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“Foregone Conclusions”: Howells’s Venice, America’s Civil War, and Global Risk

The American realist William Dean Howells, whose oeuvre includes such titles as *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and *A World of Chance* (1893), built an imaginative universe around principles of accident and risk. As Jason Puskar argues in *Accident Society* (2012), narratives of chance by Howells and his late-nineteenth-century American contemporaries supported new forms of social collectivity premised on the notion of no-fault catastrophe. A surprising omission from Puskar’s study is Howells’s early novel *A Foregone Conclusion* (1874), a tragicomedy set in Venice during the American Civil War (inspired by Howells’s own stint as Lincoln’s consul to Venice), about the entanglements among a US consul, an American teenage girl, and a Venetian priest contemplating emigration to America. *A Foregone Conclusion* is, I argue, an essential text in Howells’s dramatization of American risk. Incorporating strategic allusions to Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Howells’s novel reads as a keen political allegory about the social and ideological challenges of a Union sustained by risk rather than Providence.

The convoluted relationships among the novel’s three central characters reflect America’s precarious international standing during the Civil War, when the conservative courts of Europe regarded the Union cause with ambivalence. Howells’s center of consciousness is US consul Henry Ferris, a painter by vocation, who, typifying many American diplomats of that moment (including Howells), wields the soft power of culture while fielding foreign offers of assistance. One such offer comes from the Venetian priest and inventor Don Ippolito, who approaches Ferris with a scale model of a trick cannon to deploy against Confederate troops. Ippolito is a lightning rod for Union anxieties and hopes

regarding Catholic Europe: at first glance, a black-cassocked alien in bondage to a shadowy, anti-republican institution; beneath, a freethinking inventor who questions his vocation and yearns for America. Ippolito's decision to emigrate crystalizes after Ferris installs him as Italian tutor to the beautiful American sojourner Florida Vervain. Florida—named for her native Southern state, where her father fought the Seminole Indians, but hailing more recently from Providence, Rhode Island—emerges as a somewhat vexed figure for the Union. (Her drift from Providence is of course part of Howells's allegory.) Florida's consummately white skin and mercurial temper prove irresistible to the swarthy, repressed Ippolito. Secretly in love with her, he confesses his religious doubts and—in a revision of Hester's escape plan for the adulterous minister Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*—Florida plots the wayward Venetian priest's getaway to America. However, like Dimmesdale, Ippolito dies after rejecting freedom's risky path. Ferris, returning to America and marrying Florida, later views Ippolito, the failed immigrant, as a remote casualty in his own pursuit of happiness.

Howells's titular allusion to *Othello* nuances the allegorical implications of the novel's outcome. Like Othello, deluded by jealousy and faulty evidence, Ferris misperceives an illicit romance—here between Florida and Don Ippolito—as “a foregone conclusion.” The *Othello* allusion conjures Venice's dualistic literary image—enlightened republic, decadent city—to underscore the priest's inscrutability and, more broadly, the Union's uncertain prospects in the early 1860s. However, in an ironic coda, Ferris retrospectively considers both Don Ippolito's failure and his own success as foregone conclusions, his marriage secured by the foreign priest's “inadequacy.” Howells satirizes a postbellum, post-providential ideology holding that the Union prospers when unfit aliens are excluded from the theater of risk.

Keywords: William Dean Howells, *A Foregone Conclusion*, American Civil War, risk, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Othello*