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► **To cite this version:**

| Élisabeth Angel-Perez. Stoppard's chaomedic wit. Sillages Critiques, 2011. hal-02006420

**HAL Id: hal-02006420**

**<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-02006420>**

Submitted on 4 Feb 2019

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/2477>  
ISSN: 1969-6302

**Publisher**

Centre de recherche VALE

Brought to you by Sorbonne Université



**Electronic reference**

Élisabeth Angel-Perez, « Stoppard's chaomedic wit », *Sillages critiques* [Online], 13 | 2011, Online since 01 December 2011, connection on 04 February 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/2477>

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## Stoppard's chaomedic wit<sup>1</sup>

Élisabeth Angel-Perez

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- 1 As early as 1967, when he wrote *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Tom Stoppard was already prone to evoking science: half way between Pirandellian characters in search of an author and Beckettian tramps, the Shakespearean anti-heroes, trapped in their intertext, vainly endeavoured to have the upper hand over their destinies: the result however was known in advance. As the Shakespearean title—a verbatim quote from *Hamlet*—makes clear, Ros and Guil “are Dead” way before the play begins. The law of probability which is seen to flinch, as the long series of “heads” confirms, corroborates the idea that logic is upside down, meaning bankrupt, and that the rational metanarrative, as Lyotard would call it, is on its last legs. The world is perturbed by chaos and our epistemological certainties destabilized. Science contaminated by “madness” soon becomes the perfect paradigm of a world in crisis and of a humanity that seems to have strayed from its programme, a humanity that would have gone “off course,” and not “of course” (Stoppard 1967, 74), the double ff allowing here an anticipatory glimpse into the fractal pattern much favoured by Stoppard.
- 2 What Stoppard suggests with *Arcadia* is almost diametrically opposed to this universe that has gone out of its senses/senseless universe. Post-modernism, fragmentation, chaos are reclaimed if not by order, at least by the system. In Chaos theory, a science that he discovers in part thanks to James Gleik's book (*Chaos: Making a New Science*, 1987), Stoppard finds the oxymoronic and paradoxical vision of a world which becomes disorganized as a system but organized as chaos. This theory, which puts into perspective the certainty of physicists since Newton and shows the emergence of a disorganizing principle—chaos—also and concomitantly rationalizes or systematizes precisely that which, by definition, avoids the system: randomness, unpredictability, chance.
- 3 *Arcadia* therefore may well be a play on the triumph of meaning and on the abolition of meaning at the same time. In this play, Stoppard resurrects the brilliant Wildean comedy heralding absurdity and the “deconsecration of meaning” (Barker) and behind it, the whole great tradition of the “witty comedy” that has existed since the Restoration, but he

also reaffirms the possibility of rehabilitating humanist values in this second 20<sup>th</sup> century marked by the aftermath of catastrophe (Boireau 2011).

- 4 The new problem play that Stoppard proposes takes the shape of an “epistemological comedy” (Campos 2005, 336), conveying a message which is both conservative and iconoclastic: “I’m a conservative with a Small c. I’m a conservative in politics, literature, education and theatre. My main objection is to ideology and dogma” (Gussow 1995, 37). An oxymoronic play (Francoite-Chabin), *Arcadia* superimposes several literary layers—Shaw’s problem plays (and *Heartbreak House* in particular), Wildean pre-absurdism and post-Beckettian absurdism—and piles up several genres from the *whodunnit*, to the metaphysical farce or mad-cap comedy via romance, and eventually asserts the triumph of emotion and of a reason wise enough to acknowledge and spot whatever it is that it cannot control. I will examine here, in the wake of other critics, how paradox, which is the foundation stone of Chaos mathematics, shapes all the components of the play—down to Stoppard’s epigrammatic style which, in my opinion, through an effect of binary reversibility not alien to Newton’s laws, becomes in turn a metaphor for chaos theory.

## Reconceptualizing the problem play: “epistemological comedy”

- 5 In his Preface to *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, George Bernard Shaw gives his most convincing and technical definition of the Problem Play. The traditional psychological conflict needs to be replaced by a conflict of ideas and, since it is the musician and not the dramatist who produces a type of drama based on emotion, “problem” is to become the very substance-matter of theatre (Shaw 249). The thesis advanced in *Arcadia* is one of complexity: the idea Stoppard defends is that the world is both deterministic and unpredictable at the same time, that Newton did leave out a number of attractions (love, for instance) and that men, just like the world, are determined by laws that admit both logic and its opposite. The play, in all its components, takes after this complexity and relocates the *agôn* (the conflict) around the ideas of order and disorder, without allowing one to have the upper hand over the other. Chaos theory offers precisely that kind of chaotic determinism:

I thought that quantum mechanics and chaos mathematics suggested themselves as quite interesting and powerful metaphors for human behaviour, not just behaviour, but about the way, in the latter case, in which it suggested a determined life, a life ruled by determinism and a life which is subject simply to random cases and effects. Those two ideas about life were not irreconcilable. Chaos mathematics is precisely to do with the unpredictability of determinism. (qtd. in Gussow 84).

- 6 The play’s structure, characters and humour follow the laws of entropy, thermodynamics and chaos. In other words, they highlight the following facts: that the evolution of the world always moves from order to disorder (entropy) and not the other way round; that consequently, heat always goes from hot regions to cold regions and not the other way round (2<sup>nd</sup> law of thermodynamics) so that a system always moves towards a state of maximal entropy (“Thomasina : Newton’s equations go forwards and backwards, they do not care which way. But the heat cares very much ; it only goes one way,” 87); that a system obeying the laws of physics (if clouds gather, it rains) may nevertheless fork off towards chaos under a minute perturbation that affects its initial state—a state of chaos that can be huge whereas the alteration was only minute (butterfly effect<sup>2</sup>)—; and finally,

that within this chaos, determined patterns are recreated although in an unpredictable way (these are the “islands of order” spoken about by Septimus, p. 76): this is why Chaos theory is also referred to as “deterministic chaos.”

- 7 In its very structure, the play is informed by these scientific theories and their consequences. Like the garden whose reassuring neo-classical organisation is ruined by landscape designer Noakes’s wild “picturesque” (gothic) recomposition, the deterministic and teleological structure of the well-made play is replaced by a serpentine or meandering line at times bordering on utter chaos. Instead of the three-fold linear exposition-complication-denouement structure, an erratic temporality zigzags us through the play. From 1809 to 1993 the first two scenes announce a diachronic progression, corroborated by the replacement of the pen by the computer, for instance; yet this diachronic axis is interrupted by alternation, as act one eventually opts for shuttling to and fro between the two temporalities. But here again, the alternation is chaotic as act II reverses the pattern in a chiasmic way. The rhythm becomes trochaic, the tock comes before the tick, as Bernard puts it at the end of the first act: “Because time is reversed. Tock, tick goes the universe and then recovers itself” (50). The succession of scenes, therefore, ends up being chaotic, temporality made unsteady (as Hannah has her apple eaten by Septimus) all the way to scene 7 in which temporality is literally abolished, the two sets of characters waltzing their way out in Regency costumes: “The play bifurcates 2 or 3 times and then goes into the last section which is all mixed up. So it’s very chaos structured” (Demastes and Kelly 15, in Fleming 2008, 52).
- 8 Yet, in the final chaos (“the heat goes into the mix,” 93), some kind of choreography is being recomposed, a stichomythia waltzed through time, Valentine’s cues answering Thomasina’s and Septimus’s:
- Septimus: So the Improved Newtonian Universe must cease and grow cold. Dear me.  
Valentine: The heat goes into the mix.  
Thomasina: Yes we must hurry if we are going to dance.  
Valentine: And everything is mixing the same way, all the time, irreversibly ...  
Septimus: Oh we have time I think.  
Valentine: ... Till there’s no time left. That’s what time means. (93-94)

## Chaos, but well choreographed

- 9 Stoppard’s characters rank among the best examples of the thesis. The play is articulated around Thomasina’s discoveries, and in particular her discovery of the second law of thermodynamics according to which a dynamic system always moves towards its state of maximal entropy, which, for man, may mean dissolution in death (“Septimus: So we’re all doomed !/ Thomasina : (*cheerfully*) Yes !”, 93). Thomasina embodies what she has just discovered, she dies at the end, but it is an accidental and untimely death and therefore prompts a dose of unpredictability back into the deterministic system of entropy. All her experiences or deeds exhibit this one law she has discovered, on several scales. From the rice pudding turning pink to the episode of the translation and Cleopatra’s dilapidation of the empire (“It only needs a Roman general to drop Anchor outside the window and away goes the empire like a christening mug into a pawn shop,” 38), all her actions or cues confirm her discovery, turning her into an allegory of the second law of thermodynamics: Stoppard reorganises chaos through the logical pattern of fractals—self similarity across scales—and therefore recreates “islands of order,” as Septimus calls them, within chaos.

Nothing in the world can avoid being governed by what Thomasina has just found: this is chaos ... yet it's determined.

- 10 The *agôn* redefined by Stoppard is one that opposes order to disorder, logic to folly, determinism to chaos. His characters, like heirs to Shaw's, represent more an idea than a psychology. Whatever their temporality and according to the logic of fractals, all of them stand out as allegories: Hannah embodies classicism, the rejection of romanticism ("the decline from thinking to feeling", 27), symmetry (see her palindrome name) and Newton's laws; Bernard Nightingale/Peacock, whose name refers to Keats ("Ode to a Nightingale"), to Thomas Love Peacock, but also to theatre critic Benedict Nightingale (Boireau 2011), drives a bright red Mazda, exalts imagination and its excesses and impersonates romanticism and dandysim ("style over substance"). With his lack of scientific rigour and his exuberance, he stands out as "the whole romantic sham" stigmatized by Hannah.
- 11 However, here again, things are not that clear-cut and beneath the expected determinism of the characters, some unexpected features come up to the surface: Hannah's only proof that the Enlightenment (Septimus) has been exiled to a "romantic wilderness" ("the hermit"), is her intuition. Her book, entitled *Caro*, a title reminiscent of Byron's mistress's nickname as well as a meaningful latin predicate "*caro, carnis*, feminine: flesh," shows that beyond her stiffness and wholly cerebral *persona*, she too may be prey to affects. As to Bernard, a perfect embodiment of romanticism, he carries out his investigation in an utterly ordered and linear and predetermined way: he accumulates details and facts so as to corroborate an interpretation he has devised in advance and leaves no room for the unpredictable, contradiction or complexity. Even if he is the apostle of romantic freedom—"You can't stick Byron's head in your laptop" (60)—his method is nonetheless very Newtonian.
- 12 Chaos theory brings down the more deterministic Humour theory. Yet there is no manicheism in the play, but rather a clever logic placed under the sign of the oxymoron ("oxy-moron," Bernard says) and of the paradox: often referred to as "deterministic chaos," this theory reconciles unpredictability and determinism. An enemy of dogmatism and doxa, Stoppard summons the technique of the problem play only to have it parodied. Shaw's tenets are not shared by Stoppard; the universe tilts over into the logic of "art for art's sake" and abdicates any demonstrative or rhetorical ambition. Stoppard's thesis consists in saying that the thesis disintegrates and so does the very genre of the problem play or play of ideas.
- 13 One can therefore see to what extent the problem play frames, and is framed by, the witty comedy. Moreover, more than ideological oppositions between the characters what one notices is the characters' common essence: they all find a place in the hierarchy of the Wits and the almost allegorical construction that seemed to preside over their destinies is only a pretext to fuel verbal jousting and epigrammatic style.

## Witty comedy accommodating chaos

- 14 With *Arcadia*, Stoppard offers us a comedy in the full tradition of the British "witty comedy"—the characters defining themselves more through their capacity to come up with a witticism than through their psychological or social or ideological anchorage—but also a comedy in which the kind of wit that is used reads as a metaphor for the very same

Chaos theory that has shaped the play, itself a “powerful metaphor for human behaviour” as Stoppard puts it.

- 15 Stoppard unsurprisingly uses what I would call Newtonian wit: binary, reversible, predictable in its shape—orderly wit, as a matter of fact—yet Stoppard’s wit, if systematic, is semantically unpredictable, disorderly somehow. Wit becomes the site of the unpredictable, of the uncontrollable, and is pleasant and funny precisely because it is incongruous and surprising. But in the end, the comparisons and contrasts that constitute the basis of this binary wit have very much to do, as Freud has clearly demonstrated, with the unconscious. It is as if the Freudian function of wit were in fact incorporating into a system precisely that which by its nature resists systematisation: the unconscious. Wit therefore reads as a perfect example of deterministic chaos.

### Newtonian<sup>3</sup> wit

- 16 Let’s first concentrate on the codified sort of wit used by Stoppard, a kind of wit which is so predictable and obedient to the codes of wit (dating from the Restoration comedy or Sheridan) that it contains its own definition and reflexive self-analysis:

Brice: As her tutor you have the duty to keep her in ignorance.

Lady Croom: Do not dabble in paradox, Edward, it puts you in danger of fortuitous wit. (11)

- 17 In *Arcadia*, characters get into the same verbal jousting or battles of wit as the Restoration Comedy characters and the duels, before taking place for real and in the flesh, take place in language:

Chater: You damned lecher! You would drag down a lady’s reputation to make a refuge for your cowardice. It will not do! I am calling out!

Septimus: Chater! Chater, Chater, Chater! My dear friend!

Chater: You dare to call me that. I demand satisfaction.

Septimus: Mrs Chater demanded satisfaction and now you are demanding satisfaction. I cannot spend my time day and night satisfying the demands of the Chater family. As for your wife’s reputation, it stands where it ever stood. (6-7)

- 18 It is not to be doubted that True Wit Septimus will all too easily triumph over “Witwould” Chater, an ignorant boor who appears to be the direct heir to Puff in Sheridan’s *The Critic*, and whose poetry reads as “bad translation.”
- 19 Let’s then concentrate on reversibility. The witticisms elaborated by Septimus (or Chater as a matter of fact) are placed under the sign of symmetry—the hallmark of classical architecture—just like the garden that Noakes is busy remodelling: the double entendre of the word “satisfaction” allows Septimus to stand as the axis of symmetry between husband and wife while the metaphor of Mrs Chater’s bad reputation as “refuge” folding screen corroborates the associationist vision of the world defended by the Wits at the time of the Restoration.
- 20 The Stoppardian True Wits resurrect the associationist vision of the world of their Restoration and 18<sup>th</sup> century counterparts. As Jean Dulck has shown in his analysis of Sheridan’s humour, wit is mathematical by nature: it relies on a system of equations between the different facts of the world. This equation system comes up either in the comparative mode—A is like B— and this is the privileged mode of the Witwoulds (whose ambition it is to be acknowledged as True Wits), or in the metaphorical mode—A is B— cleverly managed by the True Wits. This stylistic regime allows the Wits to short-circuit

all reasoning processes, so as to suggest a proximity between things that are a priori very unlike but strikingly meaningful (or true) when brought together. This is the reason why wit was an object of defiance for the first philosophers who attempted to theorise it—such as Hobbes, Locke or Hume—for whom the pleasant and amusingly seductive aspect of wit should arouse more distrust than pleasure. Because it proceeds from imagination and not from reason, one should beware of wit that urges one to “discover(ing) likeness in things unlike,” Hobbes writes, in a quite epigrammatic formula from *Leviathan*, whereas Locke comes to the conclusion that wit “lies most in the assemblage of ideas and putting those together with a quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance and congruity thereby to make up a pleasant picture and agreeable visions in the fancy” (*Essay concerning human Understanding*, 1990, 1 :143).

21 The comparisons or metaphors that put the world into binary equations — “Lady Croom: I have enough with Mr Noakes, who is to a garden what a bull is to a china shop” (85)—produce a predictable, reversible, somehow Newtonian vision of the world (“Newton’s equations go forwards and backwards,” 87).

22 However, Stoppard’s epigrammatic style recalls less Congreve and Sheridan than Wilde, and the paradoxical mode certainly reads as its privileged medium. Here again, what is at stake is the endeavour to confirm a binary vision of the world by opposing two stances, two words, two ideas. Lady Croom, a coquette and a figure of authority more reminiscent of Lady Wishfort (*The Way of the World*) or Lady Bracknell (*Earnest*) than of Millamant, probably takes first place as a paradoxical punster:

The Castle of Otranto was written by whomsoever I say it was, otherwise what is the point of being a guest or having one. (13)

We must have you (Thomasina) married before you are educated beyond eligibility (84)

23 This second example makes it clear that paradox aims at revealing the truth of the world. It comes in the shape of a false polyphony (two points of view expressed) so as to serve a monolithic thesis (monology). (Falsely?) polyphonic by essence (Landheer and Smith, *passim*), paradox appears to be the preferred technique of the play of ideas: it simultaneously produces two postures or stances and aims at disclosing a truth (monologic)—here, about the nature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century patriarchal society.

Thomasina: Mrs Chater came to the music room with a note for you. She said it was of scant importance, and that therefore I should carry it to you with the utmost safety, urgency and discretion. (14)

24 Yet in Stoppard’s play, as in Wilde’s *Earnest*, “if paradox pretends to create meaning where it certainly lacked, it is only to eradicate it” (Aquié 329). Stoppard therefore does make use of a well-codified (and therefore predictable) sort of wit.

25 However, if wit is funny, it is precisely because it rests on surprise, on unheard-of situations or thoughts. Wit, it seems, is also subject to chaos.

## Wit and Chaos

26 At the heart of wit, lies the unpredictable: the image is often far-fetched and this is why it is pleasant. Thomasina’s comparison between cosmic entropy (the movement taking the world from order to disorder) and the spiral of strawberry jam in rice pudding is unexpected, unpredictable, yet accurate and extraordinarily simple:



Thomasina: When you stir your rice pudding, Septimus, the spoonful of jam spreads itself round making red trails like the picture of a meteor in my astronomical atlas. But if you stir backward, the jam will not come together again. Indeed, the pudding does not notice and continues to turn pink just as before. Do you think this is odd? (4-5)

- 27 This surprising image, which allows Thomasina to discover entropy (characterisation of the level of disorder) as well as the second law of thermodynamics (an isolated system always tends to evolve towards a more disordered state and not the other way round), proceeds through the binary regime of wit, and therefore locates surprise and perhaps even randomness at the centre of a determined (well-codified) system. The same can be said of paradox: the terms of the opposition are surprising precisely because they are opposed, yet unexpectedly and unpredictably brought together.
- 28 However, though it is surprising and unpredictable, how determined is the association of ideas proposed by Thomasina? The unpredictability of the association of ideas opens onto the possibility of a Freudian reading of wit: wit, just like dream, is a privileged site for the unconscious, Freud explains (174-75; 287). The pool of images that wit emerges from is constituted by the unconscious of the punster. In other words, within the frame of a predictable form—a comparison, a metaphor, a “substitute” or a “figuration by opposition,” Freud says—contents emerge that are unpredictable, yet determined (as it is the unconscious that speaks): the functioning of wit has everything to do with chaotic determinism or deterministic chaos. Let's read together the incipit of the play:

Thomasina: Septimus, what is carnal embrace?

Septimus: Carnal embrace is the practice of throwing one's arms around a side of beef.

Thomasina: Is that all?

Septimus: No ... a shoulder of mutton, a haunch of venison well hugged, and embrace of grouse ... *caro, carnis* ; feminine ; flesh

Thomasina: Is it a sin?

Septimus: Not necessarily, my lady, but when carnal embrace is sinful, it is a sin of the flesh, QED. We had *caro* in our Gallic Wars - 'The Britons live on milk and meat' - 'lacte et carne vivunt'. I am sorry that the seed fell on stony ground.

Thomasina: That was the sin of Onan, wasn't it Septimus? (1-2)

- 29 The play's first witticism relies on the literalisation of a dead metaphor or catachresis: Septimus takes the lexicalized expression “carnal embrace” at face value and therefore explains it in an utterly and unpredictably anti-romantic way. Obviously, young Thomasina, bright as she is, cannot not foster some hopeful idea about the real meaning of the phrase. The question she asks her teacher is obviously heading in a certain direction, as proved by the following question: “Is it a sin?” The associationist process characterising wit is still central here, but it is topped up with Stoppard's very Wildean exploitation of indirect speech acts as defined by Searle. As demonstrated by Alexis Tadié, the beginning of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Algernon: Did you hear what I was playing Lane? / Lane: I didn't think it polite to listen Sir.) is composed, just like Stoppard's incipit, of a series of indirect speech acts: What Algernon is fishing for when he asks Lane if he has “heard” his piano playing is in fact a compliment on his art. This indirect speech act is subtle and reveals the nature of the relationships between Algernon and his butler. Lane is not asked directly about the quality of what he has just heard, nor does he answer the question directly. His pretending it would have been impolite for a butler to partake of the same aesthetic feeling as his master allows him to shun speaking his mind (*I didn't think it polite to listen*). Yet this shunning is just as good as a confession and Algernon has

well understood the criticism (you're out of tune), as he answers a verdict that has been thought but not spoken out: "I don't play accurately—anyone can play with accuracy—but I play with wonderful expression"(Tadié 324).

- 30 In *Arcadia*, Septimus's elision of the sexual can only encourage Thomasina to think that the heart of the matter is indeed sexual. Septimus's evasive answers reinforce Thomasina's intuition and the metaphor, literalised and therefore annihilated by Septimus, governs all in spite (or because) of its obliteration. Septimus's answer is very Freudian: by taking the metaphor at face value, Septimus elaborates a very Freudian sort of witticism entirely based on repressed drives. The form reached through these repressed drives—the improbable image of a human being hugging a side of beef—shows that the uncontrollable unconscious thrives right at the heart of a perfectly mastered figure of speech (metaphorical witticism). Freud makes it clear that wit, just like dream, displays a structural capacity to negotiate the relationship between the utterable and the unutterable, in a dazzling formula that is the first source of pleasure produced by wit. This negotiation between the utterable and the unutterable always stems from a transgression, from trespassing on socially, morally or intellectually forbidden ground. Wit therefore marks the moment when an inhibition breaks down, a moment that Freud also identifies as a major source of pleasure.
- 31 In *Arcadia*, wit reaches us in a form that we expect, but it strikes us because of its unexpected contents. Just as Chaos theory envisages complexity inside a system, Stoppard shows not only how wit inscribes disorder in order, but also how complex things may get inside a determined system. Stoppard's wit becomes a perfect example of deterministic chaos. The unconscious, which is responsible for the semantic choice of images, rehabilitates determination. Just as the final dance in scene 7 mixes up the two temporalities (disorder) but in a choreographed way (order)—recall the waltzed stichomythia between characters belonging to different temporalities—wit is a perfect image of order in chaos or chaos in order. It becomes, and this is Stoppard's final twist, a metaphor for Chaos theory as it is thematized in the play, and which is itself used as "a powerful metaphor for human behaviour": Stoppard, *homo ludens*.

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## NOTES

1. This paper is a slightly revisited English version of my article "Newton /notneW Comédie et chaomédie dans *Arcadia* de Tom Stoppard," published in *Etudes Anglaises* 3 (2011). By courtesy *Etudes Anglaises*. Ed. Pascal Aquien. Paris : Belles Lettres.
2. Although unpredictable, these minute variations are nevertheless part of a system: "the laws of complexity hold universally, caring not at all for the details of a system's constituent atoms" (Gleick 1987, 304). Order finds its way back within chaos.
3. Newtonian because predictable and reversible, that is symmetrical by time reversal: take an elastic ball, drop it, it falls at a certain acceleration which remains constant if no exterior force affects it. The same behaviour (laws of physics) will be observed if you film it backwards (if you

reverse time): the acceleration will always be linked to the force exerted on the ball (time inversion invariance): ("Newton's equations go forwards and backwards," 87).

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## ABSTRACTS

With *Arcadia* Stoppard suggests that post-modernism, fragmentation and chaos are reclaimed if not by order, at least by determinism. In Chaos theory, Stoppard finds the oxymoronic and paradoxical vision of a world which becomes disorganized as a system but organized as chaos. The Stoppardian new problem play elects complexity as its thesis and conveys a message which is both conservative and iconoclastic: I will examine here, in the wake of other critics, how paradox, which is the foundation stone of Chaos mathematics, shapes all the components of the play—down to Stoppard's epigrammatic style which, in my opinion, is both Newtonian and chaotic and becomes in turn a metaphor for chaos theory.

Avec *Arcadia*, Stoppard suggère que le post-modernisme, la fragmentation et le « chaos » sont regagnés sinon par l'ordre du moins par le déterminisme. Stoppard découvre dans les mathématiques du chaos la vision oxymorique et paradoxale d'un monde qui se désorganise comme système mais s'organise comme chaos. La nouvelle pièce à thèse que propose Stoppard place la complexité au cœur de la comédie, et se donne comme à la fois conservatrice et iconoclaste. On analyse ici comment le paradoxe, au cœur des mathématiques du chaos, informe toutes les composantes de la pièce jusqu'au style épigrammatique de Stoppard, à la fois newtonien et « chaotique », dont on s'attachera à montrer qu'il fait du wit, à son tour, une métaphore de la théorie du chaos.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Stoppard, wit, paradoxe, mot d'esprit, théorie du chaos, oxymore, épigramme, réversibilité, actes indirects de parole, comédie

**Keywords:** paradox, chaos theory, oxymoron, epigrammatic style, reversibility, indirect speech acts, comedy

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