

Shakespeare and the nature of adolescence

A reconsideration of The Winter's Tale in the light of recent developments in the fields of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology.

'Enter an old Shepherd' reads the stage direction in Act III, scene iii of **The Winter's Tale** and into the world of Bohemia comes a hitherto unknown character, grumbling:

I would there were no age between sixteen and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting--Hark you now! Would any but these boiled brains of nineteen and two-and-twenty hunt this weather? (III.iii.58-64)¹

We smile at this *crie de coeur* from a comic stereotype and perhaps decide that adolescents do not seem to have changed much in four hundred years. We then return to the events before us, marvelling at the discovery of an abandoned baby, the drowning of a shipful of sailors, the introduction to a Bohemian sheep shearing festival and many other fantastical happenings that will eventually lead to King Leontes' reconciliation with his banished daughter Perdita and the resurrection of his 'dead' wife Hermione in the famous statue scene. Any student of Shakespeare can discuss the somewhat unusual dramatic features that make **The Winter's Tale** so typical of the late Romances, and most would be able to comment on its main themes, focussing on the jealousy of Leontes, the pattern of sin and reconciliation, the symbolic antithesis of Spring and Winter, the Art versus Nature debate, Court versus Country, and so forth. Rarely are the Shepherd's words dwelt upon, however, or seen as integral to a play that, I believe, offers Shakespeare's most comprehensive portrayal of the problems and function of adolescence.

John Abbott has focused our attention on adolescence as a "critical evolutionary adaptation" that drives human development²: " - it is adolescence which forces individuals in every generation to think beyond their own self-imposed limitations and to exceed their parents, aspirations." Citing a range of scientific studies from the last decade, he summarises the growing awareness that "there is something going on in the adolescent brain, apparently involuntary, that is forcing apart the child/parent relationship", and quotes Barbara Strauch's observation that "the teenage brain far from being ready made, undergoes a period of surprisingly complex and crucial development."³

What cognitive scientists and evolutionary psychologists have begun to suspect, moreover, has recently been demonstrated by neurobiologists who, thanks to MRI

technology, have actually been able to chart the physiological changes that take place during this most troublesome phase of human development. In particular, Dr Jay Giedd's long-term study of 1800 teenagers over 13 years, at the American National Institute of Mental Health⁴, has shown that the brain seems to undergo a process of development and restructuring that goes some way to accounting for both the aberrations of adolescent behaviour and the gradual transition to adult maturity. Adolescents, it seems lose 15% of their grey matter, matched by a corresponding increase in white matter, as a process of neural 'waxing and waning' alters not the number of nerve cells but the number of connections, or synapses, between them. Whereas until a few years ago most scientists believed that the brain was largely a finished product by the age of 12, this is clearly not the case; nor can the vagaries of teenage behaviour simply be dismissed as 'hormonal' and linked to puberty. Throughout the teenage years a reconfiguration process seems to be underway that starts at the back of the brain and works towards the front; those cells and connection that are used survive and flourish, those that are not wither and die. In a very real sense, then, the child does become "the father of the man". The very last part of the brain to be pruned and shaped to its adult dimensions is the pre-frontal cortex and this is home of the so-called executive functions – planning, setting priorities, organizing thoughts, suppressing impulses, weighing the consequences of one's actions, or perhaps, for the purposes of this article, governing a kingdom.

Giedd's research continues and clearly has major implications for how we, as a society, educate and treat our youngsters but it also provides valuable evidence for others who, from various sociological studies, would have us reappraise our whole notion of what it is to be adolescent. Barbara Strauch, writing from the evolutionary psychologist's point of view, has suggested that "the adolescent brain is *crazy by design*"; Patricia Hirsch following her study of a group of American adolescents in the 1990's describes them as "A tribe apart"⁵; whilst Czikszentmihaly and Larson's study of "**Being Adolescent**" analyses in detail the habits and behaviour of the modern teenager, concluding that "every experience can be either a challenge that stimulates growth, or an obstacle that retards it", and that "to grow means to learn to interact with more and more complex dimensions of reality".⁶

The purpose of this article, however, is not to contribute to an ever burgeoning debate about what we now recognise as a crucial and separate period of development in the life of any individual. I began with a quotation from **The Winter's Tale** because it seems to me that not only might literature have something to contribute to this ongoing discussion, as is so often the case with the social sciences, but that our understanding of so complex a work as **The Winter's Tale** might be enhanced and deepened by a knowledge of recent developments in other fields of research which tend to lie outside the usual remit of the literary scholar. It is to this latter task that I now wish to turn.

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Within barely a hundred lines of only the second scene of **The Winter Tale**, Leontes, King of Sicilia, has developed a violent and irrational jealousy of his wife Hermione's relationship with his best friend, King Polixenes of Bohemia. It is this that has captured the attention of critics as they speculate on the causes and plausibility of so sudden a jealousy, rarely noticing, it seems, the significance of earlier lines which have already established the play's interest in the issue of adolescent growth. Scene one began with a discussion, between two minor characters, about Leontes and Polixenes' mutual boyhood and introduced us to the people's expectations of Prince Mamillius, who like all young people, carries the hope of a better future. Then in scene two Hermione again raises the issue, asking Polixenes about his early relationship with her husband. He replies:

We were, fair queen,
Two lads that thought there was no more behind
But such a day to-morrow as to-day,
And to be boy eternal.....

We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' the sun,
And bleat the one at the other: what we changed
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd
That any did. (I.i.62-71)

Clearly he rejoices in what seems to have been an idyllic, unchallenging adolescence and then goes on to regret that he and Leontes should ever have been "reared With stronger blood", met their respective wives or taken on adult responsibility.

It is against this background that Leontes' jealousy suddenly erupts and it is hard not to be struck by the impulsive, self-absorbed, and irrational nature of his utterances, almost the kind of behaviour Barbara Strauch describes so effectively in **The Primal Teen** and recognizable to so many of us as typically adolescent. Paranoia, a fixation and disgust with the sexual act itself and a bullying of his courtiers add to this impression as Leontes seems to struggle to make sense of a world that seems almost entirely new to him.

It is; you lie, you lie.
I say thou liest, Camillo, and I hate thee(I.i.299-300)

Of particular interest is Leontes' preoccupation with Mamillius, whom he engages in fitful conversation and then comments:

Looking on the lines
Of my boy's face, methoughts I did recoil

Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreech'd,
In my green velvet coat, my dagger muzzled,
Lest it should bite its master. (I.ii.153-157)

Leontes, in his thirties, seems to yearn for the lost innocence of Mamillius whilst wrestling himself with the turbulence of what seems to be a frustrated and delayed adolescence. What in a teenager may be part of the natural process of growth, as we were all once “crazy by design”, becomes in an adult the crazed ravings of a tyrannical king and it is this that will dominate the next three acts of the play as Leontes persecutes his wife, his friend, his children and the kingdom of which he should be the rational leader.

Mamillius' appearance in Act II, scene I is usually seen as a chance for the dramatist to establish a scene of quiet domesticity between mother and son before the violent intrusion of Leontes with his jealous accusations. Looked at again, however, it too seems to contribute to our theme. Mamillius, in his pertness, is clearly showing signs of latent adolescence: he refuses to do as he is told, and in his mockery of his maids' make-up shows a precocious sexual awareness. He, however, will not be allowed a natural adolescence, being dead by the end of Act III, any more than Perdita who is to be abandoned on the shores of Bohemia, or, presumably, Antigonus's daughters whom he says he will “geld “ himself, “fourteen they shall not see/To bring false generations,” (II.i.147-148) if Hermione is proved to be guilty.

Sicilia, then, as critics have noted, represents an unnatural world presided over by an increasingly irrational and obsessed monarch, but what perhaps we can add is that Sicilia represents a world where the normal processes by which children become adults, through observation, imitation, experimentation and rebellion, have been stifled. Mamillius, normal as he seems, is not permitted to live up to the hopes for his future whilst Leontes and Polixenes have not undergone the essential processes of adolescence, the development of both judgement and sexual maturity having been thwarted. The onset of Leontes' jealousy, so puzzling to the critics, then, seems simply to herald the eruption of a belated adolescence but without the essential moderating influence of parents or social conventions. The totalitarian and unregulated King Leontes almost seems to represent today's “teenager from hell”, in fact.

In Act four of the play, after the Chorus, Time, has made a specific point of telling us that sixteen years have passed and that Perdita is now what we would call a “teenager”, we arrive in Bohemia which has always been regarded by audiences as a complete contrast to Sicilia. We have already met the Old Shepherd at the end of Act three but now perhaps his description of “these boil'd brains of nineteen “ seems a little more pertinent, especially when we realise that here, in Bohemia, such behaviour is accepted as natural. The Shepherd may complain of what today would be labelled as juvenile delinquency but he comforts the baby Perdita, whom

he sees as the product of some adolescent “Behind-door-work”(III.iii.73), as much as he tolerates and provides guidance for his oafish young son, the Clown. Of the three father and son relationships explored in the play, in fact (Leontes-Mamillius, Polixenes- Florizel, the Shepherd- the clown) it is perhaps the Old Shepherd who presents us with the most commendable model of parenthood whilst his son represents the extreme of adolescent confidence and yet stupidity (as we see in IV.iii, IV.iv and V.ii).

It is the Polixenes-Florizel relationship that now comes to the fore and we hear that Florizel has been very much behaving like the stereotypical adolescent: he has not been seen for three days and, as Camillo says:

..... I
have missingly noted, he is of late much retired
from court and is less frequent to his princely
exercises than formerly he hath appeared . (IV.ii.30-33)

He, of course, against his father’s wishes and in disguise, is visiting Perdita, whom all believe to be a simple shepherdess, and we witness what seems almost a celebration of the intensity and yet naivety of adolescent love. The infatuated Florizel is prepared to give up everything, swearing to Perdita:

Or I'll be thine, my fair,
Or not my father's. For I cannot be
Mine own, nor any thing to any, if
I be not thine. To this I am most constant,
Though destiny say no. (IV.iv.42-46)

When challenged by his father Polixenes, also in disguise at the sheep shearing festival, as to whether his father has a right to at least know of his wedding to Perdita, not only does Florizel refuse but, in true rebellious fashion, denies that it has anything to do with him anyway.

I yield all this;
But for some other reasons, my grave sir,
Which 'tis not fit you know, I not acquaint
My father of this business. (IV.iv.407-410)

It is at this stage that Polixenes reveals himself but then, in a manner that perhaps reminds us of Leontes in Act one, erupts into a violent rage, promises to disinherit his son and threatens all others present with torture. So extreme is his reaction, in fact, that again we are reminded of a teenage tantrum and are confronted with what seems like almost a sexual jealousy. Frisking “ i’ the sun/ And bleat[ing] the one at the other...[exchanging] innocence for innocence” seems to have as little prepared Polixenes for adult life as it did Leontes and again we are presented with the frightening prospect of an all powerful monarch behaving with the immaturity and

yet passion of a teenager.

Up until this darkening of the play, Bohemia seems to have presented a rather warm endorsement of the world of adolescence and it is perhaps only now that we see its essential vulnerability. The sheep shearing festival is presided over, not by the bitter and obsessed Leontes but by the irresistible and yet thoroughly immoral confidence trickster, Autolycus. His delight in his own ingenuity, his living for the moment, his opportunistic thievery and lechery all seem to associate him with the spirit of adolescence as do his energy and optimism. On stage the sheep shearing scene is often presented as some kind of “hippy” festival and it is Autolycus who is the ultimate gate crasher, bringing his own music, selling his wears and generally getting the party going for the likes of Florizel, Perdita, the Clown, Mopsa, Dorcas and all those others, who in their dancing and freedom of expression, seem to exemplify the joys of youth.

How different from the “crabbed” (I.ii.102) world of Leontes and yet gradually we realize the precariousness of what can only be a temporary phase in development. Whereas in Sicily, Leontes seemed to believe in nothing beyond himself, in the world of Bohemia the revellers are happy to believe in everything, as their reception of Autolycus’ preposterous ballads only too clearly demonstrates. This naivety and gullibility becomes apparent the moment Polixenes reveals his true identity, perhaps best seen in the splendidly adolescent response of Florizel who, presented with a disaster, simply proclaims:

Why look you so upon me?
I am but sorry, not afeard; delay'd,
But nothing alter'd: what I was, I am;
More straining on for plucking back, not following
My leash unwillingly. (IV.iv.459-463)

Faced with the sudden intrusion of adult censure and responsibility, Bohemia, with all its vitality and virtues, seems to crumble instantly. As Perdita herself proclaims, the cold winds of Winter “would blow [them] through and through” (IV.iv.112) and it is only the intercession of the wise and aged Camillo who prevents Florizel, in his impetuosity, inadvertently re-enacting what Leontes had achieved in Act Three: to put Perdita in an open boat and abandon her to the ocean. To live in a state of perpetual adolescence it seems is as unrealistic as hoping to progress from innocent childhood to responsible adulthood without a period of transitional growth, experimentation and rebellion.

Act five takes us back to Sicily where Leontes, through suffering, repentance and prayer has finally reached the state of adult equilibrium he so badly lacked in the first half of the play. His “saint-like sorrow” may have enabled him to achieve judgement and maturity, however, but there is a sense of staleness and stagnation as Leontes and his courtiers lament both the lack of an heir and any sense of joy. No wonder that on their sudden arrival, Florizel and Perdita’s are “welcome[d]

hither/As is the spring to th'earth" (V.i.150-151) and that Leontes is so willing to forge their reconciliation with an irate Polixenes.

Events hurry towards a conclusion that will celebrate reconciliation for all and the "resurrection" of a "dead" Hermione but again we are reminded of a lost adolescence and the similarities between Florizel and Mamillius. As Leontes says:

were I but twenty-one,
Your father's image is so hit in you,
His very air, that I should call you brother,
As I did him, and speak of something wildly
By us perform'd before. (V.i.125-129)

The young restore the old, therefore, rural Bohemia is to be united with sophisticated Sicilia under a joint monarchy, Art and Nature are reunited and "that which was lost is found" but in some ways the ending of **The Winter's Tale** does not share the happy vision of Shakespeare's early comedies. Hermione is "wrinkled", we are told, sixteen years of marriage can never be retrieved, Mamillius cannot be restored and nor can Paulina and Camillo's sudden marriage offer much more than companionship. Florizel and Perdita have been helped through adolescence to a rich maturity, and even Autolycus is persuaded to take on adult responsibilities and a new morality, but for Leontes and Polixenes the price of missing out on what to all of us is a major stage in our development as mature individuals has been a high one.

Finally, then, we are led to ask, what does this interpretation of such a play contribute to our understanding of that stage of human development that, in the 21st century, has suddenly become so interesting to both neuroscientists and evolutionary psychologists alike? The answer, of course, is probably very little. **The Winter's Tale** is after all only a play, not a piece of academic research, and as such deals with a wide range of human issues and emotions, all of which are synthesised into what is essentially a literary creation. I said at the beginning, though, that to me the play "offers Shakespeare's most comprehensive portrayal of the problems and function of adolescence" and I hope that by focussing upon just this one aspect I have added a further dimension to what must always be a complex response to an extremely sophisticated and multi-layered play. To the psychologist, however, I hope that this approach offers the reassurance that what may seem a new preoccupation is, in fact, already well documented and is indeed worthy of serious study. Since the earliest initiation rituals, adolescence has always been seen as both a vital and yet problematic process by which human society comes to adapt itself to an ever changing future: is it only now that we have turned again to worrying about what is happening to those who must form the next generation?

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All references are to the New Penguin Shakespeare edition of *The Winter's Tale*, edited by Ernest Schanzer.

In an article written for "The 21st Century Learning Initiative" entitled "Adolescence: a Critical Evolutionary adaptation"

Barbara Strauch. *The Primal Teen*. (Doubleday) 2003

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