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Modern Drama, Volume 59, Number 3, Fall 2016, pp. 306-326 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



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Compromised Epistemologies: The Ethics of Historiographic Metatheatre in Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* and *Arcadia*

PHILLIP ZAPKIN



ABSTRACT: *Tom Stoppard uses historiographic metatheatre to question the efficacy of historical narratives: plays such as *Travesties* directly address the constructed texture of history. However, partially because the 1809 scenes in *Arcadia* are naturalistic, critics generally accept *Arcadia* as presenting a “real” history. But taking anything in Stoppard’s plays at face value is a crucial mistake. Instead, we should read *Arcadia* as participating in a self-consciously destabilizing cultural project building a historiography of error – like *Travesties*, but through a less obviously constructed historiographic metatheatre – a reading that prompts us to reconsider standard narratives of Stoppard’s development as a playwright of epistemological uncertainty. Part of Stoppard’s joyous humour in *Arcadia* goes beyond satirizing Bernard and extends to the critical misreadings through which we, as critics, reproduce Bernard’s unreliable thesis and, like him, risk convincing ourselves that we are right. Taking *Arcadia* at face value undermines the ethical imperative to uncertainty and multiplicity inherent in historiographic metatheatre, an ethic that runs through both *Travesties* and *Arcadia*.*

KEYWORDS: *postmodernism, historiographic metafiction, epistemology*

There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place.

– Harold Pinter, *Old Times* (1026)

Many artists and writers seemed to sense an epistemological shift well before critical and cultural theorists, who in the late 1970s retroactively identified that western culture had been postmodern for over a decade. Tom Stoppard was one of the earliest theatre artists to pick up on what would later be called postmodern skepticism, writing plays, as early as the 1960s, that cast doubt

on accepted methods of knowing, including officially sanctioned history. Stoppard's plays since then have dealt extensively with questions of history, in general questioning the efficacy of historical narratives. Plays such as *Travesties* (1974), for example, directly address the constructed texture of history by blurring the lines among historical events, memory, and narrative patterns. Stoppard combines his interest in history and science with a scepticism about epistemologies, letting these thematic elements collectively express a postmodern doubt about whether or not humans can understand their place in the universe. Part of Stoppard's guiding ethic is expressed by Kerner in *Hapgood* (1988): "The act of observing determines what's what" (501). In other words, *how* we see an event determines the event itself.

While this narrative of Stoppard's career is widely understood, critics generally accept *Arcadia* – one of Stoppard's best constructed plays – as presenting a "real" history. Partially because the 1809 scenes in *Arcadia* (1993) are naturalistic, many take them at face value. But to take anything in one of Stoppard's plays at face value is a crucial mistake. Instead, we must read *Arcadia* as participating in a self-consciously deconstructive or destabilizing cultural project – like *Travesties*, but through a more mature, less obviously constructed historiographic metatheatre. During the roughly twenty years between the debuts of these two plays, Stoppard's work developed significantly through his increasing interest in anti-epistemological science (such as chaos theory and quantum mechanics) and his increasing scepticism about the possibilities of accurately representing the past. Part of Stoppard's joyous humour in *Arcadia* goes beyond satirizing Bernard and, indeed, can be extended to the critical misreadings through which we reproduce Bernard's unreliable thesis, convincing ourselves, like him, that we are right. Stoppard's stage repeats the past, but in the failure of the repetition, it rewrites history anew; his is a historiography of and through error, seeing the past as composed through our attempts to engage it through repetition. This is Stoppard's historiographic legacy, an intricate exploration of how repetition, theatricality, and error undermine teleological histories and open space for thinking alternatively about history.

ACT I: STOPPARD AS PLAYWRIGHT OF HISTORY AND HISTORY'S ETHICS

Christopher Innes has noted that Stoppard focuses more on history than any other contemporary British playwright, possibly any contemporary playwright of any nationality, with the vast majority of his full-length plays "set wholly or at least partially in the past" (223). Although there are excellent examples of plays by other playwrights set partially or entirely in the past – Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) or Edward Bond's *Bingo* (1973), for instance – no other contemporary British playwright has shown such

consistent interest in historical subjects. However, Stoppard rarely presents a simple or reliable historiography; he uses history to explore the problems of historical representation, even as he simultaneously grapples with scientific and cultural ideas.

As far back as his first major success, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), Stoppard's plays have been concerned with epistemological issues: reliability, the limits of knowledge, and how humans experience the laws of the universe. The famous coin toss scene that opens *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, for example, during which Guildenstern questions the mathematical laws of probability, demonstrates that "[e]fforts to grasp conceptually the universe – to gain a knowledge of its workings – through careful reasoning and logical argument, are doomed to failure and are, frankly, a trifle silly" (Buse 56). Although the play is not a history play in the conventional sense – in order to parody *Hamlet*, it does evoke the adapted text's critical and performance history but doesn't rely on an external historical ontology – it is typical of Stoppard's approach to and use of history insofar as it destabilizes comfortable meta-narratives about knowledge and truth. Stoppard's disruptive approach demonstrates affinities with the postmodern historiography offered by thinkers such as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, with Jean-François Lyotard's language-games paradigm, with Linda Hutcheon's theory of "historiographic metafiction," and with scientific theories such as relativity, chaos theory, and quantum mechanics.

Stoppard's work demonstrates two elements of White's postmodern historiography in particular: the "emplotment" of history according to narrative arcs, and the processes of repression, excision, selection, and symbolization that go into these emplotments. White writes that "by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures" (83; emphasis in original). Many of Stoppard's history plays reflect metafictional or metadramatic themes as the playwright adopts literary and dramatic plot arcs. For instance, *Hapgood* is a noir spy story, and *Shipwreck* (2002) "raises questions about the way history is being presented – as a drama in itself and through the framing of this drama as a classical three-part tragedy" (Innes 234). As White explains about histories, the structure of events in this play corresponds to a culturally sanctioned and recognizable form of storytelling: the tragedy is a form that theatre-going audiences could reasonably be expected to identify. Peter Buse notes this same process in the relationship of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* with *Hamlet*, writing, "there is a sense in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* that the plot of *Hamlet* is almost tyrannical in its demands. The meta-narrative allows for no exceptions; all elements must eventually come under its sway" (58). For both Stoppard and the historian, emplotment according to

culturally recognized or recognizable narratives requires processes through which “events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies” (White 84; emphasis in original). William Demastes argues that Stoppard’s plays depend for their effect on the audience engaging in these same processes: “We are habituated to taking certain evidence/information/data and almost unthinkingly squeezing everything into tried-and-true explanations” (232). Because theatre viewers (at least in Britain and the United States) are generally embedded in similar cultural contexts and familiar with similar language games, the strategies through which we organize and understand information utilize the same discursive norms as those used by western historians. However, Stoppard complicates these narrative expectations, using them to contest epistemological and historiographic processes.

Stoppard’s narrative and linguistic strategies rely on a language shared by audiences, playwrights, and historians – a common set of language games. Indeed, Stoppard is the playwright of games: linguistic, thematic, parodic, and metacritical. Nowhere is this gamesmanship more readily apparent than in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, in which we see the titular characters “betting on tossed coins, playing the game of questions, playing guess which hand the coin is in, role-playing the parts of Hamlet and the English King, and of each other, for that matter . . . It could even be said that all they do when not participating in *Hamlet* is play one form of game or other” (Buse 63). Even when participating in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still playing a game, though not necessarily one they consciously engage in. Rather, Stoppard orchestrates the game between himself, on one hand, and the actors, the audience, and *Hamlet*, on the other: a game of parody.

Parody plays a central role in postmodern historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon describes the work of historiographic metafiction as exploring, through literature, the epistemological limitations of historical knowledge. She argues, “Historiographic metafiction, while teasing us with the existence of the past as real, also suggests that there is no direct access to that real which would be unmediated by the structures of our various discourses about it” (146). In other words, historiographic metafiction shows how historical knowledge is constructed through the stories we tell about the past based on the artefacts that remain in the present. In his recent book, *Dramas of the Past on the Twentieth-Century Stage*, Alexander Feldman expands Hutcheon’s focus on historiographic metafiction to theorize historiographic metatheatre. He argues that metatheatrical plays – even more than metafiction – “by exposing the theatricality *within* theatre, provoke questions as to the artifice, the spectacle, and the dramatic constructs of the world beyond” (3; emphasis in original). Feldman

essentially adds the complication of performance to Hutcheon's argument, claiming that historiographic metatheatre disrupts ideological certainties built on historical narratives taken to represent actual past events.

Historiographic metafiction and metatheatre enable a political/ethical project of opening up gaps within ideology or creating dissensus, which Jacques Rancière describes as "not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which has no reason to be seen" (38; emphasis in original). Self-reflexive strategies in historiographic metatheatre call attention to narrativizing methodologies inherent to all histories, and thereby they undermine any and every history's (generally implicit) claim to represent ontological truth. As Feldman says, "these performances *refer* to events that have taken place, in one way or another, but the manner of their *presentation* subverts, or at least destabilizes, the referential capacity of these stagings" (23; emphasis in original). These gaps and instabilities compromise hegemonic power structures, in turn creating spaces for alternative discourses, all of which have a similar epistemological uncertainty.

However, many critics question historiographic metafiction's potential to resist power, arguing that postmodern uncertainty actually closes down possibilities for ethically grounded protest. For instance, Eric Berlatsky takes issue with this deconstructive project, critiquing it as insufficiently engaged with a current critical focus on ethics. Challenging Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, Berlatsky theorizes what he calls "postmodernist historical fiction," a genre in which texts attempt to locate the truth about the past, utilize postmodern formal play, and express "the ethical necessity to find the real" (8). For Berlatsky, summarizing ideas expressed by Norman Geras, the ethical role of postmodern art is not to destabilize discourses but precisely to assert counter-discourses: "the first step to fighting injustice is not merely identifying and deconstructing dominant discourses, but is rather in uncovering and affirming the existence of oppressive behavior . . . it is imperative to be able to say what really happened" (30). One problem with Berlatsky's argument is that he doesn't justify his belief in a recoverable ontology so much as he identifies a discursive need to assert the existence of that ontology. In other words, oppositional discourses such as feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism, and so on may *require* an ontological reality to which they can appeal, without necessarily being able to answer the objections of postmodern theorists who argue the impossibility of reaching such a truth. Although Daniel Jernigan doesn't use the term "postmodernist historical fiction," his analysis of *Arcadia* asserts that Stoppard's ontological stance has greater affinities with postmodernist historical fiction than with historiographic metafiction (or historiographic metatheatre). He argues that Stoppard demonstrates

this faith in a recoverable ontological reality, asserting that “*Arcadia* portrays an Enlightenment attitude whenever it suggests that rationality might be able to assist Bernard and Hannah in their recovery of the past” (23). Stoppard’s work points to a really existing past that is recoverable if only sufficient care is taken in the investigation. Jernigan’s reading of *Arcadia*, however, is based in science rather than in historiography, and thinking through the play as a historiographic exercise complicates his assertion.

In theorizing postmodern historiographic ethics, Frank Ankersmit asserts the necessity for history to claim multiplicities, in contrast to Berlatsky’s literary analysis of the ethical turn or Jernigan’s work on scientific discourse. Ankersmit argues that, through multiplicity, historians gain greater access to an approximate historical “truth,” as different historical narratives are weighed against one another and their relative accuracy determined. For Ankersmit, there is no way to assert a unified counter-discourse without falling into the same problem of traditional, hegemonic histories. He explains:

In history there are no a priori criteria enabling us to establish to what extent one *individual* account of the past matches with the past or not. Such criteria develop simultaneously with the proliferation of the accounts that we have of some part of the past. Hence, the more accounts of the past we have, and the more complex the web is of their agreements and differences, the closer we may come to historical truth. (15; emphasis in original)

In other words, while asserting a unified counter-discourse might be politically advantageous, it sacrifices the complex interactions of historical accounts that, Ankersmit suggests, allow us to evaluate historical accuracy. Berlatsky and Ankersmit both want to establish an ethical historiography, but their goals and methods differ. While Berlatsky seems concerned primarily with establishing one or more narrative correctives against hegemonic histories – patriarchal, colonialist, racist, and so forth – Ankersmit believes that the best way to approach (though never to actually reach) historical truth is through relativistic comparisons of as many histories as possible, weighing the claims of each against one another. Ankersmit’s ethic of multiplicity relies on the same kind of doubt and openness as historiographic metatheatre, and the same project of questioning and debating destabilized historical narratives.

But even to think about *Arcadia* scientifically – as Jernigan does – may be more problematic than it might first appear, given postmodern philosophy’s troubling of even the ostensibly objective investigations of science. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard argues that narratives are the legitimating structures of science as well as history. He writes that “recourse to narrative is inevitable, at least to the extent that the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own. If this is the case, it is necessary to admit an irreducible need for

history” (28). Stoppard’s interest in ideas such as relativity or chaos theory aligns his plays with history, because science itself relies on the meaning-making tools of historiography. Like the knowledge-making or -transmitting strategies of history, those of science are based on narrativization or emplotment. Stoppard productively exploits these links to throw into question many of the worldviews upon which modern western ideologies are based. Stoppard’s plays “begin with an assumption of communal habituation against which Stoppard will push in order for us to reconsider our smug, generally upper-middle-class, self congratulatory (and generally Newtonian) perspectives on existence” (Demastes 233). In other words, Stoppard’s ethical project creates dissensus not only against hegemonic historical narratives but also against traditional notions of scientific knowledge.

Demastes traces a consistent theme through many of Stoppard’s plays, as the playwright moves ever closer to the fully conceptualized chaos theory to which he responds in *Arcadia* (Demastes 229). Indeed, *Arcadia* draws on the basic ideas of chaos theory for the fluctuations of its plotline – the principle that a small change in the input of a system can produce wildly unstable results. In contrast to Demastes’s claim, Jernigan suggests that the play fails to live up to the radically anti-epistemological potential of chaos theory. Jernigan admits that Stoppard’s “use of chaos theory as a metaphor for the difficulties faced by those involved in biographical/bibliographical literary research is, at least on its surface, decidedly contemporary (perhaps even postmodern) for the way in which it suggests that such work results in the construction of its subject rather than in its recovery” (17–18). However, he argues, the anti-epistemological possibilities of chaos theory are overestimated by non-scientist critics, including Lyotard: “chaos theory does not preclude the possibility that the scientific method might provide more accurate descriptions over time” (27). Thus, Jernigan claims, Stoppard plays with an anti-epistemological or disruptive surface but one without much critical punch. As historiographic metatheatre, however, Stoppard’s plays are less interested in the notion that science or the scientific method can lead to more accurate understanding than in showing how language shapes and limits our understanding of truth. As Hutcheon puts it, “the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’” or scientific facts (89; emphasis in original). In other words, historiographic metatheatre such as Stoppard’s confronts both history and science as epistemological discourses, exposing the limitations of narrative through a historiographic reliance on error. Stoppard’s historiographic metatheatre accepts error not just as inevitable but as part of the fabric of historiography; for Stoppard, engagement with and repetition of the past are always complicated. In engaging with the past, “[e]rror could be, in fact, *the way through* to

success: the error of the past in the now was twin to the error of the now in the past” (Schneider 53; emphasis in original). In other words, trying to repeat the past in the present – perhaps always the goal of history – inevitably fails, not only because we pull the past out of time but also because history pulls us backwards out of our time.

ACT II: THE TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *TRAVESTIES* AND HISTORY

The 1974 play *Travesties* exemplifies Stoppard’s playful discourses of language, culture, and history. The play presents the memories of Henry Carr, who worked for the British consulate in Zürich in 1917, at or near a time when James Joyce, Tristan Tzara, and Vladimir Lenin were all in that city. An elderly Carr recounts his memories of the three men, specifically how he was recruited by Joyce to play Algernon in a production of Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. One problem – at least from a historian’s point of view – is that the events recounted in *Travesties* do not correspond to historical records of 1917 Zürich: Joyce and Tzara never met, as Enoch Brater points out (162). The historical record does show that Carr played Algernon Moncrieff in the English Players’ production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* under the direction of James Joyce, and that Joyce and Carr had a series of court cases over money connected with the production. There seems to be no record, however, that Carr knew Tzara or Lenin. All of these figures spent time in Zürich during World War I, but the extent of their interactions, if any, is certainly not as in depth as Stoppard’s play suggests.

Of course, Stoppard’s inspiration for the play was little more than a historical footnote, which he acknowledges in the background to Henry Carr published with the play. Stoppard lays out a very bare chronology of Carr’s experiences, drawn largely from a biography of Joyce, noting that, “[f]rom these meager facts about Henry Carr – and being able to discover no others – I conjured up an elderly gentleman still living in Zurich . . . and recollecting, perhaps not with entire accuracy, his encounters with Joyce and the Dadaist Tzara” (x). In other words, Stoppard’s play created Carr and imagined his experiences with virtually no information about the actual past. Carr, despite having been a real person, is a fictional construct in *Travesties*. It is precisely this fictionalization that allows the play to function as historiographic metatheatre.

Instead of pretending that *Travesties* functions as an actual history, presenting the past mimetically, the play draws attention to its own fictionalization – both the fictions created by Carr’s faltering memory and the fiction created by Stoppard himself. As Brater puts it, “this play’s highly unreliable narrator, Henry Carr, speaks to us in the present about a suspect remembrance of things past” (162–63). The elderly Carr narrates the events of *Travesties*, but

the restarts, repetitions, contradictions, and other problems of his narrative undermine his credibility as a narrator and ostensible historian. In the early portion of the play, for example, the refrain of these restarts and repetitions is Bennett's recurring line, "Yes, sir. I have put the newspapers and telegrams on the sideboard, sir," to which Carr responds, "Is there anything of interest?" (10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 68). What is of interest are the processes of history-making occurring on stage. Carr's repeated retellings demonstrate the processes of emphasis that White identifies as a key component of historical narrative. History functions not merely through a series of events recorded without bias or superimposed causality – what White would call a naïve chronology (93) – but some events are given meaning above and beyond other events. Two (or three, or four, etc.) historians could present exactly the same chronological events, but through different processes of emphasis they would produce two (or three, or four, etc.) very different stories of those events. However, in *Travesties*, the single narrator – Carr – condenses this range of possibilities and presents several different stories about the same events, which not only decreases his credibility as a historian giving us the story of Zürich in 1917 but also points to the impossibility of a genuinely accurate representation of the past in any historical account. Although Carr is supposed to be narrating the important events of World War I and the Russian Revolution, his interpretation of them often runs absurdly counter to the generally accepted historical record. For instance, at the news of the Russian Revolution, Carr imagines a revolution of aristocrats rising up against their servants. He tells Bennett that "the day was not far off before the exploited class [. . .] goaded beyond endurance by the insolent rapacity of its servants, should turn upon those butlers, footmen, cooks, valets" (13). This inversion of the Revolution fits Carr's neatly bourgeois worldview and provides an opportunity to chastise Bennett for serving so many bottles of champagne at a recent social event. Simultaneously, however, Marxist historians might find an ironic truth in Carr's claim, since capitalist exploitation does resemble an aristocratic attack on the working classes. This conflict of interpretation demonstrates the plasticity of history, which can be shaped to fit the specific purposes and worldview of the historian. Ankersmit would suggest that having both narratives increases our ability to evaluate their truth claims and brings us closer to understanding the truth about the past.

Carr's faulty memory is a postmodern technique, characteristic of historiographic metatheatre, which undermines the reliability of a text – memory in this case – through which human beings try to gain access to the past. Historiographic metafiction or metatheatre "establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices (and bodies) that use memory to try to make sense of the past" (Hutcheon 118). In Carr's opening monologue, he explains that he will recount his adventures: "My memoirs, is it, then? Life and times,

friend of the famous. Memories of James Joyce. James Joyce As I Knew Him. The James Joyce I Knew. Through the Courts With James Joyce . . . What was he like, James Joyce, I am often asked" (6). He repeats this formula almost verbatim with Lenin and, to a lesser extent, with Tzara. This catalogue of phrases promises historical non-fiction – the memoir – while also emphasizing how memories are structured through generic conventions by playing off a series of stereotypical memoir titles (particularly titles used by people like Carr, whose memoirs tell of knowing famous people). And as though Carr's obviously failing memory and repetitions weren't enough, the play's closing scene involves Old Cecily, a previously unseen character, directly challenging Carr's recollections. Old Carr has just given us his memoirs in the form of the play when Old Cecily declares, "you never got close to Vladimir Ilyich, and I don't remember the other one [Tzara]. I do remember Joyce, yes you are quite right and he was Irish with glasses but that was the year after – 1918" (70). This character allows Stoppard some last-minute fun at Old Carr's expense. And, of course, Stoppard is also having some fun with the audience by making it perfectly clear that the "history" of Zürich in 1917 that we've just witnessed is the fantasy of an old man.

Through narrative gaps, repetitions, and contradictions, Stoppard demonstrates the potential variation of events existing within the same basic chronology. To take a very simple example, the first meeting between Tzara and Carr is performed twice, with each version being dramatically different. The first performance emphasizes how Tzara, in Bennett's words (which Carr borrows in a Wildean linguistic repetition), "spoke French with a Romanian accent, and wore a monocle" (12). And Stoppard's description of Tzara's entrance reads, "*This Tzara (there is to be another) is a Romanian nonsense. His entrance might be set to appropriate music*" (15). This first Tzara uses dialect specifically to emphasize his Romanianness, which would almost certainly strike the stuffy bourgeois Englishman Henry Carr as exotic and unfamiliar, much like Tzara's radical Dadaist ideas about art. The later Tzara, on the other hand, parodies Wilde's characters, and almost everything the latter Tzara says is either a parody of Wilde or an artistic/philosophical statement (generally in debate with Joyce). For example, the first Tzara says, "Plaizure, plaizure! What else? Eating ez usual, I see 'Enri?!" (15), while the second says, "Oh, pleasure, pleasure . . . What else should bring anyone anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Henry?" (24). The wording is exactly the same as Jack's line from Act One of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (481). Throughout *Travesties*, Tzara and Jack/Algernon/Ernest are consistently conflated, reminding us, metadramatically, how thoroughly intertwined histories are with literary tropes, characterizations, and models. When Carr first narrates his meeting with Tzara, the poet's Romanianness is parodically emphasized, but then

Tzara's ethnicity almost entirely drops out of *Travesties* except for a few scattered references. Carr's tale embodies processes undertaken by historians when they select, emphasize, and narrate histories to stress the significance of certain events – or in this case, character traits – over others. Tzara can be more or less Romanian as Carr's memory of a particular event demands, but Tzara is always discussed as being an artist.

Some of the most important moments in *Travesties* are the debates between the two artists, Joyce and Tzara. Their discussions of the purpose of art mirror historiographic debates about truth and the construction of history as narrative. Tzara sees the meaning-making narratives through which we understand history as precisely the problem. He explains his distrust of causality: “the causes we know everything about depend on causes we know very little about, which depend on causes we know absolutely nothing about. And it is the duty of the artist to jeer and howl and belch at the delusion that infinite generations of real effects can be inferred from the gross expression of apparent cause” (19–20). Because our epistemological methodology is always too limited to adequately represent all the causes producing even the simplest effect, we should abandon the illusion of history (or at least history understood through cause and effect) altogether. For Tzara, what is central in historiography is the lie: his philosophy (like postmodernism) tries “to contest the very possibility of our ever being able to *know* the ‘ultimate objects’ of the past” (Hutcheon 24; emphasis in original). However, unlike historiographic metatheatre, Tzara refuses to acknowledge that, working from existing artifacts, we can produce a multitude of competing histories without needing any of them to be ontologically “true.” Tzara's historiography of the lie differs from Rebecca Schneider's historiography of error because, while Tzara identifies the lie as a limitation of knowledge, Schneider (and, I would argue, Stoppard) identifies error as an epistemological supplement.

While Tzara anarchically refuses to take this next step, Joyce emphasizes the role of texts/artefacts in providing access to the past. Innes explains Joyce's position “that facts – whether present-day events or historical – have no meaning until they are shaped by art into pre-existing cultural forms” (228). This argument restates that made by White, who also connects the work of the historian to the work of the artist: both processes involve “all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play” (84). Joyce connects history with art through the textual evidence of history provided by the artist. For Joyce, the only meaning in existence or history survives in what the artist decides is worthy of preservation; meaning inheres in the archive of texts and artefacts left by artists. Joyce tells Tzara, “An artist is the magician put among men to gratify – capriciously – their urge for immortality . . . What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed

over by the artist's touch? Dust" (41–42). The value of art, in Joyce's argument, is that it is the only thing allowing us to make meaning of the past and to establish our present identities through a narrativization of our history. Preserving artefacts from the past, especially artistic artefacts, allows processes of meaning-making in the future.

Although Stoppard acknowledges in his background to *Henry Carr* that his play is nowhere near documentary in its claims to historical reality, the discursive modes at work in the play dialogically represent important contemporary theories about how knowledge, especially historical knowledge, is created and transmitted. The dialectical encounter between Joyce and Tzara stages the same kind of epistemological crisis manifest in postmodern historiography and literary theory. Feldman identifies historiographic metatheatre with these epistemological concerns: "theatre is the ideal medium in which to consider the versions of history, in all their instability, because the provisionality of the stage and the ephemeral nature of its representations complement postmodernism's sense of the plurality of historical truths" (25). *Travesties* is explicitly historiographic metatheatre, as the play itself all but announces. Stoppard's later play *Arcadia*, on the other hand, has a more complex relationship to historiographic representation, using historiographic metatheatre but often being read by critics as presenting an unproblematized history.

ACT III: COVERT HISTORIOGRAPHIC METATHEATRE IN *ARCADIA*

Like *Travesties*, *Arcadia* shifts between two time periods: 1809 (and 1812 to a lesser extent) and 1993 (at least in the premiere, though more recent performances modernize the contemporary scenes). The play invites viewers or readers to evaluate the contemporary historians' narratives – those of Bernard, Hannah, and to a lesser extent, Valentine – based on the events in the Regency scenes. Unfortunately, when writing about *Arcadia*, many critics seem to take these Regency scenes as an unproblematic history. Critics especially focus on Bernard's incorrect theory, and in focusing on him, they assume that the 1809 scenes we see are an ontological reality rather than the qualified epistemology of historiographic metatheatre. For instance, Richard Hornby notes that "we *know* that he [Bernard] is dead wrong, because we have *seen* what happened to Chater ourselves in the flashback scenes" (282; emphasis added). Jernigan echoes this point:

the audience soon *sees* the mistakes Bernard makes while constructing his "proof." Much of the confusion stems from the inscription that Chater wrote to Septimus. The members of the audience, however, *know* the disingenuous circumstances under which the inscription was written, since they have *witnessed* the scene. (19; emphasis added)

Enoch Brater claims that Bernard's "fifteen minutes of fame is reduced even further when his shoddy research is *exposed* for the nonsense that it is" (166; emphasis added). David Guaspari notes that Hannah "finds *proof* in the Sidley Park garden book that Byron couldn't have killed Chater, because Chater did not die in 1809" (229; emphasis added). The rhetoric of all these analyses suggests that the 1809 scenes can be taken as a stable referent of a "real" past that disproves the historical narrative proposed by Bernard and gradually provides more evidence to support Hannah's theory.

The relationship between *Arcadia* and a "real" past becomes significantly more complicated when considering the scientific dimensions that Stoppard explores. Demastes argues that virtually Stoppard's entire career as a playwright worked on the margins of scientific discourses, attempting to make sense of complex ideas such as relativity and chaos theory through a dramatic medium and coming to a kind of chaotic fruition in *Arcadia*. He writes, "In *Arcadia*, Stoppard incorporates the chaotic paradigm into a work of art that both describes and demonstrates orderly disorder at work, culminating here in a masterful incorporation of chaotic-informed thought, experience, and expression" (239). The foundation of most scientific work is that observable phenomena exist and should be used as the basis for conclusions, so the logic of scientific discourse supports reading the 1809 scenes as "real" or objective and using them as a basis for evaluating Bernard's and Hannah's hypotheses. Jernigan points to this rationalist position when he asserts that "even while the work critically satirizes [Hannah and Bernard's] effort, the satire often suggests that if they only worked in a careful enough manner they might do a better job of recovering the truth than they do" (23). Jernigan's belief that there is a truth which could be recovered – implicitly, the truth given in the 1809 scenes – gives a certain ontological status to past events and assumes that these events constitute the "truth" of history apart from the stories we (or Stoppard) tell about them. This assumption seems to underlie many critical readings of *Arcadia*. Jernigan writes, "Knowledge as construction is at least partially rebutted since theories that began as interpretive constructions are reconstructed to *mirror the truth more accurately*" (23–24; emphasis added). In other words, because we have the Regency scenes as evidence of a historical "truth," we can know that some stories told in the present are "true" (Hannah's), while others are false (Bernard's). Criticism of *Arcadia* frequently relies on such a rhetoric of true and false theories, accepting the "truth" of the 1809 scenes as the implicit, and sometimes explicit, measuring stick of that truth.

The difference between the types of historical ontologies at work in *Arcadia* and *Travesties* is one reason for this confusion. *Travesties* has an external ontology – a real past and histories outside the play – against which we can

measure Carr's account of 1917 Zürich. But with the exception of Byron's existence, *Arcadia* relies on an internally constructed ontology – without reference to the past outside the play. This difference is significant, because the two ontologies are not equivalent, whatever the temptation to treat them as such. We recognize instances of historiographic metatheatre in *Travesties* because we have larger histories of World War I and biographies of Joyce, Tzara, and Lenin, and we can use these narratives as points of comparison with the events that Stoppard depicts. But in *Arcadia*, no such outside narratives exist, so we seek an internal ontology against which to measure potential epistemologies and historical narratives – and the evidence most critics cast upon is the 1809 scenes. The problem, however, with reading the 1809 scenes as the “reality” against which Bernard, Hannah, and Valentine's evolving epistemology can be measured is that Stoppard shapes these scenes specifically because of the evolving narratives in the play's present. Whereas the past of 1917 Zürich remains itself outside *Travesties* (even if our access to that past is limited), the past of the 1809 scenes in *Arcadia* reshapes itself in response to the contemporary scenes. The texture of the 1809 scenes reveals that these scenes represent not an “objective” historical picture but one crafted specifically to play off the 1993 scenes and fulfil Stoppard's satirical purpose. This visible crafting of history shows *Arcadia*'s strategic reliance on historiographic metatheatre. Stoppard's play “is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of critically shared vocabulary” and through which its “aesthetic forms and its social formations are problematized by critical reflection” (Hutcheon 4). In *Arcadia*, as in *Travesties* and many of his other plays, Stoppard stages the past as a tool for critiquing contemporary historiographic discourses and epistemologies, but in *Arcadia*, he goes beyond staging compromised histories and sets a trap for viewers and critics to examine their own historiographic thought processes.

White claims that historians shape their narratives based on culturally recognized plot patterns. Just as *Shipwreck* relies on the structure of classical tragedy, so too do the Regency scenes in *Arcadia* borrow from the comedy of manners. Guaspari notes the similarities, writing,

The surface of the nineteenth century story . . . is a classical comedy: cuckolds and carnal embraces, challenges to duel, abscondings in the night, chains of unrequited amours (X pursuing Y pursuing Z . . .), unintended encounters at bedroom doorways – all taking place offstage and known to the audience by hearsay alone. (224; second ellipsis in original)

These plot elements in the 1809 scenes suggest a continuous theatrical tradition from the comedy of manners or Restoration comedy: the 1809 scenes function like Wycherley's *The Country Wife* or Congreve's *The Way of the*

World. Beyond comedic value, however, the comedy of manners provides Stoppard a model through which to deal with his concerns about knowledge and fiction, because knowledge in the comedy of manners is always surreptitiously gained and questionably reliable at best. This epistemological uncertainty runs throughout *Arcadia*. Take, for instance, the opening scene, where Septimus learns that “Mrs Chater was discovered in carnal embrace” (2). Septimus learns this from Thomasina, but the knowledge came to her through a confused process of eavesdropping and gossip; she explains, “Mr Noakes told Mr Chater. *Jellaby* was told by the groom, who overheard Mr Noakes telling Mr Chater” (2; emphasis in original). The audience gains its knowledge from eavesdropping on Thomasina telling Septimus, but certainly, with so many removes and repetitions, the knowledge that comes to the audience must have a doubtful epistemological status. This metatheatrical gesture is only the first in *Arcadia*, which highlights the uncertainty through which historical texts, including testimony and memory, come to be narrativized in the present. Conveniently, however, Septimus confirms the rumour, which he can do only because it was he who was in carnal embrace with Mrs. Chater. His confirmation sets the overall pattern for knowledge in *Arcadia*: information is given, but its epistemological status remains unclear until it is retroactively confirmed.

Guaspari observes the same pattern governing the epistemological connections between the past and the present in *Arcadia*. He notes that Bernard’s and Hannah’s attempts to narrate summon “that story into being. Thus summoned it responds first by unfolding – typically to point out comic errors in attempts to predict the past – and then by volleying back chance relics that the future may seize upon either to correct itself or, equally likely, to heap higher its folly” (224). For instance, Bernard sarcastically evokes “a platonic letter which confirms everything – lost but ineradicable” (57), and in the next Regency scene, Septimus burns an unread letter from Byron (71). Gauspari is absolutely right that Stoppard’s play involves attempts to “predict the past” because the performative repetition of the past (via evolving histories) undoes linear teleologies and replaces them with a cyclical, diagonal, repetitive, or disjointed temporality. Schneider identifies theatricality in the historiography of repetition and error as temporally disruptive, writing, “Touching time against itself, by bringing time *again and again* out of joint into theatrical, even anamorphic, relief presents the real, the actual, the raw and the true as, precisely, the zigzagging, diagonal, and crookedly imprecise returns of time” (16; emphasis in original). This undoing or kinking of time is part of a larger postmodern project of disrupting modernist teleology and historical narratives of progress. Along the same lines, in his discussion of four productions/revivals of *Arcadia*, R. Darren Gobert argues that performance is always

haunted by previous productions, cultural citation, and the public lives of actors, playwrights, and directors. Even obscure citations or evocations affect the tenor of a production (290). Instead of a simple forward movement in time, Stoppard's historiographic metatheatre moves through time multidirectionally and repetitively. The queasiness of Stoppard's staged historiography (particularly for performance, as Gobert reminds us) derives from its seeming backwardness – if, as Guaspari suggests, the 1993 scenes seek to *predict* the past, this past is called into existence by being repeated, historiographically or theatrically. In other words, it is only because of what happens in the present that the past comes to be, as opposed to a linear temporality suggesting that historiography in the present tries to understand a past that existed in its own right.

In some cases, we do know the content of the “chance relics” (Guaspari 224) volleyed back by the past, as with the game book that records Byron's presence at Sidley Park in 1809. Valentine reports that Byron is “in the game book. I think he shot a hare” (50). The game book, with Byron's name recorded, becomes proof for Bernard's theory because it “proves” that Byron was present at the time. However, with Stoppard's characteristic historiographic play, this evidence becomes unreliable in the face of a competing historical narrative: Augustus claims he actually shot the hare, not Byron (79). This competing claim undermines the reliability of the game book and implicitly compromises all historical/archival evidence. Historians rely on artefacts to create narratives of the past, but if those artefacts have been deliberately falsified – giving Lord Byron the honour of shooting a hare, for instance – then the histories constructed using that text as evidence will correspondingly differ. Of course, Bernard (like Hannah and Valentine) does not know that the game book has been falsified, and so even as his theory apparently unravels in the face of more and more (ostensible, though sometimes unreliable) evidence, “Bernard will try to salvage some loot from his debacle – two previously unknown essays and two new lines of poetry, all, he's certain, by Byron, ‘as sure as he shot that hare.’ His treasure is as counterfeit as the hare” (Guaspari 229). In this instance, Bernard fails to realize that the textual artefacts he has (probably) lie about the past, which critics generally take as further proof of Bernard's bad historiography.

We cannot miss the fact that the only relics that seem to be “volleyed” forward, as Guaspari puts it, are those connected with either Bernard's or Hannah's investigations. Everything coming from the past into the present is (or will become) significant to the historiographic narratives being developed by the scholars: there are no chance relics; no random bits of paper or scraps of information survive to muddy the picture. After Bernard has read his paper for Hannah, Valentine, and Chloë, Hannah critiques his historiography:

“You’ve left out everything which doesn’t fit” (59). Surely the same could be said of Stoppard: Hannah’s critique of Bernard is another instance of Stoppard playing with historiographic metatheatre, drawing our attention to the processes of repression and erasure through which history is narrated. The coincidence of physical relics and historiographic narratives suggests the careful concurrence of the two time periods, which have been purposefully crafted to play off of one another.

Structurally, *Arcadia* reinforces this coincidence, as the play opens with both time periods occupying their own distinct narrative spaces before gradually collapsing together in the final scene as the two storylines come to co-exist in the same stage space. Although the setting of both the 1809 scenes and the contemporary scenes is the same – Sidley Park – the two time periods are initially kept separate as the two temporal spaces alternate. The first scene in the play is set in 1809, the second takes place in 1993, and so on. Throughout most of *Arcadia*, these two temporalities remain distinct, though furniture and props move from one time period to the other, occupying the same stage space. Guaspari refers to the concurrent existence of a single object in 1809 and 1993 as a process of twinning, and he notes that, by the end of the play, this twinning extends even to people: “the finale is staged so as temporarily to confuse nineteenth-century Augustus Coverly with twentieth-century Gus, boys of the same age played by the same actor” (223). The process of twinning here is complicated by Gus/Augustus, perhaps more than Guaspari suggests. While objects, such as the furniture, manuscripts, and the game book, remain on stage and are temporally twinned – the same object exists in 1809 and 1993, except that the latter version is almost two hundred years older – Gus and Augustus are both the same as and different from each other. What this means is that the same actor plays the two different parts, twinned by the characters’ mutual appearance but simultaneously separated by the gulf of time. Whereas the game book of 1809 is the same object (plus 184 years) as the present-day game book, Gus is simultaneously the same as and different from Augustus, and vice versa. While the objects are themselves, younger and older, the boy is both himself and not himself through the actor doubling.

This doubling becomes *twinning* at the end of the play. Doubling Augustus and Gus is a strategic move that culminates in the delivery of Thomasina’s drawing to Hannah. Augustus, in the Regency period, asks if he can keep the drawing (88), which is a somewhat odd request because the only other interaction between Septimus and Augustus in *Arcadia* involves Augustus rejecting the tutor’s authority and leaving the room. However, in the last moments of the play, the twentieth-century Gus enters in Regency dress (and, indeed, looking exactly like Augustus) for the modern Coverlys’

Regency ball. The stage directions indicate, "*Gus appears in the doorway. It takes a moment to realize that he is not Lord Augustus*" (96). The confusion is emphasized by the fact that Hannah occupies the stage space simultaneously with Septimus and Thomasina. At this moment, dressed alike, the actor could be (and perhaps is) both Gus and Augustus. The shift from merely doubling Gus and Augustus to twinning the boys is completed when Gus hands Hannah a folio that "*consists only of two boards hinged, containing Thomasina's drawing*" (96). Any distinction between the modern Gus and the Regency Augustus is at an absolute minimum because they look identical (being played by the same actor), are dressed alike, and both possess Thomasina's sketch. Gobert expresses the visual uncertainty that this creates on stage: "The false dichotomy of 'present' and 'past,' foregrounded so dominantly on the page, collapses" (286). The ensuing uncertainty encapsulates the instability of history on Stoppard's stage; it is a moment when time doubles back and touches itself.

DENOUEMENT: STOPPARD'S JOKE AND THE ETHICS OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC METATHEATRE

One of the basic moves of *Arcadia* is to satirize Bernard, who archetypically represents academics. Bernard's ethic, expressed in his short final line of the play, is "Publish!" (96), even when he no longer believes his own theory about Byron killing Chater. Stoppard's satire develops throughout the play, through Bernard's assertion of his own discovery and his wilful blindness to the legitimate critiques, counter-arguments, and concerns raised by Hannah and Valentine. Instead, Bernard plows ahead, relying on "a visceral belief in yourself. Gut instinct. The part of you which doesn't reason. The certainty for which there is no back reference" (50). The insistence that he must be right, based on a desire to be right and an unwillingness to consider alternatives, undermines Bernard's scholarly credibility. In this insistence on the authority of his own narrative, Bernard obviously diverges from Ankersmit's ethical historiography. And yet Bernard's narrative is historiographically important: as Ankersmit explains, we need multiple histories with competing truth claims in order to construct a network through which we can evaluate different claims against one another. In other words, there are no a priori criteria according to which we could say that Bernard's historical narrative is untrue, but judging its claims through *comparison and contrast* with other historical narratives may reveal problematic assumptions and unreliable interpretations of evidence – both in Bernard's narrative and in other histories. We have here a return to the historiography of error, another rejection of the faith that the past can be known in itself, and a reassertion that we can know history only through the error of re-performance. In Stoppard's theatrical historiography,

Which error . . . can be seen as more erroneous becomes a matter of parsing the errors – not parsing the truths. And this, in itself, beckons a kind of instruction about time and its inadequacies, authenticity and its promiscuities, that without question can boggle the mind of any true believer in the linearity of time. (Schneider 53)

Without falling into the trap of accepting the Regency scenes, we can see through an examination of *Arcadia*'s historiographic metatheatre that the play is a more refined, perhaps, but essentially comparable historiographic exercise to *Travesties* and many of Stoppard's earlier works. The problems of knowledge raised in *Arcadia* reflect Stoppard's ongoing commitment to compromised epistemologies, both scientific and historiographic. This reading of *Arcadia* attempts to revise the standard narrative of Stoppard's career, which sees his middle-career work moving more toward the sciences and dulling the very direct historiographic metatheatre of early plays like *Travesties*. Instead, I argue, *Arcadia* represents a multifaceted engagement with postmodern epistemological scepticism, one that capitalizes both on radical sciences and on postmodern historiography, combining them with an ethic of error that allows Stoppard to conjure a past out of the narrativizing impulse of the present. Re-performing the past, or providing the past anew, allows Stoppard to undermine teleology and the reliability of observable phenomena in ways that critics often miss whenever they approach *Arcadia* with a historical/teleological frame of mind – one that assumes a one-directional timeline moving from 1809 to 1993. Stoppard undoes this linearity, however, as the play moves between the two periods, with each one reflecting and refracting the other.

The ethical work I see in Stoppard's plays is quite different from that of the historiographic theorists, in that Stoppard is not necessarily concerned with approaching a truth so much as he is interested in disrupting the illusion that truth is accessible. We must doubt Carr's narrative(s) just as we must doubt Bernard's and Hannah's and Valentine's histories, but we must also doubt the evidence upon which we base our doubts. The ground under "truth" in Stoppard's plays is constantly shifting. No action, event, or claim exists without being compromised by conflicting evidence, and every historical narrative falls prey to (and perhaps benefits from) error. Radical historiographic scepticism dovetails with Stoppard's use of anti-epistemological sciences, which were crucial influences in his mid-career plays such as *Arcadia* and *Hapgood*. Blending these intellectual trends is part of the intricacy of Stoppard's particular genius. However, his radical doubt and push for intellectual scepticism are not despairing or depressing because they allow for individual truth narratives that can carry as much weight as the untrustworthy meta-narratives.

Stoppard's plays open up space for radically individual truths rather than for the collective opposition to ideologies that Berlatsky identifies with the ethical turn. Stoppard's historiographic metatheatre exposes the impossibility of establishing a singular ontological truth. The consequence is that individuals are free to challenge and undermine dominant discourses through new interpretations and explanations, new narrativizations of history. Only with the existence of as many truth claims and errors as possible can we begin to move toward formulating a "truth" of the past. Historical narratives arise dialogically in each play, whether in Carr's attitude shifts with each repetition and restart or in the discussions among Bernard, Hannah, and Valentine. Rather than accepting a singular discourse – dominant or oppositional – Stoppard shows the ethical importance of constantly questioning and undermining the narrative processes through which historical knowledge and ideology are made.

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