

GARDENS IN STOPPARD, AUSTEN, AND GOETHE

Three authors use landscape gardening in different ways. Tom Stoppard uses this activity to reveal the essence of different historical ages and to highlight the situation facing an intelligent woman in each era. Jane Austen uses attitudes toward landscape gardening to individualize her characters, and Goethe's use is even more complex.

A reference to Arcadia, an ancient image of a garden-like land, occurs in an early interaction between Tom Stoppard's characters. In Stoppard's *Arcadia*, thirteen-year-old Thomasina, the play's main female character, behaves in what her mother calls a "pert" fashion. Thomasina implies that her mother has incorrectly translated the phrase "*Et in Arcadia Ego*" as "Here I am in Arcadia" (12). The words "*Et in Arcadia Ego*" literally mean "and in Arcadia I," a translation which does not immediately reveal the expression's meaning. Even knowing that Arcadia is a lost Edenic garden of the Greeks and Romans does not add much to our understanding. We must know who is speaking to find the correct idiom. Later in the play, the sound of hunters' guns firing in the garden-like park leads Thomasina to say, "I have grown up to the sound of guns like the child of a siege" (13). Her tutor, Septimus, then gives the correct translation: "Even in Arcadia, there I am." Erwin Panofsky explains that Latin permits omission of the verb "to be" and that the "et" can be translated loosely – making for Septimus's interesting translation. Thomasina's next words prove she knew Septimus's translation and even knows who is speaking the words. She says, "Oh, phooey to Death!" (13). Thomasina identifies the speaker: Death. The meaning is that death is everywhere, even in Arcadia – the beautiful garden.

The phrase takes the image of the garden as a symbol of safety and happiness into stark contrast. It is derived from a sequence of paintings. The first "*Et in Arcadia Ego*" painting was by Giovanni Guercino between 1621 and 1623.¹ A large skull, personifying Death, rests on a pedestal on which is carved the inscription "*Et in Arcadia Ego*." The skull delivers a message: death comes even to people who are happy and who live in the midst of plenty – not just to the poor and miserable.

Nicholas Poussin painted two "*Et in Arcadia Ego*" works. He completed the first one presumably around 1630. It is called "*Et in Arcadia Ego*." The pedestal has been replaced by a sarcophagus on which the words have been inscribed. However, a small skull resting on top preserves the allegorical

dimension, as does the presence of the river god who is presumably pouring out the plenty which makes Arcadia a utopia. This is the form in which the motif often appears in literature.² In the painting, the shepherds can be interpreted as having just discovered the sarcophagus and to be interestedly exploring it.

Poussin's second Arcadian picture, "The Arcadian Shepherds," finished in 1635 or 1636, makes a transition. In this painting, the allegorical dimension has been transformed. The words "Et in Arcadia Ego" on the sarcophagus appear to be a message from the person interned within it. The words cry out to be translated "I, too, once lived in Arcadia"; allegorically, they would be interpreted as follows: "I, who am now dead, was once, like you, alive and happy." However, Panofsky demonstrates that this is not a translation allowed by Latin grammar; he points out instances where people educated in Latin misremembered the expression when they were referring to the meaning ostensibly proposed by Poussin's second painting on this motif; authors from Balzac to Dorothy Sayers misremembered the motif as "*Et ego in Arcadia*," a form which permits "Et" to connect with "ego" rather than with "Arcadia" ("Tradition" 307).³ Some even remembered it as "Et tu in Arcadia vixisti," which unambiguously means "I, too, lived (or was born) in Arcadia" (Panofsky, "Tradition" 296). In Poussin's second painting, the figures are contemplative and sad; this painting is always said to be a much greater one than Poussin's first try.

The garden is artistically created space (or place), an insight to which Phenomenology can contribute. Space *as experienced by a human being*, in the phenomenological tradition, is called "place." "Heidegger credits Kant with anticipating the notion of the 'clearing' as the 'open' place within which beings can be articulated and identified, hence can appear. This circle-open-place-clearing-world is a relational place; it does not, like an empty container, preexist man and things"; rather, the opening "is precisely the relation *between* man and things" (Fell 190).

In fact, to understand a "place" or "clearing" as existing prior to humans (and to demand an understanding of that place) defeats the entire purpose of phenomenology. We understand any entity (figure) only in relation to something which is *not* that entity (ground). If, as a prelude to understanding phenomena, we demand understanding of the ground for phenomena, we repeat Plato's move (and Kant's repetition of Plato's move) of turning phenomena into a series of semblances whose source is more original or primordial. If we make this mistake, as Heidegger pointed out, we deny ultimate reality to the things among which "we know ourselves immediately

at home, i.e., things as the artist depicts them for us” (Heidegger, qtd. in Fell 190).

The idea of artistically shaped space is explicated by Stoppard’s characters in the play *Arcadia*. A stage direction sets up the exchange: “The sketch book is the work of Mr. Noakes. . . . The pages, drawn in watercolors, show ‘before’ and ‘after’ views of the landscape, and the pages are cunningly cut to allow the latter to be superimposed on the former . . .” (10). Referring to Noakes, the landscape gardener who drew the sketchbooks, Hannah says,

“He’d do these books for his client, as a sort of prospectus.” (She demonstrates.) “Before and after, you see. This is how it all looked until about 1810 – smooth, undulating, serpentine – open water, clumps of trees, classical boat house.” Bernard replies: “Lovely. The real England.”

HANNAH: You can stop being silly now, Bernard. English landscape was invented by gardeners imitating foreign painters who were evoking classical authors. The whole thing was brought home in the luggage from the grand tour. Here, look – Capability Brown doing Claude, who was doing Virgil. *Arcadia!* And here, superimposed by Richard Noakes, untamed nature in the style of Salvator Rosa. It’s the Gothic novel expressed in landscape. Everything but vampires. (25)

Stoppard’s Hannah is writing a book on how the changing taste in gardens revealed the essence of each historical era, especially the transformation of the Age of Reason into the Romantic era. “The history of the garden says it all, beautifully,” she claims (27). The garden was transformed in stages from around 1730, when the garden showed “Paradise in the age of reason,” to its Gothic condition after 1810. For Hannah, the change represents “the decline from thinking to feeling” (27).

Bernard’s sneering condescension toward her shows what a modern intelligent woman must face. Bernard is intent on proving that Lord Byron killed a man named Chater in the garden of the manor. Bernard entitles his paper, “Death in *Arcadia*.” Further evidence proves him wrong, and demonstrates Hannah’s clear-headedness. The reader understands that Thomasina has discovered a scientific theory that was only known to scientists hundreds of years later; she may have even solved Fermat’s last theorem, but she dies in a fire on the eve of her seventeenth birthday. It is her death that proves to be the real death in *Arcadia*.

In Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, characters take varying attitudes towards the idea of “improving” the grounds. A curiosity about Austen’s title is that it does not refer to a person, such as *Emma*, or to human qualities such as *Pride and Prejudice*. It is one of two of her titles denoting a place; perhaps this fits with the novel’s emphasis on landscape gardening. The characters’ attitudes exactly parallel the salient characteristics that Austen assigns to each, and,

indeed, help her to assign these characteristics. Mr. Rushworth, Julia Bertram's suitor and eventual husband, is stupid and ignorant. Mr. Rushworth "had been visiting a friend in a neighboring county, and that friend having recently had his grounds laid out by an improver, Mr. Rushworth was returned with his head full of the subject, and very eager to be improving his own *place* in the same way" (46). It is interesting that Austen uses the word "place" in an almost phenomenological sense.

"I wish you could see Compton [the friend's estate],' said [Mr. Rushworth], 'it is the most complete thing! I never saw a place so altered in my life. I told Smith I did not know where I was'" (47). The purpose of the older landscape design was to bring pleasure to the residents; the purpose shifts in the new plans to a design meant to impress strangers from a distance. "The approach *now* is one of the finest things in the country," continues Mr. Rushworth. "You see the house in the most surprising manner. I declare when I got back to Southerton [Mr. Rushworth's estate] yesterday, it looked like a prison – quite a dismal old prison" (47).

The facts about Julia are that she considers her suitor to be an ignoramus and marries him anyway, for money and social position. Julia's reply to Mr. Rushworth gives Jane Austen a chance to characterize Julia: "'Your best friend upon such an occasion [planning changes in the garden]' said Miss Bertram, calmly, 'would be Mr. Repton, I imagine'" (47). A note from the editor says: "The successor of Capability Brown who died in 1783, Humphry Repton was much attacked in the early years of the nineteenth century for his improvements, which, judged by the newly fashionable standards of the picturesque, were felt to be dull, vapid, and mechanical" (435n). Thus, Julia is not only tactlessly pointing out her lack of faith in Mr. Rushworth's competence in front of the others, but Austen is also, probably negatively, characterizing Julia's taste.

Mr. Rushworth thinks that "Repton, or anybody of that sort, would certainly have the avenue at Southerton down; the avenue that leads from the west front to the top of the hill you know" (48). The reference to cutting down so many trees gives Austen a chance to characterize Fanny, the heroine, who says, "Cut down an avenue! What a pity! Does it not make you think of Cowper? 'Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited'" (50).

Edmund, the hero, ruefully sides with Fanny, saying, "I am afraid the avenue stands a bad chance, Fanny" (50). Austen also characterizes Edmund: "'Had I a place to new fashion, I should not put myself into the hands of an improver. I would rather have an inferior degree of beauty, of my own choice, and acquired progressively. I would rather abide by my own blunders than by

his'" (50). Edmund thus presents the position that the grounds would represent the taste of the resident, rather than serve as conspicuous consumption prepared by an expert in the current taste.

In Mary Crawford, Fanny's rival for the hero's hand, the author shows a different negative characterization. Mary remembers when her uncle was improving an estate of theirs: "For three months we were all dirt and confusion, without a gravel walk to step on, or a bench fit for use." Mary does not object to the new fashion, "but it must be all done without my care" (51).

Henry Crawford, the wrong man for the heroine, at first seems to be characterized positively, since he improved his estate according to his own plan: "I had not been of age three months before Everingham [his estate] was all that it is now. My plan was laid at Westminster [a secondary school] – a little altered perhaps at Cambridge, and at one and twenty executed" (55). However, we later see a different side of Henry. Henry Crawford uses the "improving" issue to tease Edmund Bertram. Henry tells how he came upon the parsonage where Edmund plans to live in a short time. "'Well,' continued Edmund, 'and how did you like what you saw?'" Pretending to refer to the "fun" Henry had while improving his property, Henry replies, "Very much, indeed. You are a lucky fellow. There will be work for five summers at least before the place is livable" (218). Saying this in front of Fanny, Henry is pointing out to her that he is much wealthier than Edmund and can give her a better material life.

Edmund replies: "No, no, not so bad as that. The farm yard must be moved, I grant you; but I am not aware of anything else" (218). Henry then gives a long list of supposedly necessary improvements, including buying up a great deal of the surrounding land – suggestions which he knows will never be within Edmund's means. Edmund disagrees, mildly, saying, "I think the house and premises may be made comfortable, and given the air of a gentleman's residence without any very heavy expense, and that must suffice me; and I hope may suffice all who care about me" (219). The reader knows that Fanny glows with approval and that Mary – who demands a more luxurious life – simmers with disappointed resentment toward Edmund. Thus, Edmund's expression of his attitude toward "improving" his property not only clarifies his character but also neatly sets off the difference between the two women who compete for his love: Mary and Fanny.

Johann von Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities* actually begins with one of the four main characters, Charlotte, supervising the renovation of a garden. Her husband, Eduard, asks his gardener where she is: "'She is over there on