

# Tom Stoppard's Arcadia: A Postmodernist/ New Historicist Reading of the Play

## Tom Stoppard'ın *Arcadia* Adlı Oyununun Postmodern/ Yeni Tarihselci Bağlamda Okunması

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### **Abstract**

*The approach towards a text through the postmodernist and counter-postmodernist consciousnesses brings into mind new methods and theories of criticism like new historicism. This article, however, is not merely committed to analyse Tom Stoppard's **Arcadia** with a new historicist stance; rather it aims to exploit or make use of the new historicist hints to understand what Stoppard strives to do while writing his play **Arcadia** because there are striking similarities between Stoppard's technique of creating his plays and the New Historicist critics' method of analysing history and literary texts. In a way **Stoppard plays the role of a new historicist** while writing his brilliant comedy of ideas. The aim of this article, then, is to show these remarkable similarities by a close reading of Stoppard's **Arcadia**.*

### **Özet**

*Metne postmodern veya karşı-postmodern bilinçle yaklaşımlar akla yeni tarihselcilik gibi yeni metod ve teorileri getirmektedir. Bu makale Tom Stoppard'ın **Arcadia**'sının yeni tarihselci bir gözle incelenmesi üzerine kurulu değildir; daha ziyade yeni tarihselci edebi teorinin belli başlı teknik ve yöntemlerinin Stoppard'ın oyunu **Arcadia** da nasıl vücut bulduğunu betimlemek için yazılmıştır. Zira yeni tarihselci edebi yöntem ile Tom Stoppard'ın oyun yaratma tekniği arasında çarpıcı benzerlikler olduğu fark edilmiştir. Bu makalenin amacı bu benzerlikleri **Arcadia** incelemesi üzerinden vermektir.*

## **I**

The term new historicism has been applied to an extraordinary assortment of critical practices. Who are the new historicists? What is their aim? For Greenblatt and Gallagher, their group of colleagues came to understand that there was, in interdisciplinary studies, a tendency to invoke, in support of one's own positions, arguments from other disciplines that sophisticated thinkers in those other disciplines had in fact been calling into question. They had, as it were, been complacently dressing themselves in each other's cast-off clothes, until, looking around the room, they erupted in laughter.

In the introduction to the book Practicing New Historicism they also came up with the following questions and comments:

How could something that didn't really exist (i.e. a specialism in New Historicism) have become a field? When did it happen and how could we not have noticed? If this was indeed a field, who could claim expertise in it and in what would such expertise consist? Surely, we of all people should

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know something of the history and the principles of new historicism; but what we knew above all was that it resisted systematization. We had never formulated a program; we hadn't drawn up for ourselves a sequence of questions that always needed to be posed when encountering a work of literature in order to construct a new historicist reading; we could not be able to say to someone in haughty disapproval 'you are not an authentic new historicist. 1

For them apparently new historicism is not a coherent, close-knit school in which one might be enrolled or from which one might be expelled. So all those that had an interest in new historicist analysis ended up with the idea of a journal which they called Representations. With the help of this journal they could freely express their personal experiences in their presentations of history and other disciplines.

This being the case and since there is not yet a definite field of expertise in new historicism, this study will claim that Stoppard with his own representations of history, life, literature, mathematics, sociology, philosophy, gardening, music etc., is another new historicist with the tendency of what Greenblatt and Gallagher described as invoking arguments from other disciplines, complacently dressing (himself) in other disciplines' cast-off clothes and creating different rooms of laughter. The difference is that Stoppard's chief purpose is to **write comic plays with serious ideas** whereas the new historicist critics' main aim is to **express playful ideas in a serious manner**.

The new historicists use non-literary and literary texts in order to create new histories out of them whereas Stoppard uses all literary and non-literary texts in order to create new events and ideas in history because he says 'plays are events rather than texts. They are written to happen, not to be read' 2. But the struggle of both sides is to present a new meaning to their present times.

On the other hand, literature today is not the path to historical truth but rather the key to particular historically embedded social, psychological formations. By textuality we should understand that every written text, literary or historical, is nothing more than a network of signs. So **history is becoming more literary** and **literature is getting more historicized** as a result of the postmodern condition.

What the new historicists take much pains at showing is the **cultural matrix** of a given society in a given time and combining it with the present. What Stoppard strives to do is to present what he calls the **moral matrix** by using the same means (literary/non-literary texts) as the new historicists. He

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1 Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, *Practicing New Historicism*, London & Chicago Chicago U.P., 2000, p.1-3

2 Stoppard in Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Stoppard*, London: Nick Hern Books Ltd., 1995, p.37

says: 'I think that art provides the moral matrix from which we draw our values about what the world ought to be like'.<sup>1</sup>

The new historicists, like Greenblatt and Gallagher, know that an era is never truly finished - that in our own time and in every period to be studied there is an odd interlayering of cultural perspectives and a mixing of peoples, so that nothing is ever truly complete and unitary. What becomes newly interesting about the binary oppositions such as nature/culture, base/superstructure, good/evil, signifier/signified etc. is the very fact that they cannot be fixed, because the boundaries between these terms and the significance of those boundaries vary too widely in different contexts. This describes **the postmodernist vein of new historicism**. A text embodying the notion of a distinct culture, particularly distant in time and space, is powerfully attractive to new historicists because one can occupy a position from which one can discover meanings that those who left traces of themselves couldn't have articulated. As Greenblatt describes it:

New historicism is a literary criticism which must be conscious of its own status as interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture; its proper goal, however difficult to realise, is a poetics of culture.<sup>2</sup>

Unsettling, transgressive, at times contradictory, new historicism, for Cox, tends to regard texts in materialist terms, as objects and events in the world, as a part of human life, society, the historical realities of power, authority and resistance; yet at the same time, it rejects the idea of 'History' as a directly accessible, unitary past and substitutes for it the conception of 'histories', an ongoing series of human constructions, each representing the past at particular present moments for particular present purposes. In other words, new historicism attempts to blend a cultural materialist understanding of history with the poststructuralist understanding of textuality.<sup>3</sup>

New historicism, besides its awareness of the relationship between every written text and its intertextuality, tends to study literary texts not as autonomous objects but as material products emerging out of specific social, cultural, and political contexts. This view of literature breaks down the traditional distinction between literary and non-literary texts and forms. Typically new historicists demonstrate the ways in which power relations of a particular era shape how literature is produced, distributed and consumed, making use of a wide range of contemporary materials, everything from diaries and travel writings to legal documents, to medical and penal records. Accordingly, Stoppard makes use of letters in Arcadia, a diary in Indian Ink, penal records and legal documents in Every Good Boy Deserves Favour and newspapers or historical documents in Travesties.

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1 Tom Stoppard in Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Stoppard*, (London : Nick Hern Books Ltd., 1995),p.4

2 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, (Chicago :Chicago U.P,1980), p.4

3 Jeffrey Cox (eds)*New Historical Literary Study*, (West Sussex. Princeton U.P.1993),p.4

New historicist critics are less –fact and event- oriented than historical critics used to be, perhaps because they have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely and objectively known. *Arcadia* is based on this very assumption of the impossibility of a real reality. New historicists (like Stoppard) are less likely to see history as linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present or the future (teleological) and they are also less likely to think of it in terms of specific eras, each with a definite, persistent and consistent Zeitgeist (i.e. spirit of the time). Consequently, they are unlikely to suggest that a literary text has a single or easily identifiable historical context. This attitude reconciles with Stoppard’s statement: ‘one thing I feel sure is that a materialistic view of history is an insult to the human race’.<sup>1</sup> This attitude also points at the new historicist’s poststructuralist understanding of intertextuality and therefore the postmodernist stand. They are aware of the indeterminacy and undecidability of meaning. The point is not to show that the literary text reflects the historical event, **but to create a field of energy (a matrix whether cultural or moral) between the two so that we come to see the historical event as literary text and the literary text as historical event.**

Why a critic like Greenblatt should be interested in Renaissance art, drama or poesy carries with it the same answer as to why Stoppard is interested in the past. They both tend to restructure history.

For both new historicists and Stoppard then, as Mc Gann puts it, ‘the text must be conceived as material fact but the power of fiction must not be reduced to the ability to lie about social realities. There must be a tactical and tactful alliance between the text and context. What the two both want to discover is the illusions of our knowledge and the realities of what we don’t know’.<sup>2</sup>

Stoppard says:

I went to see a man who had peacocks. They tend to run away. He was shaving one morning and he looked out of the window and saw a peacock leap over the hedge into the road. Expensive animals, peacocks, so he threw down his razor and ran out and caught his peacock and brought it back home. I had been looking for a short piece and I had some vague idea of what I wanted to do. I didn’t write about the man or the peacock but about the two people who just go by, and boom, they see this man in pyjamas, with bare feet, shaving foam on his face, carrying a peacock. They see this man for five-eighths of a second- and that’s what I write about.<sup>3</sup>

This is what Stoppard says about the genesis of *After Magritte* . He goes on about the creation of other plays saying:

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1 Tom Stoppard in Paul Delaney(ed) *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*.Michigan U.P. Michigan, 1994,p.66

2 Jerome Mc Gann, *Social Values and Poetic Arts: The Historical Judgement of Literary Work*. Cambridge, Mass and London. Harward U.P.1988.p.19

3 Tom Stoppard in Gussow. *Conversations with Stoppard*. Nich Hern Boks Ltd. London 1995,p.7

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is about Hamlet as seen by two people driving past Elsinore. It's a favourite thing of mine: the idea of an absolute bizarre image which has a total rationale to it being seen by different people. And everybody is absolutely certain about what they see. There are tiny bits of that in Jumpers : a man carrying a tortoise in one hand and a bow and arrow in the other, his face is covered with shaving foam. A trick I enjoy very much is when, bit by bit, you build up something ludicrous- and then someone walks in.<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact what new historicists tend to do is not much different from Stoppard's aim; that is, to show the reasons behind seeing a man with a peacock in his hand, his face covered with shaving foam, running in the streets.

On the other hand, for new historicists, literary texts are not mere reflections of historical facts, but highly complex social products related to other forms of social production. Literary texts have aesthetic possibilities but these are linked to the complex network of institutions, practices, beliefs that constitute the culture as a whole.

When it comes to Stoppard, we see that he is trying to create dramatic enactments full of subtle communication of moral values, yet with the unwilling acceptance of the dominant postmodern condition with its **indeterminacy** and **immanence**. He says:

All the political acts that have a moral basis, must be judged in moral terms...my plays are a lot to do with the fact that ***I just don't know*** . One thing I feel sure is that a materialistic view of history is an insult to the human race...Briefly art is important because it provides the moral matrix, the moral sensibility, from which we make our judgements about the world. 2

So Stoppard is another figure, this time a playwright, using Marxist theory and postmodern theory against themselves all at once and although he insists that there are underlying, unchanging moral values, he always foregrounds the notion "***I just don't know***" proving that no discourse imaginative or archival provides access to unchanging truths.

## II

What is all this hurly burly about the postmodern condition? First of all the term *postmodern* carries with it a semantic instability because it's not modern but **postmodern**, that is, it is using modernism against itself, to go beyond it and although it is a concept which is emphatically spilled out of the boundaries of literary critical debate, it still carries with it, wherever it goes, the idea of "telling stories". But the stories are now indistinguishable from what was once assumed to be knowledge:

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*,p.7

<sup>2</sup> Tom Stoppard in Paul Delaney(ed) *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, Michigan U.P. Michigan, 1994,p.63

scientific truth, ethics, law, history. Postmodernism, for Waugh, is generally considered to be the representational mood of the last twenty-five years.<sup>1</sup>

As Joseph Francese states, there is a weakened faith in a unified underlying reality so postmodernism, as a late form of modernism, is characterized by *self-reflexivity* (author's deliberate reflection of his personal ideology or life), *irony* (the recognition of a reality different from appearance), *parody* (the composition imitating another, usually serious, piece which is generally designed to ridicule a work, event or a person) and *pastiche* (literary imitation in which a writer imitates the style or technique of some recognized writer or work, or the literary patchworks formed by piecing together extracts from various works by one or several authors) and a sense of *schizophrenia* (having no sense of a linear process in time i.e. no sense of a past, present or future).<sup>2</sup>

Parody has become the most popular means of self-reflexive forms. It is viewed by Waugh as a perfect postmodern form because it always acknowledges implication in that which it criticizes, implicitly asserting that if there can be no position outside culture from which to oppose it, there can be critique from within.<sup>3</sup>

So postmodernism in literature becomes an open, playful, indetermined form, a discourse of ironies, fragments, an ideology of absences and parodies with its key terms: indeterminacy and immanence as stated by Ihab Hassan in his *The Postmodern Turn*.<sup>4</sup> New historicism, then, situates itself in relation to Marxist literary theory with its perception of the realities as stemming from a complex social context with all its dimensions and approach to hidden ideas through dialectical analysis on the one hand; and to postmodernism on the other hand with its awareness of the fact that history can no more be analysed as something linear, determinable and teleological; emphasizing the multiplicity of meaning, the undecidable and multilayered nature of realities, the sense of immanence due to the fact that language is everywhere and is our prison, it is an ever changing system with no clear and stable signs which should always be analysed with the consciousness of *intertextuality*.

Serpil Opperman states that new historicism covers four basic aspects: textuality, intertextuality, historicization and contextualization.<sup>5</sup> In explaining the new historicist understanding of textuality, she agrees with Roland Barthes saying that a text is never something spatially placed inside the book, rather it is where the signified is infinitely delayed. Every text is a network of signs which can never fully be analyzed spatially because the meaning of the text is never prior to the

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1 Patricia Waugh, *Postmodernism: A Reader*. Routledge, Chapman and Hall LInc. New York,, 1992. p.1

2 Joseph Francese. *Narrating Postmodern Time and Space*. State University Of New York, 1997.p7

3 Waugh, *ibid*, p.205

4 Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Ohio State U.P. Ohio.1987.p.92-93

5 Serpil Opperman, *Tarih Yazımı Yeni Tarihselcilik ve Roman*, Evin Pres, Ankara, 1999.p.63

reader.<sup>1</sup> It is basically the reader who gives meaning to the text. Therefore every single act of reading a text is at the same time an act of re-writing the text. Thus, textuality refers to the unstable nature of meaning.

Intertextuality, on the other hand, is a term which implies a text's implicit or explicit relationship with other texts. For the new historicists, no text has a unique and independent status. Every text (fictional or non-fictional) is written by a scriptor who is subjective and all texts should be analysed on equal bases regardless of their fictional or non-fictional presence. This approach, therefore, is a novelty with its claim that there is no difference between literary and non-literary texts.

Accordingly, historification is what a specific historian does while writing his text. Since he has to be selective, this selectivity makes the historian inevitably subjective. Also, he uses the language of the society with its cultural, ideological and social traits. This brings the concept of contextualization on scale because the possible meanings inherent in a text should also be analysed in terms of the context in which it was written. For Opperman, new historicism is not only the label for a specific kind of literary criticism which tends to analyse texts as mentioned above but also an artistic attitude which is used in the creation of postmodern fiction, which she calls "historiographic metafiction".<sup>2</sup> Postmodern authors like John Fowles, Peter Ackroyd, J.M. Coetzee and Jeanette Winterson apply history as a means for the problematization of the facts related to the past and present them so as to create a feeling of estrangement in the reader. While doing this, they consciously present history with gaps and slides in meaning although they seem to be depending on historical documents. With this attempt they, in a way, approve of Montrose's description of the textuality of history. This attitude is therefore an attempt to break the monological, teleological, unchanging nature of traditional historicism. Thus, these postmodern/new historicist writers continuously raise more or less the same questions: Whose history? Whose reality? Which ideology and context? Stoppard can easily be placed in the category of those authors Opperman cites..

Combining two contradictory theories ( i.e. postmodernist and post-Marxist) new historicism functions **as a parody of history** in its attempt to show history from multiple perspectives, representing the past at particular present moments for particular present purposes from a decentered standpoint. There is no clear line of demarcation between literary and non-literary texts, between literature and history any longer. **History is textualized and texts are historicized and this understanding brings new historicists and the literary figures like Stoppard very close.** In a way they both use the same means to parodize what they implicitly strive to present. They tend to perceive

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *From Work to Text*, Methuen, London, 1971.p.73

<sup>2</sup> Opperman *ibid*,p.64

the act of creation as parody. For both parties the act of writing is not to accept and depict **what is**, but to deform **it** because displaying knowledge as an activity is essentially critical and parodic.

This urge to show a familiar thing as something different, together with their struggle to rehistoricize the text and recontextualize history in order to create a parodic critique, builds up the essence of both new historicism, (which involves not only postmodern but also post-marxist attitudes), and Stoppardian drama. Therefore, this study has been concerned with Stoppard's postmodernist and counter-postmodernist stance together with his new historicist inclinations. Michael Vanden Heuvel works on the same aspect of Stoppard in his article titled 'Is Postmodernism?: Stoppard Among/Against the Postmodern' and he opens his discussion with a remarkable epigram:

A. Tom Stoppard is a postmodernist; and

B. Tom Stoppard is against postmodernism.

These two things are one.<sup>1</sup>

For Heuvel, this split/doubled title indicates that Stoppard takes his place in the postmodern drama with his keen interest in certain intellectual, aesthetic and ideological positions associated with postmodern art and drama, while he is at the same time critical of some of the more radical notions and claims of postmodern social theory and its image of the human subject.

Thus *Arcadia* has been deliberately chosen with regard to its affinities to the new historicist theory of literature.

### III

Like other plays by Stoppard, *Arcadia* is an uproarious comedy with unsettling undercurrents. In *Arcadia*, the undercurrents find their source in the term "unpredictability" based on the themes as of the second law of thermodynamics, history, chaos, maths and love, highlighting not only the limitations of scientific prediction but also the inescapable fact that we can never hope to foresee just what course our lives will take. As usual, Stoppard's irreverent humour prevents the play from straining under these weighty themes.

*Arcadia* is a play about history. In the play we find figures taken from history and they are presented from the point of view of the present time. The plot shuttles between the past and the present. Moreover, *Arcadia* is about historicification, writing about history and historians as well. Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to state that *Arcadia* is a parodic representation of what both historians and new historicist critics tend to do. Stoppard presents to us how historians try to make

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Vanden Heuvel, "Is Postmodernism?: Stoppard Among/Against Postmodernists". Katherine E. Kelly eds. The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard. Cambridge U.P. Cambridge, 2001.p.213

sense of clues that have been left behind. This is really a strong motif in the play when it comes to the idea of modelling phenomena based on incomplete knowledge, whether one is trying to formulate a mathematical rule to represent numerical data or trying to reconstruct how people in the past lived.

### *Stoppard's Postmodernist Stand in Arcadia*

#### **a)The Sense of Displacement:**

The sense of displacement is generally assumed to be the sense of a person's not belonging to where he is supposed to belong. In *Arcadia*, knowledge is displaced along with the characters. What Thomasina discovers is a kind of knowledge not to be expected in the early nineteenth century. It is too early a discovery. She can, because of this discovery, be considered to have been born before her time. Knowledge displaces the owners of it in the play. Bernard's hypothesis on Lord Byron's murder of Ezra Chater displaces him and alienates him from the academic work he is doing, because it turns out to be a wrong supposition. Hannah's hard-hearted classicism displaces her in the modern age. The world is chaotic and this very idea is underlined throughout the play. This chaotic existence deprives every character from having a proper placement.

Even the minor characters like Mr. and Mrs. Chater are displaced figures. Mr. Chater, who has no skill in writing poetry, claims to be a poet. Being an adulterer, Mrs. Chater is a displaced figure as a married woman. Septimus is 'everywhere' in that he has affairs with Lady Croom, Mrs. Chater and Thomasina (in this case only platonic), but he is 'nowhere' and never achieves his goals in life (he becomes the isolated hermit trying to discover the formula for the future but never attains it). At the end of the play he is assumed to be the hermit of the hermitage in the garden but such kind of a placement is questionable as well. Lady Croom's case is more or less the same as Mrs. Chater's in terms of her extramarital affairs with Lord Byron and Septimus. Valentine, Chloe and Gus are displaced figures because they are trying to make their present lives meaningful through research on the roots of the family, or by organising a Regency Ball in the twentieth century to set up bounds with the family's past. Gus is mute and this defect displaces him. No one in the play seems to do the right thing in the right time and place, and this creates the comic atmosphere. The tragic atmosphere, on the other hand, is always hidden between the lines. Life and the meaning of life are questioned by the major characters and the answer is that no matter what you learn, or discover in life, it is never in your hands to shape your future. Thomasina's unexpected end symbolizes this tragic fact.

The use of the "gardening" motif in the play is another means to create the sense of displacement because the garden that Mr. Noakes designed displaces the family psychologically. Lady Croom feels very disappointed at the sight of the gothic landscape with all its absurdities.

Once things are displaced they never get back to their original condition. Thomasina's experiment on rice pudding is significant in this sense. When she comments upon jam not coming together again and the situation's oddity, Septimus answers her question:

Time must needs run backward, since it will not, we must stir our way onward mixing as we go, disorder out of disorder into disorder until pink is complete, unchanging and unchangable, and we are done with it forever. This is known as free-will or self-determination.<sup>1</sup>

Of course this is very ironic because what Septimus calls free-will is nothing more than an obligation, since we are not allowed to move time backwards. We all have to live within "disorder out of disorder" and time is irreversible.

According to Thomasina, and also to Newton's law of motion, everything acts according to a law and so is predetermined. But for Septimus, free-will changes this predestination. Chloe says that we may fancy the people whom we are not supposed to fancy, and this breaks the law of Newton. Thermodynamics makes the world chaotic and in a chaotic world every person, idea or historical fact is doomed to be displaced.

The sense of displacement carries with it the notion of pluralism and from this aspect it represents the postmodern understanding of art. The name of the play "Arcadia" strongly stresses the sense of placement. A heaven-like garden should be a place where everybody wants to belong to. But the word connotes both the paradise-like place on earth which has full order and death at the same time. As Zeifman puts it, Lady Croom quotes "Et in Arcadia Ego!" translating and interpreting the inscription traced on the tomb by the shepherds in Poussin's celebrated seventeenth century painting of a pastoral idyll. The translation is "Here I am in Arcadia".<sup>2</sup> In a chaotically uncertain world the only certainty is death and this is proved by Thomasina's death at the end. There is death even in aristocratic idylls and their "Arcadia" proves to be far from being immune to changes over time. Septimus makes a conscious mistranslation of the same Latin quotation as: "Even in Arcadia, there am I!"<sup>3</sup>

### **b) Absence of a Unified, Underlying Reality**

When it comes to scientific truth, the whole play becomes a continuous rebuttal and refutation of truth of all kinds. Newton's scientific determinism and the classical values of intellect, reason, geometry and thinking are all refuted by Thomasina's discovery of "the actions of body in heat".

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*, Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1999, p.12

<sup>2</sup> Hersh Zeifman, "The Comedy of Errors: Stoppard in Love", in *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*, ed Katherine E. Kelly, Cambridge U.P., 2001, p.189

<sup>3</sup> Stoppard at 19, *ibid.*, p. 25

Thomasina refers to the physical structure of the universe; what she has stumbled on, long before its time, is thermodynamics, the study of heat that first burnt away some of the certainties of Newtonian determinism. Hannah, who is obviously a Newtonian, classical determinist, approaches events hard-heartedly, shutting herself off from anything even remotely connected with romantic sensibility. The erotic, for her, is too erratic. For Zeifman, among the romantic instances that punctuate the action of *Arcadia*, Hannah positions herself deliberately as an outsider, who never kisses, dreams, fancies or makes love.<sup>1</sup> Thomasina asks Septimus “Do you think God is a Newtonian?”<sup>2</sup> and then she proves through her second law of thermodynamics that he is not. Hannah, with classical reserve attempts to make her own private version of “Arcadia”, a paradise of rationality and predictability. But there is a serpent and an apple in the garden and they are standing for irrational, seductive powers. Chloe’s comment on the problem is as follows:

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 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. All the way back to the apple in the garden. Yes.<sup>3</sup>

The attraction that Valentine and Chloe talk about calls to mind the chaos theory. Trying to make sense of clues that have been left behind is a strong motif in the play. It is really the idea of modelling phenomena based on incomplete knowledge, whether one is trying to formulate a mathematical rule (like Thomasina and Valentine) to present numerical data, or trying to reconstruct how people in the past lived (like Hannah and Bernard). Mathematics is not given as a collection of simplistic calculating rules; rather it provides rich descriptions of our complex world. Describing his efforts with the “noisy” data he has on the grouse population, Valentine says :

Like a piano in the next room, it is playing your song, but unfortunately it is out of whack, some of the strings are missing, and the pianist is tone deaf and drunk...(so you) start guessing what the tune might be. You try to pick it out of the noise. You try this, you try that, you start to get something –it’s half-baked, but you start putting in notes which are missing or not quite the right notes. And bit by bit...(He starts to *dumdi da to the tune of “Happy Birthday.”*) Dumdi dum-dum, dear Valentine, dum-di-dum-dum to you –the lost algorithm!<sup>1</sup>

This remarkable analogy is the essence of not only this play but also of postmodern art in general. For, nothing is presented in a well-ordered and clear way in postmodern art. The audience is only allowed to make their own compositions of it in order to get a message out of it. On the other

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<sup>1</sup> Zeifman at 20 *ibid*, p.189

<sup>2</sup> Stoppard at 19 *ibid*, p.13

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.104

hand, Valentine's analogy is remarkable in the sense that it describes what Bernard, Hannah, Thomasina, Septimus and he himself all do. They all work on bits without having complete knowledge.

### c) Irony

Irony in *Arcadia* stems from two main points: philosophical and periodical. The irony which is revealed by the philosophical points includes numerous binary oppositions like: irregularity/regularity, unpredictable/predetermined, order/disorder, heart/mind, romanticism/classicism, Newtonian/chaotic, intuition/logic etc. All through the play these opposing notions are represented as interpenetrating and interdependent or coexisting opposites. There is always a rich interaction between these opposites working in conjunction to make life as it is. Almost everything carries a double meaning or turns out to be as logical as its opposite. This creates the paradoxical and therefore ironic quality of the play. On the surface level we see that indeterminacy, uncertainty, unpredictability, disorder and chance prevail. In contrast, on the deeper level, while acknowledging unpredictability, Stoppard focuses on what is stable and ordered and stresses the process of recognizing the order within disorder, by revealing the fine structure of the play which is hidden within the seemingly random presentation of the scenes. This enables Stoppard to use the play, *Arcadia*, as a celebration of the human struggle to obtain knowledge, with meaning arriving as much out of the process as the product. Since Hannah ultimately succeeds in proving her theory, and since Thomasina's theories are shown to be accurate, the play is an affirmation that despite all the indeterminacy, people can use their intellect and intuition to gain knowledge. Without all the questions fully answered, people can still be happy and that interacting of the opposites is part of what makes human life worth living. Life can be chaotic but is also stable, and within chaos there are windows to order.

The other kind of irony results from the overlapping representation of the past and the present. The play is set in two periods of time in the same place. The scenes related to these two periods of time develop independently, but the audience is continuously encouraged to find connections between the two periods. What links these two periods of time is the philosophical and also the paradoxical dimension of knowledge and thinking. Time is irreversible and changing, but it is also repetitive and unchanging. Past and present are two different notions syntagmatically (i.e. on the linear level), but they are identical paradigmatically (i.e. on the vertical level). Stoppard approaches time both synchronically and diachronically. In the diachronic aspect, where we witness the changes in time from a linear perspective, everything (people, modes of life, the spirit of the times, technology, decoration, years, etc) changes. These are obvious in the scene shifts. In the past-day-scenes we see

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1 *ibid*, p.67

the reflection and the microcosmic revelation of early nineteenth century England in the Coverly family and their guests. The things they deal with, the costumes, the daily routines, the transition from classicism to romanticism are all represented through discussions based on numerous different subjects: landscape gardening, maths, science, literature, secret affairs, hunting, manners etc. They are typical of their age. In the present-day scenes we see the representation of late twentieth century England in the descendants of the Coverly family and their guests. Time changes on the diachronic level.

#### **d) The Parodic Aspect**

*Arcadia* is a multidimensional play with multiple angles, discussing equally important issues. But, all in all, structurally the play is the parody of history and new historicism. The whole structure is designed to point out how inefficient all the new historicist academicians are in the depiction of what had once really happened. The sense of working through incomplete and uncertain data restricts the scholars. This does not show that they are always misled or wrong in their comments, but the scenes related to the past are consciously included by Stoppard to serve the dramatic enactment of how incapable and hopeless we are all of knowing everything fully. We can never go back or travel forward in time, so all historians have to work on the clues bit by bit, piece by piece to catch just a small part of the immense archive of history. As the audience, we witness that the letters burnt by Septimus will never be read, the hermit of Sidley Park will remain mysterious, the secret affairs will only be known to the ones involved in them. There are always things that will remain unknown. It is not possible to understand life through Newton's laws, thermodynamics, quantum physics or chaos theories. Life is mysterious and even if we happen to get all the clues for what had once really occurred, there are things which are bound up in a cause and effect relationship. Life is random and complex. There has always been metaphysical phenomena as well. The play, therefore, is filled with mysteries. Most of the play's mysteries are solved at least for the audience.

This notion of "I just don't know" underlies almost all the plays of Stoppard and in such a condition of "not knowing", the best way for him was to create parodies. His is not a form of pessimism, because he acknowledges and through his comedic quality proves that this very state of "not fully knowing" makes life worth living. Valentine, Hannah, Thomasina, Bernard, Septimus and Chloe are all in agreement with this perspective.

The parodic aspect is highlighted in the person of Bernard, who has an obsession that Lord Byron killed the so-called poet Ezra Chater in a duel and fled to the United States because of this. In contrast to Hannah, Bernard embodies the romantic temperament in that he is more energetic, more

passionate, and more prone to intuition. “Dressed with flamboyant flair“ , Bernard’s character is a demonstration of style over substance.

He knows that no one can get complete knowledge while making research in history and gut instinct would be helpful when there are gaps of information. But Hannah opposes him and always asks for proof. For example when Bernard comes in with an extract from Byron’s English Bards and Scotch Reviewers and reads it with excitement and a sense of triumph, and Hannah asks for proof. He reacts: ‘*Proof? Proof? You’d have to be there, you silly bitch!*’<sup>1</sup>

This impossibility of a new historicist being there (in the past) when things were happening and Bernard’s solution of depending on his “gut instinct” creates the parodic atmosphere in *Arcadia*. The play automatically becomes the parody of how historians work in the persons of two contradictory scholars: Hannah and Bernard. While the laws of the universe indicate that time can only go forward, Bernard’s declaration suggests that human intuition is an aspect of life -one that is more mysterious, something that cannot be confined and explained by science. Yet, Bernard’s gut instinct is proved to be dead wrong, while Hannah is ultimately able to prove the validity of her instinctively-derived thesis that Septimus was the hermit of Sidley Park. Thus, human intuition is neither corroborated nor debunked. For Fleming, Bernard’s flaw was that he started his research with a desired conclusion, and only sought information that would make his line of reasoning sufficiently logical. Bernard seems to be an object of Stoppard’s satire on the excesses of the academic ambition and competition.<sup>2</sup> There is nothing left to Bernard but to apologise to everyone at the end of the play:

Sorry to you too. Sorry one and all. Sorry Hannah –sorry,  
Hermione- sorry, Byron –sorry, sorry , sorry, Now can I go? <sup>3</sup>

#### IV

### Stoppard’s New Historicist Attitude

As stated above, new historicism embodies postmodernist and counter- postmodernist attitudes. There is a tendency to approach the literary and non-literary texts in order to gain a different perspective of history. *Arcadia* is a play functioning as an allegorical representation of what the new historical discipline stands for and how it works. *Arcadia*, similar to Plato’s analogy of the Cave Myth, where he describes what he really means by showing the difference between the world of ideas and appearances, is an analogical representation by Stoppard of what new historicism means and that how new historicist scholars work on incomplete data.

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p.71

<sup>2</sup> John Fleming, *Stoppard’s Theatre: Finding order Amid Chaos*, Texas U.P. Austin,2002 p.202

<sup>3</sup> Stoppard at 19 *ibid*, p.134

Bernard uses archives, letters, poems, and history books, in short, both literary and non-literary texts in order to gain a different perspective of history. The comic atmosphere is created when Bernard is misled by his own obsessive, subjective and romantic claim that Lord Byron was a murderer. His individual ambitions rather than an academic thirst for knowledge underlie his character and so Bernard becomes a parodic representation of new historicist scholars. Hannah functions as a means to neutralize the understanding of an ideal academician. She is objective and never gives way to her feelings, frailties or passions while working professionally. The whole play is structured upon these two academicians' curiosity about the real meaning of things, and what had really happened in the past. But, Stoppard is sensible enough to show that meaning (since different perspectives are always present) is unstable both within the very text in which it is conveyed and also in the different texts with which it is directly or indirectly connected. Thomasina's diagram, Lord Croom's game book, letters, books, poems, primers, and footnotes all contribute to the search for reality in the play. Yet none of them enables the scholars to achieve unchanging and definite truths.

Another tenet of new historicism is that history is not a linear process (i.e. teleological, having an end in itself) and therefore that no era has ever truly finished and, nothing is ever truly complete and unitary. Stoppard constructs the play to prove this consciousness, because not only does the last scene bring the past and the present together, but also from the beginning the events of both periods interact. *Arcadia* is a play about historification and rehistorification, which are two notions central to the new historicist attitude to art and to methods of research. While the scenes of the past build up the historification process, the scenes of the present show how they are rehistorified. Thus, Stoppard reconciles the postmodernist with the counter-postmodernist .

Hannah stands for the classical Marxist (therefore counter-postmodernist) angle of the new historicist discipline. For her, literary and non-literary texts are not mere reflections of historical facts, but are rather, highly complex social products related to other forms of social production. These are linked to the complex network of institutions, practices and beliefs that constitute the culture as a whole. From this aspect she traces historical changes and the relationship between cultural artifacts and the social, political and material world which provides a strong model for historicist criticism. Her data of research is the history of gardens and landscaping. Through the history of gardens (with the symbolic presence of the Sidley hermit), she tries to find the historical transition from classicism to romanticism. What she does is no different from Greenblatt's "cultural poetics". Bernard, on the other hand, knows the fact that it is impossible to witness what has really happened in the past and he adds his "gut instinct" to his research technique. When the two characters come together, the difference between their attitudes toward their research creates a sense of multicentered perspective. But they are the means for Stoppard making the play a parody of the new historicist way of doing research.

Bernard's subjective deductions even from very unlikely things create a comic atmosphere and Hannah makes us know that his interpretations are not reliable. He even seems to think of the possibility of the hermit's being S.T. Coleridge, just because they died in the same year. The problem is, Bernard has always been "like this"! He makes very keen research on even the minutest details, but he loses his way because of his obsessive beliefs which mislead and distance him from reality.

The way both of the scholars work on their theses is very reminiscent of what new historicists attempt to do in general. But the scenes of the past are represented for the audience to make the whole thing a parody, because the reality can very possibly be different from the expected. New historicists tend to find what has never been shown before or say what has never been said before, in short, they try to create new histories out of the literary and non-literary material. But, in this play, Stoppard, stresses the fact that life is mysterious and it is impossible to understand the hidden truths through science, maths, history, academic research or grouse populations. None of them can provide an answer. No one can know what is beneath the surface. In his own studies, just like Bernard and Hannah, Stoppard works like a Marxist literary critic, but his plays' construction and open-endedness makes him a postmodernist playwright who is fond of new historicism to enrich the content and intertextual quality of his plays. He enjoys exploiting the state of "not knowing" and celebrates this view of life as a thing that makes life worth living. New historicists tend to create estrangement through their findings and Stoppard enjoys estranging his audiences forever, endlessly.

From the play's content and the dialogues between the characters, we understand that Stoppard has worked on numerous literary and non-literary texts just like a new historicist. We see that he has done research on physics (thermodynamics, Newton's law of motion); maths (Fermat's Last Theorem); Byron's life (his relationship with Caroline Lamb, his poetry -Hannah quotes from Byron's poem *Darkness* - and his book English Bards and Scotch Reviewers) , he has studied Latin (Thomasina's translation of *Anthony and Cleopatra*) ; he has found data on Thackeray's editorship of *Cornhill* until 1763; he has worked on the famous English gardeners like Capability Brown; he has found information about Poussin's famous painting where he picked up the epitaph "Et in Arcadia Ego!", etc. What saves Stoppard from the severe criticisms of scholars is that -unlike his character Bernard- he never attempts to use all this information to come up with definite conclusions, he knows that there will always be a risk of falling in Bernard's situation. And this consciousness results in his producing plays from a new historicist perspective.

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