

Who Shot the Hare in Stoppard's *Arcadia*? A Reply to Anja Müller-Muth*

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In my recent essay on Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* I claim that the epistemology of the play is not sceptical. This is not a fashionable claim. The current academic climate favours sceptical arguments. Critics prefer undermining to confirming, aporias to solutions, open-endedness to closure—in *dubio pro dubio* is their motto. To a certain degree, these preferences are healthy ones; scepticism is an essential part of a literary critic's methodological equipment. But at the present time, scepticism frequently hardens into dogma; indeterminacy and uncertainty are simply taken for granted and imposed on a text regardless of what the text itself has to say. This being my impression, I am ready to take up the cudgels over the issue of scepticism, on which Anja Müller-Muth and I have rather different views. "While I wholeheartedly agree," she writes, "that *Arcadia* is primarily concerned with epistemological processes and that the misunderstandings in the play are creative rather than disruptive, I part company with Niederhoff when he tries to invalidate sceptical readings" (282).

To make her case for the play's scepticism, Müller-Muth insists that the play does not answer all of the questions that it raises. "[S]everal uncertainties still remain unresolved at the end of the play for both

*Reference: Anja Müller-Muth, "'It's wanting to know that makes us matter': Scepticism or Affirmation in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 12.2-3 (2002/2003): 281-91; Burkhard Niederhoff, "'Fortuitous Wit': Dialogue and Epistemology in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*," *Connotations* 11.1 (2001/2002): 42-59. Subsequent references to my essay and to Müller-Muth's response will be made parenthetically. I would like to thank Roger Clark, Sven Wagner and the *Connotations* reviewers for their comments on the present essay; thanks are also due to Heike Buschmann, Vicki Harris and Sandra Wenzel for their help in tracking down the radiographical information in note 4.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01101.htm>>.

characters and audience, who still do not know, for instance, why Byron left England, or who shot the hare. *Arcadia* also remains painstakingly vague about Septimus's precise motivations and occupations as hermit of Sidley Park" (286-87). To my mind, the question why Byron left England is hardly more relevant to *Arcadia* than the number of Lady Macbeth's children is to Shakespeare's tragedy. By contrast, the motivations and occupations of the hermit are central to the play, but they would require an extensive discussion too long for this brief reply. Thus I will focus on the more manageable question of who shot the hare, to which the play does give an answer. The deadly shot comes from the rifle of Augustus, the son of the Croom family, as I mentioned in my article and will attempt to substantiate in the following discussion.¹ This discussion will also show that the shooting of the hare is not quite as irrelevant as it might seem at first sight. It is linked to some of the major themes and episodes of the play by significant connections and parallels.

Let us review the evidence, beginning with an entry in a game book: "April 10th 1809 [...]. Self—Augustus—Lord Byron. Fourteen pigeon, one hare (Lord B.)."² In his trial lecture, the researcher Bernard cites this entry in a triumphant manner; he regards it as a crucial piece of evidence for his theory that Byron killed a fellow poet in a duel while he was visiting the Croom family. At a later stage, when this theory has been refuted, Bernard still insists that "Byron [...] shot that hare" (89). But at this point, we can be reasonably certain that Byron no more killed the hare than he killed the poet, and that the game book's attribution of the animal to him was either a mistake or a gesture of politeness to a visitor. We are repeatedly told that Byron is a poor shot, for instance in the opening scene, in which Lady Croom spots the hunting party through the schoolroom windows:

Lady Croom. [...] Ah!—your friend has got down a pigeon, Mr Hodge. (*Calls out.*) Bravo, sir!

Septimus. The pigeon, I am sure, fell to your husband or to your son, your ladyship—my schoolfriend was never a sportsman.

Brice. (*Looking out*) Yes, to Augustus!—bravo, lad! (13)

Our doubts about Byron's skill with firearms are confirmed when Lady Croom, in a later scene, commands Septimus, her daughter's tutor, to take Byron's pistols away from him. "He is not safe with them. His lameness, he confessed to me, is entirely the result of his shooting himself in the foot" (41). Finally, Augustus tells his sister and Septimus that it was he who shot the hare, not the visiting poet. "Lord Byron?!—he claimed my hare, although my shot was the earlier! He said I missed by a hare's breadth. His conversation was very facetious" (79). This remark indicates that, on his hunt with Lord Croom and Augustus, Byron was too busy scoring rhetorical hits to concentrate on aiming his gun at small and fast-moving targets. Byron's claim to the hare rests on nothing more than a pun.

Müller-Muth attempts to invalidate the evidence just quoted on the grounds that those who impugn Byron's marksmanship are not reliable. "Septimus," she writes, "is envious of his more famous and successful friend" (290). This may be true, yet Septimus shows sufficient loyalty to Byron to give credit where credit is due, for instance when he assures the butler that his friend would have left a coin for the servants if he had had one (68). Augustus, in his turn, is not a "boastful macho" (291), as Müller-Muth claims. Judging by the scant evidence that we have, he seems to be a fairly ordinary teenager displaying the volatility to be expected from a fifteen-year-old: one moment he defies Septimus' wishes, leaving the room and almost slamming the door (80), the next he humbly apologises and asks the tutor to enlighten him about "[c]arnal things" (88). Analysing Augustus' statement about Lord Byron, Müller-Muth writes that it "only tells us who shot first, not who hit and who missed" (291). Here she is splitting hares, displaying a juridical subtlety that is more appropriate to a cross-examination than to a play. Admittedly, the evidence that I have adduced might not be sufficient to convict Augustus of the killing of the hare beyond reasonable doubt in the eyes of a jury. But a play is not a trial; the principle of aesthetic economy obtaining in drama requires that two or three hints suffice to establish a point for which a court of law requires much larger quantities of evidence.

Byron's claim to the hare is also weakened by the contextual symbolism of the hunting episode, that is, the way in which it is connected with some of the major themes and episodes of the play. There is, for instance, a parallel between the game book entry quoted above—"Fourteen pigeon, one hare (Lord B.)"—and Bernard's ideas about Byron. The entry contrasts a large number of ordinary animals, the pigeons, with a single and more interesting one, the hare, the latter being associated with Byron. This contrast fits Bernard's image of Byron as a solitary and flamboyant genius who dwarves the ordinary mortals around him. Now this is precisely the image that leads Bernard into error in his reconstruction of the events at Sidley Park. The real story at Sidley Park, the one that merits reconstruction, is not about Byron but about Thomasina, the daughter of the Croom family, and Septimus Hodge, her tutor. Thus the special status that the entry accords to Byron is denied to him in the rest of the play, a fact that weakens the validity of the entry and the poet's claim to the hare. A second parallel that also weakens Byron's claim consists in a similarity between the hunting episode and the duel that Bernard believes Byron to have fought. According to Bernard, Byron shot both a hare and a man.³ But since Byron does not fight a duel, let alone kill a man, analogy suggests that he does not kill the hare either. A third parallel exists between the hunting episode and the various sexual conquests in the play. When Lady Croom says that Byron "has got down a pigeon" and Septimus retorts that the bird "fell to" the other hunters, there is a suggestion of a sexual chase, of men causing women to fall. Again, the parallel works against Byron, who fails to make any extraordinary sexual conquests. Admittedly, he enjoys the favours of Mrs Chater but, given her nymphomania, this is hardly a proof of his seductive skill. To remain within the metaphorical scheme of the play, Mrs Chater is not a hare that needs to be hunted, but a pigeon that presents an easy target. The more difficult and attractive sexual conquest, that of Lady Croom, remains for Septimus.

A final parallel is the one between the hunting episode and intellectual discovery, between hitting or missing the hare and hitting or

missing the truth. Again, it is not Byron who makes any discoveries in the play. Nor is it Bernard, his fan and representative in the 20th-century plot. On the contrary, Bernard misses the truth about the events at Sidley Park by much more than a hare's breadth. The most important discoveries in the play are made by the teenager Thomasina, which suggests that it is another teenager, her brother Augustus, who shoots the hare. Thus the contextual symbolism of the hunting episode confirms the conclusions drawn from the more direct evidence analysed above. Critics who are inclined to read *Arcadia* as a sceptical play will have to look for other prey than the hare, whose death does not remain shrouded in mystery and uncertainty.

While Müller-Muth disagrees with me on the issue of scepticism, she endorses my claim that the play focuses on the *process* of intellectual discovery, that it emphasizes the activity of research rather than its result. Given that Müller-Muth considers this my most "valuable insight" (287), it is puzzling that she so strongly disagrees with my observation that, in the opening scene, Thomasina learns about the facts of life, in other words, that we see her in the *process* of making a momentous discovery. Müller-Muth considers this one of the instances where "he [Niederhoff] clearly misreads *Arcadia*" (283). In her view, Thomasina already knows about sexual intercourse when the play begins. Thus Müller-Muth's Thomasina is a tease, whose opening question—"Septimus, what is carnal embrace?" (1)—is not a genuine one but rather a mischievous attempt to put her tutor in a tight spot. This disagreement is not trivial; the different readings have a bearing upon the epistemological significance of the play. My view that Thomasina learns about "carnal embrace" in the opening scene fits in much better with the play's focus on the process of discovery. Furthermore, if this view is correct, the first minutes of the play establish an immediate link between making discoveries and making love, a link that plays a significant part in *Arcadia*. Sexuality, "[t]he attraction that Newton left out" (74), is a metaphor for the chaotic, irregular and unpredictable forces which are such crucial factors in bringing about intellectual discoveries in Stoppard's play.

All the evidence that I can find suggests that Thomasina's opening question is a genuine one.⁴ The other characters, for instance, assume that she ought to be ignorant about "carnal embrace." It is by accident that she hears the phrase, and the butler who inadvertently utters it in her presence is hushed immediately (3). When she asks her tutor about the meaning of the butler's words, he tries to fob her off with evasive answers, informing her, for instance, that "[c]arnal embrace is the practice of throwing one's arms around a side of beef" (1). Thomasina's mother is scandalised when she hears the phrase from her daughter's mouth; the girl's uncle indignantly tells Septimus, "As her tutor you have a duty to keep her in ignorance" (11). More importantly, Thomasina's brother Augustus only learns about the facts of life when he is fifteen (88), i.e. two years later than Thomasina, who is thirteen years old in the first scene. The way in which Thomasina responds to Septimus' utterances also suggests her ignorance. When she tells him that Mrs Chater was discovered in carnal embrace in the gazebo, he replies, "With whom, did Jellaby happen to say?" (2)—a question that does not quite square with his earlier reference to "throwing one's arms around a side of beef." The tease envisioned by Müller-Muth would surely greet this lapse with a knowing smirk. The stage direction, however, tells us that Thomasina "*considers this with a puzzled frown*" before she retorts, "What do you mean, with whom?" (2). The most conclusive evidence for Thomasina's ignorance is the "Eurghhh!" elicited by the definition of carnal embrace that Septimus finally gives her after his earlier evasions:

Septimus. [...] Carnal embrace is sexual congress, which is the insertion of the male genital organ into the female genital organ for purposes of procreation and pleasure. Fermat's last theorem, by contrast, asserts that when x , y and z are whole numbers each raised to power of n , the sum of the first two can never equal the third when n is greater than 2.

(Pause.)

Thomasina. Eurghhh!

Septimus. Nevertheless, that is the theorem.

Thomasina. It is disgusting and incomprehensible. (3)

By using his trademark technique of simultaneously juggling two or more topics, Stoppard here creates a joke about the mechanics of sexual intercourse, which, to the innocent mind at least, seem as puzzling and strange as a recondite mathematical problem. More importantly in the present context, Thomasina's bewilderment shows that she hears about the mechanics in question for the first time.

In my essay I did not merely claim that in *Arcadia* the focus is on the process of research; I also made a claim about how the process operates. As pointed out above, in the remark on sexuality as an epistemological metaphor, chaos and chance play an important part in this process. Discoveries are made and meanings are created as a result of accidents or mistakes—a principle that is succinctly described in Lady Croom's phrase "fortuitous wit" (11). By way of conclusion, I would like to analyse a further example of "fortuitous wit," which Müller-Muth discusses, in rather different terms, both in her response to my essay (283) and in her book on *Arcadia*.⁵

Lady Croom. But Sidley Park is already a picture [...]—in short, it is nature as God intended, and I can say with the painter, 'Et in Arcadia ego!' 'Here I am in Arcadia,' Thomasina.

Thomasina. Yes, mama, if you would have it so.

Lady Croom. Is she correcting my taste or my translation? (12)

Müller-Muth points out that the reference is not merely to the two paintings by Poussin in which a group of Arcadian shepherds contemplates a tomb bearing the inscription *Et in Arcadia ego*; Stoppard also alludes to Erwin Panofsky's admirable article on the history of this phrase.⁶ The original meaning of *Et in Arcadia ego*, which is obvious in a picture by Guercino and the first of the two paintings by Poussin, is a *memento mori*, a warning about the ubiquity of death. This interpretation of the phrase presupposes that *ego* refers to death and that *et* goes with *in Arcadia*. It is Death himself who warns the shepherds, 'Even in Arcadia, there am I.' A later, rather different interpretation of the phrase was introduced, according to Panofsky, by Poussin's second painting. This work suggests that the shepherds around the tomb are not thinking about death but about the dead

shepherd lying in the tomb. Thus the translation of the phrase is changed in a way that takes some liberties with the grammar of elliptic Latin phrases; Panofsky goes so far as to call it a “mistranslation” (318). The implied verb is in the past, *et* goes with *ego*, and *ego* refers to the dead shepherd. ‘I, too, once lived in Arcadia,’ the deceased reminds his fellow shepherds. The meaning is no longer a stark warning, but a nostalgic, half-melancholy, half-pleasurable evocation of a happy past. At an even later stage, death vanishes from the meaning of the phrase altogether. It simply states that a person once was, or still is, a carefree member of the Arcadian community.

While I fully agree with Müller-Muth that the various meanings distinguished by Panofsky “resonate in the first scene of Stoppard’s *Arcadia*” (283), I am hesitant to follow her when she claims that the allusion brings about a dissolution of meaning, that it opens the door to a labyrinth of ambiguities or that it amounts to an infinite *mise en abyme*.⁷ To my mind, the allusion is an excellent example of “fortuitous wit”; it adds another *felix culpa* to the many mistakes and misunderstandings that, in the opening scene of the play, create the most interesting meanings. Lady Croom’s translation of *Et in Arcadia ego* is a blunder; she misconstrues the Latin and uses the phrase in its most bland and innocuous sense. But when she addresses her translation specifically to Thomasina, who will die a premature death at the age of sixteen, she also utters an inadvertent but fully pertinent *memento mori*, thus creating one of the most powerful moments of the play. In a later scene, Lady Croom’s request that Septimus take command of Lord Byron’s pistols makes her brother exclaim, “Now! If that was not God speaking through Lady Croom, he never spoke through anyone!” (41). In the opening scene, Death speaks through Lady Croom, warning Thomasina that he will soon come to take her.

NOTES

¹For Müller-Muth's attempt to refute this claim, see note 15 of her article (290-91).

²Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) 54. All further references will be to this edition.

³This parallel is strengthened by another episode. When Septimus shows up for his duel with Ezra Chater, he does not find his opponent, who has already left Sidley Park. Instead of shooting Chater, he shoots a rabbit and takes it along to the schoolroom. Enter Lady Croom, who confuses hares with rabbits but is not in the habit of suffering contradiction: "*Lady Croom*. All this to shoot a hare? / *Septimus*. A rabbit. (*She gives him one of her looks*.) No, indeed, a hare, though very rabbit-like" (68). This mistake about the shooting of a hare is another hint that Lord Croom (or whoever wrote the entry in the game book) made a similar mistake when he attributed the hare to Byron.

⁴I stand corrected, however, on a minor point. In my essay, I state that Thomasina re-enters the opening scene with the question "What is the topic?" on her lips (46). Müller-Muth points out that she cannot find this sentence in the 1993 edition of *Arcadia*. This is only too true. The question "What is the topic?" is uttered in the radio version that was made with the cast of the original production at the National Theatre: *Arcadia*, by Tom Stoppard, dir. David Benedictus, BBC, Radio 3, 26 Dec. 1993 and 3 April 1994. I own a tape of this version, whose text occasionally differs from that of the printed edition. Needless to say, this is merely an explanation of my misquotation, not a justification.

⁵*Repräsentationen: Eine Studie des intertextuellen und intermedialen Spiels in Tom Stoppard's Arcadia* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001) 206-08. This book, which came to my notice too late to be acknowledged in my original essay, analyses three fields of allusion in Stoppard's play: the Arcadia myth, the landscape garden, and chaos theory; first and foremost, however, it is a highly theoretical study of representation, intertextuality and intermediality.

⁶"*Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition*," *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955) 295-320.

⁷I am paraphrasing the German text of *Repräsentationen* (207-08). Müller-Muth's view of intertextuality is based on deconstructionist premises; she argues that the allusions in the play evoke undecidable alternatives or create infinite chains of signification.