

Arcadia presents an intricate tapestry in which a warp of mathematics and science supports a weft of poetry, history, and human connection. Stoppard has spun his threads from the tensions between classical geometry and modern mathematics, rationality and romanticism, rhetoric and philosophy. The audience sees the emerging patterns in interleaved eras of the early 19th century (1809 and 1812) and the recent present, anchored in the schoolroom of an English country estate.

The play opens in 1809 during a lesson between Thomasina Coverly, the daughter of Lord and Lady Croom, and her tutor, Septimus Hodge. Thomasina, a callow 13 year old, is also a mathematical prodigy who casually proposes a solution to Fermat's theorem. She challenges and fascinates her tutor, a student of mathematics and natural philosophy with an Englishman's early grounding in literature and the classics. The Crooms are hosting a gathering consisting of a stunningly bad romantic poet, Ezra Chater, his unseen, promiscuous wife, Lady Croom's brother Captain Brice, and Hodge's schoolmate: an (unseen) romantic poet and critic with a lame foot. Meanwhile, Mr. Charles Noakes is wreaking havoc on the landscape, using a monstrous steam drill to turn the "pastoral refinement" of Lady Croom's garden into a picaresque wilderness, complete with a hut for a soon to be hired [hermit](#).

The farcical elements of an aristocratic house party abound: Mrs. Chater is observed during a tryst in the gazebo, her husband seeks satisfaction in a duel that ends with the death of a rabbit. The lame poet flees inexplicably in the dawn. The housekeeper, Jellaby, delivers letters that go astray and reappear centuries later.

The early action shifts to the present where two modern scholars, Hannah Jarvis and Bernard Nightingale, try to decipher the events of 1809 and those of 1812 (which the audience has not yet seen). Meanwhile, a contemporary Croom and student of mathematics, Valentine Coverly, is searching for statistical patterns in the game books of an earlier era. She is observed by her sister Chloe whose naïve and inarticulate romanticism contrasts with mathematical genius of Thomasina, her long dead ancestor. Off stage, their brother Gus plays the piano treasured by Lady Croom in 1806.

In the second act, the 19th century characters eventually untangle the mistaken identities and chaos of the fateful house party. Hannah and Bernard wrangle over the clues to what occurred, with Bernard falling in love with his own reconstruction of events. He rushes off to tell the world and make his fortune but returns when his beautiful hypothesis is "slain by an ugly fact". (Huxley)

In the final scene, the characters of different eras, with the addition of Thomasina's younger brother Augustus, occupy the same space simultaneously. By this time Valentine has cracked the code of the data in the game books, and the modern historians have solved the puzzles of the past, proving that Stoppard, for all his absurdity, is a playwright closer to Shaw than Ionesco.

The non-linear representation of time in the play riffs on relativity, the modern theory that overturned Newtonian concepts of time and space. Euclidian geometry underlies the love triangles of the dalliances of both past and present.

The tension between historical reality and historical imagination strengthens the warp of the play while supporting the weft of the comedic struggle between Hannah and Bernard. The character of Thomasina is based loosely upon that of Ada Lovelace, the daughter of the notorious poet George, Lord Byron. History credits Lovelace with developing the mathematics of the infinite series that underlie many powerful algorithms. She spent her adult life popularizing and refining the work of Charles Babbage, the

inventor of computers. The congenitally lamed Byron fled England in disgrace after seducing many aristocratic women. By naming her gardener "Culpability Noakes," Lady Croom conjures up Lancelot "Capability" Brown, a highly successful landscape architect who transformed the painterly vistas of 18th century English estates into brooding wildernesses. Bernard, a "public intellectual" obsessed with celebrity, is a comic version of Byron, the celebrity of his age.

As in a woven fabric, parallel threads of this play cross only at the edges until the end, when the borders come together like a wrinkle in time. The timeless verities of the play are the absurdities of love and lust (and death), the cleverness of women and the pretensions of men, the constancy of great architecture, and the immortality of tortoises.

Julia Frank (Jellaby)