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Recommended Citation

Sleight, Jean E., "Stealing Revelation: A screenplay of The Thief accompanied by a religious analysis" (2016). *Honors Projects*. 46.
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STEALING REVELATION: A SCREENPLAY OF THE THIEF ACCOMPANIED BY A
RELIGIOUS ANALYSIS

by

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A project submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the University Scholars Program

Seattle Pacific University

2016

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my faculty readers, George Scranton, Todd Rendleman, and Candace Vance, for their feedback on over 120 pages of material, for catching unfinished plotlines and reminding me why I chose *The Thief* in the first place.

Thanks to my English-teacher sister and fellow fangirl, Annie Disher, for reading early drafts and telling me that I needed a b-plot, for going through late drafts with a fine tooth comb, for letting me bounce scenes and sentences off of her brilliantly eloquent brain, and in general for being the best big sister a girl could ask for.

Thanks to my mother, Nancy Sleight, for her never-ending support and for lending her eye for detail to find every misplaced comma and missing semicolon.

Thanks to my lovely cast who performed a staged-reading of my screenplay: Cassie Fitzgerald, Cole Zieser, Emily Olson, Emma Heesacker, James Lynch, Jason Hill, Joshua McBrayer, Katie Gillette, Mariah DeLong-Wright, Miles Flett, and Nichols Eveland.

Thanks to Megan Whalen Turner who wrote *The Thief* on which this project is based. And finally, thanks to God whose influence in my life is the main reason among many that I keep returning to Megan Whalen Turner's books.

Stealing Revelation

The Thief, a novel by Megan Whalen Turner, largely centers on a journey. The first layer is a physical journey, but there is also a faith journey. The title character, Gen, is unhappily put on a horse and trotted unwillingly from skepticism to faith. Gen's faith background and his subsequent growth are revealed through stories of the gods, meetings with them, dreams, and miracles. His religious experiences in *The Thief* grow his faith and reveal the gods as key players whose actions often resemble those of the Christian God.

The Thief is set in three countries: Sounis, Eddis, and Attolia. The two lowland countries, Sounis and Attolia, were once overrun and now worship the gods of the invaders. These gods are called the new gods. Formerly, all the countries worshipped the old gods—those which are still worshipped by the people of Eddis, a mountain country that controls land trade between Sounis and Attolia (54). Gen, short for Eugenides, is the title character and the person whose perspective we follow throughout the book. Once assembled, the party of characters travels from Sounis through Eddis to Attolia to retrieve a politically important item that will help Sounis conquer Eddis or Eddis maintain independence, depending on who gets it first. The party consists of the magus, who is the chief advisor of the king of Sounis; his apprentice; the current heir of Sounis; a guard; and Gen, who is pulled out of the king's prison to serve his sentence by employing his skills as a thief in the king's service.

Gen begins his quest with a cultural knowledge of the gods and a habitual veneration of them. Although he does not believe in the gods until very late in the story, he mentions them in the very first paragraph saying, "I swore to myself and every god I knew that if I got out alive, I would never never never take any risks that were so abysmally stupid again" (1). The risk he is referring to is arranging to get himself thrown in the king's prison. The next mention is a comparison of the old and new gods, like Greek and Roman mythology. The context is, again,

swearing. Gen says that even people who worship the new gods call on the old when they “need a truly satisfying curse” (15). Although the new gods are official, the old are still very much a part of the cultural consciousness of the people of Sounis, much like how many non-Christians use the name of Christ as an expletive.

While on the road, the party discusses the gods in regards to their place in history and politics. Like Greek mythology, the old gods comprise “an almost infinite pantheon” and “a higher court” (54). All of them believe the gods to be myth, but the oldest and most learned character, the magus, says, “It’s hard to say what is myth and what is real” (55). However, he is referring not to the existence of divine beings, but to the human aspects of the story that is the basis of Eddisian politics. The story tells of Hamiathes’ Gift, a stone alleged to be dipped in the waters of immortality and given to the mortal king Hamiathes by the Great Goddess Hephestia. A tradition sprang up where a thief would steal the stone and give it to his or her chosen candidate, thus making the receiver the rightful ruler of Eddis (55).

Because one character, Sophos, is largely ignorant of the old gods due to his father’s disapproval, the others relate stories, beginning with the creation story. “Earth was alone,” so she creates the sun and moon out of pieces of herself, like God created Eve from Adam’s rib (63). She then breathes out the Sky who becomes her husband, like in Greek mythology (64). Some of the gods are their children. Others, the Earth creates. The Sky creates humans out of dust and snow, some dark and some light, but they are weak, unlike the gods Earth had made, and the Earth feels pity for them and gives them gifts of fire, plants, and animals (64-65). In a similar way, the Christian God saw that it was “not good for the man to be alone” and cared enough to “make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). When Sophos asks if Eddisians believe the creation story, Gen laughs and asks rhetorically if Sounisians believe the stories of the new gods, which pose even greater similarities to Greek mythology (66). He goes on to

claim that people like the tradition, but do not truly believe; they do not “expect a god to show up at their door” (66).

Later, the party visits a small shrine to the goddess of a spring (70). The magus refers to it as a “heathen temple” (70). In order to interest his more cynical student in religion, the magus says, “knowing someone’s religion can help you manipulate that person” (71). This reinforces the party’s obvious disbelief in the supernatural. It also mirrors how Christianity can be misused to control others, “to promote a political agenda, rally around a particular cause, support a certain belief or to simply gain power” (Mattson).

Gen tells the next story which is about the birth of Eugenides, god of thieves, for whom Gen is named. Like the adventurers, the people in the story do not expect to meet a Goddess, but they believe and obey her when they meet the Earth in the woods. A woodcutter and his wife want a child and Earth provides them with one. Like God in the Bible allows Adam to name the animals, Earth allows the woodcutter and his wife to name her son because “the gods know themselves and have no need of names. It is man who names all things, even gods” (Genesis 2:19-20, 77). Earth visits the child every few years and gives him gifts. One year as she is traveling to him to give him the gift of immortality, the Sky finds out she had a son with the woodcutter and becomes angry and causes havoc. Earth also becomes angry and adds to the destruction. Their oldest daughter Hephestia speaks to them and calms them. She advocates for the humans being terrorized by her parents’ fighting. She convinces the Earth to give up her power of shaking and the Sky to give up his thunderbolts so that humanity would not suffer when they become angry with each other (79). As a result, humans pray to Hephestia to intercede for them (79).

The magus tells the next story which is, “Eugenides and the sky god’s thunderbolts” (93). Although the sky god promised to give Hephestia his thunderbolts, he delays. So Hephestia

seeks aid from Earth who directs her to her half-brother Eugenides. Eugenides steals the bolts, gives them to Hephestia, and also tricks the sky god into giving him immortality (95). Having the Sky's thunderbolts "and the ability to shake the earth, Hephestia became ruler of all the gods except the first gods" (96).

The first of Gen's dream visions is barely mentioned in passing: "I had a strange dream that night of a marble-walled room and a woman in white" (109). The dream returns the next night. In it, moonlight falls "on the white hair and dress of a woman...wearing the ancient peplos that fell in pleated folds to her feet, like one of the women carved in stone beside old altars" (115-16). Gen feels he should recognize her, but he doesn't (116). Their first conversation is short and formulaic:

"Who brings you here?" she asked.

"I bring myself."

"Do you come to offer or to take?"

"To take,"...

"Take what you seek if you find it then, but be cautious. Do not offend the gods." (116)

She writes his name down at the bottom of a long list of those who have tried to steal the stone before. It is clear that this woman has had this same conversation many times before with many different thieves.

Gen tells the story of Eugenides and the Great Fire, in which Eugenides' mortal brother, prompted by the sky god, goads the now immortal Eugenides into stealing the thunderbolts from Hephestia and using one of them (119). The world is set on fire and the brother burns to death in Eugenides' arms. Hamiathes, a mortal king, convinces a river to overflow his bank and quench the fire, for which action Hephestia gives him the Gift. Gen does not like this story, probably because it warns against the perils of pride.

By this time, the party has arrived at their destination, a hidden maze that the magus refers to as a temple (123). The temple is not exactly ‘seeker friendly’ since it lies underwater in the Aractus river and only dries out enough to be entered for three nights each year. The river and a trap corridor support its purpose, which is to guard Hamiathes’ Gift.

Gen has used the gods for curses throughout the book, but when he begins his main task of stealing Hamiathes’ Gift, he offers up “a perfunctory prayer to the god of thieves” calling it “a superstition [his] grandfather had ingrained in [him]. Send up a prayer as you start your work, send up a prayer as you finish it, and leave a gift once a month on the altar of Eugenides” (125). Although Gen believes this is superstition, he still goes through the motions, saying the prayers and leaving earrings on the altar (125).

When Gen enters the temple, he recognizes the room from his dream, but the woman in white is not there. Speaking in hindsight, Gen says, “If I had been a religious person, I might have stopped to pray in earnest, but it didn’t occur to me” (125). When Gen almost becomes trapped in the watery temple, he panics, saying aloud, “‘Gods,’ ... ‘oh, gods’” like many people might do if they were in a plane going down (126).

When Gen describes the temple maze, he notes that it is not much bigger than a small temple of a minor deity, and it does not seem like a temple because “there was no naos, ... no pronaos, no altar, no statues of the gods or of their supplicants” (130). This observation begs the question—if it lacks the structure and trappings of a temple, why is it known as a temple? Besides being a place to bring offerings, a temple can be a dwelling place for a deity. But Gen is not looking for a deity; he is looking for a rock. He is more concerned that there is “no treasure room to store valuable offerings” than with any other implications of the lack of traditional temple architecture (130).

After his first venture into the temple, while waiting for the water to subside so that he can return to his search, Gen dreams again of the woman in white whose “hair was held away from her face by a string of red stones set in gold” (135). She puts another mark by his name and seems concerned for him (134). Gen tries to ask about the missing altar and statue of the goddess, but awakes before he can.

On his second trip into the temple, Gen shifts through a pile of bones and random jewelry in search of Hamiathes’ Gift. He takes a ring, but shovels the rest “back into the pool, offerings to the gods”—the gods he still does not believe in (137). After failing to find the stone, Gen returns to the party. Because of where Gen found the ring, the magus playfully calls him a “grave robber,” at which Gen laughs because he considers “trying to rob a god’s temple” more worrisome than “the ghosts of a few dead men” (140). Though not necessarily consciously, Gen acknowledges the power of the gods.

Like God called Samuel, in Gen’s next dream, the woman in white calls him by name (1 Samuel 3). When he does not respond, she calls again. He answers “I am here” (140). She seems to be trying to warn him, saying, “If you go a third time into the maze, you will not leave without what you seek” and “There is no shame if you did not [go again]” (140). Eventually the conversation returns to the script:

‘Who brings you here?’ she asked.

‘I bring myself,’ ...

‘Be cautious... Do not offend the gods.’ (141)

She is interacting with Gen both on her own and in her scripted role. This balance of intervention with restraint and mystery is consistent with the actions of the gods in the rest of the series.

Upon waking, Gen tells himself that “She was a dream, something made of my own imagination” (141). Gen does not yet believe in the supernatural, but when Sophos asks Gen if he thinks there might be somebody or something in the maze with him, Gen is uneasy: “Not that [Gen] thought ghouls and ghosts were real, but they were easier to believe in when standing in a cold, dark, wet hole in the ground” (143).

During his third and final venture into the temple, Gen realizes that one wall looks more like a window, so he batters it down with a crowbar (145). Walking up some steps, he finds himself in a chamber filled with robed figures (146). One of these figures is the woman from his dreams, whom Gen recognizes as “Moira, who recorded men’s fates” (147). He “had found her image in the world and somehow [he] thought all mysteries were explained” (147). Gen expects to find an altar, but instead finds a throne upon which is seated “the statue of the Great Goddess Hephestia” (147). Hamiathes’ Gift rests on a tray on her lap (147). Gen stretches out his hand to take it, but stops when he notices the statue *breathe*.

The Death Star is no moon and Hephestia is no statue. At the realization that “This was the Great Goddess, and she was surrounded by her court[, Gen’s] extended hand began to shake” (147). Like the Shakers in the play, *As It Is in Heaven*, Gen’s response to seeing the gods in person is to shake. He looks up at the Great Goddess who looks beyond him, “impassive, distant, not unaware of [Gen’s] presence but unmoved by it” (148). The Great Goddess does not speak to the human thief before her.

Gen meets his patron god, Eugenides, the god of thieves, and he is not what Gen would have expected, had he expected the gods to be real at all. The story of Eugenides and the Great Fire says that the god was “burnt black as toast” making him “dark-skinned like the Nimbians on the far side of the middle sea” (121). Instead “his skin was a deep brownish red, like fired clay”

(148). Unlike the other gods who seem unreal in their perfection, “the god who had once been mortal” is smaller and has a scar “shaped like a rounded feather” on one cheek (146-8).

The god of thieves assures Gen that he has “not yet offended the gods” and commands Gen to “take the stone” (148). When Gen does not move, Eugenides places his hand on Hephestia’s hand and repeats the command, “Take it” (148). Despite this reassurance from his patron god, Gen remains frozen due to “religion that had seeped into [his] childhood without [his] knowing it. The thought of stealing something from the Great Goddess was too awful to contemplate” (148). Only Gen’s eyes move until he “looked again into the eyes of the Great Goddess, and for a moment she looked back at [him]. That was enough” to get him moving (149). He snatches the stone and flees out of the maze.

Gen’s thinking is radically changed from this point on. He is now consciously aware of the gods. It is no longer simply tradition that causes him to pray. Instead of using their names for curses, he thanks every god and goddess he can remember (152). When the magus believes Hamiathes’ Gift to be lost, he declares that they can just make a replica and Gen “almost expected lightning to strike him dead” (161). Gen almost expects an act of the gods when the Gift from Hephestia is trivialized. Yet, it is still *almost*; Gen does not fully expect the gods to make their presence felt outside the temple.

Surprising, because it is unexpected, is the miracle Gen witnesses when he steals some horses. The party needs horses in order to get away from the Attolian soldiers and the magus decides that Gen will steal them (163). During the theft, Gen “sent a hasty prayer to the god of thieves that the horses would keep quiet” (166). The profound silence shocks Gen because it “hadn’t occurred to [him] that the gods that [he’d] seen silent and unmoving in their temple might still be taking an interest in [him]” (166). But take an interest they do, so much so that they temporarily suspend the normal functioning of sound. The gods bend the laws of physics

like Jesus did when he walked on water (John 6:19). I like to refer to this miracle as the silent crack of doom: “The **iron shoes** on [the horses’] hooves **struck** the **flagstones** *soundlessly*” (167 emphasis mine). This miracle unnerves Gen more than seeing the gods in their temple because the gods acted outside of their temple in Gen’s normal world. Gen is “eager to divest [him]self of the gods’ attention as quickly as possible” (167). Again, Gen shakes, “a perfectly normal reaction for someone who has had a careless prayer answered by the gods” (167). As a thief, the knowledge that someone is watching him is likely even more disturbing than it would be for other folk.

After the miracle of the silent horses, a gong sounds in the village, which is bad news for the fugitives. Gen attributes the gong to Aractus, the god of the river who was charged to let no thief steal Hamiathes’ Gift (168). If the gods can work for him, they can certainly work against him.

As the group attempts to flee Attolia, Gen proposes a plan which brings to his mind his oath from the beginning that he had “sworn to the gods...that [he] wasn’t going to embroil [himself] in any more stupid plans. Of course [he] hadn’t actually believed in the gods at the time” (170). This plan ends with three wounded and one dead. He is one of the wounded, the rest were Attolian soldiers in the queen’s guard.

Gen’s worldview has changed. When he hears voices in his delirium, while being wheeled in a cart to prison, he thinks some of them “might be gods” (176). Instead of seeing the divine and assuming it to be his imagination, like he did when Moira visited his dreams, he actively considers divine answers to things that confuse him. He is not so comfortable with the gods as to ask where a lost fibula pin might be, but readily considers the possibility that the gods speak to him and influence events.

When Gen learned that the river destroyed the temple, he thought of the gods gone from the place where he had seen them and “blinked water out of [his] eyes” (181). He mourned the breaking of the temple where he met his gods, a tiny echo of Israel mourning the loss of the temple in Jerusalem (Lamentations).

When the queen of Attolia arrives in the prison, she is dressed in imitation of Hephestia (182). “Everything about her brought to mind the old religion,” an effect deliberately created “to remind her subjects that as Hephestia ruled uncontested among the gods, this woman ruled Attolia” (182). But Gen “had seen the Great Goddess and knew how far the Attolian queen fell short of her mark” (182). Even in Attolia, where the new gods are worshipped, the old gods remain enough a part of the cultural consciousness that the queen may use the images to her advantage. The magus said that “knowing someone’s religion can help you manipulate that person” (71). Attolia knows this well and uses it to her advantage, like modern advertisers who use shining light and an angel chorus to sell their product.

While Gen raves with a fever, he is visited by both Moira and Eugenides (184). Moira assures him that he isn’t dying and Eugenides comforts Gen and assuages his guilt at having killed an Attolian soldier. These comforts help Gen resolve to save his companions and complete his quest to give Hamiathes’ Gift to his queen.

Many readers (including myself, the first time I read the book) are not aware of the thief’s true identity until he arrives back in Eddis. Gen is actually a high-born Eddisian thief, a cousin of the queen, who masquerades as Sounisian gutter-scum to infiltrate the secret Sounisian expedition to retrieve Hamiathes’ Gift. He comes from a long line of thieves, though he is also a master swordsman because his father, Eddis’ minister of war, desperately wanted him to become a soldier.

During their escape from the Attolian prison, the magus declares that “The river is running the wrong way” and Gen panics because he believes that the flow of the river had actually switched instead of the magus being mistaken about its direction (190). “Let the gods into your life and you rapidly lose faith in the natural laws” (190). Gen has good reason to doubt natural laws, considering that not so long ago, a group of iron-shod horses pranced soundlessly through flagstone streets.

Although Gen now believes in the gods, he still has little patience for the trappings of religion. He still associates “the temple with boredom” and disdains “the empty mumblings [he’d] seen in temples all [his] life” (192). Even “having seen the gods, [he] continued to doubt all of the stories” (205).

During his flight from the Attolian guards, Gen gets grazed by a bullet, which he is sure will leave “a feather-shaped white scar” a sign of approval from the god of thieves (197-198). The line of communication is still open. Gen’s god still watches him with care like the Christian God watches His people (Psalm 121).

As soon as Gen completes his quest, he faints and sleeps “untroubled by visions of the gods” (205). Eugenides may still be watching his follower, but there is no need for him to disturb Gen’s slumber. Gen is grateful for the silence, because all he wants is for the gods to “hear [his] prayers from a distance, accept [his] offerings, and not trouble [his] dreams again” (205).

Once Gen returns to his home in a library in Eddis, he tries to research the temple where he stole the Gift. Eventually he concludes that “Hamiathes’ Gift had been hidden in the temple under the Aractus by every generation for hundreds of generations...and had been removed by each successive generation only with the gods’ approval” (216). The gods are, have been, and will continue influencing human events, but not necessarily in the same way. Since the temple

was destroyed, the stone cannot be returned there. Moira, the messenger of the gods, told the queen of Eddis to “take [the stone] up to the sacred mountain and throw it into Hephestia’s fire” (217). Eddis says of Hamiathes’ Gift, “It doesn’t belong in this world” (218). Gen says, “In a hundred years no one will believe it was real” (218). The old stories will be believed less and less until they become to the Eddisians like the mythology of the Greeks is to us.

Though Gen could not tell the magus about his meeting with the gods, he is relieved to be able to share his story with his friend, the queen. He shares “what it meant to be the focus of the gods’ attention, to be their instrument, used to change the shape of the world” (218). From the beginning of his quest, when Gen steals a king’s seal ring and shows it off as proof to a man who turns out to be an informant for the king’s advisor, to not letting him die after he is stabbed through the chest with a sword, the gods are watching their instrument (206, 178).

Gen’s religious experiences—his dreams of Moira, his meeting with the gods, the miracle of silent horses—move him from skepticism to an awe-filled faith. He still finds ritual boring and he will likely return to his habitual reverence, but he acknowledges the gods. Gen’s experiences and his faith are important because they reveal, ever more over time, the expansive role of the gods. The actions of the gods in *The Thief* express a concern and care for humanity that echoes the love of Christ for the world.

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