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BERNARD'S CHOSEN

The Knights Templar

FIGHTING INJUSTICE TO RULING THE WORLD

The afterlife of the Templars

Heroes. Villains. Saviors. Destroyers. It's hard to think of another organization that has such a widespread reputation of being both good and evil in almost equal measure. In a strange twist of fate, Philip the Fair's defamation and destruction of the Templars in the fourteenth century has given them an afterlife in the popular imagination that has reached all corners of the world, far surpassing the reach of the medieval order. Given the relative brevity of their existence and the fact that they ultimately failed in their mission, what is it about the Templars that has kept us fascinated for centuries?

By *Danièle Cybulskie*

The Templar Order easily caught the attention of faithful medieval Christians, their vows and their deeds combining some of the most potent ideals of the time. The Templars were obedient and chaste, humble and self-sacrificing, deadly and skilled in the military arts. They were the epitome of faithful devotion over personal comfort as monks, while still retaining the chivalric glamour of knights. In medieval fiction, romantic heroes and lovers found shelter at their temples, and characters in need of penance were sent to serve with them in Outremer. As service in their order could lead to salvation, the Templars were a sort of conduit to a divine power, and they seemed almost superhuman in their devotion and skill.

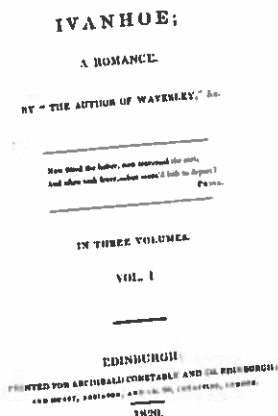
No matter how highly they had been regarded in the

past, however, after losing their hold on the Holy Land the Templars were suddenly vulnerable to more sinister fictions, such as those told by Philip the Fair: fictions which, it seems, the public was all too willing to believe. Fantastical rumors and accusations were spread far and wide, and the Templar name was blackened and besmirched as their order was dissolved. No one wanted to tell heroic stories about them any longer.

After being relatively (not completely) forgotten for centuries, the Templars began their climb back into the popular consciousness in the eighteenth century when they became associated with the Freemasons, a society of intellectuals who were blamed for disrupting the social order to further their own ideals. Thanks to the association the Freemasons made between themselves and the crusader orders, the Templars began to gain a reputation of being rebels against powerful organizations, freedom fighters and righters of injustices. The historical

*The first edition of Sir Walter Scott's novel **Ivanhoe**, published in 1820.*

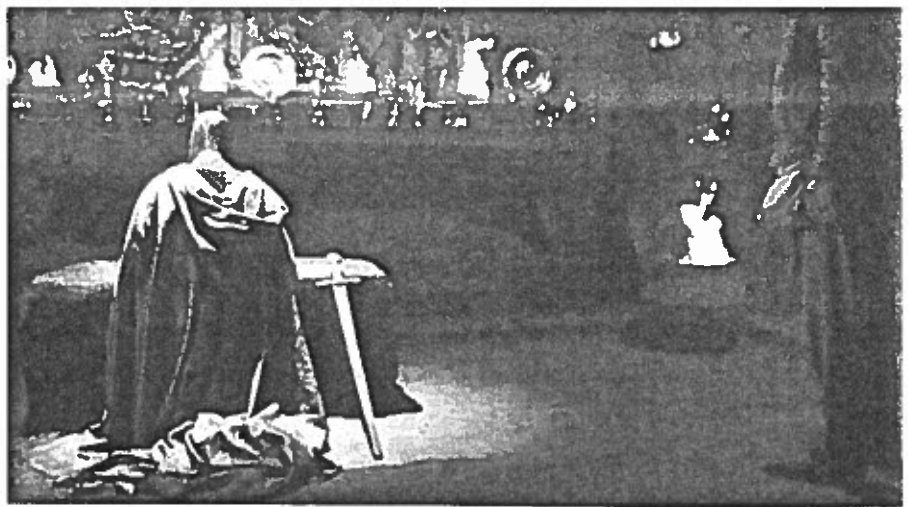
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Templars had never had a history of being rabble-rousers or significantly challenging the status quo. Quite the opposite, in fact: they were endorsed by popes and kings. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, being heroic meant fighting injustice. It seemed to follow that the Templars must naturally have done the same.

Not everyone at this time was in love with the Templars, however. Sir Walter Scott's hugely popular *Ivanhoe* features trigger-happy Templars, all too eager to accuse a woman of witchcraft and try her, despite this not having been their historical function. Scott paints the Templars as more Inquisition than military order, something which may have stemmed more from broadly anti-Catholic sentiment than anti-Templar sentiment, as Scott was writing at a time when the divide between Catholic and Protestant was still an extremely wide gulf. Whatever the reason, Scott's sinister Templars stood as villains to the Freemasons' noble Templar heroes.

In the past several decades, the Templars seem to be more popular than ever, appearing again and again in fiction, with many Templar-themed stories becoming international, record-breaking hits. At times, these modern Templar characters are depicted in a way that is close to their medieval selves: defenders of their faith, for better and for worse. One version of a Templar-esque knight that medieval people would find recognizable in this regard appears in 1989's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* as the only human worthy enough to guard the Holy Grail, just as similarly Templar-esque knights served this function in the medieval poem *Parzival*. (Although Indy's knight's order is called the "Brotherhood of the Cruciform Sword", he is referred to as a knight of the First Crusade, and his white surcoat and red cross are clearly meant to be evocative of the Templars.) This guardian is an unequivocally saintly version of a Templar, untainted by scandal. More recently, though, in the wake of 9/11, the Templar knights in Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* are portrayed as guardians of



the faith in an entirely negative light, as it is their thirst for blood and unprovoked slaughter of Muslims that directly leads to their loss of Jerusalem.

In both *The Last Crusade* and *Kingdom of Heaven*, the Templars' faith is central to their characterization, as we might expect it to be, but there are many instances in modern fiction in which the emphasis is placed on the Templars' martial skills and chivalric virtues instead. Heroic Templars in some modern historical fiction are troubled by their participation in crusading in ways that medieval (fictional) Templars never appear to be, and these troubled Templars are easily tailored to fit the currently popular mold of the brooding action hero, responsible for protecting hugely important, but largely secular, people and things. A famous exam-

Movies such as Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (top) and The Da Vinci Code (bottom) make use of the Templars and have their order carry on to present day.

© Paramount Pictures (above) and Columbia Pictures (below)

A few of the recent bestselling novels which prominently feature the Knights Templar.



ple is James Purefoy's Thomas Marshall in *Ironclad*, who protects both the heroine of the film and Rochester Castle against the evil King John in the name of justice. There are also several series of popular historical romance novels, such as those by Mary Reed McCall and Claire Ashgrove, which feature Templars as dashing warriors, tasked with protecting lusty maidens instead of (or along with) holy relics. Like Marshall, these Templars chafe at their vows, and the romantic Templars often end up being released from that most troublesome vow: chastity. It seems to be a strange choice to cast Templar knights in the role of romantic or secular leads; however, their legendary military prowess has transformed the Templars into cultural shorthand for "elite medieval knight", with their religious nature being relegated to the background. These modern depictions cater to a more secular audience, who may be less troubled by the breaking or relinquishing of religious vows than audiences of centuries past, especially in the name of romantic love.

Here in the twenty-first century, the elaborate espionage (both psychological and technological) of recent history as well as the increasing interconnectedness of the world have created a widespread willingness to believe in long-term, worldwide conspiracies. The Templars are natural targets for a conspiracy theory, given their huge international influence in the Middle Ages and the fact that there are no actual Templars left to disprove any allegations. The late Umberto Eco famously poked fun at this phenomenon in his novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, a story in which the characters gleefully create an absurdly complex literary Templar conspiracy that, in turn, leads to their own destruction. Templar conspiracy does indeed sell these days, and the most popular contemporary Templar fiction by far features them as enmeshed in conspiracy, as well as a certain unwritten understanding that the Templars have always been conspirators and everyone knows it. What is

so fascinating, however, is that there seems to be no consensus as to whether the Templars are out for the good of humanity, or for its destruction.

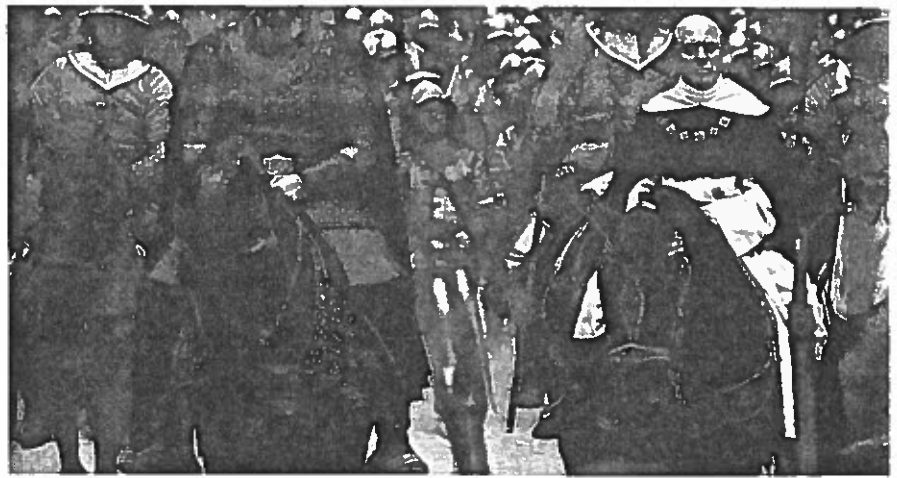
In Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, the Templars are seen as persecuted by the Catholic Church for their knowledge of a deep, dark secret, which, while anathema to Catholicism, is nonetheless in the service of Jesus. For these Templars, the mission to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land was a ruse from the start: sort of a happy side benefit of their real mission. Brown's Templars are martyrs, and he skews historical facts to ensure that they are seen as such; Ron Howard's movie version features Templars burning by the dozen as clerics look on. On the other side of the coin is the hugely popular *Assassin's Creed* video game series by Ubisoft (now also a feature film, and a series of books and comics), in which the Templars are a corporation, determined to use modern people to find powerful artifacts that will help them to bend the world to their will. In a clever bit of metafiction, they use video games to find their unsuspecting victims. Their enemy is, of course, the Brotherhood of Assassins, who fight to keep these artifacts out of the Templars' hands, and keep the world free of their mind control.

What is fascinating about *The Da Vinci Code*, *Assassin's Creed*, and the other hugely popular book (and TV series) *The Last Templar*, by Raymond Khoury, is that these twenty-first century incarnations of the Templars have restored the sort of superhuman status they have not fully enjoyed since the Middle Ages. Suddenly, the Templars are connected with holy relics that contain actual power, both real and potential, whether it is the Holy Grail (with the power to heal), or the Pieces of Eden (with the power to control minds), or a secret that will destroy the faith of millions. In all of these stories, the Templars are capable of creating the most cryptic and complex quests and clues to keep their secrets safe while simultaneously revealing them to just the right people at just the right time. They are supernaturally prescient as a matter of course.

In addition to these powers, the Templars' political, financial, and social influence in these modern stories is international and far-reaching, just as it was in the Middle Ages. They are connected with the most respected thinkers of the last millennium, thanks to their association with the Freemasons, and sometimes also the millennium before. *Assassin's Creed* confronts the Templars' medieval wealth and power head-on with their ownership of banks, and while other modern fiction doesn't often deal directly with the Templars' monetary wealth, the Templars are nonetheless always wealthy enough to have constructed the type of devices and tombs that are required for their vast conspiracies.

One of the biggest ways in which contemporary depictions of the Templars harken back to the Middle Ages is the intense focus on secrets. As Jace Stuckey points out in *Seven Myths of the Crusades*, keeping secrets was a necessary function of the Templars' activities, as military strategists, ambassadors, and bankers to kings. Like Philip the Fair, though, modern popular culture downplays the Templars' historical actions in favor of their secret-keeping. This makes a lot of sense: for Philip, drawing attention to the Templars' worth as bankers and Christian allies would have created a sympathy towards them that he could not afford; for modern people, emphasizing their historical role as crusaders would diminish our sympathy towards them. Either way, the bitter end of the Templar Order in the fourteenth century placed the focus squarely on the fact that they were keeping something secret, a focus that modern depictions of the Templars almost always share.

It seems, then, that the Templars have come full circle since the Middle Ages, drawing modern people in through their legendary status as warriors and secret-keepers, and their mystery just keeps growing. While it seems that their connection to huge, complex conspiracies is here to stay, their status as historical heroes is in a constant state of flux. Were they out to save the world? Were they secretly hell-bent on destruction? In so much of history,



truth is definitely stranger than fiction, but in the case of the Templars, the truth disappears into an entertainingly, wonderfully strange world. **MW**

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*Javier Gutiérrez and Hovik Keuchkerian are among the starring in the 2016 film *Assassin's Creed*. Based on the popular video game, these Templars aim to rule the world.*

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Further reading

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