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Dance and Theatre as Culture Metaphors

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The Attraction England Left Out

"The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act."

Hector History Boys (Bennett 53)

Tom Stoppard is well known for his ability to tease out the ironies of life while staying just this side of clarity. His plays challenge audiences to keep up with a type of British intellectualism that celebrates the perceived ideals from the classical world. Yet in holding up a mirror to scholars past and present, Stoppard asks us to see beyond the ideal into paradox. The great poets, playwrights and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome celebrated intellect hand in hand with love and passion, and yet British academia stresses the more Enlightenment-based triumph of knowledge over instinct. As writer Richard Ellmann puts it, "Artists could display their morality by fidelity to nature, and by eschewing self-indulgent sensuality" (qtd. Haill, *The Beautiful* 5). Love, passion, sex—this side of understanding the universe—was carefully removed from scholarship in favor of a detached acquisition of knowledge. Nor is it Stoppard alone among the playwrights who explore this contradiction. In his play *History Boys,* Alan Bennett looks at the same incongruity in the British school system of today. Even Oscar Wilde, a great influence on Stoppard, questioned the dual expectations of his society through his plays, most notably *The Importance of Being Earnest.* But while Wilde wrote in the midst of controversy and Bennett during modern day, it is Stoppard, specifically in his plays *The Invention of Love*

and *Arcadia,* who captures the enduring nature of this paradox throughout English history.

In influencing Stoppard, Oscar Wilde provided not only life examples of the dichotomy between passion and knowledge, but also provided an appreciation for the art of paradox. Particularly in plays like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde uses Victorian society as the butt of jokes by drawing attention to the difference between expectation and reality. At the start of the play, Algernon, in explaining why Gwendolen would not marry his friend Jack, says, "In the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right" (Foreman 322). The audience is presented with a number of contradictions that are normally taken for granted: that a woman flirting with a man is interested in him for marriage, that flirting and then turning a man down is the "right" thing to do, and that there are means through which a woman would attract a husband other than flirtation. Wilde by no means demands that the audience accept his statement as true, but puts just enough truth into it to force the audience to recognize the humor of the paradox. Some women do flirt without intention; in fact, it is quite common, but it is not part of the Victorian image of the ideal, chaste woman. Rather, it is a sin more commonly attributed to men: "The play's satire constantly cuts in this way through conventional gender divisions and constrictions" (Sloan 119). In the second act, Gwendolen takes this even further: "The home seems to be to be the proper sphere for the man" (Foreman 362). Her statement is in complete opposition to the values of the time, and thus it is humorous, but it also forces the audience to question why such a contradiction is wrong.

But it is within the play's title and subtitle—*A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*—that Wilde focuses his amusement toward the unreal expectations for purity in Victorian society. When Wilde was writing and "the word 'earnest' began to be used approvingly to denote Victorian devotion to moral and civic duty, the name Ernest became fashionable. To Wilde's audiences, both his title and his subtitle were recognized as ironically subversive of traditional Victorian attitudes" (Sloan 117). That something as superficial as a name would be any indication to the character of its bearer is in itself ironic, and yet it is more highly valued in Wilde's play than any truly earnest behavior. As Gwendolen tells Jack: "It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations" (Foreman 330). Later, Cecily tells Algernon: "It has always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence" (Foreman 360). Both Gwendolen and Cecily have little interest in the actual personality of their chosen mates, but strive toward an ideal they only understand in terms of fashion. Yet even through their superficial portrayals, Wilde seems to withhold judgment: "Artistically [Wilde's] aim was not to flatter or correct, but to create a critical awareness in the audience through the interplay of seemingly opposing attitudes and styles" (Sloan 21). In pointing out the absurdity of comparing Ernest and earnest, Wilde is asking his audience to identify both with the paradox and with the characters caught up in its societal significance. The viewer laughs at the antics of the characters, but still wants them to live happily ever after, even if that happiness is a superficial one.

Wilde could do little to ridicule the real controversy that surrounded him—a gay man in Victorian London—but the controversy is the subject of Stoppard's play *The*

Invention of Love. In 1885, Parliament passed the "Labouchere Amendment," punishing "any act of gross indecency" taking place between two men with two years hard labor. It was the law Oscar Wilde himself fell victim to after his affair with Lord Alfred Douglas (Haill, *Frank Harris*). At the same time, the writer and scholar A.E. Housman was quietly in love with his own male friend. "Who would you rather of been?" asks one reviewer of Stoppard's play, "Oscar Wilde, who threw his life away on a flamboyant infatuation with Lord Alfred Douglass, or A. E. Housman…whose unrequited love for a sporty Oxford contemporary, Moses Jackson, had to be repressed and channeled into the passionate pedantries of textual criticism and the obliquities of lyric verse" (Taylor). As the unspoken theme of the play, Stoppard followed Wilde's example and provides no clear answer. Instead he focuses on the dual standards raised by the material Housman studies and the moral standards of the day: "In the ancient world you could die in your comrade's arms. In Victorian England, where the classics, suitably heterosexualized, are considered a major civilizing force, you are left to nearly die in Reading Gaol" (Taylor). Stoppard's Housman desires the pure love idealized in the ancient world, but exists in a culture that seeks to suppress it.

In the play, A. E. Housman's love for Jackson is inseparable from his love of classics and scholarship. "Stoppard connects Housman the homosexual with Housman the scholar" by identifying the origin of his love in the works he translates. In his eyes, the poets and philosophers of the ancient world write from a place of purity, unlike the flamboyant nature of Wilde the Dandy. As the deceased A.E.H. in the play tells his younger counterpart, Housman, "A scholar's business is to add to what is known. That is all. But it is capable of giving the very greatest satisfaction, because knowledge is good"

(Stoppard, *Invention* 37). He believes in the "virtue of the ancient world" (76) because it has been pervasive throughout the texts in which he seeks this knowledge. And yet as the younger Housman reports: "There are things not spoken of foursquare at Oxford. The *he* loved by the poet is turned into a *she*: and then when you come to the bit where this 'she' goes off with somebody's wife…he leaves it out" (40). The learning of the time has become an inherent contradiction, seeking to add to knowledge but also limit sin through ignorance. "Housman spent his life trying to eradicate errors of transmission in texts that emerged from a culture where love between men was not regarded as corrupt beastliness" (Taylor), that he should seek such an ideal in his own life cannot have been a far stretch. As he confesses his love to his friend, Moses Jackson, Housman compares himself to Greek heroes: "[Theseus and Pirithous] weren't sweet on each other. They loved each other, as men loved each other in the heroic age, in virtue, paired together in legend and poetry as the pattern of comradeship" (Stoppard, *Invention* 76). For Housman, love between men comes from the same world as the knowledge he seeks, and therefore, his love can only be good.

On the page, Houseman's idealism is simple, but British academia of the time was bent on the purification of the ancient texts rather than historically accurate interpretations. One historical character in the play, Benjamin Jowett, in conversation with Walter Pater and John Ruskin, claims that: "Nowhere was the ideal of morality, art and social order realized more harmoniously than in Greece in the age of the great philosophers…buggery apart" (Stoppard, *Invention* 17). The addendum neatly sums up the paradox of the culture; classical culture was romanticized right up until it challenged the standards of Christian morality. Instead, scholars of the time found defenses for the

writers they admired who deviated from those standards. Jowett excused Plato's homosexual tendencies "on the grounds that this was easily transposable by modern readers into love of women" (qtd. Haill, *The Beautiful* 12). Where Houseman saw honor in the canonical writings of the classical world, Jowett and other scholars like him saw honor in reshaping such writings to conform to standards of the day. In fact, homosexuality was identified as the cause for the fall of Greece (Haill, *The Beautiful* 8). Preventing the same decent into corruption was seen as part of the duty of educators. W.T. Stead, editor and journalist, is quoted in the play: "London shows all the indications of falling into the abyss of perverse eroticism that encompassed the fall of Greece and Rome" (Stoppard, *Invention* 62). The standards of the time ignored the pursuit of true history in favor of maintaining a Christian moral standard.

It would be easy to assume that this attitude towards scholarship was a symptom of the time rather than being imbedded in the culture, and yet Alan Bennett's *History Boys* tells a more modern story with a similar denial of passion in academics. In explaining why he is hiring a new professor, Irwin, the headmaster comments: "Mr. Hector, our long time English master, is General studies. There is passion there. Or, as I prefer to call it, commitment. But nor curriculum-directed. Not curriculum-directed at all" (Bennett, *History* 12). The headmaster speaks of passion, or commitment, with scorn, as though it were an undesirable trait in a professor. Instead, he is far more concerned with the school's reputation for getting students into the two most important colleges, Oxford or Cambridge. "Get me scholarships, Irwin," says the headmaster, "Pull us up the table and [the job] is yours" (11). As Bennett himself describes in the program, it was the prestige of the schools more than the learning that the students sought. "Snobbery was

part of it," he writes (Bennett, *False Pretenses* 2). Later, he recalls the tests for a scholarship to Oxford: "Everything tumbled out, facts, quotations, all the stuff I'd laboriously committed to memory over the previous three months" (12). Rather than a test of knowledge or aptitude for learning, Bennett earned his scholarship based on simple memorization of facts and techniques crammed into his head in a short space of time. He has no passion for the subjects, only for the prestige of the universities. "Why are we bothering?" one of the students asks Irwin. "I don't know at all," he says. "You want it, I imagine. Or your parents want it. The Headmaster certainly does" (Bennett, *History* 20). The hollowness with which both teacher and students approach the subject suggests that the scholarships themselves are the goal rather than any higher education.

What the History Boys and most of their professors seem unaware of is that their approach to learning contradicts the spirit of the subject of their studies, a spirit very much alive in Mr. Hector's classes. Shortly after being told he must retire, Hector tells one of his students: "The best moments in reading are when you come across something—a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things—which you had thought special and particular to you. It is as if a hand has come out and taken yours" (Bennett, *History* 56). The passion of the speech is palpable. Not only does Hector love his topic, but he wants to pass on that love to his students. But it is precisely that passion, that desire of knowledge for knowledge's sake, which he loses himself in: "The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act," he says to defend himself from the Headmaster's accusation of molesting his students. Hector feels a connection to his subject, and takes it even further to become a connection with his students. And it is this kind of teaching that sinks in: "I remember," writes Alan Bennett, "boys…when they talked of their

schooldays there was often in the background a master whose teaching had been memorable" (*History* xii-xiii). The Headmaster sees teaching as merely a means to an end: "Fuck literature and Plato and Michelangelo and Oscar Wilde and all the other shrunken violets you people line up. This is a school and it isn't normal" (53). The idea that learning is erotic is a challenge to the Headmaster's view that education is a passionless pursuit of honor. Even the scholarship itself is nothing but meaningless decoration: "It carried more prestige certainly, but no more money. I wanted a scholarship out of sheer vanity," says Bennett (*History* xiii). And yet in the Headmaster's argument, he merely highlights the shallowness of his intentions. Where would his precious History Boys be without the passion of these great thinkers who went before? Hector's passion, though inappropriately expressed, springs from a desire to continue the work of such great men, whereas the Headmaster cares for the hollow prestige of a statistic.

But for all that England's history points to little advancement in the reunion of learning and passion, Stoppard's *Arcadia* is a reminder that the two are truly inseparable. The deeply intellectual play begins with the question "What is carnal embrace?" asked by Thomasina, the precocious thirteen-year-old student of Septimus Hodge (Stoppard, *Arcadia* 1). His reply is humorous, "Carnal embrace is the practice of throwing one's arms around a side of beef" (1), but also symptomatic of the belief that mathematics or Latin is a worth learning, but sexual education is improper. "As her tutor," says Captain Brice, Thomasina's uncle, "you have a duty to keep her in ignorance" (11). Once again, Stoppard imitates Wilde's love of cultural paradox by making a statement that is the opposite of expectation, but contains just enough truth as to resonate with the audience.

The facts Thomasina is expected to know hold no relation to the random nature of life: "The vision given to us by Newton…is of an orderly and predictable world, governed by laws and rules—laws and rules which can best be expressed in mathematical form" (May 1). If Thomasina learns only mathematics, then she may only act within the rules and laws of the predictable world. Such a philosophy leads her to proclaim at the start of the play that "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" (Stoppard, *Arcadia* 5). The statement is a great leap for a thirteen-year-old girl in the early nineteenth century, but it captures the sense of power through knowledge that was the forefront of the Enlightenment.

Yet for all the wisdom of Thomasina's statement, it relies on the existence of a completely Newtonian universe: one that works the same backwards and forwards and has no chance events. But a different kind of mathematics, deterministic chaos, "says that a situation can be both deterministic *and* unpredictable; that is unpredictable without being random" (May 3). As Thomasina realizes, "Newton's equations go forward and backwards. But the heat equation…goes only one way" (Stoppard, *Arcadia* 87). The result is the addition of a nonlinear variable, heat, which follows a predetermined but erratic pattern. A century later, mathematician and descendent of Thomasina's family Valentine Coverly makes the same observation: "It's a one-way street. Your tea will end up at room temperature. The sun and the stars. It'll take a while but we're all going to end up at room temperature" (78). Heat complicates the equation of nature while remaining within the boundaries of physics. Yet it is so ingrained into the daily lives of the

characters that, except for Valentine and Thomasina, they seem unaware of its effect on their lives. Hannah Jarvis quotes Byron after Valentine's revelation: "'The bright sun was extinguished, and the stars/Did wander darkling in the eternal space'" (79). The knowledge of heat as a fading variable was clearly in the mind of thinkers long before the creation of deterministic chaos, and yet the need for predictability kept it from the work of the Enlightenment physicists and mathematicians.

In the play, heat does not only play a physical role, but also comes to represent the volatile presence of emotion in the intellectual world. "The universe is deterministic all right, just like Newton said," explains the previously empty-headed Chloe to Valentine, "but the only thing going wrong is people fancying people who aren't supposed to be part of the plan." "Ah," he replies. "The attraction Newton left out" (Stoppard, *Arcadia* 74). It is the unpredictability of this attraction that seems to rule the lives of the characters, many of whom place their faith in the reliability of mathematical equations. "Stoppard invokes theory only to chart that precise realm of experience where theory leaves off," comments one reviewer (Wolf 70). By separating passion from knowledge, Thomasina's education prevents her from seeing what she cannot comprehend, and it is only her own single-mindedness that leads her to this understanding. "Determinism leaves the road at every corner…the cause is very likely…the action of bodies in heat," she tells her mother (Stoppard, *Arcadia* 84). The power of heat is the power of passion, and without taking heat or passion into account, facts lose their ability to grant true understanding.

But the heat of passion does not only apply to love or sex. By the end of the play it is clear that the unpredictability of the attraction Netwon left out includes destruction and grief. Such is the nature of Arcadia: *Et in Arcadia ego.* Lady Croom misinterprets the

saying, “Here I am in Arcadia” (Stoppard, *Arcadia* 12), seeing her land as a Garden of Eden, free from the complications of humanity. The missing translation, “Even in Arcadia, I, Death, hold sway,” becomes a metaphor for the play. Even as Thomasina and Valentine recognize the variable power of passion, they forget that unpredictability is also dangerous. Stoppard’s Arcadia is true to form: “[Thomasina] was dead before she had time to be famous,” Hannah tells the excited Valentine, “burned to death” (76). The news comes as a shock in the midst of Valentine’s realization that Thomasina had created a formula for heat exchange. The breakthrough for science is tempered by the existence of chance: “The elegant milieu of Arcadia hides such inelegant happenings as romantic confusion, insanity and cruel untimely death” (Wolf 70). The event of her death is carefully juxtaposed to the discovery of her own sexuality. Ending with the final twirl of a waltz, Septimus sends Thomasina to bed: “Take your essay, I have given it an alpha in blind faith. Be careful with the flame” (Stoppard, *Arcadia* 96). Stoppard leaves the audience with the knowledge that Thomasina goes to her death and the grief drives Septimus to madness. He juxtaposes the tragedy with the glorious discovery of new love, and also with the essay she wrote on heat. For all her understanding of physics and mathematics, Thomasina, like all the characters of the play and Arcadia itself, cannot separate concrete facts from the unpredictable nature of heat.

England is home to two of the world’s best-known institutions of higher education. The famed Oxford and Cambridge that the History Boys so desired to attend came by their reputations through years as the great establishments of learning attended by scholars from around the world. Yet the ideal of learning in England was coupled with the idea of the defeat of sin and chaos through intelligence. It was an ideal that could

never be realized. “Better a fallen rocket than never a burst of light,” Wilde tells A.E.H (Stoppard, *Invention* 96). The consequence of passion is both joy and destruction, but without it knowledge is a hollow pursuit. Tom Stoppard recognized the paradoxical requirements of English intellectualism idealizing at a time when enthusiasm for learning went hand in hand with an enthusiasm for life. He challenges these requirements through his plays, forcing his audience to accept love and death as inseparable from the comprehension of the universe. This is the attraction England left out.

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