EVEN IN ARCADIA—SEX, LITERATURE AND DEATH AT SIDLEY PARK by Jennifer Madden, Gamm Resident Scholar

> *We shed as we pick up… and what we let fall will be picked up by those left behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language. Ancient cures for diseases will reveal themselves once more. Mathematical discoveries glimpsed and lost to view will have their time again.* –Septimus Hodge, *Arcadia*
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> *It's wanting to know that makes us matter.* –Hannah Jarvis, *Arcadia*
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> *… It's all because of sex. 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 going wrong is people fancying people who aren't supposed to be in that part of the plan.* –Chloë Coverly, *Arcadia*

Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* opens in 1809 in the drawing room of Sidley Park, a British country manor. There, 13-year-old math prodigy Thomasina Coverly (loosely based on mathematical genius Ada Lovelace, daughter of Romantic poet Lord Byron) and her tutor, Septimus Hodge, tackle the mechanics of sexual intercourse, Fermat's Last Theorem (a fiendishly difficult math problem formulated by Pierre de Fermat in 1637 and not solved until 1995) and the Second Law of Thermodynamics (the process of inexorable, irreversible entropy that ensures everything, from the post-Big Bang universe to a white-hot love affair, must eventually cool and die). Thomasina is also on the cusp of discovering a form of "irregular geometry" through iterated algorithms (mathematical equations depicting patterns found in nature).

Scene 2 opens in the present day in the same room. Hannah Jarvis, author of a bestselling but critically panned book about writer Lady Caroline Lamb, Byron's lover who famously called him "mad, bad and dangerous to know," is researching the history of Sidley's renowned garden. Transformed two centuries earlier from the Classical (symmetrical and pastoral) to Romantic (disordered and intensely artificial) style, the garden symbolizes for Hannah a decline from the intellectual rigor of the Enlightenment to the excesses of the Romantic imagination captivated by "cheap thrills and false emotion." She also hopes to uncover the identity of the fabled "Sidley hermit," a mad recluse who lived in the garden for years. (Fashionable gentry did in fact employ "hermits" to inhabit their garden hermitages as living lawn ornaments). Enter deliciously obnoxious Byron scholar Bernard Nightingale. He hopes to achieve pop fame by establishing that Byron's role in an 1809 duel at Sidley caused him to mysteriously flee England.

The two scenes establish several thematic dichotomies: order/chaos, Classicism/Romanticism, past/present, intellect/emotion, life/death and love/lust. *Arcadia* percolates with heady ideas while it simmers with heat and desire. Stoppard uses physics to echo the complexity of human relationships: want, need, unrequited love, atoms that attract or repel. Sex and science share a common foundation. In his review of the play's 2011 Broadway revival, Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* observed:

> Good old lust is only one complicating element within the deeper impulse that animates both the characters… and the play itself. That is the unquenchable human urge to acquire knowledge, whether carnal, mathematical, historical or metaphysical. It is the itch to discover what lurks beneath concealing clothes and clouds and dusty layers of accumulated years. Success in these quests is irrelevant, since full and true knowledge of anything is impossible.

Ultimately *Arcadia* is a play about heat: the Promethean fire cherished by the Romantics, the burning excitement of intellectual inquiry, and the consuming inferno of love. ■