

Fate vs. The Church of the Second Chance

by Jeffrey S. Wilson

For my friend Darrell: This Vyacheslav gave gifts but, better, loaned me Asimov.

Mulling things over in Kearney Square, I wonder if there remains anything new under the *Sun*. But what of novelty? Is it not enough to report the same strong stories to every generation, to quench contemporary thirst with rich old wine in new skins?

Perhaps Chuck Hogan patterned his 2004 *Prince of Thieves* upon Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, written about 400 years earlier and, in turn, based on Danish tradition of nearly a millennium before our time (Asimov 79-80).

The parallels are clear: the titles of the two works; Douglas MacRay as another prince who will die, who indeed *must* die for his story to find full force; Charlestown, as much an inescapable enclave as Elsinore (Asimov 92); two ghostly fathers who reveal shocking truths; accomplished shadow duelists in the shapes of Hamlet and Doug versus King Claudius and FBI Special Agent Adam Frawley (Asimov 100-101); Doug's return to C-Town after moulding in MCI Wittenberg; Desmond "Dez" Elden, "the Monsignor," who had developed so far outside Doug's sphere that he might happily have joined in Laertes' Parisian studies (Asimov 90); Krista Coughlin, an angel-dusted, unfair Ophelia hard-wired to drag the nearest decent man into her desperate personal drowning pool; Queen Gertrude and Claire Keeseey, each astonishingly oblivious to the tempests swirling about them (Asimov 124); Doug's climactic Fenway Park robbery's doubling for Hamlet's meticulously planned play within the play (Asimov 113-123); and each story's bloody, inevitable-but-let's-hope-for-better denouement.

Imagine crime stories so gripping that their authors can afford to jettison mystery! You have two here. Early on, both *Hamlet* and *Thieves* identify their undergirding criminal motives, means, opportunities and perpetrators – to the reader and characters alike. Leave mystery to Agatha Christie when there is so much else to say.

To be sure, many elements land askew. Hogan wrote his own absolutely terrific novel, after all. His “camo kid” snitches evoke Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only inasmuch as all four curry favor in their respective courts, with three perishing for the privilege. Agent Frawley's sordid subornation of informants is more to treachery's point. Fergus “Fergie the Florist” Coln, the corrupt old spider sensitive to every tremor of Charlestown's criminal web, would seem to find no equivalent in *Hamlet*. (Certainly Fergie and Polonius die by Doug's and Hamlet's hands, but there is no parallel in cunning or animus between these characters, and Doug *meant* to kill Fergie.) Nor are “the primal eldest curse” of fratricide (Shakespeare 3.3.40) and rightful royal succession, so clearly motivational in *Hamlet* (Asimov 127), available in *Thieves*: Doug must find his own reasons to hang around the old neighborhood and destroy himself. No Fortinbras emerges to pluck the crown from Doug's head as he dies, though Claire hints she may exhume the king's ransom Doug has planted in her garden.

I had hoped to ask Chuck Hogan about connections between *Hamlet* and *Thieves* when he visited MCC. However, on Tuesday, November 14 at 10:30 AM, two blocks away in the Talbot Building's fourth floor computer lab, Prof. Moghimi lectured on certain aspects of digital communication. The Nyquist sampling theorem and inter-symbol interference won the day; I missed my opportunity to meet the author.

Convolutional encoding of Shakespeare's play as Chuck Hogan's novel is not my central inquiry (Proakis and Salehi 46). Perhaps there are only a handful of classic, universal stories.

Homer's *Odyssey* reflects in every youth's coming of age (final page of Book 24). There is just one primal account of the gods' furious agents hounding Orestes for avenging Agamemnon, supremely unjust since it was at Apollo's behest (Sophocles 1.1). There is only one *Hamlet*. If the set of tales is limited, even the most talented writers must recount the same few, time and again.

Both tellings of this tragedy are wonderful, and each raises questions of redemption and will: Can an individual make significant changes in life's trajectory? If dealt a mean-smelling hand, can he play it well?

Literary convention casts Hamlet as quick-witted but irresolute, but I must agree with Asimov in his *Guide to Shakespeare* that Hamlet appears quite resolute, firmly bent on revenge and redeeming his crown (101). His show of madness is for the benefit of Claudius and his court, as Hamlet bides his time and watches for an opening. Thus his signature "To be, or not to be" soliloquy (Shakespeare 3.1.56-90) reflects Hamlet's difficult, thoughtful choice of strategy, not lassitude or the mad, morbid yearning that Claudius and Polonius may wrongly apprehend from behind the drapery (Asimov 118).

Douglas MacCray also thinks, also chooses. Time in "the can" was time to dry out and assert control. There is no returning for another shot at professional hockey, but Doug sees a path for self-improvement and embarks upon it. He understands the corrosive, seductive power of old habits, so he enrolls in A.A. He fends off Krista, who would be only too glad to Bourbon-soak the both of them and crawl into the sack. He would keep his own counsel, which is no problem with gaping Gloansy but proves impossible with Jem, the fatally flawed jewel who flashes more than enough madness for the whole gang. And for just the briefest hiatus, just long enough to make *Thieves'* readers roil in foreshadowed dread, Doug aspires to woo Claire Keesey.

However, these stories are tragedies, written as such. No more can Doug escape the brooding Breed's Hill obelisk than can Hamlet quit Elsinore. He doesn't try going straight but instead assembles a gang in Charlestown's proudest criminal tradition. And Doug might as well sprout gills as swim in Claire's placid lagoon. He finds that he cannot have it both ways despite his steely will. Toward the end of *Thieves*, Doug utterly disintegrates, large hunks of personality dropping from him like rusty bits off of an old Buick Skylark shuddering over potholes. He should blow off the Fenway Park job as soon as Krista jabs him with her Tiffany necklace accusation, but he is too far gone by then. The job's outcome now falls to Fate, much as Hamlet, having enjoyed a bit of lucky detection and improvisation in thwarting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Asimov 142), returns to the castle and remarks to Horatio:

Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do fail; and that should teach us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. (Shakespeare 5.2.8-11)

Hamlet and *Thieves* are two isolated, fictional anecdotes of certain doom. How can we profit by knowing them? What do they show us?

To fend off personal tragedy in favor of any measure of success, we must first perceive the difference between How Things Are and How Things Could and Might Be. Second, we must Think, and we must Choose rather than remain adrift across our days. (Note, however, that Choice can entail watchful waiting.) Third, we must cultivate Good Habits and Associations. Fourth, we must Act, and fifth we must not fall prey to Fate, for Fate is the ancient Olympian apologia upon which tragedy turns. A Divinity beyond Fate does shape our ends, I am convinced, and we can follow it if we pay attention; we need not tumble into the abyss with

Princes Doug and Hamlet. No one says this is easy, but touchstones like *Hamlet* and *Thieves* help by marking these points for us.

It is likely that you are involved with MCC if you read this. Welcome therefore to The Church of the Second Chance, where the game is rigged to favor good choices, habits, associations and works over Fate. That is why I am here. How about you?

As we follow our paths of choice, may we all enjoy the loyal friendship of our own Horatios and Dez Eldens, who variously divert police firepower from us, defend our Sublician Bridge (Lendering 1), offer discretion and sincere counsel or, when we lie at terminal ebb, charitably bid us “Good night, sweet Prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (Shakespeare 5.2.360-361).

If you enjoyed *Prince of Thieves*, read *Hamlet*. If the Prince of Denmark has previously impressed you, try Hogan's Charlestown treatment. Each is fine stuff. You will gain from both.

Works Cited

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