Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*: the Invention of Tradition

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Abstract
The article discusses Stoppard's play as an instantiation of how literary tradition is invented. By problematising the processes of artistic creation, transmission (especially by means of verbal communication) and interpretation of literature, the play demonstrates that the emergence of tradition is not a matter of natural growth. Based on the biography of A.E. Housman, The Invention of Love *presents his tentative attempts at identifying himself and, especially, at defining the nature of his commitment to another man. Housman's self-perception is shaped by his knowledge of literature, and in particular classical culture. It is mainly in ancient poets that the protagonist finds models for his own feelings. In his own poetry, Housman also gives priority to fabulation rather than imitation of reality. It is argued here that both his creative and scholarly work as well as his private life exemplify a variety of the processes by which literary tradition is constructed.*

Keywords
Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, A.E. Housman, transmission, interpretation, tradition

One of T.S. Eliot's main objectives in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was to liberate the concept of tradition from its usual, denigrating association with the science of archaeology[1] and to assert its living presence and invigorating influence on contemporaneity. Eliot argues that the whole European literature from Homer "has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order,"[2] which results in creative interaction between past and present. This approach entails redefining the idea of tradition from a passive inheritance of the past to an active force engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the present. Hence Eliot stresses the need for an active approach to tradition: "It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour."[3]

Implicit in Eliot's argument is the idea that tradition changes in response to its new readings and re-readings, or, to use Hans Robert Gadamer's term, in accordance with the changed "horizon of expectations". Although literary tradition in the broadest sense comprises the entire written corpus, in practice only a small part of it becomes canonised and so acquires the potential to be transmitted and to shape successive literary works. The process of canon formation has attracted much critical attention, but the prevailing view is that it is a matter of more or less conscious selection, governed by fluctuating aesthetic and ideological criteria. To quote Harold Bloom:

> The Canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival, whether you interpret the choice as being made by dominant social groups, institutions of education, traditions of criticism, or, as I do, by

1 T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: Norton & Company, 2000), 2395.

2 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 2396.

3 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 2396.

> late-coming authors who feel themselves chosen by particular ancestral figures. Some recent partisans of what regards itself as academic radicalism go so far as to suggest that works join the Canon because of successful advertising and propaganda campaigns.[4]

In *The Invention of Tradition* Eric Hobsbawm points out that much of what is taken for granted as the natural inheritance of the past was in fact once deliberately invented, constructed, and instituted formally: "the history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so."[5] The fact that historians do not just report on the past "as it was" but construct narratives about it has long been acknowledged in historiography. But, as Frank Kermode argues in "Canon and Period", historians of literature face the same problem of the impossibility of giving a neutral, objective account of the literary past.[6]

Tom Stoppard's plays are an exemplary case of creative use of and dialogue with literary tradition, although the liberties he takes with it are probably not quite what Eliot envisioned. Sir Richard Eyre, director of the National Theatre from 1987 to 1997, described Stoppard as "[o]ne of those great emancipating figures" of contemporary theatre. In his opinion, Stoppard follows in the footsteps of Brecht and Beckett in expanding the possibilities of the medium: "... I think Tom has sort of taken Brecht – with whom he has no sympathy at all – and Beckett, and has simply seen, 'Yeah, this medium: you can expand and contract, it's a poetic medium that is fantastically flexible; you can throw your imagination at it and it'll bounce back and amplify it."[7] One of Stoppard's key methods of opening up the theatre to new options is throwing his imagination at literary and cultural tradition. Stoppard's quintessentially postmodern play with literary and/or biographical material engendered some of the most important works in his oeuvre: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Travesties*, *Arcadia*. *The Invention of Love* (1997), based on the life of A.E. Housman, exemplifies well the character of Stoppard's inventiveness: textualised history and literary texts freely intermingle, giving rise to the intensely self-conscious literariness of the play.

Due to its prominent biographical theme – Housman's suppressed homosexual love for a fellow student – the play has usually been interpreted as a reflection on the duality of Housman's life and personality, generated mostly by his socially unacceptable proclivities. According to Lawrence Frascella, the play has its secret centre in "Housman's struggle, his loneliness, his repression of his gayness through the pursuit of sky-high academic standards."[8] Kate Kellaway writes in a review of the play that it is "not about the invention but the suppression of love."[9] Robert Brustein, somewhat annoyed at the excessive allusiveness of the text, establishes that "[w]hat Stoppard really wants to establish, aside from his own cleverness, is how gay men suffered under a repressive

4 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London and Basingstoke: Papermac, 1995), 20.

5 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 13.

6 Frank Kermode, "Canon and Period," in *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 111-112.

7 As quoted in Jim Hunter, *About Stoppard: The Playwright and the Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 222.

8 Lawrence Frascella, "Broadway: *The Invention of Love*," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 14, 2001, 67.

9 Kate Kellaway, "Dreams and Spires," review of *The Invention of Love*, *New Statesman*, October 10, 1997, 37.

sexual regime."[10] Likewise, Richard Eyre recalls that his initial response to the play was "the sense of the unconsummated love"; however, subsequent readings and re-readings revealed to him that "the whole thing was an extremely complicated structure."[11]

In refusing to focus on the representation of Housman's life in terms of the clash between his inner and outer selves, or the supposed depiction of his professional career as a sublimation of his unfulfilled personal desires, this article will treat the play as a commentary on the invented quality of literary and cultural tradition. The paradox inherent in the title of the play implies that the most powerful human emotion may have its origin in culture rather than nature; by extension, the play questions the concept of tradition as a natural accumulation of human achievements over the course of successive ages. The choice of a textual critic and eminent classical scholar as the protagonist enables both explicit and implicit comments on the extent to which the formation of tradition is subject to arbitrary decisions, to inadvertent errors of transmission and deliberate mispresentations, to historical contingencies which determine the survival or loss of artifacts, and to the inevitable misunderstandings which normally impede human communication.

The exposure of the invention is made possible thanks to the disruption of chronology as well as abrupt shifts between particular episodes, in turn leading to clashes of settings and of cultural and linguistic registers. The action of the play, extending between Housman's youth and old age and spanning two acts, is probably a matter of mere minutes, or seconds, in reality. This is as much time as may reasonably pass between Housman's opening line "I'm dead, then"[12] on the bank of the Styx and his closing words "But now I really do have to go."[13] Yet, in the words of Deryl Davis, the only discernible time and place settings in the play exist in the protagonist's mind.[14] Images from his past, including references to his classical scholarship, appear in his consciousness in the fleeting moments preceding death. Scattered throughout the play are occasional references to a nursing home, incongruous in the context of the dialogues, but most probably reflecting the protagonist's actual circumstances. His last impression of standing "on this empty shore, with the indifferent waters at my feet"[15] is conjured up by his expectations of the Styx, quite understandable in a man mentally immersed in the ancient world, but may be simply an indication of his pitiful physical incontinence. The radical compression of time in the character's mind, his confusion of interposed images, associations and recollections, often arbitrarily preserved and linked, are a small-scale illustration of some of the mechanisms which shape cultural tradition. The temporal disruption plays havoc with the arbitrary construct of the Golden Age as the perfect, originating moment of mankind's history before it began to deteriorate. Catullus looked back wistfully on the age when gods supposedly still visited humans; Ruskin saw the advent of the railway and industrialisation in terms of civilisational decline. As the old Housman remarks, "We're always living in someone's golden age, it turns out: even Ruskin who takes it all

10 Robert Brustein, "Mind Over Material," review of *The Invention of Love* and *Mnemonic*, *New Republic*, May 14, 2001, 30.

11 As quoted in Hunter, *About Stoppard*, 219.

12 Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 1.

13 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 102.

14 Deryl Davis, "Look out Broadway," *Stage Directions* 14, no. 8 (October 2001): 45.

15 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 102.

so hard."[16] Likewise, the idea of modernity is subject to time. Jackson confidently claims, "Every age thinks it's the modern age, but this one really is."[17]

The action repeatedly returns to its initial (and final) imaginary setting on the river bank, marking the fluid boundary between the world of the living and the land of the dead, into which the protagonist will soon cross. Memories of boating at Oxford in his student days blend with episodes from the late nineteenth century classic *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog!)* (Jerome is one of the rowers in Act Two), and with the mythological scene of Charon ferrying the dead to the underworld. Even the dog makes an appearance in the phantasmagoria of Housman's dying consciousness, although, too, in various guises. Charon's solemn warning against the three-headed dog of Hades is followed by the yapping of the little dog in the boat that the men are rowing, which in turn is followed by a philological conversation about loving a dog and being loved by a dog, the dog in question finally turning out to be Jackson, the object of Housman's secret affection. The colloquial use of "dog" in the sense of "man" does not surprise Charon, just as Housman is not impressed by Charon's casual reference to his acquaintance with Theseus. The recently deceased classical scholars of Housman's acquaintance have joined the ancient historical and mythological characters, and all inhabit the same sphere of collective memory and imagination.

The dialogues between real and imaginary, contemporary and ancient characters, between the young Housman and the old Housman (named AEH in the play) are possible owing to the limitless resources inherent in the linguistic medium – which Stoppard freely exploits, and which he expects his audience to apprehend. However, what makes for flexibility of language, simultaneously also makes language a slippery tool for communication. The characters in the play manage to communicate, paradoxically enough, thanks to their failure to notice the incongruities and incompatibilities of their utterances and intended meanings. Charon's sailing command "Belay the painter"[18] is unquestioningly interpreted by AEH as a reference to Ruskin's lectures on modern art; the scholarly discussion about the corruption of Propertius may mean both his supposedly immoral ideas and the editorial errors in the manuscript of his poetry[19]; AEH is pleased with himself when he arrives "dead on time", according to Charon[20]; AEH's existential question "What are you doing here, may one ask?" is answered by his student self, "Classics, sir."[21] On each occasion, the dialogue goes on uninterrupted.

The failure to notice the linguistic pitfalls in their own conversations contrasts sharply with the characters' awareness of the fluidity and instability of the medium. Indeed, for many of them, notably Oscar Wilde, the master of paradox and aphorism, and Housman, a poet and a textual critic, exploration of language is at the core of their creative and professional life. The scholar Jowett's complaint that "we already have so many watery words"[22] is not only a remark on Catullus' elegy, but on the nature of language in general. Of course, since language is the main medium in which the literary tradition is formed and transmitted, its ambiguity must be seen as a major factor (mis-/re-)shaping the inheritance of past ages.

16 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 44.

17 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 53.

18 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 1.

19 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 26, 32.

20 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 29.

21 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 30.

22 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 23.

Ideas are also shaped by the cultural context in which they appear, and so may be denoted by different words. While in antiquity "virtue" signified nobility of character and was later related to the chivalric ideal, it gradually shifted its meaning, to degenerate into its present definition. As Housman puts it, today "[v]irtue is what women have to lose, the rest is vice."[23] Of special interest to the protagonist is the conceptualisation and verbalisation of the idea of love between men. As Jeremy Treglown observes, the play is set in "a crucial period in the construction of British attitudes to homosexuality", from the repressed classical aestheticism of Jowett, Ruskin and Pater, to the "vengeful heterosexuality" of W.T. Stead and Henry Labouchčre (it was under the latter's clause in the Criminal Law Amendment Bill that Oscar Wilde was tried).[24] All these historical figures are evoked as characters in Stoppard's play. Quotes from Plato and from Greek poets describing love between men as a noble friendship coexist with contemporary slang – "spooniness", "beastliness" – carrying a sense of disapproval. In the translation of Tibullus which Housman analyses, the poet's male lover has been turned into a woman by the use of the pronoun "she" as well as the omission of those lines where the transformation could not be accommodated in the bowdlerised version.[25] Housman criticises the recent coinage "homosexuality" as a corruption – what he reacts to is not the idea but the word itself, being an unacceptable hybrid of Greek and Latin. Another illustration of language's capacity for corruption – in the same context – is Jowett's letter to the father of a certain undergraduate, where the Master of Balliol justifies the student's expulsion from Oxford by the need to "stamp out unnatural mice" – in the secretary's version.

Housman devoted his scholarly life to re-reading and re-editing classical texts, correcting both the intentional and unintentional misinterpretations of other scholars. He believes that textual criticism is a science, capable of revealing the truth i.e. the unblemished original text. Yet, as another classicist in the play points out, the text that survives to modern times and is subject to critical scrutiny has inevitably undergone innumerable distortions in the process of transmission:

> [...] anyone with a secretary knows that what Catullus really wrote was already corrupt by the time it was copied twice, which was about the time of the first Roman invasion of Britain: and the earliest copy that has come down to *us* was written about 1,500 years after that. Think of all those secretaries! – corruption breeding corruption from papyrus to papyrus, and from the last disintegrating scrolls to the first new-fangled parchment books, with a thousand years of copying-out still to come, running the gauntlet of changing forms of script and spelling, and absence of punctuation – not to mention mildew and rats and fire and flood and Christian disapproval to the brink of extinction as what Catullus really wrote passed from scribe to scribe, this one drunk, that one sleepy, another without scruple, and of those sober, wide-awake and scrupulous, some ignorant of Latin and some, even worse, fancying themselves better Latinists than Catullus – until!

23 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 76.

24 Jeremy Treglown, "Those Who Can, Teach Also: Art, Biography, Housman and History: the Instructive Quirks of Tom Stoppard," *Times Literary Supplement*, October 10, 1997, 20.

25 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 40.

> – finally and at long last – mangled and tattered like a dog that has fought its way home, there falls across the threshold of the Italian Renaissance the sole surviving witness to thirty generations of carelessness and stupidity: the *Verona Codex* of Catullus [...].[26]

Housman could certainly subscribe to Jowett's observations. He made a name for himself as a very competent and scrupulous scholar, ruthlessly exposing and condemning mistaken interpretations even of acknowledged authorities on ancient literature. Housman discovers, for example, that a misplaced comma in a poem by Catullus resulted in four hundred years of misreading.[27] AEH eloquently demonstrates to his younger self how contemporary attempts at rectifying past mistakes lead to more editorial errors. In this scene, AEH goes through a pile of books, pointing out their inadequacies and impatiently throwing them away one by one. However, Housman was once naively idealistic in his typically nineteenth-century confidence that meticulous textual study would yield the definitive version. Looking back, AEH explains to young Housman that when he was a student at Oxford, his edition of Propertius "was going to replace all its forerunners and require no successor."[28] Now, he seems less confident about the feasibility of the quest for the definitive reading. Even if the autograph copy were available, as modern readers know – and as the dialogues in the play amply illustrate – the words on the page may not correspond to the ideas in the speaker's/author's mind, and even less do they correspond to the ideas evoked in the listener's/reader's mind.

Perhaps the best illustration of the disjunction between literature and writers' experience is in the volume of poetry for which Housman is best known, *A Shropshire Lad* (1896). The volume gained popular recognition after the Boer War, and continued to be widely read throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century.[29] It was the First World War in particular that brought the volume a mass readership.[30] Written in a poetic idiom which in literary circles was decidedly outmoded even at the time when they were published, the lyrics celebrate the rural landscapes of Shropshire, often portraying a speaker exiled from the country to the metropolis – or to the front - and lamenting the loss of his childhood paradise. Most of the poems are set in Shropshire, with its pastoral landscape serving as the backdrop to the brief and often tragic life of the inhabitants, representative of the sad fate of humanity.

Yet, for all their emotional impact, the poems are a product of Housman's imagination rather than a reflection of his real experience. As Housman's biographer Ian Scott-Kilvert explains, Housman "was not a countryman, nor did he enjoy talking or mingling with rustics." His image of Shropshire was a creation of his "inward eye", "a personification of the writer's memories, dreams and affections". Shropshire was his private "blighted Arcadia."[31] Housman had grown up in Worcestershire, but he admitted to, as he put it, "a sentimental feeling for Shropshire because its hills were our western horizon."[32] Shropshire came to symbolise for Housman a state of lost happiness and

26 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 24.

27 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 37-38.

28 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 32.

29 Ian Scott-Kilvert, *A.E. Housman* (Harlow: Longman Group, 1977), 21.

30 Treglown, "Those Who Can, Teach Also," 20.

31 Scott-Kilvert, *A.E. Housman*, 26-27.

32 Quoted in John Sparrow, Introduction to *Collected Poems*, by A.E. Housman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1956), 12.

innocence[33] – a process which must have been facilitated by the poet's ignorance of the actual place. To Housman, Shropshire was "a county of the mind", much like Arcadia had been to Virgil.[34]

In Stoppard's play, there are allusions to the invention of Shropshire in Housman's poetry. Confronted by his sister who complains that a certain Mrs M., encouraged by the poems, made a trip to Shropshire and was disappointed to discover numerous inaccuracies, Housman asserts in his defence that it is "[t]he landscape of the imagination."[35] Yet, ironically enough, the poet's ashes were buried in Shropshire, "a country where [he] never lived and seldom set foot", as the protagonist of Stoppard's play freely admits to Charon.[36]

Another controversy in the criticism of Housman's poetry surrounds the identity of the Shropshire lad, who is the speaker in the majority of the poems. Scott-Kilvert speculates that Housman "apparently needed an imaginary setting and a central character who could at once be himself and not himself."[37] The note of "resigned wisdom" combined with "quiet poignancy", "the undertones of fatalism and even of doom" seem to project the poet's own attitudes through the imagined character.[38] There is also a distinct theme of emotional frustration, although, in contrast to what is known of the poet's biography, love in the poems is the conventional lad-and-lass affair. In fact, biographers are in agreement that the emotional turmoil in Housman's life, which for a few years disrupted his scholarly career, was most probably due to his suppressed love for his fellow student and lifelong friend Moses Jackson.[39] In his Introduction to Housman's *Collected Poems* John Sparrow argues that the love poems in *A Shropshire Lad* were inspired by "actual experience of the passion of love" but because his kind of love was a forbidden affection, Housman never disclosed it and hid behind the invented figure of the lad.[40]

It is only in the posthumously published *More Poems* and *Additional Poems* that Housman's suppressed love finds some expression, although still half-concealed behind the veneer of propriety.

Because I liked you better
than suits a man to say,
It irked you, and I promised
To throw the thought away[41]

is interpreted as a veiled allusion to his feelings for Jackson.[42] There is slightly more candidness in *Additional Poems*. In Poem VII, the speaker talks of the tragedy of his unrequited love for a man:

33 Scott-Kilvert, *A.E. Housman*, 27.

34 Treglown, "Those Who Can, Teach Also," 20.

35 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 88-89.

36 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 1.

37 Scott-Kilvert, *A.E. Housman*, 26.

38 "A.E. Housman," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: Norton & Company, 2000), 2041.

39 Scott-Kilvert, *A.E. Housman*, 10.

40 Sparrow, Introduction, 13.

41 Housman, XXXI, *More Poems* in *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1956), 191.

42 Scott-Kilvert, *A.E. Housman*, 10.

He would not stay for me; and who can wonder?
He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.
I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder
And went with half my life about my ways.[43]

These lines are spoken by Housman in the play, where they explicitly refer to Jackson.[44]

"Ask me no more, for fear I should reply; / Others have held their tongues, and so can I"[45] is clearly a confession of his fear of making a confession. The description of a "young sinner", condemned to humiliating imprisonment and hard labour for the God-made colour of his hair[46] may be read as an allusion to the trial of Oscar Wilde.

By analogy with Shropshire, the love depicted in Housman's poetry is a matter of invention rather than the simple transference of real-life experience into literature. Pursuing his personal concerns in textual criticism, the Housman in Stoppard's play speculates about the indeterminable correlation between poets' real-life erotic experiences and the love poetry they wrote. Catullus, known as the author of a series of love poems addressed to Lesbia, in another poem made a young boy the object of his speaker's affection. Horace's writing poses the same question – for all the predominance of women in his love poetry, there are also poems glorifying the beauty of male athletes.[47] Notwithstanding the scarce biographical information available to contemporary readers and hence the sheer impossibility of ascertaining the truth, such questions are obviously related to the perennial problem of the relationship between art and life, and the legitimacy of analysing literature as a mirror of reality.

To complicate matters further, it must be borne in mind that literature of course cannot mirror reality directly but is shaped by the existing textual modes. Love poetry, as Housman's discussion of the classics implies, imitates other love poetry, and those intertextual links may be easier to trace than the supposed connections between art and life. The protagonist asserts that the first Roman love elegist was Cornelius Gallus, to whom other poets refer, but of whose poetry only one line has survived.[48] The "long silences"[49] which marked Housman's life, by his own admission (probably pertaining to the love that dared not speak its name) correspond to the large blanks in the surviving literary heritage. Housman uses the metaphor of a cornfield after reaping, where only single stalks have unaccountably been spared; he regrets the loss of innumerable classical texts of which merely titles remain, as well as of hundreds of "Greek and Roman authors known only for fragments of their names alone."[50]

Housman's commitment to Jackson is construed differently by the characters concerned, depending on their background and mentality, or their reading experience, as the case may be. Housman thinks of his love in terms of ancient models, speaking appreciatively of the myth of Theseus and Pirithous, or of Horace's admiration for

43 Housman, VII, *Additional Poems* in *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1956), 222.

44 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 78.

45 Housman, VI, *Additional Poems* in *Collected Poems*, 221.

46 Housman, XVIII, *Additional Poems* in *Collected Poems*, 233.

47 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 41.

48 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 98-99.

49 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 3.

50 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 71-72.

Ligurinus. Jackson, an unsophisticated heterosexual male, reacts with anger and disgust to Housman's veiled declaration of love, and can hardly recall the erudite context of the scholarly discussion in the course of which Housman's imagination was captured by Jackson's affectionate gesture towards a dog. In accordance with the common association of homosexuality with Aestheticism after the scandal of Oscar Wilde, Jackson warily re-defines his friend: "You're not one of those Aesthete types or anything – [...] how could I know?!"[51] Jackson's identification of Housman with the Aesthetes is wide of the mark, as Housman had little in common with the movement. In the play, Housman exchanges views with Oscar Wilde. This is a completely invented episode – according to what is known of their biographies, they never met in person. True to his reputation, Wilde boasts of having invented his own myth, proud of having turned his life into art: "The artist must lie, cheat, deceive, be untrue to nature and contemptuous of history."[52]

Although his own lifestyle was radically different from Wilde's, Housman will inevitably follow him to the other world, or to the domain of cultural tradition ("I will be coming later"[53]). AEH's final monologue is a sample of the contingent material that constitutes the legacy of the past: snatches of ancient and contemporary classics, quotations, memories of significant contemporary events. Wilde's closing words could also serve as a comment on the invented nature of the biography presented in the play: "One should always be a little improbable. Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance."[54]

Stoppard's play demonstrates that the arbitrary, the provisional and the invented constitutes a substantial part of literary and cultural tradition. The paradox is that Stoppard's works, playful and often irreverent in their approach to tradition, mixing fact and fiction, inventing episodes in real-life biographies, are already regarded as contemporary classics, and stand every chance of being incorporated into the tradition they toy with.

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51 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 77.

52 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 96.

53 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 97.

54 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 102.

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