

ARCADIA EXPLAINED

By Bobby Kennedy

Stoppard has remarked that, in putting a play together, “what happens is you pull in all sorts of ideas which previously had been quite disconnected, which had been floating around in one’s mind for years...As usual I found that one has a play to write at the point where different threads, quite separate threads, begin to join up.” In *Arcadia*, four main threads join up over the course of the play and we will provide a little information about each of them here.

CLASSICAL & ROMANTIC

“Our urge to divide, counter balance and classify has never, perhaps, produced two denominations which work so suggestively over the infinite terrain of human expression. In speaking of Classical and Romantic literature, painting, music, sculpture, architecture or even landscape-gardening, we balance reason against imagination, logic against emotion, geometry against nature, formality against spontaneity, discretion against valor... But in so doing, we are drawing attention not so much to different aesthetic principles as to different responses to the world, to different tempers. ‘Romanticism’ is an idea which needed a classical mind to have it.” — Tom Stoppard

Stoppard deliberately used the conflict between Classicism and Romanticism as a means to frame the story of *Arcadia*. The Classical period, often referred to as Neo-Classical (or, alternatively, the Enlightenment) in order to distinguish it from the time of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, corresponds to the philosophy and art that emerged between the years 1660-1790. During this time, great thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, Benjamin Franklin and the other founding fathers of the United States; and writers such as Jonathan Swift, Molière, John Dryden, Alexander Pope and Voltaire were building on the advances that had been made during the preceding Renaissance. Their writings were highly intelligent, witty and thoughtful, but always painstakingly rational in design and intention. Concurrently, the scientific community, including Isaac Newton and his companions in the Royal Society, made breakthrough after breakthrough, bringing order to the natural world with new rules and laws.

However, as the 19th century dawned, writers and philosophers began to rebel against the principled order and restraint of Neo-Classicism. Romantics placed renewed emphasis on emotion, rather than intellect, and advocated the importance of an individual’s free expression. Poetry, in particular, thrived during this period, with Coleridge, Blake, Wordsworth, Byron and Keats all making names for themselves. Other writers considered a part of this movement include Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the Brontë sisters, Johann Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Alexandre Dumas, Alexander Pushkin and Edgar Allan Poe. In *Arcadia*, some of Stoppard’s characters at times embody a Classical inclination while others exhibit traits more in line with the Romantics. The clashes between these two temperaments is an overarching theme of the play that also plays out on a micro level in the evolution of garden architecture, poetry and physics.

ENGLISH GARDENS

“The grounds of Sidley Park, the house which provides the setting for *Arcadia*, are a palimpsest on which all three of the main styles of 18th and early 19th century landscape garden have at one time or another been inscribed. Until the 1750s, the garden was laid out according to an aesthetic which saw beauty

only in symmetry, in the geometrical pattern made by circular pools and the intersecting straight lines of avenues, allées, terraces, hedges. This formal design was then buried beneath the improvements of Lancelot ('Capability') Brown, the most famous advocate of a 'natural' style of gardening which saw beauty only in asymmetrical arrangements of sinuous curves and trees planted in loosely, scattered informal groups. As *Arcadia* opens, this design is about to give way to the 'picturesque' style favored by Mr. Noakes. The 'picturesque' was an aesthetic of irregularity, of 'romantic' wildness, in which the continuous, serpentine lines of Brown were deliberately broken and obscured by sudden declivities and the jagged shapes and shadows of rocks and unkempt trees." — John Burrell, from the program for *Arcadia's* 1993 world premiere at the National Theatre, London

The development of landscape garden architecture in Britain during the 18th and 19th centuries parallels the transition from Classicism to Romanticism. A growth in nationalistic pride (and a consciousness of its differences between its government and the absolute monarchies of continental Europe) prompted Britain to cultivate a distinctly British identity throughout the 18th century. Classical, symmetrical gardens, the dominant style prior to the mid-18th century, were seen as too French— too ordered and confining. Brown's "natural" style better reflected the more enlightened and egalitarian position that Britain occupied on the world stage. As a result, many country manors had their gardens remodeled. By the beginning of the 19th century, however, in the wake of the American and French Revolutions, Britain (with its constitutional monarchy still intact) could no longer claim to be at the forefront of Progressivism. Inspired by the growth of Romanticism, picturesque gardens changed the British narrative once again, from one of youthful exceptionalism to one of deep-rooted tradition that would not be altered by the latest fad, political or otherwise. In *Arcadia*, the architect Mr. Noakes is an advocate of the "picturesque" style and is persuading the 19th century Coverlys to remodel their garden under his guidance, despite the objections of Lady Croom who prefers the "natural" style already present.

LORD BYRON & LADY CAROLINE LAMB

George Gordon Byron, who went by Lord Byron after inheriting a Barony at the age of ten, was one of the most famous poets of the Romantic era. His works, including the books *Don Juan*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the shorter poem "She Walks in Beauty," remain landmarks of early 19th century literature and were wildly popular when published. Byron, however, was just as renowned for his lifestyle as he was for his writing. He accumulated enormous debts, exiled himself from Britain multiple times, had scores of affairs (with men as well as women), and died fighting in the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire. Despite a life lived so publicly, a handful of events in his life have remained difficult to definitively explain, exacerbated by the burning of his memoirs a month after his death. Of particular importance to *Arcadia* is Byron's initial self-imposed exile in 1809, the same year that he published his first book of poetry, *Hours of Idleness*, which he then followed with a scathing satirical attack to his critics, entitled *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Byron wrote from Albania, "I will never live in England if I can avoid it. Why, must remain a secret."

After remaining abroad from 1809- 1811, Byron returned to England and published the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which were an instant success. The fame of this success brought him into new social circles in London where he encountered Lady Caroline Lamb. Despite the fact that the Lady had been married for several years, the two soon began an affair that lasted until August of 1812. Byron biographer Leslie Marchand notes that "soon after their first acquaintance [Lamb] wrote dramatically in

her diary: 'That beautiful pale face is my fate.'" Ultimately, however, Lamb's instability and indiscretion proved too much for Byron, as the publicity of their affair started having consequences for the ambitious poet. Byron began avoiding Lamb in June, and she resorted to showing up at his home in disguise and later threatening to desert her family or even kill herself for the poet. When Byron formally broke things off, Lamb's husband took his devastated wife to Ireland for a year to prevent her from further destroying her reputation. Though their affair had ceased, Byron and Lamb would continue to write to each other, both publicly and privately, until Byron's death in 1824, after which Lamb wrote to a friend, "I grew to love him better than virtue, Religion —all prospects here. He broke my heart, & still I love him...."

Hannah Jarvis and Bernard Nightingale, characters in the present-day scenes of *Arcadia*, are both scholars of 19th century Romanticism. Jarvis has recently published a book on Lady Caroline Lamb, and Nightingale is hoping to make a name for himself with a bold new theory about Lord Byron and what drove him into that first exile. Jarvis's and Nightingale's different approaches to scholarship also follow a Classical/Romantic split.

CHAOS THEORY

While Stoppard put the focus of his play on the divide between Classical and Romantic thought, his original impetus for writing the play was a desire to explore the groundbreaking science of chaos theory. In his 1987 landmark exploration titled *Chaos: Making a New Science*, author James Gleick writes "[Some scientists] go so far as to say that 20th century science will be remembered for just three things: relativity, quantum mechanics and chaos. Like the first two revolutions, chaos cuts away at the tenets of Newton's physics."

Isaac Newton's groundbreaking laws were originally conceived to apply to an orderly world in which cause and effect are relatively easy to determine and predict, given enough information. However, complex systems such as the weather or population growth have proven to be infinitely complicated to accurately predict, despite their ability to be modeled with equations. Until the emergence of chaos theory, unpredictable outcomes in systems like these were attributed to randomness, but chaos offered a different conclusion. As Gleick explains, "tiny differences in input could quickly become overwhelming differences in output —a phenomenon given the name 'sensitive dependence on initial conditions.' In weather, for example, this translates into what is only half-jokingly known as the Butterfly Effect —the notion that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York. Only a new kind of science could begin to cross the great gulf between knowledge of what one thing does —one water molecule, one cell of heart tissue, one neuron —and what millions of them do."

While chaos was not defined until the 20th century, its rejection of classical Newtonian physics mirrors the rejection of Classical art by the Romantics in the 19th century. In *Arcadia*, the character of Thomasina Coverly, who is studying physics and mathematics in 1809, makes a prescient discovery of the second law of thermodynamics ("that heat can flow in only one direction, from hotter to colder," which contradicts the backwards and forwards nature of Newton's laws of motion) and is beginning to play with the principles of chaos theory more than a century before that science even had a name. In the present-day scenes, Valentine Coverly, a descendant of the family, is a mathematician who had been studying chaos theory at university and is examining it with regards to his family's history of hunting grouse at their estate.

All of these subjects—Classical and Romantic thought; “natural” gardens and the “picturesque”; Lord Byron and Lady Caroline Lamb; and chaos theory — intertwine their way through *Arcadia*, easily one of Stoppard’s most ambitious plays in what has been an incredibly ambitious writing career.

■ Further Reading

Fleming, John. Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*. London: Continuum, 2008.

Gleick, James. *Chaos: Making a New Science*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Hunt, John Dixon and Peter Willis, ed. *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620-1820*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988.

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Nadel, Ira. *Tom Stoppard: A Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

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