

Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* “The Play's the Thing”

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Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, first produced in 1993, is set in one room of the country house Sidley Park in Derbyshire. What is strikingly unusual about the construction of the play is that the action is split between the events in the house almost two hundred years ago, in 1908, and later in 1812, and the present. Stoppard chose two eras undergoing fundamental changes in their outlook toward the natural world, and we watch the characters struggle with the effects of those changes on their identity. “Stoppard's play delves into the unsettling experience of new ideas, the interplay of hypothesis and evidence, and the role of human character in discovery.” (Peterson 2)

In 1809 the daughter of the estate, Thomasina, thirteen years old and a prodigy, is being tutored, amongst other things, in maths by Septimus Hodge. Slowly she begins to recognize cracks in the Newtonian physics she is being taught and which is the prevalent theory of the time. She observes that as you stir jam into pudding it dissipates, but the action cannot be reversed, as Newtonian physics predicts it could be. Her tutor agrees that the jam, like time, cannot run backwards, and that “we must stir our way onward mixing as we go, disorder out of disorder into disorder . . . This is known as free will or self-determination” (5). Unwittingly, Septimus lays out the central problem of the play, how to find meaning as change seems to deprive us of it.

Thomasina proposes to test (with the intention of seeing it fail we are given to believe) Newtonian physics by pushing it to its logical extreme: “If you could stop every atom in its position and direction, and if your mind could comprehend all the actions thus suspended, then if you were really, really, good at algebra you could write the formula for all the future” (5). As she continues to think about the relationship between mathematics and the real world, Thomasina begins “to feel the limitations of the geometry she is studying” (Hunter 175) because it only creates regular shapes, “as if the world of forms were nothing but arcs and angles.” (37). “Most of the shapes in the world are irregular: she wants to find the equations for them too—striking out with her own free will into what would be now called fractal geometry.” (Hunter 175) She postulates there must be a way to equate irregular forms and plans to “plot this leaf and deduce its equation.”

In all of these efforts, Thomasina is seeking freedom, as Hunter suggests, from the determinism inherent in the Newtonian system and the classical world view. In *Arcadia* this is

represented as a "clockwork" view of the universe [which] considers forces between a small number of objects in a controlled environment and provides a metaphor for control, logic, and the picture of the world as orderly and unchanging." (Crone 1) Thomasina's queries into why the jam dissolving into her pudding cannot be reversed is pointing to the second law of thermodynamics developed in the nineteenth century. Her attempts to find the mathematics capable of recreating irregular forms points toward iteration and algorithm, both modern math sciences, but out of reach without computing power. "What makes these two fields different [from Newtonian physics] is that they deal with situations in the real world more complicated than a small number of objects in a controlled environment. In the case of thermodynamics, the difference is that a large number of objects are involved, like molecules in the air." (Crone 1) Other, relatively simple situations in the real world prove Newtonian physics to be useless because it depends too heavily on accurate measurements. "Repeat an experiment with identical initial conditions, and very soon the body's position and velocity do not even come close to those obtained the first time. After a very short time, the state of the system will be essentially unknown. These systems, which can be as 'simple' as water dripping from a faucet, are called 'chaotic.' It is virtually impossible to predict when the next drop will fall." (Atkatz 2)

Thomasina's scientific intuitions are ahead of her time, but Stoppard chose to create such a character to have her a contemporary of the political and artistic revolutions abreast in Europe, most notably the Romantic literary movement, in full bloom at the time. In *Arcadia* Stoppard emphasizes the connection, or even competition between science and art in creating an understanding of the world. As Newtonian physics began to erode as a secure explanation of the universe, everything seemed to become more unpredictable, so the Romantics "believed more in the validity of relative and personal truths, than in the possibility of achieving empirical knowledge. . . . Romanticism in art, literature and music was marked by a cult of feeling over thinking, and a belief that truth is found in the instinct of a genius more readily than the ratiocination of a group of dogged scholars." (Rauser 1)

This connection is dramatically emphasized by the presence of Lord Byron, on the threshold of his emergence as a major figure in the Romantic movement in 1809, as a guest at Sidley Park at the opening of the play. Byron is sometimes considered the ultimate Romantic, author of some of the major pieces of the cannon of the English Romantic movement, as well as a rebel in every aspect of his life, from love, to adventure, to celebrity status. However, Byron actually "contained within himself some of the tensions examined in *Arcadia*: classical v. Romantic, order v. randomness, rationality v. sexual impulse. (Hunter 174) He was an aristocrat, a traditionally conservative class, and his penchant for satire had more in common with the literature of the previous century than his own. The modern-day Bernard assumes that Byron was the author of the

scathing critique of Chater's *The Couch of Eros*, though it was actually Septimus who wrote it, because Byron was famous for his criticism of literary figures, an enthusiasm he took to the extreme when he even took on the major poets Coleridge and Wordsworth. (Rogoff 1)

Stoppard also ingeniously weaves this theme of the contrast between the classical and Romantic into the literal background of the play: the garden outside the windows of the room in which the play takes place. "The history of the garden says it all, beautifully," (27) says Hannah, a character of the present. We learn that the garden had already, in the eighteenth century, undergone a change that reflected the changing intellectual nature of society. Until the mid eighteenth century the garden had been an ornamental garden with strict symmetry and trees and bushes clipped into shapes, much in the enlightenment style emphasizing the control of man over nature. "Paradise in the age of reason. . . . topiary, pools and terraces, fountains, an avenue of limes—the whole sublime geometry," Hannah relates. Then this garden had been altered, "ploughed under by Capability Brown," (27) to make way for a garden which attempted to recreate a more natural landscape, or, as she says, "so that the fools could pretend they were living in God's countryside."

Lady Croom prefers the garden the way it is in 1809: "Sidley Park is already a picture, and a most amiable picture too. The slopes are green and gentle. The trees are companionably grouped at intervals that show them to advantage. The rill is a serpentine ribbon unwound from the lake peaceably contained by meadows on which the right amount of sheep are tastefully arranged—in short, it is nature as God intended." (12) In 1809 and still in the later scenes of 1812 the Sidley Park grounds are being made over by the landscape architect Richard Noakes, who "came to bring God up to date." She is almost beside herself as she watches the changes her husband has initiated taking place. "Where there is the familiar pastoral refinement of an Englishman's garden, here is an eruption of gloomy forest and towering crag, of ruins where there was never a house, of water dashing against rocks where there was neither spring nor a stone . . . My hyacinth dell is become a haunt for hobgoblins, my Chinese bridge . . . is usurped by a fallen obelisk overgrown with briars." Her attraction to the style of the current garden, however, belies the nature of gardens which are essentially the recreation of nature: they are always going to be an idealized view of nature as the designers see it. Her garden presents a deliberately arranged and, in her view, improved picture of nature. Noakes's garden intends to present a deliberately arranged, and in his view, improved picture of the wild side of nature. Thomasina, ahead of the crowd in landscape fashion as she is in mathematical theory, approves of the changes being made: "In my opinion, Mr. Noakes's scheme for the garden is perfect." (10) Her tastes run in parallel with her growing interest in irregular shapes and eventually the unpredictable "wildness" of the natural world.

In the interspersed scenes in the present, the author Hannah Jarvis and, in a separate effort, the English don Bernard Nightingale are attempting to establish what happened in that same house in

precisely the time being acted out. Hannah is trying to establish who the hermit was who occupied the hermitage completed in 1812, and Bernard is attempting to find proof for his hunch that Byron was involved in a duel at Sidley Park and killed a man, thereby explaining his sudden departure from England in the summer of 1809. Their discoveries of pieces of information and their interpretations of what they find, slowly shed light on the events of nearly two centuries earlier. "Slowly" is crucial here, because Bernard rushes off to make a public announcement of his theory, only to be shown to be humiliatingly wrong when evidence is found proving Byron was not culpable.

The moderns find themselves in a climate of intellectual change similar to the ancients. Valentine, the young heir of the estate and a budding scientist, explains where Thomasina was headed with her theories and where understanding of the universe is going now. He is the one who sees that Thomasina's ideas were about thermodynamics which says that heat will forever dissipate, "The sun and the stars. It'll take a while but we're all going to end up at room temperature." (78) Using his computer he carries on Thomasina's equations to show that they are actually primitive algorithms which theorists have now used to lead to the postulation of the modern chaos theory. In an interesting twist, it is this chaos theory that is currently punching holes in the prevailing understanding of the universe. At the beginning of the twentieth century "People were talking about the end of physics. Relativity and quantum looked as if they were going to clean out the whole problem between them. A theory of everything." (47-8) However, they found they "are better at predicting events at the edge of the galaxy or inside the nucleus of an atom than whether it'll rain on auntie's garden party three Sundays from now." The mathematics of the algorithm, which Thomasina was crudely suggesting, released by the power of the computer, has shown that the "unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is."

Running throughout the play is love and sex, the most inexplicable and unpredictable of human behavior. All of the characters are involved, and to emphasize the point that sex is equated with chaos, Stoppard makes the characters all unsatisfied; each is involved with someone who they can't have for reasons of differences in age, social status, or because they are married. In the play's first line, Thomasina asks "Septimus, what is carnal embrace?" She had heard a rumor in the house that Septimus had been observed with Charity Chater, the wife of a guest of the house, Ezra Chater, an aspiring poet. Septimus shows no lasting interest in Mrs. Chater and she is soon in bed with his visiting friend Byron, all while she is carrying on a long-term affair with the brother of wife of Lady Croom, Captain Brice. At the end of the 1809 episode, Septimus admits his deeper attraction for Lady Croom. Earlier, the Lady indicated an interest in Byron as she asks Septimus' assistance in persuading him to delay his departure, and she is seen to have been attempting to visit Byron's room, which is why she was able to discover Mrs. Chater coming out of it. Her

subsequent adoption of Septimus as her lover seems to be done as a consolation over losing Byron. Over the next several years Septimus and Lady Croom have an affair, but in the end Septimus is cast aside by her. In 1812 it is apparent that Lady Croom is now interested in the Polish Count Zelinsky, though she still has a fancy for Byron, as she is jealous of his appearance in public with Caroline Lamb. Still, she has the gall to try to keep Septimus on the string: "SEPTIMUS: Your ladyship's approval is my constant object. LADY CROOM: Well, do not despair of it." (83)

Even the young Augustus, in 1812, approaches Septimus for advice: "There are things a fellow cannot ask his friends. Carnal things," (88) and Septimus agrees to have a fatherly talk. On the eve of her seventeenth birthday, Thomasina's mother decides that she is too educated for her own good and, because she herself was married at seventeen, she decides that her daughter should be as well, suggesting that Thomasina's future husband will be chosen for her. In the course of the play Thomasina grows into a woman who falls in love with her tutor. The play closes with the two of them dancing alone at night, but Septimus resists her repeated attempts to invite him to her room. Though this was a proper, even courageous decision, Septimus has to live the rest of his life miserable with the thought that if he had been with her that night, she might not have died in the fire.

Elsewhere, Ezra Chater is stuck in a marriage to a woman who we find not only slept with Septimus and Byron, but also Captain Brice. Brice, deeply in love with Mrs. Chater, had become her husband's patron in order to remain close to her. Even Noakes is suspected of being a voyeur as he was evidently spying on people in the garden at night.

In the modern era, the young scholar, Bernard, has got Lady Croom "in a flutter" according to Valentine. "He gave her a first edition of Horace Walpole, and now she's lent him her bicycle." "Lending one's bicycle is a safe form of sex, possibly the safest there is." (51) Bernard, however, is more interested in her daughter Chloe, who, he suggests, seduced him: "Every time I turned around she was up a library ladder. In the end I gave in." (64) It is not a match that is feasible given the difference in their ages and class: "This is my first experience of the landed aristocracy. I tell you, I'm boggle-eyed." (64) He casually drops her when they were discovered together by Lady Croom. This was not before Bernard propositions Hannah to accompany him to London, not to attend his lecture, but for sex. The two sons of the house, Valentine and his younger brother Gus, it turns out, are both in love with Hannah. Valentine is openly so, the shy Gus only able to meekly give her an apple.

Hannah is the only character who does not seem to be at the beck and call of romantic attractions. However, we begin to see that remaining alone is a conscious decision on her part. Valentine comments that "She never lets anyone kiss her," (49) and when Chloe tries to "fix her up" with Bernard, her only comment is "Believe me, it gets less important." (33) After Bernard's

proposition she says she has "Nothing against it," (63) but she questions its predominance. "Sex and literature. Literature and sex. Your conversation, left to itself, doesn't have many places to go. Like two marbles rolling around in a pudding basin, One of them is always sex." She also raises concerns about the influence of emotions over rational functions. "Einstein–relativity and sex. Chippendale–sex and furniture. Galileo–'Did the earth move?' What the hell is it with you people?" And to bring it down to an earthy level, she considers sex constricting on every level of freedom: "Chaps sometimes wanted to marry me, and I don't know a worse bargain. Available sex against not being able to fart in bed."

She is unambiguously anti-romantic. Her description of the history of the garden, which views both alterations as abominations, places Hannah squarely in the classical camp, which fits with her characterization as one who stoically inhibits emotions and is even disdainful of intuition. She sees Romanticism as "The decline from thinking to feeling." (27) She goes along with Valentine's advances, allowing him to call her his fiancée, only as a "joke that consoles." (23) Though he is not successful, Valentine understands her better than anyone. After she repels one of his light-hearted attempts at her affections, he comments, "Your classical reserve is only a mannerism; and neurotic." (75) She is, however, taken aback by the attention of the younger and far more serious Gus. When he shyly gives her an apple, after Chloe observes, "It's not a joke to him," she lets out a worrisome "Oh, dear," to end the scene. (33) At the very end of the play he gives Hannah the picture that Thomasina had drawn of "Septimus holding Plautus" which is the missing evidence to her theory of the tutor having become the hermit. Able to catch Hannah in moment of weakness and get her to dance with him, her loneliness for affections shows through, and they dance. Those two figures dancing mirror Septimus and Thomasina dancing in the same room to close out the play.

Stoppard sets up this untamable yearning for affection as the anti-thesis of the desire to be able to understand the world in concrete terms represented by the scientific method. Valentine tells Chloe that Newtonians thought "that from Newton's laws you could predict everything to come."

CHOLE: But it doesn't work, does it?

VALENTINE: No, It turns out maths is different.

CHLOE: No, it's all because of sex.

VALENTINE: Really?

CHLOE: That's what I think. The universe is deterministic all right, just like Newton said, I mean it's trying to be, but the only thing going wrong is people fancying people who aren't supposed to be in that part of the plan.

VALENTINE: Ah. The attraction that Newton left out. (73-4)

So, what is the theatergoer or the reader to make of all this? Complicated characters abound amidst a plethora of complex themes. Stoppard has been criticized for creating a play that is too

thick to wade through. Damien Jaques warns the theatergoers to “Be prepared for an intellectual challenge unlike almost any other you have encountered in a theater,” and wonders if that because “the piece is very dense, it raises the question that has been asked of the playwright’s previous work: Is Stoppard too clever for his own good? There is a sense of intellectual showing off, like the class genius proudly demonstrating his cerebral superiority.” (1-2) Ann Barton, while admitting the play’s depth, laments that “*Arcadia*, despite its readily available surface fun, is not easy to appreciate fully the first time around in its acted or (indeed) even its printed form.” (4-5) Richard Brunstien is more caustic.

Now that I have completed a refresher course in physics and mathematics, literature and horticulture, and after visiting the Lincoln Center production and reading the play twice, I’m a bit smarter but still unrepentant about my dissenting view. . . . *Arcadia* is a virtual grab bag of literary and scientific ideas. . . but the play seems to me a popularized expression of elitism. *Arcadia* synthesizes abstruse material not in order to advance thought or illuminate minds so much as to intimidate the ignorant. Like *Hapgood*, it is a mental exercise with no discernable purpose other than to demonstrate the author’s considerable virtuosity and flatter the intelligence of the educated liberal classes. (1)

Lloyd Rose thinks that even without being able to understand the intellectual subtleties of the play, “the play is still accessible.” However, he feels that “For all its surface brilliance, *Arcadia* lacks passion and urgency,” so that “Despite the sorrowful string of its last scenes, the evening is not quite a full theatrical experience. It’s more like eavesdropping on a dinner party full of smart, glib, shallow, charming people” (2-3)

In contrast, Brad Leithouser sees the play as a kind of breakthrough for Stoppard.

We’ve been told Stoppard has no real subject but his own ingenuity. But with *Arcadia* he has taken on, dazzlingly, an expansive slew of topics: a young girl’s dawning sexuality, the birth of Romanticism, modern academia, post-Newtonian physics. We’ve heard he fails to understand women or to create good female characters. But in Thomasina Coverly, a 13-year-old mathematical genius fated to die before her 17th birthday, he has forged a female role any young actress would pine for. We’ve heard that he is all brain and no heart, and yet by *Arcadia*’s final act, Stoppard has shown he knows. (1)

It should not be surprising that specialists in the intellectual fields dealt with in the play line up to write analyses of *Arcadia*’s mathematics, physics, history, social theory, and gardening. (Antor, Kasman) “*Arcadia* deserves a tip of the hat from every rationalist who has fumed at Hollywood’s two-dimensional scientific noncharacters. . . . The verbal virtuosity in *Arcadia* rests on a respectful, even sympathetic, examination of the way modern science looks at the world.” (Beardsley, 3) For the rest of us, it is to Stoppard’s credit that he keeps the human element at the forefront. Sex strings through the play uninterrupted to the point that Hannah’s tirade against men, “Literature and sex.

Sex and literature," could be applied to this play and Stoppard as well. The character in which these two themes of science and sex are most closely linked is the computer wielding, mathematical biologist, and pathetically-in-love Valentine. He claims that all that matters is "Scientific progress. Knowledge," (61) but at the same time he is the one who realizes the futility of intellectual activity.

The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is. It's how nature creates itself, on every scale, the snowflake and the snowstorm. It makes me so happy. To be at the beginning again, knowing almost nothing. . . .The future is disorder. A door like this has cracked open five or six times since we got up on our hind legs. It's the best time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong. (47-8)

In the brilliantly interweaved lines in the last scene, just as Septimus realizes the implications of Thomasina's equations, "So the Improved Newtonian Universe must cease and grow cold. Dear me," (93) Valentine revels in the idea: "The heat goes into the mix. . . .And everything is mixing the same way, all the time, irreversibly . . . till there's no time left. That's what time means." (94) Concurrently Septimus turns down Thomasina's requests to "dance" with "Oh, we have time, I think," ironically, hours before her tragic death. They do eventually dance, but to her pleas to come to her room:

THOMASINA: I will wait for you to come.

SEPTIMUS: I cannot.

THOMASINA: You may.

SEPTIMUS: I may not.

THOMASINA: You must.

SEPTIMUS: I will not.

Clearly of his own free will Septimus misses the opportunity not only to save Thomasina but also to save himself. Haunted by the thought that this kind of free will is the harbinger of the chaos inherent in the universe, Septimus confines himself to the hermitage to carry out her equations. Before he died 20 years later, "the cottage was stacked solid with paper. Hundreds of pages. Thousands. . . . He'd covered every sheet with cabalistic proofs that the world was coming to an end." (27) To do all this, Valentine observes, he would have had to have, in addition to time and paper, a "reason for doing it," (52) and later concludes that he was actually trying to save the world by hoping to disprove Thomasina's theory. (78)

Architects and landscape artists use the term "genius of the place" to suggest "that a locale possesses ecologically and spiritually unique qualities." (Black 1) Bernard uses this term to describe the hermit and Hannah admits that it is the intended title of her book. To her the hermit is "A perfect symbol. . . [of] The whole Romantic sham, Bernard! It's what happened to the Enlightenment, isn't it? A century of intellectual rigour turned in on itself. A mind in chaos

suspected of genius. In a setting of cheap thrills and false emotion.” (27) She misses the irony that the hermit was the ultimate classicist who withered away resisting the transformation to a new world view which we all now take for granted. The over-serious Septimus took the end, the equation, the proof, to be the goal, not the journey as Valentine sees it. The pursuit of knowledge is held to be a quintessentially human activity; yet it is the act that is important, not the knowledge gained, which will always prove to be fleeting. Tragically Septimus’s own observation, “we must stir our way onward mixing as we go, disorder out of disorder into disorder until pink is complete, unchanging and unchangeable, and we are done with it forever. This is known as free will or self-determination,” (5) is advice that he himself cannot heed. In this Stoppard seems to be supplying his play with armor to resist his critics. The intellectual content of the play is not what makes the theater. For the playwright it is in the creation, for the actor, in the performance, and for the audience, in the experience that we find meaning.

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