The Da Vinci Code in the Academy
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The question is obvious: Why *The Da Vinci Code*?

Why has one novel among many recent and similar novels, one fictional work among many speculative works over the last fifty years, one presentation of “facts” as “fiction” captured the imaginations and the interest of both the common reader and the critical academic?

The answer is both obvious and obscure, like *The Da Vinci Code*’s sources and secrets. To find an answer, or perhaps several answers, I have asked a number of scholars—religious, literary, cultural—to examine the cultural phenomenon which has become *The Da Vinci Code* controversy.

Specifically, these critics go beyond the continuing debate over the validity of sources and stories, of histories and alternative histories. They look at this text in terms of the controversy which it has caused, and why it has caused such controversy. It is easy to observe that *The Da Vinci Code* has been a powerful catalyst. The intriguing question for academics and other cultural observers: a catalyst in what mixture of forces, ideas, values? One book has functioned to trigger a cultural explosion, but what were the ingredients, waiting to react? What made *The Da Vinci Code*, if I may borrow a current cultural analogy, into *The Perfect Storm*?

One thing is clear: the answer always manifests itself at the intersection of fact and fiction. Every scholarly debate, in one way or another, returns to these fundamental questions: What is fact? What is fiction? This phenomenon has been our first date, culturally speaking, with postmodernism. This rising chorus of voices is the first popular awareness of the unraveling of authority proposed by the postmodern dilemma.

**A Code To Live By**

Regardless of what one thinks of Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*, a couple of facts are indisputable. Individually, tens of millions of people worldwide have read the novel. Publicly, it has gotten a lot of attention. That’s a bit of an understatement. This one contemporary novel has generated at least fifty other books which claim to explain, to debunk, to criticize, or to capitalize on the attention. Likewise, universities have created courses to do the same. Conferences have been held worldwide, including in Leonardo’s hometown of Vinci, Italy, mostly to debate the factual errors, the historical inaccuracies, the
flawed theories—contained in this fiction. Even the Vatican itself has joined the debate, one which will surely continue for years.

We, however, are not concerned only with alleged errors or inaccuracies, at least not those that may or may not be contained in this novel. We are concerned with the perhaps unprecedented reaction to a popular novel by otherwise sober academics and their institutions, by religious leaders and organizations more often concerned with people’s souls rather than a book’s sales, by the common readers who seem so impassioned by a retelling of the passion of the Christ which previously had become for so many passé.

*The Da Vinci Code*, like it or not, has entered the academy. And so we begin to look—not at the book’s veracity—but at our collective reaction to what is now a debate beyond one book, but a debate about all of our stories.

Be they scholarly or popular, religious or radical, sacred or profane, these are the codes we live by.

**Postmodernism Meets the Masses**

At a conference, we were talking about *The Da Vinci Code* controversy, about why this novel has become more than a novel. That was the key, we agreed. It’s not about Brown, the novel, or Leonardo da Vinci. It is the rekindling of desire, desire to reconnect with the divine in a world which has been robbed of divine secrets and stripped of divine codes, a world which continues to erase the wisdom of the ancients, and which denies that our stories can contain truth, even a glimpse of it.

It’s the postmodern dilemma. Everything is a text. But . . . what do we need to survive? We need a text. We need a story. We need our stories. We have always had stories, and for most of human history, stories were true.

Stories were, and are, where we keep the truth, or at least something close to it. The novel’s speculations about history and religion do not so much suggest lies as they suggest that truth, and true stories, still exist. Leonardo knew it, as did many, many writers, artists, and everyday folks throughout our existence on this planet. People throughout history have solved problems and dilemmas large and small, by recognizing the underlying divinity of human existence.

That is, until the twentieth century.

*“Where is now thy God?”* (Catholic Prayer Book, 1662)

*The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon is a reaction to a century-long process: access to the divine realm of human existence has been lost, severed by the rise of, first, modernism, and then, postmodernism, which have reduced all of our stories to texts, including our most sacred mythologies. Brown’s novel has
touched a nerve by suggesting that we could perhaps reconnect to our stories, that our mythologies once again could be true.

For most of our collective history, our stories revealed the real connection between human experience and that which is beyond human experience, that is, beyond rational human understanding. Through our participation in these stories, in our mythologies, we could experience, intuit, feel, and know something of what is beyond.

Now all of our stories—myth, legend, religion, history, opinion, news, novels, films—are only texts, devoid of the authority they once had. Why?

A text is written by a human being. A text can be changed. A text does not reveal fundamental truth, divine truth, by providing a story that can be understood by a human being. A text is simply a manipulation of words.

Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, whose preface claims that all “descriptions of . . . documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate,” has achieved tremendous success and notoriety. Why? The novel has introduced millions of people to the postmodern paradox: if everything’s a text these days, where do we find truth? Over the last century, we have accepted that all of the codes we live by are really just stories, just texts, and texts are not truths. Now, Brown’s novel has confronted millions with that dilemma by suggesting that alternative texts may exist and may have as much, or even greater, authority than the standard versions.

The Contributors

Robert Davis examines the underlying issue of the sacred feminine, and his is a masterful description of the origins and resurgence of the goddess figure today in the discussion of this novel and in a number of other forums. He offers an intriguing explanation for *The Da Vinci Code*’s incredible popularity based on a re-manifestation of the sacred feminine, especially in American culture, fostered by the feminist and post-feminist re-visioning of religion and history over the last fifty years. Also, he offers a meticulous explication of why this popular novel forced its way into academic debates. His analysis, as many of the other analyses, touches on the rise of feminism, the weakening of the traditional church, the loss of textual authority in a globally connected world, and the continuing need for divine authority in a globally confused world. Ultimately, the nexus of the debate falls into the inevitable postmodern gap. Its most recent return, popularized by a novel, began almost a century ago. It blossomed as we approached the twenty-first century, only to explode in recent years, a phenomenon of a culture, he writes, “obscurely dissatisfied with its moral and spiritual inheritance.”
Deanna Thompson takes a revealing look at the controversy, and she concludes that the debate itself is not actually centered on feminism, not specifically fueled by the idea of sacred feminine. The focus of the controversy is on sex, and she leads us on a field trip back in time to meet some early Christians.

Rachel Wagner looks carefully at the bases of the debates, and she reveals a set of Chinese boxes, each text revealing a previous text as its basis. Her analysis of the controversies goes beyond the written texts under discussion as sources. The texts being called into question by all sides are the texts of credentials, experience, study—our life texts which give authority to those who inhabit them—whether academic or clergy, professor or priest, scholar or saint. The reason for *The Da Vinci Code* debate is made clear: postmodernism is the new Gnosticism; relativism, the enemy of Christian faith.

Arlette Poland, likewise, takes us back to visit early Christianity. Poland’s approach suggests that the solution lies not in the truth or fiction of the texts (whether ancient or modern) but in experience itself. She does, however, recognize the immense importance of texts in shaping our experience of the divine, especially the divine feminine.

Rosa Maria Stoops presents another unique perspective on the controversy. As both an academic and a Catholic, she explores the ironies of Brown’s novel and its subsequent debaters, so ready to question the authority of traditional texts and teachings, while so eager to accept the authority of alternative texts and theories. She places the charge of systemic discrimination against women into the context of Catholic Church history, up to and including the positions taken by Pope John Paul II. Like many of the other critics here included, her analysis reveals that the popular polemic debates often oversimplify and misrepresent the issues at hand.

Harry Brown examines the novel as a new Grail quest, which it purports to be. While he agrees that the phenomenon of the novel’s popularity has parallels with the tremendous popularity of the Grail legends of centuries past, he enumerates the differences among *The Da Vinci Code*’s version and the various manifestations of the divine feminine as part of the Grail quest stories. His conclusion points to a specific but elusive underlying reason for the book’s twenty-first century impact.

Our last essayist points out that *The Da Vinci Code* is not the heretical treatise it has been made out to be. If we read carefully, we may actually come to the opposite conclusion.

Jennifer Brandt writes about the detective genre, and she reveals that the popular debate often misses the point. She argues that the novel is not a model for feminism, inside or outside of the Church. She suggests that this detective thriller is truly just that, conforming to almost every expectation and stereotype.
Her analysis challenges the premises of those who suggest that Brown’s novel presents anything new, different, or contrary to the patriarchal standards for gendered behaviors.

**The Awakening**

This exploration of the reaction to a novel has paralleled an experience I have every spring. I have the pleasure of seeing a mind’s awakening, expanding, comprehending, seeing in a way not yet imagined. It seems profound, and in some way it is, but it is also a quite normal process of intellectual growth. Let me explain.

Every spring for the last ten years, I have taught a first-year course which I created for the Honors program at my university. It replaces the standard Introduction to Literature course required of almost all students, because most students in the Honors program have already been introduced quite thoroughly to literature. Titled Twentieth Century Literature and Culture, it is designed not only to enhance their appreciation of literature but also to provide an introduction to literary theory and its linguistic underpinnings. The students are always from diverse disciplines and diverse cultures, which I have found provides the perfect cauldron for preparing this potion.

In short, these bright first-year students, most recently out of high school, are introduced first to the premises of Modernism, as distinguished from Romanticism, broadly defined. By spring break, we are moving into Postmodernism, and they are thoroughly uncomfortable with the breakdown of certainty and stability. However, by the time we reach the final weeks, they are not only comfortable with the postmodern dilemma, they also feel extremely empowered by this heretofore secret knowledge. They are further comforted by their understanding that this knowledge is reserved only for the initiate. Only those who have endured the process (in this case, Honors English) will know the code. The initiates have been given a power to understand how a text is created and maintained, but more importantly, how they themselves can alter, indeed create, new texts to serve their needs.

Why have scholars worldwide reacted with such vehemence to a detective novel?

The postmodern dilemma is not necessarily new to intellectual understanding. However, it has recently been magnified by our proliferation of texts and global communication. It has been said that the Internet makes every person on the planet an author and publisher, and with this change, the conditions that grant a text authority are being lost. An accepted text, an authoritative text, must have readers who accept that authority. And we are in the process of losing millions and millions of readers, who are being replaced.
with millions and millions of writers, all of whom have more or less equal authority.

It is the sacred or divine feminine, the goddess figure who plays the critical role in this retelling of history and religion. This feminine archetype of power and divinity is central to the study of religion, history, and literature. It is also one which today plays an iconic role in postmodern cultural studies, as well as psychology, sociology, folklore, and linguistics.

The novel has become a proxy debate for two of the most compelling scholarly and social issues of our time: the feminist/post-feminist challenge to patriarchal authority; and the textual construction of meaning and value. Combined, these represent the intersection of two of the most inflammatory academic and social conflicts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Divinity, femininity, and dominance, all mixed in with Leonardo da Vinci, a detective story, and a little romance. The answer becomes obvious.
When Salome inquired when the things concerning which she asked should be known, the Lord said: When ye have trampled on the garment of shame, and when the two become one and the male with the female is neither male nor female...In the Gospel according to the Egyptians...they say that “the Savior himself said: I have come to destroy the works of the female.”

—Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, iii

Jesus was the original feminist.

—Lee Teabing to Sophie Neveu (Brown 334)

Robert Langdon’s “three hundred page draft—tentatively titled *Symbols of the Lost Sacred Feminine*” (Brown 43), perhaps sounds an unlikely addition to the publications list of a contemporary Harvard art historian and “symbologist” (98). Were it to appear in print, however, it would doubtless find the kind of mass readership of which most Harvard academics (with some famous exceptions) only dream. The audience for this kind of popular scholarship is considerable, drawn largely from educated professional classes estranged from the established religious traditions of Western society—most conspicuously Christianity—but retaining powerful attachments to generically “spiritual” and transcendental longings in the pursuit of which their characteristically modern and conflicted forms of affluence and education perform an enabling role (Hanegraaff, *New Age*, 514-525). This is the core constituency of the so-called New Age generation, alienated from the material conditions of production and consumption that simultaneously support and provoke those unfulfilled desires which alternative forms of contemporary spirituality promise, with varying degrees of confidence, to fulfil (Mears and Ellison 289-94). The imagery of these movements of religious feeling in modern society draws promiscuously on a rich variety of sources, which textbooks such as Langdon’s intended volume exist to marketise and catalogue, systematising vaguely held intuitions into...
bodies of belief which mimic the doctrines of the major faiths—even as they also explicitly reproach them—and helping resolve the New Age experience into something like an emergent religion (Heelas 110-135).

In some important respects, the rich and variegated communities of New Age adherents nonetheless represent an anomaly in the history of ideas and in the master-narrative of religion in Western society. They were not scheduled to happen. According to the well-worn arguments of the secularisation hypothesis, which has been such a powerful motor in Enlightenment thought since the middle of the eighteenth century, organized religion was supposed to be doomed by the irresistible two-hundred-year advance of reason, science and the unprecedented material prosperity brought about by technological civilization (Wallis and Bruce 8-31). The myth of modernization has for some time presented several options for explaining the eventual fate of religion in the post-confessional world, but neither a return of religion as a public force nor its continuing capacity to shape people according to its own ethos and instill into them an enduring habitus was supposed to be among them (Villa 540-552). To be sure, very few thinkers expected religion to disappear quickly or completely with the expansion and ascendancy of industrial society. Typified by the sociologist Thomas Luckmann, most assigned religion to a provisional space in the private sphere where it would simply wither as the conditions of its existence (put simply, scarcity, subsistence and superstition) were gradually ameliorated (114-146). Religious institutions, it was assumed, would undergo a parallel process of internal secularization, adapting increasingly to the requirements of modern social structures while maintaining their residual religious symbolism, which would steadily mutate into alternative and wholly material forms of cultural expression such as art and recreation. Some analysts, such as Robert Bellah, imagined that national ideologies or civil religions would functionally replace religious traditions, or expected socially constructive religious values (such as charity or solidarity) to permeate modern societies elsewhere in headlong retreat from traditional forms of religious observance (164-189). Few were prepared for the global resurgence of religions as public forces and as the powerful shapers of religious subjects they now seem set to become in many parts of the globalised world (Berger 1-19).

Adherents of the range of philosophies and spiritualities embraced by the flexible terminology of the New Age complicate the narrative of secularisation still further. Their general suspicion of established authority, hierarchy and doctrinal allegiance actually endorses in important senses the secularist model of enhanced individualism, dissenting enquiry and freedom of thought—signature attitudes of the Enlightenment response to traditional religious belief and authority (Bruce 75-90). At the same time, New Age dissatisfaction with what is frequently regarded as the incomplete or attenuated account of human
purpose implied by the Enlightenment paradigm, and with many of the social, cultural and environmental effects of secularisation, stands in uneasy tension with the elevation of reason and progress that are such mobilising concepts in the modern project. To the affront of Enlightenment apologetics, New Age polemic frequently critiques precisely those principles that the emissaries of the radical, materialist Enlightenment once believed would eventually sweep aside the obscurantism, charismatic hierarchy and irrationalism associated with the benighted ages of faith (Israel, 218-30). A specific object of New Age ethical dissatisfaction, indeed, is that area of rational endeavour seen by many champions of the inductive method to be the touchstone of serious intellectual advance—science. That the chief beneficiaries of modernity should question the most obvious manifestation of their emancipation from the constraints of nature is seen by many of its critics as the ultimate delusion of the New Age (Kaminer 189-219), while admirers of the movement discern in its response to science both the pedigree and the defining ethic of a genuinely distinctive worldview (Sheldrake 149-164).

Misconceived or prescient, the constellation of New Age values and attitudes which now plays such a prominent role in the popular imagination in Western society has a distinct and in many respects impressive genealogy. Understanding something of the alignment of forces within this heritage of ideas sheds revealing light upon the appeal of The Da Vinci Code to a contemporary readership and helps elucidate the complex of heterodox religious and spiritual abstractions that have proved so compelling for a significant segment of that readership. The notion of the sacred feminine is, it would appear, the most resonant and sensational of these concepts, striking deep chords within the novel’s fanbase and beyond, coalescing with religious themes and intuitions in the wider culture and gathering up into its orbit a cluster of hopes and anxieties associated with the current state of the world and our reaction to it. Dan Brown’s account of the sacred feminine may be in vital respects confused and diminished, and there may well also be far-reaching objections to be raised about the salience of the concept per se as a viable religious perspective on the multiple ambiguities of twenty-first century life. Nevertheless, the origins of the sacred feminine run to the heart of the New Age critique of both traditional religious orthodoxy and Enlightenment rationality. Understanding their place in the legacy of Western spirituality offers unique insights into the character of religious thought in late industrial culture. That The Da Vinci Code has created the critical space in popular culture for such an intervention is certainly to be welcomed.

Orthodox opponents of the New Age frequently contend that little of its theological content is, in fact, new. In this regard, it may be poorly served by its nomenclature. Certainly, subversive and alternative belief systems in which the
female principle, however constructed, figures prominently have been central to the imaginings of Counter-Enlightenment protests against the rise of reason and modernity for several centuries. They perhaps achieve their most recognisable expression in the cultural productions of Romanticism, where they appear as essentially poetic and imaginary valorisations of nature and the earth, in contradistinction to what many artists and thinkers of the Romantic period perceived prophetically as the growing menace of industrialisation, urbanisation and technology (Bate 24-44):

Sacred goddess, Mother Earth
Thou from whose immortal bosom
Gods, and men, and beasts have birth
Leaf and blade, and bud and blossom.
—P.B. Shelley, “Song of Proserpine” (Shelley 612)

Influential critics of Romanticism, such as Isaiah Berlin, have highlighted the extent to which Romantic ideologues projected backwards the sources of their protest on to a re-imagined version of antiquity and the religious imagery of the classical past—when, in the cadences of John Keats, “holy were the haunted forest boughs, / Holy the air, the water and the fire” (Keats 341). This process was far more complex and less crude than Brown’s oversimplified stand-off between Christian and pagan, but it nonetheless included—and in a vital sense initiated—a deep-seated interrogation of Christianity within elements of Romantic literature, driven principally by the perceived complicity of the Church with the injustices and depredations of early industrial society (Berlin 21-46). Despite its frustratingly garbled account of these movements of ideas, The Da Vinci Code nevertheless succeeds in isolating the fundamentally theological and symbolic nature of the contest, echoing recent Romantic theory in its restatement of the centrality of religious conflict to this aspect of the rhetoric of Romanticism (Balfour 71-90). The ambivalent figure of the “Eternal Feminine” in High Romantic writing—made famous by that most ambiguous of Romantics, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe—has its origins in a promulgation of alternative mythologies, a concentration of symbolism and iconography around a strategic resistance to both the supposed patriarchal power of monotheistic religion and the presumed reductionism of instrumental reason and its unforgiving institutional, economic and political expressions (Hoeveler 111-133). In the formulation and enrichment of ideas such as the Eternal Feminine, Romantic artists often found themselves propelled to the fringes of their own orthodox religious and philosophical inheritance, drawn by the forbidden allure of the suppressed and subterranean traditions reportedly marginalised by both Christianity and the growing philosophical rationalism of the academies (Abrams 169-197). This esoteric body of belief included fashionable if
outlandish Hermetic doctrines from the centuries immediately before and after
Christ, in which something approaching an all-encompassing female divinity
had been represented to her devotees by the canopy of the stars in the night sky.
Equally potent for Romantic aesthetics was the trope of the mystical androgyny,
found in an array of similarly arcane traditions, including the occult wisdom of
the alchemists and the cabbala, as well as the secret teachings of Orphism and
Neoplatonism—and which fed the Romantic temperament in its challenge to
established normative definitions of gender and sexuality (Roberts, “Ethereal
Chemicals”). In The Da Vinci Code, Brown makes much of classical Gnosticism
as a primary source for the maintenance through history of a cryptic and
counter-Christian devotion to the sacred feminine. The acquaintance of
Romantic writers with Gnosticism was, however, uncertain and fragmentary,
largely restricted to their knowledge of the tantalising but sparse citations left by
the Gnostics’ dismissive patristic opponents. Smitten by the seditious allure of
Gnosticism, intellectually accomplished and wide-ranging writers such as
Novalis, Shelley, and Victor Hugo brooded over these elusive sources,
frequently drawn to the recovery of ancient heresy because of its mysterious
resonance with the theological and philosophical conflicts of their own time.
Nevertheless, these efforts fell far short of the maintenance of a continuous
tradition of alternative wisdom preserved intact from the ancient past and
transmitted unbroken to later generations of adherents (Hanegraaff,
“Romanticism,” 237-269). Ronald Hutton has used the inchoate and haphazard
character of the resultant Romantic construction of the Eternal Feminine to point
up precisely the absence of any systematic articulation of feminised divinity in
Romantic literature, despite the dazzling catalogue of visionary female figures
who populate Romantic epic—including, in the English tradition, archetypal
representations such as Shelley’s Asia, Blake’s Enitharmon or Keats’
hallucinatory priestess of the Titans, Moneta. Instead, Hutton has highlighted
another, related repository of ideas within which a fully-fledged concept of the
Goddess assumed, in the course of the nineteenth century, a shape and substance
of enormous import to contemporary New Age spirituality (32-43).

The anticlerical and sceptical vector in Enlightenment thought found one of
its principle targets in the Bible, which was to become the focus of intense
scrutiny in European intellectual circles in the period after the Peace of
Westphalia of 1648. This process was furthered by the growth of imperialism
and the encounters between the European powers and a diversity of ancient and
exotic civilizations—many of them immeasurably older than Christianity—to
which the expansion of trade and empire in the early modern period swiftly led.
Engagement with the cultures of remote societies was often driven, of course,
by the imperatives of Christian mission and by aggressive territorial incursion
on the part of the European powers across the globe. In the academies and
universities of Europe the results of the confrontation with alien societies gave rise to a feverish debate, often at the fringes of approved scholarship, and frequently involving a corresponding critical reflection on Europe’s own “primitive” foundations as reflected in the status of the Hebrew Scriptures and the meaning of classical mythology. Growing fascination with the “otherness” of colonised or appropriated cultures stimulated in certain circles a “comparativist” reassessment of the founding documents of the European worldview (Zammito 221-255). Initially, late seventeenth century thinkers such as Athanasius Kircher, Alexander Ross and John Turner attempted to comprehend the mythologies of other ancient or unfamiliar cultures by emphasising the historical and doctrinal priority of the Old Testament and the derivative character of all other belief systems, including those of the Egyptians, Greeks and Hindus. At a later stage, more progressive minds such as Thomas Burnet and Noel Antoine Pluche, influenced by the preference for deism over revelation, urged a rationalistic interpretation of heathen religions, finding in primitive religious belief a perfectly comprehensible compound of superstition and ignorance of the laws of nature. In Scotland, the classicist Thomas Blackwell and in Italy, Giovanni Vico—one of the greatest minds of the age—pioneered by the middle of the eighteenth century the first serious departure from these generally patronising and “scientific” perspectives, arguing, instead, for an account of both ancient myth and savage belief which viewed each as coherent, if sometimes debased, representations of sublime truths: what Blackwell chose to term the “pagan philosophy” (Ackerman 147-155).

The distinct idiom of the response to myth typified by Blackwell and Vico had a pronounced leaning towards syncretism: grouping together into capacious thematic categories otherwise disparate elements of belief systems often separated by vast distances of time and space. This was an essentially imaginative undertaking, of enormous appeal to artists, writers and philosophers intent upon the affirmation of an organic past with which to resist the fissiparous forces of modern, industrial disintegration (Hungerford 62-91). It is out of this impulse that there emerges in the late eighteenth century the first shadowy image of a Great Goddess, unifying in her iconography the elemental qualities of female deities from across the imperial possessions and from within the mythological inheritance of the West itself. Synthesisers and encyclopedists such as Jacob Bryant, Charles Dupuis and George Stanley Faber sought to aggregate the characteristics of the principal female divinities of both the ancient world and the newly discovered religions of India and the Far East around certain grounding concepts such as seasonal change, astronomical observation or cosmic maternity (Feldman and Richardson 244-268). The influence of scriptural paradigms continued to be of incalculable importance in this process, and Faber, especially, derived his unitary image of a Mother
Goddess from what he claimed was a race memory of Noah’s Ark, teeming with life. The argument also fed, however, on the extensive quantities of new material reaching scholars from the writings of imperial travellers, missionaries and explorers. In his remarkable 1808 compilation from his journals and commonplace books, entitled “Essays on the Sacred Isles in the West,” the English soldier and amateur antiquarian, Francis Wilford, equated a number of classical and Indic goddesses with one another, at one point pausing to notice the recurrence of the idea of whiteness in their names or appellations (Wilford 165-188).

A growing band of classicists took to this perception of their discipline, perhaps because it offered an overarching explanatory framework within which the volatile body of classical myth could at last be organised and interpreted. This was, of course, a widespread Enlightenment aspiration. In 1849, the German philologist, Eduard Gerhard, proposed that behind all of the diverse goddesses of ancient Greece there stood a single Mother Goddess, venerated in prehistory before the rise of a Bronze Age warrior society had eclipsed her worship (Gerhard 101-105). Echoed in the work of a generation of Continental classicists, convinced that the cultures of Mesopotamia and Persia—into which European colonial expansion was now proceeding apace—were the ancestor civilizations of the Greeks, the concept of the Mother Goddess reverberated into other social and political debates taking place more widely in European thought.

The writer most closely associated with the initial popularisation of the Great Goddess hypothesis, J. J. Bachofen, was a Swiss lawyer, who, in his 1861 book Das Mutterrecht, made the important advance from identification of an ancient universal Goddess to the proposition that the religious and cultic arrangements associated with her veneration reflected the fact that the earliest human societies had in fact been matriarchal. Bachofen’s remarkable claim was to be of tremendous import in the promotion of the concept of the sacred feminine. Ironically for both its defenders and opponents, his original formulation of the theory rested upon an assumption for the most part conveniently ignored by his modern admirers. This was the view that the shift from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society represented evolutionary progress for humanity, as the aggressive, inventive cultures of the ancient Near East shook off the stifling influence of woman-centred but essentially static institutions (Bachofen 220-43).

The vision of a primordial Goddess shimmering behind all of the belief systems of the ancient world would have remained the preserve of armchair academics and antiquarians had it not been for the hold it gained in the course of the nineteenth century over the fledgling disciplines of archaeology and anthropology. An initially sceptical community of amateur field archaeologists, following in the footsteps of imperial travellers and administrators, fell into the
habit of interpreting ancient and prehistoric religions in terms of the comparative, tribal and totemic categories by which orientalist scholarship had begun to classify—and regulate—many of the subject peoples of empire (Said 73-92). Projecting these specifications on to the distant past became a natural propensity of classicists and folklorists across Europe seeking explanatory frameworks through which to make sense of the emerging archaeological and ethnographic record. By the beginning of the twentieth century writers such as the medievalist Edmund Chambers and the hugely influential classicist, Jane Harrison, began to write openly of a Great Earth Mother, progenitor of all of the gods and goddesses of ancient Europe, whose traces could be found variously in Greek myth, in early medieval rite and custom and in traditional folktale and romance. As Ronald Hutton has shown, the conversion to the Goddess hypothesis in the first decade of the twentieth century of Sir Arthur Evans, celebrated excavator of the Aegean Bronze Age warrior civilizations of Crete, proved decisive in establishing a consensus around which vast and disparate deposits of archaeological and anthropological material from across Europe were to be subsequently interpreted (37-40). In the years immediately preceding the First World War, intellectuals such as Harrison, Dechelette and even Sir James Frazer himself had helped establish an academic consensus that seemed able to translate almost any selection of material from premodern society—literary, historical or cultic—into evidence in favour of the Goddess hypothesis. The argument could assume various guises, and in its detail led not infrequently to incompatible conclusions. A common trend, however, was for writers of varying levels of scholarly rigour to seize upon a place or a period in European or Asian antiquity and suddenly marshal a whole raft of discordant data in support of the presence of the Goddess. John Arthur Goodchild brought the analysis home, as it were, when he boldly asserted in his strange book of 1898, *The Light of the West*, that a Great Mother Goddess had been the overarching divinity of all of the peoples of “Celtic” Britain, with her cult centre at no less prominent a site than Glastonbury. This argument was to have lasting significance for the revival of interest in the sacred feminine in the British Isles, particularly because Goodchild, a medic and self-proclaimed psychic, openly called in his study for the revival of devotion to the Goddess in order to heal the ills of the modern world (Goodchild 124-144).

Goodchild, of course, possesses many of the hallmarks of eccentricity that would make adherence to the Great Goddess hypothesis such an easy target for mainstream scholarship in subsequent decades. His position signals an important shift, however, in the speculative traditions of the sacred feminine because of its openly partisan and theological slant, determinedly advocating a return to Goddess worship and matriarchy. It is also arguable that Goodchild’s work, despite its fringe status, exposes to view the theological—indeed
evangelical—impulse residing at the heart of the Goddess hypothesis almost from its origins. As an intrinsically oppositional position, disputing the hegemony of both Abrahamic monotheism and Enlightenment rationalism, and deliberately promoting marginalised or ignored traditions of belief, advocacy of the Great Goddess exhibits many of the features of a heresy, contesting the dominance of a powerful orthodoxy and posing, as heresies always do, a radically divergent account of religious and philosophical truth. Perhaps the most notorious example of the attempt to rewrite religious history by openly presenting the cult of the Goddess as an underground heresy was Margaret Murray’s book *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* of 1921. Murray’s work was destined to become a seminal text in the revival of modern paganism, because of its insistence that the medieval witch craze was a disguised form of Goddess worship, maintained by a conservative rural population largely untouched by Christianity and systematically persecuted by a frightened and misogynistic Church (Murray 19-28). No amount of subsequent refutation of Murray’s methodology and her conclusions has dislodged her books from the consciousness of modern paganism and its feminist fellow-travellers. The continuing appeal of her ideas highlights the extent to which support for the sacred feminine is prepared to defy orthodoxy whether it comes in theological or academic forms (Simpson 89-96).

Brown’s fiction-making is therefore perversely correct in repeatedly describing the doctrine of the sacred feminine in the terminology of a heresy, feared and despised by an anxious religious and political establishment, even if the account he then offers of its historical origins is, like Murray’s before him, almost entirely anachronistic:

The Priory believes that Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion forever….The days of the goddess were over. The pendulum had swung. Mother Earth had become a man’s world, and the gods of destruction and war were taking their toll. The male ego had spent two millennia running unchecked by its female counterpart. The Priory of Sion believed that it was this obliteration of the sacred feminine in modern life that had caused what the Hopi Native Americans called *koyanisquatsi*—“life out of balance”—an unstable situation marked by testosterone-fueled wars, a plethora of misogynistic societies, and a growing disrespect for Mother Earth (172-174).

Like all heresies, the doctrine of the sacred feminine rests upon the disputation of key religious and mythological texts. As we have seen, from its outset, the theory of a primordial, Goddess-worshipping matriarchy required a comprehensive hermeneutical re-visioning of the immense body of historical
and textual material out of which the dominant narrative of Western civilization had been constructed. In its specifically anthropological ancestry, the theory drew obvious sustenance from the strain in late Enlightenment thought that subjected the Bible in general, and the New Testament in particular, to dissenting sceptical enquiry. Finding the Goddess involved the sifting of manipulated source material supposedly fashioned in the interests of prevailing antifeminist orthodoxies, whether these lay in the scriptures or in the canonical versions of classical myth. The interrogation of the Biblical tradition by German Higher Criticism in the nineteenth century participated in a similar endeavour: restoring from their residual remains in the scriptural texts the plurality of stories, beliefs and practices homogenised by later orthodoxy into a closed and theologically coherent system from which all alternative narratives had been rigorously effaced (Smith 173-179; Barr 32-59). Once again, Brown’s understanding of the argument here is oversimplified and sensationalised, but his intuitions guide him towards a basically valid perception of the doctrinal struggles reflected in the construction of both the Old and the New Testaments. As Teabing remarks:

“The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions.…

Jesus Christ was a historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has ever seen… His life was recorded by thousands of followers across the land…More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.” (312-313)

Central to Brown’s argument, of course, is the insistence that consolidation of the canon of the New Testament involved two related forms of exclusion or redaction. The first is the familiar one of Goddess apologetics: that the development of the dogmatic coherence of the New Testament repeated and intensified the patriarchal Judaic elimination of the Goddess from all understanding and experience of the sacred. The second is much more unusual: that the developing story of the one of the key actors in the New Testament drama—Mary Magdalene—is profoundly interwoven with the same process by which the sacred feminine was erased from the historical memory of the Christian faith. Although Brown’s attempt to unite these two themes is not without precedent, in its final form it represents one of the most conspicuous contributions of *The Da Vinci Code* to the contemporary renewal of interest in the Great Goddess. Brown’s writing shows some passing acquaintance with a vibrant tradition of New Testament scholarship that has for over a century promoted Mary Magdalene as a character of central importance to the ministry
of Jesus and to the Apostolic witness of the early Church; whose standing was later deliberately minimised by the misogyny and jealousy of a male priesthood in the first few Christian centuries (Brock 177-216). There is little or no suggestion in this literature, however, that Mary Magdalene represented unorthodox or pagan perceptions of women or of spirituality. Indeed, recognition of her status in Jesus’ ministry is frequently used by theologians to highlight Jesus’ inclusiveness and the innovative gender equality of the first Christians, in contrast to the sexual norms of surrounding paganism (de Boer 41-56). Brown’s modification, here, is to link the revaluation of the role of Mary Magdalene in the events of the New Testament to the revaluation of the feminine principle in the overall apprehension of religious truth.

This departure involves establishing a genealogy for the image of Mary Magdalene that somehow parallels the fortunes of the cult of the Great Goddess in the context of the rise of a powerful and hostile Church. As is by now well known, Brown is furnished with a crucial link between the two strands of his conception by the evidence of the Gnostic Gospels, and the glimpses they contain of an alternative biography of Mary. This is further enhanced by the (entirely specious) bloodline theory, the centrepiece of which is the secret marriage of Mary to Jesus and the descent of a hidden royal lineage from them (Brown 329-336; Baigent et al 346-355, 419-421). Aspects of this dual hypothesis have their origins in early Biblical criticism and in the first serious efforts by German theologians to question the composition and historicity of the Gospels. The profile of Mary Magdalene drawn by the Tubingen school of New Testament studies was consistent with the broader aim of reconstructing the background to the life of Jesus by downplaying the miraculous elements of the Gospels and filling in their biographical and historical omissions through reference to extra-canonical sources and informed conjecture. In this setting, supposition as to the nature of the companionship of Mary and Jesus could run free, leading a number of prominent scholars to surmise that intimacy may indeed have existed between them. Nineteenth century speculation stopped short, however, of the direct suggestion that the two were married, preferring to emphasise, instead, the dependence of the excitable and histrionic woman demoniac on the male charismatic leader in whose quiet service she found peace of mind (Haskins 328-331). The various components of Brown’s underlying vision of the sacred feminine combine in an internally coherent synthesis of Goddess, Magdalene and New Age feminine principle only through a feat of the imagination, which can supply missing connections and elaborate a pattern of associations across highly differentiated material. It is therefore not surprising to discover that the most significant forerunners of Brown’s portrait of Mary Magdalene and the Goddess can be found in two key areas—twentieth century historical fiction and the treasury of primary texts of early Christian Gnosticism.
unearthed by the archaeological findings at Nag Hammadi. Upon its discovery in 1945, this astonishing Fourth Century library revealed in something approaching a complete form the traditions of heretical Gnostic belief that had been known to the Romantics and their followers only in fragments. There is, of course, a relationship between these two sets of materials exploited by Brown, but it is a complex one. Some of the important novels in which a genuine anticipation of Brown’s preoccupations may be detected were written long before, or in complete ignorance of, the Nag Hammadi documents. The Nag Hammadi texts themselves reflect a huge range of theological positions, of which classical Gnosticism is only one strain, and within which the role of a divine female principle is a sub-theme of uncertain provenance and doubtful meaning (Williams 54-76).

Nevertheless, it is certainly true that the Nag Hammadi cache, supplemented by other ancient Gnostic texts reappraised in the light of its discovery, provides the basis of an affinity between the figure of Mary Magdalene and a wider vision of the sacred feminine with which she is directly implicated in certain strains of Gnostic thought. Brown’s version of this association is understandably novelistic, stressing the recognition of Mary as, first, Jesus’ wife and lover and, secondly, as a mystical channel of the divine wisdom, the *Pistis Sophia*. The first of these propositions is, as we have demonstrated, a fringe and intermittent conjecture of a still broadly orthodox interpretation of the New Testament. The second, however, is a profound deviation from orthodoxy predicated upon a startlingly unconventional perception of the nature of the divine, wildly at odds with accepted Judeo-Christian dogma (King 83-93). Several Gnostic texts do indeed offer this portrait of Mary Magdalene as a favoured and ecstatic visionary, accorded privileged access to the secret teachings of Jesus, the uniqueness and prestige of which incurs the fear and resentment of the apostles (Haskins 37-43). A recurring motif of this writing is the erotically-charged metaphor of sacred marriage, though the status of the motif is hotly disputed in the context of the general Gnostic disapprobation of the body and sexuality (Calvert-Koyzis, “Re-sexing the Magdalene”). Similarly, the relative lateness of the Gnostic texts, when compared with, particularly, the synoptic Gospels, casts doubt on the perception of them as genuine, rival accounts of power and gender relations in the Early Church. They may, in fact, require to be read in the context of the prolific allegorical mythmaking of the later Gnostic temperament and its insistence on the priority of secret knowledge over witness and faith (Schaberg 297-318). Their indiscriminate sampling of the traditions of wisdom literature from Neoplatonism and Hermeticism is consistent with the decadent syncretism of the mystery religions that held such fascination for the pagan Alexandrian
intellectual elites of the second and third centuries and whose imprint is stamped all over Gnostic theology.

Syncretism has been, as we have shown, a crucial process in the formation and defence of the sacred feminine from the Romantics onwards. The Da Vinci Code is a relentlessly syncretic venture, evidenced most clearly in the endless pseudo-scholarly digressions which fill out the narrative. Syncretism, it might be argued, is propensity of the myth-making mind, closely allied to conspiracy and paranoia. Umberto Eco’s novel, Foucault’s Pendulum famously ironises it as a method of historical enquiry: “I began to let myself be lulled by feelings of resemblance: the notion that everything might be mysteriously related to everything else” (139); “There are always connections; you have only to want to find them” (190); “The problem is to find occult links between, for example, the cabala, and the spark plugs of a car” (314). “So wanting connections, we found connections–always, everywhere and between everything. The world exploded into a whirling network of kinships, where everything pointed to everything else, everything explained everything else” (384). Several of the works of fiction that prefigure The Da Vinci Code repeat the same procedure, and it is through the power of their syncretic imaginings that they have made a decisive contribution to the dissemination of the sacred feminine as an appealing religious concept for the modern age.

Probably the most revealing and accomplished of these works is Robert Graves’ 1946 novel King Jesus. Graves’ chief contribution to the return of the Goddess to twentieth century religious awareness—and still widely underestimated in most studies of the phenomenon—is his 1948 work of poetic anthropology, in the tradition of Frazer and Harrison, The White Goddess. The White Goddess is a work of painstaking, even obsessive, erudition, reconstructing the presence of the Goddess behind patriarchal religious dogma—classical, Jewish and Christian—and providing her with a devotional poetic and cultic history. It is also, however, a manifesto, urging the revival of her veneration as an antidote to the bankruptcy of modern theism and the menace of scientific rationalism, which Graves sees as the secular heir to the patriarchal values of the recent religious past (Graves, White Goddess 465-479). The impact of Graves’ ideas on the student and countercultural politics of the 1960s has never been properly appraised, but his combination of poetic devotion to the Muse and detailed defence of a matriarchal understanding of ancient religion and society carried his ideas to a readership largely untouched by abstruse academic debates (Psilopoulos 159-175). As a gifted novelist, Graves was also able to harness important aspects of his prose fiction of the 1940s to the same project: vindicating the experience of the Goddess and the worship of the sacred feminine and situating them in the imaginative portrayal of archaic cultures in which otherwise inaccessible scholarly claims might be sympathetically
rendered and explored. *King Jesus* lies at the heart of this creative endeavour. Exhibiting a deep and knowledgeable indebtedness to the anthropological methods of the Cambridge School and the hermeneutics of the Higher Criticism, the novel recaptures the magical, conflicted character of first century Palestine in which the personality of Jesus is formed. In Graves’ realization, this is a place of feverishly competing belief-systems, ethnic rivalries, brutal political intrigue, messianic expectations and endemic superstition. While undeniably dominant, the austere Jewish worship of “Jehovah,” centred on the Jerusalem Temple, exists alongside residual and emergent religious practices that call into question its temporal authority and cultic credentials. The fictional universe of *King Jesus* pays homage to an alternative, healing, ceremonial conception of religious sentiment in which hidden, occult interpretations of seemingly unassailable orthodoxies represent not simply heresy, but a return to a kind of feminised and unifying religious innocence intimate with the mysteries of life, love, death and rebirth. Jesus is secretly and deliberately brought into the world by his royal parents to announce and inaugurate this cleansed and balanced perception of divinity. It is a perception epitomised by the sacred marriage of king and priestess, and which, it is intended, will culminate in the anticipated establishment of a purified socio-religious order under the sovereignty of the “the Great Triple Moon-goddess who is generally reputed to have mothered the Mediterranean races…” (Graves, *King Jesus* 8). The novel attains its unique level of human and theological interest, however, when it returns to the inner dynamic of the New Testament itself, presenting in its central character a figure whose appeal lies in his unexpected resistance to the onward drive and closure of the pagan matriarchal impulse, including his role in the sacred marriage. Graves’ Jesus is a personality of commanding presence in the novel by virtue of his unflagging individualism—an extraordinarily intensified self-consciousness that refuses the immobilising surrender and loss of self implied in a preordained mythological destiny and opts instead to assert free choice and spiritual agency.

As a sacred King, the last legitimate ruler of an immensely ancient dynasty, his avowed intention was to fulfil all the ancient prophecies that concerned himself and bring the history of his House to a real and unexceptionable conclusion. He intended by an immense exercise of power and trust in God the Father to annul the boastful tradition of royal pomp…and at the same time to break the lamentable cycle of birth, procreation, death and rebirth in which he and his subjects had become involved since Adam’s day. Merely to resign his claim was not enough. His resolute hope was to defeat Death itself by enduring with his people the so-called Pangs of the Messiah, the cataclysmic events which were the expected prelude to the coming of the Kingdom of God (239).

Jesus attains his spiritual autonomy in two ways: first, through the achievement of self-mastery in which all personal vices and appetites are
subdued; secondly—and much more demandingly—through direct confrontation with the representatives of the pagan Goddess and what Jesus regards as her pernicious rites. The second of these tasks forms one of the major themes of the novel and is expressed in a series of dramatic encounters between Jesus and the remnant of the Goddess’ followers. The most momentous of these is the contest with Mary the Hairdresser (Mary Magdalene). Mary is depicted in the novel as a seemingly outcast priestess of forbidden rites and holy icons, which she preserves as reminders to Israel of its repressed matriarchal, Goddess-centred past. The ritual confrontation between Jesus and Mary at the Terebinth Fair is a turning point in the novel. Graves goes to considerable lengths in the struggle to emphasise that Jesus is not simply ignorant of the Goddess, like so many of his naïve contemporaries. He in fact possesses an intimate understanding of her cult. He remains, nonetheless, her sworn adversary, “come to destroy the works of the Female” (191) and intent, quite literally, on writing her out of the sacred narratives of Israel by wresting from Mary the authority to interpret the ancient icons in her charge.

A great contest ensued between Mary and Jesus over the interpretation of the pictures, and neither was ever at a loss for the word of contradiction.

Mary said: “See where my Mistress, the First Eve, is seated on her birth stool under the palm tree. The people are awaiting a great event, for the pangs are upon her.”

Swiftly Jesus answered her: “No, witch that is not the First Eve: that is Deborah judging the Israelites under the palm-tree of Deborah. For so it is written.” (213)

Jesus, once again by consummate force of will, finally breaks the resolve of Mary and wins the contest at the Terebinth Fair, proclaiming his intent to take spiritual authority forever away from the regressive claims of mother-right in the name of the fierce but benevolent Father God of the Jewish people. In one of the many ironies of King Jesus, it transpires that Jesus’ boldest gestures of defiance in fact unintentionally lock him still more securely into his inescapable destiny as sacred king and sacrificial victim. Mary Magdalene and the Goddess therefore enjoy a kind of victory over Jesus as he is condemned to death on the Cross in the same fashion as the countless other consorts who have preceded him. Graves’ Mary, though not the bride to whom Jesus is betrothed, combines in her role individual will and determination with hieratic access to the hidden religious truths of the divine feminine. In this fusion, she draws heavily on the Mary of Gnostic and other heresy while fully anticipating her pivotal function in the esoteric history that forms the backdrop to The Da Vinci Code.

What this connection underlines is a point made throughout this essay: that the return of the Goddess is fundamentally a cultural phenomenon of modern society, fulfilling a need and radiating through the intellectual and spiritual life
of a culture obscurely dissatisfied with its moral and spiritual inheritance. It is a movement of feeling that seeks out, and makes use of, a range of resources routinely branded as heterodox, proscribed or anathema; seizing imaginatively upon peripheral or rejected beliefs wherever they are to be found and taking them up into a fully-developed protest against both religious and secular orthodoxies and the diminished accounts of human nature they continue to pedal. In this respect, the question of validity is a less relevant issue than the expressive potential of the concept itself—its enabling function within a broader economy of alternative spiritual realities. In the period between the publication of the novels *King Jesus* in 1946 and *The Da Vinci Code* in 2003, interest in the sacred feminine has burgeoned in both scholarly and popular circles all across the developed world. It seems fair to observe from the outset that almost every academic effort to reconstruct a coherent and convincing anthropology of the primordial Goddess and the supposed matriarchal civilization over which she once presided has failed to satisfy the criteria of historical verification (Eller 56-81; 93-116). The accumulation of circumstantial archaeological and folkloristic evidence presented by respected field researchers such as the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas has been seriously challenged by a community of sceptical anthropologists doubtful of the inclination in Goddess scholarship to favour survivalist models of culture and uncritical reconstructions of the attitudes and worldviews of the distant past based on the most problematic of data (Wood 19-23). The spirituality of modern feminism has been a crucial driver in this process, eschewing the Marxist, antireligious preferences of first wave feminism, but determined to articulate a vision of the transcendent free from the patriarchal assumptions of the monotheistic creeds and their damaging misogyny. Almost inevitably, this inflection of the Goddess hypothesis has, as a consequence, been drawn into the orbit of contemporary neopaganism and the synthesising philosophies of movements such as Wicca, with their omnivorous tendency to assimilate widely diverse religious and quasi-religious experiences into a single overarching narrative of feminine religious ontology, from palaeolithic ritual, through Mesopotamian myth, to mediaeval witchcraft (Gadon 233-257). There is, of course, no prima facie reason why the association of Goddess scholarship with openly religious organisations should invalidate its claims. The study of the Bible remains strongly rooted in the practice of Christian theology. However, rebuttal of the arguments in support of the existence of a primordial Goddess cult is made more difficult when it gets confused with repudiation of the sacred feminine itself, for the latter implies a delegitimation of perceptions that have assumed genuine meaning in the lives of many contemporary women. In a sense, the withdrawal of the concept behind the confines of popular fiction shelters it from this criticism, by exempting it from the tests of conventional scholarship—tests which many of its advocates
believe to be fundamentally compromised by their inbuilt rationalist (and masculinist) epistemology.

Paradoxically, this point of apparent impasse may be the juncture at which some sort of evaluation of the significance of the so-called return of the goddess becomes possible without being merely adversarial. Defence of the sacred feminine, as its locus in imaginative writing suggests, is essentially a symbolic undertaking. It is certainly no coincidence that The Da Vinci Code is a text obsessed with symbolism and devoted in large measure to the interpretation of a colossal array of signs, symbols and cryptograms in which are encoded a tremendous religious secret. The act of interpretation involves the discernment of hidden meanings, but it may equally be seen as the imposition of sense and meaning upon otherwise intractable or unmediated material. At the heart of Langdon and Teabing’s quest is a woman’s name, a name that is also the signifier of the divine female principle, Sophia. Sophie Neveu, like Mary Magdalene, is cast in the novel as an individuated woman, but also as a conduit to the religious mystery that forms the centrepiece of Brown’s argument. Interpreting the disputed symbolism of the Goddess is, in the end, an identity-conferring action and this may be its chief purpose all along: once again to invest female cultural identity with a spiritual purpose and to resist the story of patriarchal hegemony and suppression by retelling one of enduring female dignity and power, the wisdom and integrity of which may yet have bounty to communicate to the modern world. If this analysis is correct, the truth conditions of the sacred feminine shift perceptibly, away from historicism and back towards myth, in exactly the direction Simon Pembroke argued some thirty years ago the Goddess hypothesis is always destined to move. When the ancients spoke of matriarchal societies from their own remote past or in distant foreign lands, Pembroke suggests, they employed the concept normatively, as they did with the fearful notion of societies ruled by slaves, to justify—construct, even—their own forms of social organisation and cultural attachment. “Gynaeocracy,” Pembroke states, “is women getting out of hand” (30). The triple claim of primordial Goddess, primitive matriarchy and pervasive sense of the sacred feminine simply reverses this strategy, by inducing a contemporary culture confronted on all sides by crises of its own making to question the complicity of its underpinning spiritual allegiances in the causes of these crises and to contemplate, perhaps at the moment of greatest danger, other more optimistic ways of configuring both the human and the divine.

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