



## Gifts of Control: Pseudo-Feminism in The Da Vinci Code

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### Abstract:

Since its publication in 2003, *The Da Vinci Code* written by Dan Brown came as a big hit to the world and has been listed atop the bestseller list by *New York Times* for about two years. The novel recounts a story of Sophie and Langdon questing the Holy Grail and then discovering an ancient secret behind it, namely, the marriage and an descendant of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. Most criticisms are concerned with historical and religious meanings,

contributing to the public outcry for “radical feminist” of the novel in potentially threatening Christianity. However, it should be noted that the so-called great cause of unveiling Mary Magdalene, the silenced goddess, victimizes the modern female, Sophie. Despite the proliferation of current studies, there seems to be an oversight with regard to “cryptex” which is mentioned about sixty-nine times in the novel. Nevertheless, readers are easily entrapped by this negligence into men’s phony concern for women, in particular their masked manipulation of Sophie. From this vantage point, the present article, drawing on gift theories, aims to reveal the pseudo-feminism in the novel. It is argued that Saunier’s cryptexes, presented as unconditional gifts for Sophie, are actually complicit with patriarchal ideology and finally force her to sacrifice self-identity for reciprocation. In the end, the paper pinpoints the practical implications of the novel for women in the contemporary world to remain vigilant and rational towards faux-feminism.

**Keywords:** *The Da Vinci Code, cryptexes, pseudo-feminism, gift theories.*

### Introduction

Dan Brown, acclaimed by Time Magazine in 2005 as “one of the World’s 100 Most Influential People, excels at writing well-researched novels with intricate plots. The Da Vinci Code, one of his most critically well-known masterpieces, follows symbolist Robert Langdon and catalyst Sophie Neveu as they investigate a murderer of Saunier Neveu and discover a battle between the Priory of Sion and Opus Dei over the possibility of Jesus Christ having been married to and fathering a child with Mary Magdalene.

Generally hailed as Brown’s best-selling work which takes only three years on the bestseller list (Morris, 2006), *The Da Vinci Code* has received

critics’ attention. Generally speaking, current interpretations can be divided into four dimensions. First and foremost, much has been written about the novel’s religious, historical and artistic descriptions. Specifically, the novel can be interpreted as Brown’s revisionist history of Christianity and anti-Catholic for numerous plots are challenging established beliefs (Zias, 2008). Moreover, some critics delve into religious signs and their implications through the lens of semiology (see, for instance, Xu, 2017; Hu & Zhang, 2015). Secondly, the novel is studied from a socio-cultural perspective. Considering that the novel was published in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist event, Schneider-Mayerson (2011) claims that the event provokes



the emergence and popularity of “conspiracy-suffused writings”, which greatly contributes to the achievement of the novel. In addition, from the view of mass culture, Zhu and Zhou (2004) attribute the novel’s success to its blending between the highbrow and the lowbrow culture. As for the third dimension, the artistic characteristics of the novel are under heated discussions as well. Take narrative art for example, Li and Liu (2006) offer a comprehensive analysis of Brown’s writing style on the genre and various signs. Furthermore, drawing on semiotic theories, Gestalt psychology, DEFT mechanisms and Symptomatic Reading, Li and Huo (2007) make an in-depth analysis of the novel’s verisimilitude.

Apart from the above three aspects, the focus most persistent in the novel’s criticisms concerns the issue of its purported “radical feminism” (Maddux, 2008). As one of the most significant figures in the novel, Mary Magdalene draws many critics’ attention and is commonly believed to be the emblem of “goddess worship”. For instance, McCormick (2003) highlights that the novel “gives voice to a growing feminist critique of a patriarchal church”, which echoes with subversion in Brown’s ‘radical feminist agenda’ as explained by Kearney (2009). By contrast, there are still some scholars who express their skepticism towards the “radical feminism” ostensibly reflected in the novel. Maddux (2008) contends that obvious feminist impulses finally result in anti-feminism, which discloses the covert phallocentrism in Sophie’s grail-seeking journey through “its unremitting celebration of the biological”. However, it focuses on Sophie’s fulfillment and fails to recognize the impact of Saunier on Sophie. Additionally, drawing on feminist theologies, Baker (2007) argues that Sophie is deprived of her agency and strength in the myth-searching journey, which represents repercussions of the patriarchal culture but lacks in-depth analysis. In the same vein with them, Zhao (2020) further explores pseudo-feminism by examining Sophie’s resistance and final compromise with patriarchal ideology, which sheds light on understanding Sophie’s subversion against phallogentric society and also inspires the present paper.

Through a scrutiny of recent literature, it turns out that existing illustrations of the novel are marked by diversity. Despite the fervent interest in the either feminist or pseudo-feminist analysis, there seems to be ignored that the “cryptex”, which is embodied as a gift sent by Saunier to Sophie, exerts tremendous influence on disciplining the latter to patriarchal rituals. More importantly, given that the “cryptex” is mentioned in the novel for about sixty-nine times, it is reasonable to presuppose that such negligence would pose challenges to evaluating faux-feminism in the novel. Seeing that the “cryptex” exists as a present image and shares close relations with other gifts manifested in the novel, this study aims to adopt gift theories to illustrate the pseudo-feminism shown from Sophie’s victimization of males’ presents, which are disguised as gifts of unconditional love but reify the patriarchal ideology.

## Results and Discussion

### Accepting Gifts: the Ignorant Surrounded by Love and Knowledge

Speaking of gift-giving analysis, it should be noted that Marcel Mauss is not the first to show an interest in it, but the first to systematically bring to the fore a model in which the gift embodies a major social fact (Hénaff, 2013). According to Mauss, ritual gift practices represent three inseparable obligations, namely, to give, to accept the gift and to reciprocate (Mauss, 1990). Based on Mauss’s innovative insight, Hénaff (2013) further develops the implication of the concept of reciprocity, that is, gifts are “symbols of a commitment between partners”. Put differently, gift-giving behavior serves as an integral element in forming a social bond between givers and recipients. In *The Da Vinci Code*, it can be argued that cryptexes, as gifts sent by Saunier to Sophie, forge a close social bond between them and accordingly account for Sophie’s final compromise of accepting his legacy.

First and foremost, submerged in Saunier’s love conspiracy where she is hailed as “princess Sophie” (Brown, 2003, p. 92), Sophie ignorantly

takes her acceptance of his cryptexes as gifts for granted. In her childhood memory, smaller cryptexes are presented for her birthday and several riddles are hidden inside them (Brown, 2003, p. 167-169). Complying with her grandfather's demands, Sophie could get her real birthday presents only when she figures cryptexes out. In the long run, she gradually becomes obsessed with the process of decoding his cryptexes rather than the gifts themselves. Tellingly, it is this uncontrollable addiction to deciphering cryptexes internalized by Saunier that forces Sophie to fall into the phallogocentric trap step by step. In this way, cryptexes, as the necessity in constructing the filial relationship between Sophie and Saunier, are more or less portrayed as real gifts he manages to give to her. In other words, taking advantage of love-oriented gifts, Saunier desperately trains Sophie to be "the heiress of his role of Grand Master of the Priory of Sion" (Zhao, 2020). For instance, to improve decoding skills, Sophie is required to practice French at school and English at home (Brown, 2013, p.63), and is taught mysterious tricks and knowledge that unfits her age.

However, such morbid control in the name of love problematizes Sophie and brings about her escapement, which can be elucidated as her rejection of Saunier's gifts and defense against the identity constructed by him. Saunier's excessive manipulation of either her mindset or behavior triggers Sophie's strong hatred to cryptexes she once greatly appreciated, which can be demonstrated in her complaint, "I hate secrets" (Brown, 2003, p. 94). Furthermore, Sophie's revolt culminates when she witnesses Saunier's ritual of "sacred marriage" (p. 261), which acts as a catalyst for her estrangement from Saunier. As Benedict (1960) expounds that consciously rejecting gifts embodies the reaffirmation of one's selfhood, Sophie's estrangement from Saunier manifests her refusal to accept the identity of Saunier's "princess Sophie" for it threatens her real ego.

Nonetheless, due to the strong power of gratitude generated in the gift-giving process, Sophie finally compromises herself to accept Saunier's legacy, which leads to more indebtedness. According to Schwartz (1967),

gratitude produced in gift-exchange rituals binds both the living and the dead. With regards to the novel, it is the bond attributed to Saunier's cryptexes that makes Sophie reconcile with Saunier after her incipient escapement. Moreover, as a result of "eternal indebtedness" generating in inherited benefits that cannot be reciprocated (Schwartz, 1967), Sophie embarks upon a homecoming journey, which shows her acquiescence in embracing Saunier's final gift, namely, the legacy concerning her family secrets. In the meanwhile, it is worthwhile noting that the legacy brings her knowledge-oriented gifts from Robert Langdon and Leigh Teabing. Since starting the murder-searching journey, Sophie has been made to listen to lectures about the history of Christianity from Langdon and Teabing, through which Sophie is internalized and patronized (Baker, 2007) by their male-centered ideology. In addition to their knowledge-oriented presents, Langdon's protection is represented as love-oriented gifts for her as well, which is affirmed by the statement that "the romance between Neveu and Langdon is subtle but undeniable" (Massux, 2008). That is to say, the death of Saunier who is her last remaining relative overwhelms her and it is until the emergence of Langdon that greatly solaces her.

### **Reciprocating Gifts: the Offering to Phallogocentric Cause**

Throughout the spiritual mechanism of the gift-giving process, the most essential feature is one that obliges a person to reciprocate the present that has been received (Mauss, 1990, p.9). In other words, unbalanced power relations are to be formed in that givers are transformed into recipients' creditors who require reciprocation (Godelier & Scott, 2000). In *The Da Vinci Code*, gifts sent by males to Sophie involve her in their conspiracy where her real identity is required to be sacrificed as the offering to their phallogocentric cause.

Considering the covert complicit between personal interest and presents (Godelier & Scott, 2000), it can be argued that gifts from Saunier, Langdon and Teabing are, in fact, results of patriarchal culture. As Levi-Strauss (1965)

suggests that gifts “are vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion...”, males as gift senders in the novel utilize gifts to wield their dominance over the receiver Sophie in their unbalanced power relations. Specifically, when giving Sophie his present, namely, the truth behind the Holy Grail, Teabing uses such words with sexual innuendo like “virgin” (Brown, 2003, p. 193), “your first time” (p. 193), “robbed her of the climax” (p. 193) to satisfy his sexual desire. Moreover, he equates Sophie’s control of intellect to her chastity and accordingly takes advantage of it to psychologically possess her. Given that “men tend to confirm their own identity by presenting gifts to others” (Schwartz, 1967), Langdon’s dedication to protecting Sophie on their Grail-seeking journey serves to achieve his masculine fulfillment. Even Saunier, Sophie’s beloved grandfather, deploys his cryptexes to project Sophie into his great cause of Privory.

More importantly, due to the “gratitude imperative” (Schwartz, 1967), Sophie feels obliged to reciprocate their gifts, which, however, results in her final tragedy of losing her discourse power. Put differently, Sophie has been engaged in the patriarchal order since she accepts the gifts from those males in the novel. Ironically, it is until that time that those gifts Sophie strongly appreciates are transformed into her poison. According to Mauss (1997), “gift” and “poison” share the same etymology in Germanic languages. However, with the development of language, modern German retains the meaning of “poison” and modern English keeps the meaning of “gift” and “donation”. As for Sophie, she actually becomes the victim of gifts. In other words, prior to accepting Teabing’s and Langdon’s presents, Sophie epitomizes the modern female with “new wisdom” (Baker, 2007). As an exemplary female catalyst in male-centered elite field, Sophie’s advantageous capabilities challenge the authority of captain Fache and therefore contribute to his aggressive misogyny, which can be reflected in his strong denial and vilification of career women. Additionally, Fache’s masculine anxiety and impotence can also be detected from his

unconscious physical reactions towards Sophie’s arrival, “Bezu Fache was suffering a stroke” (Brown, 2003, p. 43). Nevertheless, in their Holy Grail quest, what strength Sophie has at the beginning of the story starts to gradually disappear (Baker, 2007) and she is progressively marginalized into an obedient follower. In the later part of their Grail-searching journey, Sophie is portrayed as an “ideal (female) student” who keeps asking Langdon and Teabing questions so these supposedly brilliant teacher-heroes can shine (Baker, 2007), and “she is even left out by the author of the novel before the truth of the Holy Grail is to be revealed” (Zhao, 2020). In other words, Sophie is finally banished to the periphery where her discourse power is repressed.

Apart from being deprived of discourse power, Sophie also suffers from an identity crisis because of her counter-gift for Saunier’s cryptexes. In view of the fact that “the acceptance of a present is in fact an acceptance of the giver’s ideas as to what one’s desires and needs are” (Schwartz, 1967), Sophie’s addiction to decoding Saunier’s cryptexes and her truth-seeking journey actualize her internalization of patriarchal culture. Sophie’s initial plan to find out Saunier’s murderer is progressively replaced by unveiling the secret behind herself, that is, the descendant of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. That is to say, what Sophie has to reciprocate for embracing the legacy that her grandfather left is to conform to his hierarchical community, The Priory of Sion, where she should play the role of “his Princess Sophie” (Brown, 2003, p. 94). After reuniting with her brother and grandmother when deciphering the final cryptex, Sophie is expected to be the next supreme leader to charge the Priory in that “women held far more honored status within the Priory and could ascend to the highest post from virtually any rank” (Brown, 2003, p. 374). Therefore, as Brown said in the novel, “The news she had received has changed everything in her life” (p. 378), Sophie is changed from an independent female elite in social space to Saunier’s princess who has to sacrifice her due freedom for his great cause.

## Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the novel is a phallogocentric work that is disguised by “**radical feminism**”. That is to say, although the novel speaks highly of sacred femininity, it should not be overlooked that the protagonist Sophie is obliterated her agency and her real identity through men’s gifts. Tellingly, those gifts make it easy for women to immerse into sweet dreams made by men to demonstrate their phony appreciation for femininity, such as Sophie’s obsession with deciphering cryptexes. In fact, they are calculatedly designed by males to legitimize their patriarchal control. In other words, the novel’s anti-feminism is a direct product of its explicit feminism (Maddux, 2008).

More importantly, these potential threats inherent in disguised feminism have practical implications and should deserve attention in the contemporary world as well. In this post-feminist era, if the term “feminism” is only poorly defined by a generation of women eager to disavow it (Dow, 1996, p. 93), it perhaps has become an empty signifier that can be applied to any text--so long as it features women (Maddux, 2008). Put differently, it should be acknowledged that overemphasis on feminism would not significantly emancipate women from exploitation and suppression of patriarchal ideology but reinforce the difference of binary gender and finally re-involve female victims into the patriarchal society. Therefore, in case of unconsciously becoming endorsers of the patriarchal order, feminists in the contemporary world should be alert about conspiracies in the name of feminism and should keep a rational mind to chase after women’s due rights.

## Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interest.

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