

Chapter One

Introduction

History is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books—books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe. As Napoleon once said, “What is history, but a fable agreed upon?” He smiled. By its very nature, history is always a one-sided account.

—Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* 276

The Sangreal documents simply tell the other side of the Christ story.

—Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* 277

Soon after its first publication in 2003, *The Da Vinci Code* became one of the most popular and, at the same time, one of the most controversial books in America. *The Da Vinci Code* is a controversial detective fiction that begins and ends with the investigation of the Holy Grail.

This novel enchants readers because it utilizes the unexpected ways that the meaning of the sacred feminine has been repressed throughout history. As the reader decodes the clues that are hidden throughout the novel, an undiscovered history is suggested: the myth of the Holy Grail. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the Holy Grail stands for Mary Magdalene, who carried and conceived Jesus Christ’s child. In the novel Mary carries a significant symbolic meaning because she is portrayed as the wife of Jesus as well as the mother of His daughter. This stunning premise is responsible for making *The Da Vinci Code* not only popular, but also very controversial. Critics vary

in their reaction to the 'subversive' ideas in *The Da Vinci Code*, but there are two predominant kinds of reaction to the novel. The first type reflects the view that *The Da Vinci Code* is a popular work that encourages feminine, independent thinking that works in opposition to conventional and social power. The second views it as a fictitious work fraught with historical inaccuracies. Generally speaking, both types mention the issues of power and resistance in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Patrick McCormick argues that *The Da Vinci Code* has become popular because it exposes Christianity's repression of femininity throughout history. He asserts that one of the reasons the novel is popular is its "feminist sensibility"¹ (McCormick 2). For the critic, it is the plot of feminine resistance that makes the book so popular.

Barbara Kantrowitz, Anne Underwood, Pat Wingert and Karen Springen (Kantrowitz et al. 48) claim that *The Da Vinci Code* not only offers a great opportunity for woman to resist oppression from the Church but points out how the image of women has been demeaned and suppressed to preserve male power.² For feminist critics, *The Da Vinci Code* shows women not only as victims long suppressed by patriarchal religious power but also as individuals who possess the innate power to resist patriarchal control.

¹ Patrick McCormick holds that the novel is a feminist critique of Christianity and Catholicism. *The Da Vinci Code* repeats an argument of many feminist scholars: Official Catholic teaching not only misinterprets the Bible but also reinforces a tradition that benefits men. This tradition has silenced woman's "voices, perspectives, and stories." (2). Yet, Dan Brown's novel can undo the Christian tradition (2). In Brown's novel, Mary, representing all women, is re-interpreted as the center of the ancient Christian tradition. By deciphering the code, the protagonist is also led to dispel the power vested in the Christian authority and its traditions. Thus the novel can be read as an expression of a feminine voice resisting the suppression of patriarchal power.

² By Power control I refer to Michel Foucault's idea of power. Power for Foucault is "an effect of operation of social relationships, between groups and between individuals" (Sheridan 218). Within this society of power, "every group and every individual exercises power and is subjected to it" (218). Hence power eventually "subjects bodies not to render them passive, but to render them active" so that the individual controlled by power "corresponds to the exercise of power over it" (219). As a consequence, Foucault implies that "power was a fundamental and inescapable dimension of social life" (Smith 124) since power is already present to subject every group and individual and exercised by it. In his book *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault claims that "the forms of power have undergone a transformation over the past few decades" (124).

Linda Kulman, Jay Tolson, and Katy Kelly deem that *The Da Vinci Code* may encourage readers to search for their own interpretation of the Bible.³ After reading *The Da Vinci Code*, readers will cease to regard the Church as the only source of their belief. Instead, the reader will form his or her own independent thinking. Therefore, for critics, *The Da Vinci Code* readers may find their own belief system rather than relying on beliefs which might be controlled by others.

For David Klinghoffer, *The Da Vinci Code*'s popularity relies on its fascinating conspiracy theory: the plan of ancient Christianity to control others.⁴ The conspiracy theory not only increases the excitement of reading the novel, but exposes the fact that every power is built upon the control and suppression of other voices (Klinghoffer 2).

While some critics describe *The Da Vinci Code* as a constructive work exploring women's social position, other critics regard it as a work full of errors and problems. These critics mainly focus on Dan Brown's falsifications. Most of them assert that the fabricated ideas in *The Da Vinci Code* have not only damaged the power of Christianity but have also brought chaos to the religious world.

³ Linda Kulman, Jay Tolson, and Katy Kelly point out that the public usually builds their belief and knowledge from popular culture even though there are real histories that can be read. However, *The Da Vinci Code* does not make people believe. Instead, the novel makes people rethink their religious beliefs. Linda Kulman, Jay Tolson and Katy Kelly refer to the "debates within the church on how to interpret issues of sexuality" (Kulman et al. 2). *The Da Vinci Code* shows that Jesus, as a feminist, centers his belief system around love and treats people equally (Kulman et al. 2). Critics stress that the ideas in the book are welcomed and widely accepted as the book is sold throughout the world. For critics, the book brings readers to look for their own interpretations of old beliefs. The popularity of the books will eventually help people to establish independent thinking about religious matters.

⁴ In his study of the conspiracy theories, Klinghoffer discusses not only the Christians' effort to regain their powerful control, but also the meaning of the conspiracy theories: the hidden world of exotic. On the one hand, the detailed refutation published by Christians shows the "problems in the Catholic religious education are every bit as severe as the Catholic conservatives" (Klinghoffer 2). In other words, they do not allow any voices to challenge their religious norm. The Christians' efforts to refute every idea in *The Da Vinci Code* also suggest Christians' efforts to regain their control of power. On the other hand, judging from the popularity of the conspiracy theories in *The Da Vinci Code*, the public believes that "under the surface of our world resides a hidden world of the exotic, usually unseen creatures" (2). This idea is so thrilling and popular because the public believe in the existence of hidden, undiscovered and invisible realities.

As the Honorary President of the International Arthurian Society, Norris J. Lacy highlights many details of *The Da Vinci Code*'s problems. First, Lacy points out that Dan Brown has made "virtually everything into evidence for his conspiracy theory" (Lacy 83). Brown has one of his characters comment that many stories (and literary works), including Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, and Merovingian dynasty, are about the Holy Grail (Lacy 83) regardless of the fact that those stories are irrelevant. Second, Lacy indicates that Brown "exaggerates widely" (84) the number of women burned at the stake by the Church. Brown writes that there were "five million women" (Brown 125) while Lacy asserts that "the actual number is probably closer to 50,000" (Lacy 84). Third, Brown writes in his novel that Leonardo had hundreds of lucrative Vatican commissions. Lacy indicates that Leonardo actually "had only one, which he failed to complete" (85). Fourth, Lacy indicates that both the painting of *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper* are not, as Brown claims, specifically related to Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail. The figure in the *Mona Lisa* is the wife of Florentine Francesco del Giocondo (85). The figure sitting next to Jesus in *The Last Supper* is not, as Brown writes, Mary. Instead, he is John who has been "traditionally shown as a young and delicate person" (85).

Lacy's critical study also covers many other errors in Brown's book. Having exposed the problems in *The Da Vinci Code*, Lacy underscores that the book has put the power of the Catholic Church in danger with its forged ideas.⁵ Lacy points out that *The Da Vinci Code* is full of errors of both "facts and interpretation in relation to

⁵ Norris Lacy is Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of French and Medieval Studies at Pennsylvania State University. Lacy indicates that Dan Brown admits to have made up evidence for his conspiracy theories. Lacy point out that Brown merges the legendary story of the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight with the Grail. In the meantime, Brown also grafts the Grail story onto Walt Disney and Disney's animation movie, *The Little Mermaid* (Lacy 83). The technique of connecting every common thing we know in our life enables Brown to forge the idea of the conspiracy theories. With seemingly realistic evidence, Brown can make his readers believe whatever the novel depicts (Lacy 82).

the art of Leonardo da Vinci” (Lacy 85). Lacy claims that Brown has done a great harm to the church with his “elaborate, fascinating and, most important of all, wrong ideas” (89). Although Lacy has claimed that many of the historical facts in the novel are fabricated, I do believe other ideas in the novel are worthy of scholarly consideration; namely, those related to issues of feminine power and resistance.

In his research *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, Darrell L. Bock has reviewed most of the novel’s central ideas.⁶ Bock concludes that the book contains many interesting and disparate ideas but in the end cheats the reader (Bock 6) since those ideas have been proved as fictional ideas Brown created for his novel. In his book, Bock centers on eight topics which are central to *The Da Vinci Code*. He examines Mary Magdalene, Jesus’ marriage, the secret message in the Gnostic Gospel and the significance of Mary’s role (xi). He claims that he has broken the first code in *The Da Vinci Code* by proving that Mary was not a prostitute and did not marry Jesus (30). Bock then continues to explore another of the book’s many shocking assertions: that Jesus married. Bock asserts that there is no evidence or documentation of Jesus’ marriage (32-45). When reviewing the feminine ideas in the Gnostic Gospel, Bock claims that the Gnostics were merely a different group of Christians who produced

⁶ The first code Bock breaks in *The Da Vinci Code* is the mystery about Mary Magdalene. By citing several other scholars’ studies, Bock concludes that Jesus did favor Mary, that Mary was regarded as a symbol of wisdom, and that Mary was not a prostitute. However, concerning the main plot about Mary’s marriage with Jesus in *The Da Vinci Code*, Bock still proves there is no historical record of Mary, which is because she was never married to Jesus (29). The second code Bock breaks is the assertion in the novel that Jesus was a married man. Bock surveys all the historical documents from the time when Jesus was in the ministry, when he was tried and crucified, and after his death and resurrection. He discovers that his mother, brothers, and sisters were mentioned more than once, but that there was never mention of a wife (45). Therefore, the story about Jesus’ family can only be the result of Dan Brown’s imagination. Meanwhile, Bock also shows that it was acceptable for pious young Jews living at the time to remain single. This contradicts Brown’s assertion in the novel that a pious young Jew should also be a married man. Then Bock proceeds to review the Secret Gospels in *The Da Vinci Code*. On the one hand, he claims the Secret Gospels, especially the Gnostic Gospels and the four Gospels, interpret the original faith differently than traditional Christianity. On the other hand, quoting remarks from a Roman Catholic New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown, Bock concludes that the source documents from the 2 and 3 century documents related to the Secret Gospels and the four Gospels in *The Da Vinci Code* are immaterial documents (123). These immaterial documents, however, have shaken the authority of the Christian establishment.

their own Scripture based on the same source used by other Scriptures (97). Therefore, the feminine ideas in the Gnostic Gospel are only different interpretations of the shared Christian document rather than an independent factual record. Bock asserts that Brown has fabricated many of his ideas in order to make his book a commercial success. *The Da Vinci Code* is a best-selling novel because Brown gained inspiration from a panoply of disparate ideas, not because he has thrown the ideas together.

For Anthony Wilson-Smith, *The Da Vinci Code* is not only a “badly written, but also a compelling novel filled with stilted dialogue” (4). He claims that Brown deliberately distorts the meaning of real history “necessary only to his story” (4). The only reason for Brown’s success lies in readers’ wish to believe what he writes in the novel.

Moreover, after close study, Bill Putman and John Edwin Wood uncover evidence that suggests *The Da Vinci Code* is built upon a series of fabricated histories. They indicate that historical information about Jesus’s marriage was invented by Pierre Plantard from Paris (Bill 3). Believing himself to have descended from the Merovingian kings of France, Pierre Plantard “created a whole series of documents including elaborate genealogical tables that purported to trace his ancestry back to the Merovingian king Dagobert II (2). Meanwhile, Plantard’s friend, Phillippe de Cherisey, helps Plantard embellish the story by making Plantard the descendent of Jesus Christ (2). In the end, Bill Putman and John Edwin Wool argue that Brown’s astonishing inventions regarding historical matters is to design an extraordinary hoax that will attract as many readers as possible (3).

Having surveyed a variety of research on *The Da Vinci Code*, I find one thing rather unusual. Though most critics we have explored do discuss independent thinking in religion, Dan Brown’s fabrication of history and his narrative technique, none of

the critics I have read analyze the theme of power, feminine resistance, and narrative technique from theoretical perspectives.

Therefore, in order to review the novel from this critical perspective, this dissertation will employ social science and feminist studies perspectives to analyze power, resistance, and narrative technique in *The Da Vinci Code*. Concerning power control, I will employ Michel Foucault's critical theory of power analysis to explore how power is imposed on the individual from ancient times to the present. Foucault's theory of power control offers a gender-neutral analysis of power control. In order to analyze how feminine resistance changes the dynamics of power control, I will use Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical theories to discuss how the individual with maternal semiotic characteristics can resist the control of patriarchal power. In discussing the narrative technique, I will also attempt to unravel the reason why the detective novel genre can attract so many readers throughout the world. I will employ the concept of "crossing the boundary" (Iser 4) to illustrate how Brown develops his detective fiction in a way that enchants so many readers.

Following Foucault's power analysis, I will discuss the workings of Christian and patriarchal power control. I will trace the history of power from sovereign ages to modern times as it is represented in *The Da Vinci Code*. Foucault has divided the development of power control into two stages: sovereign power in "the absolutist monarch" (Smith 124) and disciplinary power in the modern era (Smith 124). In the age of the emperor, the control of sovereign power was enforced by punishment. In the modern era, panoptic surveillance⁷ is the key to disciplinary power. Most of all,

⁷ Foucault's idea of panoptic surveillance derives from Bentham's conception of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is a machine "which 'produces homogeneous effects of power,' as an 'architectural figure,' and as a 'laboratory'" (Smart 88). Smart highlights that the Panopticon "constitutes a programme for the efficient exercise of power through the spatial arrangement of subjects according to a diagram of visibility so as to ensure that at each and every moment any subject might be exposed to 'invisible' observation" (88). Foucault applies Bentham's conception into his discussion of disciplinary power.

panoptic surveillance, working under disciplinary power, will eventually internalize disciplinary power within the individual. Therefore, by reading *The Da Vinci Code* via Foucault's analysis of sovereign power, I will explore the history of oppression by Pope Clement as a way of preserving Church power in Langdon's narrative. Through Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power in modern ages, I can expose how the individual has never escaped the control of disciplinary power.

Readers can easily identify a number of central issues of Brown's novel: the Holy Grail, the sacred feminine, and Mary. Throughout the novel, the church criticizes these ideas as demoniac and destructive. Yet I would like to assert that the oppressed sacred feminine is the better way to resist the church's patriarchal control. Only through the sacred feminine can the detective subvert symbolic patriarchal regulations so as to uncover the meaning of each code. The sacred feminine exists almost everywhere throughout the story. Therefore, in order to discuss the power of feminine resistance, I will employ Kristeva's psychoanalysis to discuss how feminine resistance dissolves and subverts patriarchal power control. I will first analyze how everything related to femininity has been demonized and oppressed by patriarchal religion, and that despite this oppression, femininity can still escape and resist the control of patriarchal power. Then I will proceed to employ Kristeva's theory of symbolic, semiotic and poetic language. I will expose how symbolic regulation works to achieve the univocal order. Then I will discuss how the semiotic resists by changing the univocal meaning of the symbolic.

With panoptic surveillance, the individual is entangled in "an impersonal power relation" (88). In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault stresses that "he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power. . . makes them spontaneously upon himself . . . inscribes in himself power relation . . ." (36). In *The Da Vinci Code*, disciplinary power is also carried out by panoptic surveillance. For instance, Silas is subjected to religious belief. He makes religious power spontaneously upon himself and inscribes in himself power relation. Therefore, Silas never escapes the control of religious power till his death.

In addition to addressing these two opposing elements working in the novel, this thesis will continue to discuss why *The Da Vinci Code* can so enchant readers. With Wolfgang Iser's concept of "boundary crossing" (4), I will demonstrate that Brown's narrative technique of boundary crossing is the key to making his novel a success. I will also invoke the concept of "boundary crossing" (Iser 4) to show how *The Da Vinci Code* crosses the boundary from real to imaginary fiction, and from classical detective fiction to post modern detective fiction. It is Brown's narrative skill of boundary crossing that not only fascinates the reader, but stimulates the reader's desire to explore the unsaid⁸ in the novel.

In summary, my thesis contains four chapters that focus respectively on the search for power, feminine resistance, and boundary crossing narrative techniques. In the second chapter, I intend to explain Michael Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Wolfgang Iser's theories in *The Da Vinci Code*. In the third part, I will employ textual evidence to support my theoretical analysis. In the conclusion of my thesis, I will claim that only through the dialectic oscillation between transgression and law can the individual escape the symbolic control and discover resistance. Furthermore, the narrative technique of boundary crossing is the key that has made the book a runaway success throughout the world and that also renders the reader eager to explore their own world further. Finally I reach the conclusion that *The Da Vinci Code* is not merely a work full of errors and conspiracies, but also a novel that exposes the violence, resistance and sense of loss in contemporary society.

⁸ In "A theory of literary production," Pierre Macherey stresses that "what is important in the work is what it does not say" (Ashley 132). Macherey claims that "In the space in which the work unfolds, everything is to be said, and is therefore never said" (130). The aim of my discussion about *The Da Vinci Code* is to unfold the importance of the work: the unsaid in the work.