The Priory of Sion—a European society founded in 1099—is a real organization. . . . The Vatican prelature known as Opus Dei is a deeply devout Catholic sect that has been the topic of recent controversy due to reports of brainwashing, coercion, and a dangerous practice known as “corporeal mortification.” (1)

Unlike the genre of historical fiction, beginning a *mystery novel* with a statement of facts is unusual and, of course, should tip off the reader that TDC is no ordinary mystery. Although the latter “fact” is verifiable, the former is a complete fabrication; the Priory of Sion was a secret society hoax created by Pierre Plantard, a French prankster, in the 1950s (Donnelly E3). Perhaps unbeknownst to Brown, the dirty secret of TDC is guarded by none other than this fake organization, the Priory of Sion. And so at the very outset two different kinds of readers are hailed: first, the reader who accepts the existence of the Priory of Sion as a fact, and thus is primed to contemplate the novel’s “truth” as possibly just that. Second, there is the more skeptical or cynical reader who reckons that nothing of importance can be hidden in a non-existent organization, no matter how “factually” the novel might treat this imaginary group of heretics. The audiences brought into being by this strange preface to a “fictional” novel is the first key to how TDC buries the real secret in plain sight.

A second key, as we already hinted in our discussion of the Western Mysteries, is the word “mystery” itself, which derives from the ancient Greek term for mystic rites, later rendered in Latin as *mysterium*.⁹ Although in contemporary usage “mystery” refers to “a hidden or secret thing,” originally the term referred to the secret religious rituals and ceremonies of the Mysteries that can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks. We have already detailed the generic or formal aspects of the Mysteries; as we move into the specific, narrative content of TDC, a little more information about the content of the Mystery rituals will prove useful.

The most famous of the Western Mysteries were the Eleusinian mysteries, which were comprised of ceremonies that centered on the abduction, rape, and death of Persephone and her subsequent resurrection with Demeter (her mother), followed by the divine birth of a spiritually conceived son (Guiley 382; Evans “Sanctuaries” 227–254). Of course, scholars today do not know much about the practices of the Mysteries because they were expressly secret, however, we do know that all of them

shared some common characteristics: They were centered on a divine female as the vessel of transformation, even if they were cloaked in patriarchal form; their purpose was to secure eternal life in the afterworld, through rebirth or redemption; they contained an erotic-sexual element of union with the primal mother; . . . there were blood sacrifices; there were elements of magic and ecstasy in the rites; [and] the initiate was revealed the secrets and the instructions of the cult. (Guiley 382)

In addition to the practices of cults and secret societies (e.g., the *Ordo Templi Orientis*), as well as the more widely known fraternity of Freemasonry, perhaps the most popular vestige of the Mysteries is the Christian Eucharist, whereby the consumption of bread and wine is thought to transform into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Many have argued that seeking “salvation through the union with Christ” is actually a reunion with the Goddess or Great Mother, “as the cup which holds the blood and wine” as well as the “womb in which rebirth and baptism take place” (Guiley 383). The party line of scholars is that the Hellenic mysteries ended when Christianity became the dominant religion; their secret rites and ceremonies were absorbed, disguised, and transmuted into Christian dogma and ritual.

That Brown intended TDC as a modern day celebration of the Western Mysteries is unquestionable, as secret societies of all kinds are peppered throughout the novel. As the story progresses—and here It comes, perhaps unexpectedly . . . wait for It, close your eyes, take a deep breath—the central secret, that which was repressed but here returns, emerges as a sex-rite, not a historical truth. The secret teaching of TDC is an alchemical belief that is embodied in the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, *which is merely an allegory itself*, a spiritually charged and controversial fabrication. The allegory of the Holy Grail as the literal union of Christ and Mary is so culturally suffused that it eclipses the uncanny truth of alchemy advanced by the book: a confrontation with alterity, represented by sexual difference, is the only road to spiritual enlightenment.

Brown reveals this “uncanny truth” through the now unrepressed memory of Sophie Neveu, who accidentally stumbled upon a meeting of the Priory of Sion and witnessed an ancient rite of reunification with the Goddess. Brown teases the reader with flashes of Neveu’s memory until, near the middle of the novel, a titillating graphic depiction of the rite is related (a depiction that was significantly muted in the screenplay): Twelve men and women arranged in a circle do a ritual dance that gets faster and faster, while a man and a woman have sex until both climax, all the while chanting esoteric incantations. After Neveu reveals—with some embarrassment—the memory to Langdon, the goodly professor explains

that although what she saw probably *looked* like a sex ritual, Hieros Gamos [sacred union or marriage] had nothing to do with eroticism. It was a spiritual act. Historically, intercourse was the act through which male and female experienced God. The ancients believed that the male was spiritually incomplete until he had carnal knowledge of the sacred feminine. . . . Since the days of Isis, sex rites had been considered man’s only bridge from earth to heaven. “By communing with woman,” Langdon said, “man could achieve a climatic instant when his mind went totally blank and he could see God.” (309)

In short, the real truth in TDC is the blasphemous possibility that spiritual enlightenment can only occur through the *hieros gamos*, sexual contact between two people. At first blush this “truth” sounds like simple wish-fulfillment, especially when one considers all the sex scandals that plague congregations country wide, Protestant and Catholic alike (e.g., “have sex with me to get closer to God”). But the terror of this secret runs deep when one contends with the truly subversive entailments

of *hieros gamos*. Unlike religious sexual manipulation, the *hieros gamos* attempts to achieve spiritual insight by *disempowering* both individuals. Here returns the third element of alchemical subjection in the form of the fifth, but in an important new guise.

In the novel, Brown has Robert Langdon identify the *hieros gamos* as the central spiritual rite of the sacred feminine: “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” (133). Langdon suggests that Matriarchal paganism, protected by the Mystery traditions for centuries, was repressed, “forgotten,” and replaced by a fledgling, patriarchal Christianity. Because TDC is fiction, one should be somewhat skeptical of the ideas Brown forwards about the sacred feminine and the *hieros gamos*; however, more respected scholars have made the same case.

In her landmark study *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner examines the gendered dynamics in Mesopotamian religious practices in the second and third millennium B.C., a period that did feature a common belief in what Freud would label “animistic magic.” “The answer to the question ‘Who creates life?’” writes Lerner, “lies at the core of religious belief systems” of this period (180). Her intricate and careful analysis of texts reveals how the answer to this question shifts over the millennia in complex ways. Beginning with the Mother-Goddess figure as the sole generator of universal fertility, the emphasis gradually moves to the Mother-Goddess as assisted by numerous male gods or human kings. From there, creativity shifts from the Mother-Goddess and her male consorts to a “symbolic creativity” that is captured in the magical act of naming; symbolism thereby became a site of mystery and magic. Subsequently, demonstrates Lerner, the male gods who could name things were eventually collapsed into one powerful, male, storm-God (144–160).

In making their case for the sacred feminine as a Templar secret, Picknett and Prince extend Lerner’s observations to sexual intercourse: the arrival of (religious) patriarchy and the consequent association of the bodily with woman led not only to sexual discrimination, but a demonization of coitus:

This simple-minded myth [of the singularly male God-head] has provided a retrospective justification for the degradation of women, and discouraged the alleviation of gynecological and birthing agonies. It has denied women a voice for thousands of years—and it has demeaned, degraded and even demonized the sex act, which should be joyful and *magical*. It has substituted shame and guilt for love and ecstasy, and it has inculcated a neurotic fear of a male God who was apparently so full of self-hate that he loathed even his best creation—humanity. (160)

Coming full circle, in calling for a resurrection of the *hieros gamos*, a wedding of sex and spirit, TDC echoes what alchemists refer to as the “sacred wedding.” To appreciate the terror of this return, we revisit some alchemical texts that clarify just what is at stake in the *hieros gamos*.

In literature on the Mysteries and related Hermetic texts, the balance between the gendered forces of ultimate reality was achieved in *hieros gamos*. As Lerner states, the

union is frequently represented by the Mother-Goddess taking a young male partner, typically her son or brother, and by means of their sexual union bringing fertility and rebirth to the polis. One better-known, mythic prototype of this kind of sacred sexuality was the coupling of the goddess, Isis, and her god-consort Osiris. It is generally believed that in the ceremonies and rites of various Mystery traditions, ceremonial couples would engage in ritual intercourse to both re-enact the spiritual origin-story as well as achieve spiritual insight themselves. The Pharaoh dynasties, for example, practiced ritual intercourse and carried it into the pre- and then Hellenic periods. As the practice traveled from Egypt to the Greeks, Picknett and Prince explain that

the *hieros gamos* was the ultimate expression of what is termed “temple prostitution,” where a man visited a priestess in order to receive gnosis—to experience the divine for himself through the act of lovemaking. Significantly, the original word for such a priestess is *hierodule*, which means “sacred servant,” the word “prostitute,” with its implied moral judgment, was a Victorian rendering. Moreover, this temple servant is, unlike the secular prostitute, acknowledged to be in control of both the situation and the man who visits her, and both receive benefits in terms of physical, spiritual, and magical empowerment. The body of the priestess had become, in a way almost unimaginable to today’s Western lovers, literally and metaphorically a gateway to the gods. (257)

Seen in this way, “sex is. . . the bridge between heaven and earth, bringing a release of enormous creative energy, besides revitalizing the lovers in a unique way—even down to their cellular level” (152).

Although the idea of sex as a sacrament continued unabated in the East, mainly through Indian Tantra and Chinese Taoism practices,¹⁰ it was violently oppressed and repressed in the West by the Church, whose fear and loathing of women was strongly grounded in the potential power of procreation and female sexuality.¹¹ There is, Picknett and Prince note, no clear-cut tradition of sacred sexuality in the West, “*unless it was simply known as alchemy*” (italics in original; 153). Indeed, it was through the secret practice of alchemy that the sacred feminine and the concept of the *hieros gamos* were both preserved and further theorized.

Centuries of alchemical thought make it difficult to generalize about the diversity of alchemical beliefs and practices, however, many scholars agree that alchemists held (and continue to hold) a general worldview that orbited two concepts, the *hieros gamos* and the *numinosum* (Jung, *Alchemical* 122–124, 180–185; Jung, *Psychology* 36–37; Schwarz-Salant). The *numinosum* is ultimate spiritual reality, a dimension that interpenetrates material reality and is synonymous with deity. The concept is fundamentally animistic and idealist in character, yet, ultimately material reality is *part* of the *numinosum*, even though we experience material reality as separate. A direct experience of the *numinosum* is fleeting but fundamentally transformative and often described in terms of “rebirth.” Indeed, for the contemporary alchemist, “the greatest failing of our world today, probably encouraged by the abstracting nature of science and technology, is the alienation from the *numinosum*” (Schwarz-Salant 7).

The most direct route to the *numinosum* is the *hieros gamos*, both in terms of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman and in terms of chemical

substances.¹² Simply stated, the key to all alchemical work is the idea that “it takes two.” Chemically, the *numinosum* is tapped when two baser metals combine to make gold; spiritually, sexual partners receive fleeting glimpses of the *numinosum* at the moment of orgasmic release. The process of the union of two different substances, be they people or natural elements, is termed *coniunctio*, and at the highest, most spiritual level the *coniunctio* achieves *rubedo*, a highly desirous state of spiritual illumination (Schwartz-Salant 10–14). Working on both the exoteric level of metals and the esoteric level of spiritual growth, Jack Lindsay reports that the process of *coniunctio* proceeded in three basic steps: (1) the mixing of contrasting substances; (2) the introduction of a third, dynamic factor that changes the original relation between the substances into a qualitatively new substance (sexual intercourse, Hegelian sublation, and so on); and (3) the stabilization of the new substance (e.g., the production of gold or spiritual transformation and rebirth; Schwartz-Salant 8–9). Achieving spiritual illumination and new substances was described as the “Great Work” of alchemy.

What is unique about alchemical thinking—and what attracted Freud’s one time heir apparent, C. G. Jung, to alchemy—was its stress on the necessity of duality for spiritual insight and material change. With the introduction of the great monotheistic faiths, a more individualistic model of spiritual illumination replaced the pagan, epistemic teaching of the *hieros gamos*: from the ancient Mysteries to medieval alchemy, only a unification of contrasting substances can lead to spiritual rebirth. With the exception of a number of Eastern faiths, most contemporary religions feature a solitary individual seeking salvation from a transcendent deity, often with guidance from priests and ministers. Because psychotherapy stresses the fundamental necessity of interpersonal dialogue between the analyst and analysand, C. G. Jung began to research alchemy and, eventually, described his clinical teaching as fundamentally alchemical.

Nathan Schwartz-Salant argues that Jung’s understanding of alchemy straddled the division between alchemy as a *metaphor* for self-improvement and insight and as a real “spiritually illuminated science.” On the one hand, some theorists believed that alchemy was a figural projection of the general, human processes of inner development. Jung clearly had sympathy with this view. On the other hand, however, some scholars, such as Titus Burkhardt, see alchemy as “a continuous system engaged in by centuries of adepts who passed their knowledge on to one another” (Schwartz-Salant 11). Jung also had sympathy with this view, and particularly because of his understanding of the libido. Unlike Freud, Jung understood the life drive or libido to be a spiritual yearning for “individuation,” a process of psychical progression by which an individual becomes increasingly aware of his whole being and the interconnections among all facets of psychical and material life. As is detailed in his autobiography, Jung saw the esoteric side of alchemy as an innovative anticipation of his own psychodynamics. For Jung, the *mysterium coniunctionis* of sacred sexuality was merely one form that individuation might take. “The mystical side of alchemy,” writes Jung, “as distinct from its historical aspect, is essentially a psychological problem. To all appearances, it is a concretization, in projected symbolic form, of the process of individuation” (*Alchemical* 105–106).

The alchemical form of the individuation process, at least from Jung's point of view, was also uncanny in a number of senses. First, of course, was the repression that the exoteric work represented: working with metals was a *projection* of interior processes (as is, Freud would maintain, civilization itself). Second, in respect to the threefold process of alchemy, Jung writes:

The alchemical operation consisted essentially in separating the prima material, the so-called chaos, into the active principle, the soul, and the passive principle, the body, which were then reunited in a personified form in the *coniunctio* or "chymical marriage." In other words, the *coniunctio* was allegorized as the hierosgamos, the ritual cohabitation of Sol and Luna. From this union sprang. . . the transformed Mercurius, who was thought of as hermaphroditic in token of his rounded perfection. (122–123)

This remarkable passage not only links the alchemical process with the sacred marriage, but adds the ultimate gender-bender—namely, that the changed lovers will experience themselves as hermaphroditic—not physiologically, of course, but psychologically. This psychical hermaphroditism was central to the Great Work: masculine and feminine differences were to commingle within a single person's psyche, just as the sexual act unites differences among bodies.

We submit that it is the promise of *this* spiritual truth, the gender-imploding promise and aim of the *hieros gamos*, that provokes so much reactionary rhetoric about TDC. Although ostensibly (and one might say even ideologically) TDC is a heteronormative tale, its tacit threat is the egalitarian promise of polymorphous perversity. For example, only the intercourse of Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu can unravel the spiritual secret, and only the contrast of their differences yields the Holy Grail of spiritual insight, an exciting contact—however fleeting—with the *numinosum*: the excitement of mystery itself.

We are now in a better position to revisit TDC *as an alchemical text* and thus the terror it seems to provoke in many Christians and Church apologists. If this text calls for the return of the *hieros gamos* of the Mysteries and related pagan religious practices, then *even in fiction* TDC poses a threat to any mainstream religious teaching that stresses the centrality of *individual* salvation: neither patriarchy *nor* matriarchy have access to the divine, as they are not dialectical. The centrality of sacred marriage to TDC implies that spiritual enlightenment comes, not through the symbolic mediation of a priestly class, but rather directly, personally, and even *literally* via sexual relations with an adept. In a qualified sense, the *hieros gamos* is the antithesis of the Eucharist.

In light of the affront the central teaching or "truth" of alchemy poses for contemporary Christian teachings, we submit that TDC is not merely an alchemical story, but rather, a repackaged, alchemical text: first, the prose can be seen as occult rhetoric, a "truth" hidden behind the veil of fiction and, though written in an accessible style, it is still nevertheless doing a kind of Janus-faced labor; second, the secret about which the narrative hinges is a ruse. The sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is an allegory for the central Mysteries teaching of alchemy: the necessity of *two* for spiritual insight. Whether or not one believes in the ability of sacred sex to

lead to spiritual insight, when one reads the novel itself as a demonstration of the kinds of secrets the story is about, TDC effectively *functions* as an alchemical text, delighting those “in the know” and offending (or secretly titillating) those who are not. Of course, the truth of TDC need not be “true” for it to function for millions of readers as a spiritual illumination, regardless of the intentions of Brown or Doubleday. As a dutiful kabbalist might say, the consequence of getting this alchemical formula right is “in the numbers.”

Concluding Remarks: Alchemy as Pre/Postmodern Religiosity

Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts!
—Hélène Cixous (1530)

Using TDC as an exemplar, in this essay we have advanced a theory of alchemical rhetoric as a generic form comprised of five, interrelated elements: an alchemical text will (1) feature misleading or equivocal, mysterious prose with evocative, occultic symbols; (2) hint at or promise some secret, underlying truth; (3) the truth toward which the text gestures will be spiritual or religious in nature; (4) the text will encourage respect and wonder for some, and a fear of subjection for others; and (5) the ultimate “teaching” or Quintessence of alchemical rhetoric will insist on the necessity to two or more *different* individuals for spiritual insight.¹³ Although TDC advances the latter in terms of the *hieros gamos*, Jung would stress that this alchemical truth is itself allegorical: sexual union is an inferior union homologous to the dialectic of much higher spiritual agencies. In this respect alchemical rhetoric is fundamentally Platonic “all the way up”: in the end, sexual difference is a necessary illusion.

As a generic innovation, TDC helps us to better locate the features of contemporary alchemy at the same time as it specifies the limitations of generic criticism: aside from crass, copy-cat style mysteries, few texts will model all five elements of the alchemical neatly, as genres are elastic and bend, mold, and morph over time. An earlier example of the alchemical is James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy: An Adventure*, self published in 1993 and picked up by Warner Brothers in 1995. Ostensibly a fictionalized account of a man in search of a mysterious Peruvian manuscript of revelations dating to 600 BCE, *The Celestine Prophecy* promises spiritual insight to readers via the ruse of a fantastic story. Arguably, *The Celestine Prophecy* is not alchemical because it does not stress some variation of the *hieros gamos*, however, a number of its “Nine Insights” stress the import of subjection to the flow of energy that unites all human beings (viz., the Quintessence). *The Celestine Prophecy* is alchemical rhetoric because, in addition to promising a secret, spiritual truth in allegory, it stresses the transcendence of difference through unification and the recognition of a form of an underlying, universal substance.

At the time of our writing a newer, bestselling occultic book has emerged that also tempts the alchemical label: some readers might describe Rhonda Byrne's wildly popular, edited elaboration of “the law of attraction” (otherwise known as “wishful thinking”), *The Secret* (2006), as an alchemical text because it promises to collect a

profound, spiritual truth that has been previously hidden from the masses in various, disparate religious texts. Although *The Secret* is certainly an occultic text, it is not alchemical because there are no elements of misdirection, no puzzles, and no ruses that bury a deeper teaching or truth that concerns the necessity of *two*.¹⁴ In short, *The Secret* promotes a highly individualistic and self-centered ideology in a relatively straightforward manner. Alchemical texts promise enlightenment by means of misdirection and only through a process of de-individualization in one way or another, which is why they are markedly distinct from the narcissistic aims of contemporary self-help literature.

What *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Celestine Prophecy*, and *The Secret* do share in common, however, is an appeal to spiritual fulfillment. Insofar as each of these texts has sold millions of copies because of their revelatory structure, the motor behind the reading public's embrace is obviously a deeper longing that the culture industries have tapped into. Alchemical rhetoric is thus party to a larger, popular culture religiosity that continues to expand in influence; it participates in our contemporary iteration of the purchasing of Indulgences. Some would thus argue that the reason why alchemical rhetoric *works* to sell books and inspire people has something to do with a deeper spiritual thirst—precisely that longing that Jung suggested informed Freud's more superficial (and secular) reading of the libido. Or as Burke puts it, "the mystic would say that sexual yearnings are but the conventionalization of a still profounder yearning" (Auscultation 103). Perhaps this is why Thornbury observes that Brown's contemporary iteration of the Western Mysteries appeals to a soul-deep need for spiritual fulfillment in a time when our religious and political leaders are routinely exposed as frauds, in a time when wars are waged under false pretenses, and in a time when the U.S. public is perhaps its most cynical and civically disengaged (see Putnam). Cynicism, the hallmark of our time, is the catalyst of the sense of lack and spiritual longing that has resurrected the alchemical as a postmodern form of religiosity. Consequently, novels, magazines, and the movie theatre have become the dominant sites of religious mysteries; although we know what we are reading or watching is "fiction," at some level our rituals of consumption are attempting to fulfill a spiritual need.¹⁵

However flawed its surface, the alchemic sub-text of TDC holds out the promise of (divine) justice, of righting the wrongs committed against women, against sex, against spirit in the history of humankind, of toppling powerful authorities or institutions who have deliberately deceived us, of recharging our sex lives with some hope of spiritual import; it promotes an ideal, egalitarian, harmonic world.¹⁶ If the reactions to Brown's novel are any measure, TDC is the most prominent and conspicuous of recent texts to deliberately cultivate an aura of religiosity, laying bare the true locus of contemporary faith in popular culture. In this respect, the negative reactions of religious authorities to Brown's little bible are not merely reactions to the affront the *hieros gamos* poses to religious patriarchy, but are the collective groans and growing pains of traditional religious institutions adapting to the way in which spirituality is experienced in an age of cynical reason (see Sloterdijk). Centuries ago St. Augustine urged of church leaders to read the bible figuratively; today the unwashed masses

understand all too well how to read truth in figure. This is the hermeneutical pedagogy of alchemy, and we predict an increase in alchemical rhetoric as one of the ways in which the culture industries and its purchasing publics are choosing to reckon with our contemporary spiritual malaise. In postmodernity, religiosity is increasingly defined by a faith in truthful fiction.

Notes

- [1] We distinguish between “the occult” as referring to a tradition involving the study of secrets, and “the occultic” as a highly connotative term for all things dark and mysterious. The reasons for the distinction will become clearer below.
- [2] This is not so among our colleagues in the social sciences, media studies, and performance studies, however. See, for example, Cuklanz and Sujata; Dannels; Langelilier and Peterson; and Schryer, Lingard, and Spafford.
- [3] Well hello, curious reader! Welcome to the footnotes, where most of the secret work of academic writing is done. You didn’t think we’d hint at a secret and not tell you what it was *somewhere* in this manuscript, did you? Is there no help for the poor widow’s son?
- [4] This is the thesis of perhaps the most famous work of Masonic scholarship in the world: Albert Pike’s *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*. Unfortunately space limits any discussion, but W. Kirk MacNulty has offered a persuasive, well-researched psychoanalytic account of Masonic ritual as a Mystery rite (see MacNulty).
- [5] During the build-up to the invasion of Iraq (via demands from the United States for Iraq to comply with various UN resolutions to allow for weapons inspections) distrust about pretenses for going to war were already widespread by the time the United States invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003. *The Da Vinci Code* was released just two days prior, and so the novel literally greeted a war-time public. It did not become a smash hit until 2004, the same year in which two flashy, non-fiction books on presidential secrecy and deception appeared, Eric Alterman and Mark Green’s *The Book on Bush: How George W. (Mis)leads America* (February) and its follow-up, Eric Alterman’s *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and its Consequences* (September 24). In this respect, TDC was published in a “perfect storm” of popular reception, precisely at a time when suspicion was high and the risks of deceit were massive and deadly.
- [6] Alchemists believed in four basic elements, earth, air, fire, and water. Some believed in a fifth element, the Quintessence or Aether, which denoted to some “spirit” while to others some supernatural form of matter or substance. Later alchemists and occultists have described the Quintessence as that which permeates and unites all things. For an updated alchemical narrative that suggests the Quintessence is a woman (again, a goddess reference), see the 1997 sci-fi thriller, *The Fifth Element*.
- [7] In a chapter titled, “The Private Parts of Jesus Christ,” Royle details the intimate relationship between the uncanny, sexuality, and divinity.
- [8] Lamarckism refers to the notion that outward experiences are imprinted on the psyche and genetically passed from one generation to the next.
- [9] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “mystery.”
- [10] Of the Tantric and Taoist traditions, Picknett and Prince write, “Both of these are ancient—and greatly respected in their cultures—and stress the potential of certain sexual practices for achieving mystical awareness, physical regeneration and longevity, and oneness with God” (152).
- [11] For a careful, historical account of how this came to pass, see Qualls-Corbett; and Whitmont.
- [12] Obviously, as we discuss it here, sacred sex occurred in that liminal historical period when spiritual insight was no longer controlled by the goddess and not yet controlled by God. In

- seeing sex as the fusion of masculine and feminine into spiritual oneness, that period was heteronormative (when viewed with *our* lenses) to be sure. However, the transformative moment in sacred sex was always the simultaneous orgasms of the two initiates, and where that moment is highlighted, what was important is the difference among people. To us (as well as most modern magicians, alchemists, and pagans) it seems to matter little whether the participants are two men, two women, one of each, and so on.
- [13] Of course, specifying anything like a formula for alchemic rhetoric is a deliberate misdirection; if one can reduce the alchemic to a series of features, then she surely will miss the message.
- [14] Similarly, we would deny that the Holy Bible is an alchemic text—or at least the Bible sans the Book of Revelation. Certainly the latter has been used as an occult and alchemical text, however, barring that controversial book, since the Reformation the Bible has been received and taught as a revelation without deception.
- [15] Although we have been concerned principally with a novel, the religious need-fulfillment of the culture industries has been more thoroughly explored in the context of film. Drawing on the definition of “religion” advanced by Clifford Geertz, John Lyden argues that film-going has become one of the most dominant religious experiences of our time (see Geertz 3; Morgan 363–376). “First of all,” writes Lyden, “films do provide a set of symbols, both visual and narrative, which act to mediate worldviews as well as systems of values and . . . these establish both certain moods as well as motivations (to ‘do the right thing’ for example)” (44). Defining religion in terms of *function* instead of meaning, Lyden shows how films provide audiences with models of how the world ought to be and often provides an imaginary mirror for how the world is. The ritual act of communing in a darkened room in order to have one’s loves, fears, and anxieties performed on the big screen is like going to church: Most people go to the movies claiming the need to ‘escape,’” reports Lyden, “But to what do they escape? The world presented by films tends to be Neater, more orderly, and has satisfactory endings (usually) in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded, families are reunited, and lovers mate for life. . . . This does not mean that every film invokes a banal “happy ending” But, as Geertz said about religion, it can provide a sense that justice and order exist, even though particular events remain unexplained or seem Unfair” (42). That films hold out the promise of justice or remind us that we live in an unjust world, argues Lyden, makes movie-going a sermonic experience.
- [16] And this promise, we readily admit, is an empty one that is ideologically invested.

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