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## Re-thinking vulnerability and resilience through a psychosocial reading of Shakespeare

Resilience has become a prominent signifier in public discourse over the last decade. Its use abounds in advertising, across academic disciplines and particularly, in the policy documents of Western governments<sup>1</sup>. As the use of the term multiplies, its meaning seems to shrink. The logic that underpins the use of the term resilience in academic, advertising and policy discourses positions the rational, enlightened<sup>2</sup>, normal 'I' against the uncontrollable, malefic and hazily-defined 'it'. Resilience has come to signify the binary opposite of vulnerability: the ability to shore oneself (or one's community) up against attack from the other, from nature, or from socio-economic crisis, coupled with the redoubtable ability to bounce back and resume normality after that attack has happened<sup>3</sup>. The event itself now seems inevitable. The reasons for 'our' vulnerability to that event are generally unproblematized, as is the hurt we experience as a result of that event, and the relationship between the normality we resume and the way that we anticipate future events.

The resilience/vulnerability binary is the consequence of what Hélène Cixous (1975/1986) describes as the "universal battlefield" which underpins Western thought and its colonialist, 'masculine'<sup>4</sup> legacy. That is to say, it is an irreconcilable and inherently hierarchical positioning of two signs (resilience and vulnerability) as being in opposition to each other. This arrangement of language (and therefore thought – Cixous is a deconstructionist) emanates from an understanding of culture and human development as self-serving. The other must either be destroyed or appropriated in such a system: "there have to be *two* races – the masters and the slaves." (Cixous, 1975/1986, p.70). In systems like this, gifts are only ever given with the expectation of return. The violent gift is no exception to the apparently benign one – harm is received and responded to with more harm in an endless playing out of revenge and acquisition. Original thinking itself becomes impossible. The "law" ordains what is or what is not "thinkable" by ordering thought into a series of hierarchical oppositions, which all stem from a 'central' one: "man/woman". (Cixous, 1975/1986, p.64). This ordering leads us nowhere, other than to more orders, and to all the violence and oppression that goes with them. When resilience takes place in such an arena, our understanding of it can

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<sup>1</sup> Ager points out that there has been approaching an 8-fold increase in the probability of use of the term 'resilience' in a scientific and other scholarly work over a twenty-year period. (2013, p. 488).

<sup>2</sup> A Strong Britain in and Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy (2010) The Stationery Office: HMSO, p.22

<sup>3</sup> As Mark Neocleous puts it, "Resilience is nothing if not an apprehension of the future, but a future imagined as disaster and then, more importantly, recovery from disaster", (2013, p 4).

<sup>4</sup> Cixous usually uses the term in a performative sense. For example, all the examples she provides of 'feminine' writers in her ground breaking essay, *Sorties* (1975/1986) are biologically male.

only ever be according to the terms of the revenge economy and the assumption of a reality in which attack and retribution are inevitable and natural. We need to break that law if we are to find other ways of imagining a more generous and less destructive universe. For Cixous this can happen partly when we surrender to a process of writing that goes beyond codes and rules, a process that has the potential to radically re-order and redefine the core relationship between self in terms of a different economic model of exchange. This can happen, she argues, when the mechanics of gift giving are radically re-imagined. We therefore urgently need to use our imaginations if we are to go beyond the apparently natural law that reduces life to a “universal battlefield” (Cixous, 1975, p.64).

What would it mean to imagine a version of resilience that breaks the law? Or rather, to develop an understanding of resilience that exists instead *beyond* the law, in a remote and lawless place where symbolic codes have different meanings? Although the act of imagining this other version of resilience is, in itself, a resilient act (Hoult, 2012), we need help if we are to imagine this other place, this Elsewhere that exists beyond the wall of the law. As Cixous explains in her autobiographical account of her own resilience as a fatherless Jewish girl growing up in occupied Algeria:

There has to be somewhere else, I tell myself. And everyone knows that to go somewhere else there are routes, signs, ‘maps’ - for an exploration, a trip. – That’s what books are. (Cixous, 1975/1986, p. 72)

Literature, because of its reliance on metaphor, has the potential to provide the emergency escape routes – the rabbit holes - which can get us out of the ideological thinking that masquerades as common sense and into alternative realities and new ways of thinking. “Reading poetry won’t save the planet”, Timothy Morton tells us “. . . But art can allow us to glimpse things that exist beyond or between our normal categories.” (2010, p. 60) Literature’s power to offer escape routes and even to revolutionize is foundational to Cixous’ philosophy and it is the inspiration for the reading experiment contained in this chapter. We need help from books if we are to find that remote and desert place where resilience and vulnerability operate, not as binaries but as each other’s nucleus, so that the knowledge and near memory of what it feels like be hurt is core to one’s understanding of resilience, and the knowledge of one’s ability to repair is core to our experiences of vulnerability. But for Cixous books are just part of the escape route. For her, “(T)o begin (writing, living) we must also have death.” (1993, p.7) Citing Kafka’s description of a picture of the death of Alexander that

hangs unnoticed on a classroom wall<sup>5</sup>, Cixous demonstrates how images of death surround us. She argues, however, that most of us spend our lives looking at those images and not seeing. For Cixous really living and really writing means and returning to a state where we really see death and mourn afresh each time we see it.

“Writing is this effort not to obliterate the picture, not to forget” (1993, page 7).

But she is not advocating a gothic fixation with death as fetish. She means we need to remember what it feels like to experience the heart breaking - almost obliterating - mourning that makes us human. Learning to see death again is, for her, an essential education before we can write and live. She locates her early encounters with death as key to her writing and life, where they work on a literal, biographical level as well as signifying the stripping away of defences that she sees as essential if we are to really see and feel death properly, and be transformed by it.

“I immediately recognized the way to school. As future skinned animals, to go to school we must pass before a butcher’s shop, through the slaughter, to the cemetery door. Through the cemetery, our hearts beating from so much death, until we reach young life. This is our primary school, the school before school. The school to get to school.” (1993, p.8)

So a sort of de-programming is needed if we are to live a compassionate, resilient life. It means engaging viscerally with our own vulnerability (as future skinned animals). To be resilient is to survive with this full knowledge, not looking away with our hands over our ears. It means fully embracing the pathos of an individual lifespan while at the same time understanding it as held within wider, cosmic panorama. That panorama ‘itself’ is closer to T.S.Eliot’s notion of “an infinitely gentle/infinitely suffering thing” (Eliot, 1917, ‘The Prelude’) than to either the crass, popular applications of scientism, or the superficial, single readings of monotheistic traditions that are represented in the media. We need some new metaphors.

In this chapter I want to unsettle the prevalent understanding of resilience and vulnerability as binaries of each other by thinking about the relationship between the concepts within a psychosocial framework. I will try to demonstrate how Psychosocial Studies offers an interdisciplinary space which can allow for fresh thinking to occur. It is a space in which the

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<sup>5</sup> Cixous cites Kafka’s incomplete novel included in *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*, tr. C. Kaiser and G. Wilkins (New York: Schocken), p.329 as the source for this reference.

application of deliberate theoretical eclecticism can open up the spaces for imaginative work to take place. By holding problems and taken-for-granted assumptions up to what Bruna Seu (2013) calls the “psychosocial prism” we can allow competing, and sometimes highly contradictory, readings to co-exist. I will draw on insights from various disciplines, asking, after Rorty (1989), not if one or other is true but whether it is useful in helping to think through a different kind of relationship between vulnerability and resilience to the oppositional one that has come to dominate public discourse in the last decade. It is possible to draw on evidence-based disciplines as well as psychoanalytical and critical ones, without descending into a dialectical debate about the rightness of one or another.

### **Where we are now**

‘Resilience’ urgently needs to be subjected to critical thinking. The term has come to prominence in the international policy arena since 9/11 and the terms ‘security’ and ‘resilience’ have been increasingly elided in political discourses in the UK and US since then. When the UK’s Coalition government published its national security strategy<sup>6</sup> (2010) on coming to power, for example, military attack was conflated with natural disasters and large-scale accidents into a general block of threat which must be defended against. The document combines anxiety with arrogance in interesting ways, combining a child-like hubris in the face of catastrophe with a nightmarish picture show of what those threats might be. The statement:

“We must do all we can, within the resources available, to predict, prevent and mitigate the risks to our security. For those risks that we can predict we must act both to reduce the likelihood of their occurring, and develop the resilience to reduce their impact”. (p.25)

is followed shortly by the plaintive admission of our inherent vulnerability:

“But we cannot prevent every risk as they are inherently unpredictable. To ensure that we are able to recover quickly when risks turn into actual damage to our interests, we have to promote **resilience**, both locally and nationally.”

This understanding of resilience positions it as the antidote to vulnerability. ‘Resilience’ here means the ability of a nation state to both anticipate impending (and, by implication, inevitable) attack and to regroup and resume normality quickly after the assault has

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<sup>6</sup> A Strong Britain in and Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy (2010) The Stationery Office: HMSO

happened. Resilience has become synonymous with the pursuit of invulnerability. As Simone Drichel puts it, in this new political landscape, “invulnerability serves the function of restoring a sense of control and mastery over a threatening environment.” (2013, p. 5)

In his essay on the increasing ubiquity of the term resilience, Mark Neocleous (2013) examines the rise to prominence of the term in UK and US Security documents, such as National Strategy for Homeland Security (2007) in the US and the UK’s ‘National Security Strategy’ (2008) – both post 9/11 as well as in publications from international quangos such as the documentation from international guidelines for disaster planning and the IMF. He writes of the use of the term in the financial sector: “Resilience comes to form the basis of *subjectively* dealing with the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capitalism as well as the insecurity of the national security state.” (P.5) and summarises this emergent but dominant use of the term resilience thus:

“The presupposition of permanent threat demands a constant re-imagining of the myriad ways in which that threat might be realized. Resilience therefore comes to be a fundamental mechanism of policing the imagination.” (p.4)

If this is true then resistance of the imposition of law on the imagination is necessary and urgent, as Cixous predicted. Other writers have made similar arguments about the term vulnerability. Indeed an entire edition of the journal *Substance* was dedicated in 2013 to a critical analysis of the term in the social and political sphere and re-thinking possibilities for it. In her introduction to the number, Simone Drichel (p5) points to the problem with the current association of vulnerability with impending threat of destruction by the other:

“This conventional understanding of vulnerability as openness and exposure to threat and violation is operative across many different contemporary political arenas, where it animates a range of biopolitical discourses of security and resilience. The experience of vulnerability, in other words, generally results in the pursuit of invulnerability, where invulnerability serves the function of restoring a sense of control and mastery over a threatening environment.”

The definition of resilience by the editors of the annual research review edition of the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry (Panter-Brick and Leckman, 2013, p.333) as the “process of harnessing biological, psychosocial, structural, and cultural resources to sustain wellbeing”, is more helpful. The authors emphasise the multi-dimensional pathways of resilience and the way that it must be understood as temporarily and contextually specific.

Still we are left with a superficial list of mechanisms and still we are left with the fundamental opposition between resilience and vulnerability. As I said previously, we need new metaphors and the best metaphors will always be found in literary and artistic work. I will

now turn to the writer who has, according to Cixous, gone further than anyone else through the emergency exit: William Shakespeare. His play, *The Winter's Tale*, is the quintessential tale of resilience. It is a fable of human survival against all the odds and the transformation of the logic of revenge into the economy of forgiveness.

### **Vulnerability/Resilience in *The Winter's Tale***

Shakespeare's late play – *The Winter's Tale* includes one of the most troubling scenes in the whole of his oeuvre. A newborn baby is abandoned on a beach in the middle of a storm and left by a man who is chased away, and subsequently killed, by a bear. The interplay between the extreme vulnerability of the abandoned baby, her surprise survival and the interjection of the bear lends itself to an exploration of what resilience might look like outside of the revenge economy. I will use this key scene in the play as a way of exploring alternatives for the relationship between resilience and vulnerability. I do not expect all readers to have a close working knowledge of the play: the point is to demonstrate how a psychosocial reading of a text might help us to imagine new ways of thinking about a problem, and to use Shakespeare's text as a cradle for that reading.

“The storm begins. Poor wretch,  
That for thy mother's fault art thus exposed  
To loss and what may follow! Weep I cannot,  
But my heart bleeds, and most accursed am I  
To be by oath enjoined to this. Farewell.  
The day frowns more and more. Thou'rt like to have  
A lullaby too rough. I never saw  
The heavens so dim by day. A savage clamour!” (Act III, scene 3, lines 49-56)

With these words Antigonus, a respectable middle-aged man and father of three, abandons a newborn baby girl in the middle of a violent storm in a place which is known for its dangerous wildlife. It is the fate that her biological father, King Leontes, has determined for her. Leontes, a violent and jealous man has convinced himself that his pregnant wife has slept with someone else (his best friend, Polixenes) and that the baby is not 'his' and therefore it must cease to exist in his consciousness. He has set out specific instructions

that the baby (or the “brat . . . No father owning it” as he calls her (Act III, scene 2, lines 87-88)) must be left to the elements, without mercy or protection. Horrific though this is, in fact it is a climb down from his initial declaration that the baby must be burned on a fire or else he will bash its brains out<sup>7</sup>. The abandonment idea is his concession to his advisors, who plead with him not to kill the baby.

Watching a violent middle aged man being restrained from killing a new born baby in front of us is as shocking now as it would have been in Jacobean England when the play was first performed. This tiny being, who cannot even sit up or eat without the support of another, is being threatened with destruction by the adult who should be protecting her. And so the father is restrained and the baby is left completely alone on a dangerous coastline of a far off country – Bohemia - which is known for its vicious storms and its predatory wild animals. It is a scene of shocking brutality – a demonstration of how dangerous adults can exploit and abuse the glaring vulnerability of very young children. Leontes’ instructions to Antigonus were specific: he must take the baby “To some remote and desert place, quite out/ Of our dominions” (Act II, Scene 3, lines 175-175). Here his ‘dominions’ are his psychic ones as well as the geo-political boundary controls of his actual kingdom. The geographical distance of the abandonment is significant – it is what makes the monstrosity of the act bearable for the key players. Leontes is making the same move that we habitually make in the North/West when we withhold support for the vulnerable other who lives far away from us. ‘The distant sufferer’ as Peter Singer (2009) puts it, is removed beyond the boundaries of our compassion and we mobilise the concept of geographical distance to help us to maintain those boundaries. Shakespeare shows the mechanism at work on stage but will not allow his audience the ‘real life’ luxury of looking away. Instead he uses the ‘as if’ space of drama to invoke immediacy and brings us face to face with that sufferer, silent, still and moments from destruction. This wordless image of extreme vulnerability is brought right into our face, as it were. And then the scene snaps: a storm does its worst and Antigonus is killed by a bear. Nature, it seems, will not stand by and allow for this violation of vulnerability, even if humans allow it.

### **‘ . . . exit, pursued by a bear’**

The scene in which Antigonus is chased off the stage by a bear is often treated with comic embarrassment; it is set up by what Dennis Biggins calls “the most notorious stage direction in the whole of Shakespeare” (Biggins, p3). Critics and audiences have sometimes understood the scene in pantomime terms and as such, question Shakespeare’s reasons for including the stage direction. The Clown’s subsequent description of the way that Antigonus

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<sup>7</sup> “The bastard brains with these my proper hands/Shall I dash out.” (Act II, Scene 3, lines 139-140).

is eaten by the bear is gory enough (“to see how a bear tore out his shoulder-bone, how he cried for me to help. . . “3/3, 94 and “If there be any of him left, I’ll bury it” (3/3, 127)), without the need for Shakespeare to actually put the bear on stage<sup>8</sup>. So why include the actual bear in this most poignant of scenes of vulnerability? Why not use a sound effect, hold the moment of silent shock and then report the death off stage? It could be argued, of course, that it is just our<sup>9</sup> modern familiarity with bears as either children’s toys or endangered species that interrupts what would have been, for Jacobean audiences, a horror scene. Modern theatre directors struggle to re-capture at least enough of that original horror to quell the audience’s laughter, even if it is impossible to re-create the fear itself. But even still, for Jacobean audiences, there would be some risk of laughter. They probably would have been de-sensitised to some of the danger of bears by their familiarity with chained dancing bears in the streets – it is this master-slave relationship between human and bear that the play subverts. Although there is some historical evidence of the use of tamed bears by English theatre companies in the seventeenth century, realistically the bear can only ever have been a man dressed in a bear suit, Shakespeare must have known that the scene would risk introducing laughter to this most painful of scenes.

Michael Bristol (1991, p.159) has argued convincingly that considerations about the strangeness of the decision to stage the bear by this most sophisticated of playwrights are irrelevant. In his comprehensive account of the symbolism of the bear in terms of the pagan and Christian pattern of festivals with which the Shakespearean audience would have been familiar, he argues that the bear is in fact a Candlemas bear, a symbolic trope that would have very specific associations with early seventeenth century European audiences, signifying the end of winter and the movement from death to rebirth and that Shakespeare’s contemporary audiences would have clearly understood the symbolism in profound and nuanced ways that escape modern audiences. In Bristol’s convincing reading, “practical and contingent” generic questions about how to read the bear scene as spectacle are rendered irrelevant.

Although I can’t add anything to Bristol’s historical scholarship, I would like to suggest a symbolic reading of the scene, which might also loosely be described as ‘psychosocial’ for the purposes of exploring what the scene can teach us about vulnerability and its relationship to resilience. Let us return to the play and remind ourselves of the context for the events on the beach. As I have said, Antigonus abandons the new born on a dangerous

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<sup>8</sup> In the preceding quotation it is notable how within the space of four words a human being is destroyed. The ‘him’ has already become a body part (it) by the end of the sentence, echoing Leontes’ earlier othering of Perdita as an it (a ‘brat’ and a ‘bastard’, in fact).

<sup>9</sup> The ‘our’ here is contingent on geography: readers who live inside the Arctic Circle would probably have less cosy associations with bears.

coastline of a country that is known particularly for its predatory wild animals and punitive weather. The baby has been wrenched from her mother a few hours after being born because her father, King Leontes, is convinced that he is not the biological father of the child and that, instead, his friend Polixenes has fathered the child. In this mad world, which I have argued in previous work is a representation of Hélène Cixous's masculine economy (Hoult, 2012), the abandonment of a new born to almost certain death becomes imaginable when the patriarchal order is undermined. Protection of the vulnerable is only afforded to those who are legitimately conceived and who therefore fit into the rigid patriarchal lineage structure. Such selective abandonment only increases and intensifies our revulsion, especially as we know that it has been common practice - and indeed still is - in some communities. Even if we acknowledge, as we should, that 'abandonment' is social construct which is clumsily applied in modern times in ways that belie the far more nuanced understanding of parental passing on of responsibilities in other cultures (see Panter-Brick, page 4 – 5 for example), what Shakespeare puts on stage in the middle of *The Winter's Tale* is undeniably a shocking and unnatural act which, in Panter-Brick's words (p.3) is "an act which effectively sidesteps infanticide".

What we are watching, therefore, is infanticide intercepted. Given this, I would argue that perhaps the nervous laughter that troubles critics is not the result of anachronistic understandings of dangerous wild animals as cuddly toys, but is instead a response that was anticipated by the playwright. The up close image of an abandoned newborn baby in a terrifying landscape is perhaps too painful for any of us to hold our gaze on if for more than a few seconds and this is as true of the early seventeenth century audience as it would be for us in the twenty-first century. It is too close to our own primal experience of helplessness, even when we were born into relatively safe circumstances. We cannot recover the genesis of this earliest vulnerability. But the dark, dreamlike nature of the theatrical space offers us something different. Time and proximities are jumbled - as in dreams - and we are able to re-experience what is withheld elsewhere. In the theatre we have no 'eye-lid of the soul', as Cixous puts it, that can blink quickly enough to shield us from what we do not want to see. Mostly we have developed sophisticated filters which allow us not to look at the picture of the battle scene on the classroom wall. We are shored up to the hilt and are able to look without seeing. As long as we are never taken by surprise. Shakespeare takes this shock and holds us there, just for a few seconds. He asks us to keep our eyes open long enough, and to take in, even momentarily, that image of deliberate abandonment to violent death of a new born baby girl. And then the scene snaps. He makes the unbearable bearable again by giving us a bear to chase away our darkest horror and bring us back to the now. We take

relief in embarrassed tittering as the man dressed in a bear costume lumbers on stage and we feel okay again.

If we can tolerate the argument that Shakespeare is coaxing us to confront our own buried vulnerability in order to point us to a more plural and resilient way of being, then we can make links with other writers who seem to be arguing, in other mediums, for the same thing. Hannah Arendt, for example, emphasises an associated idea in her notion of natality as the foundational experience (1958). And Judith Butler states that in order to “understand how humans suffer from oppression” (2004, p.32) we must be prepared to hold our gaze on the first and fundamental experience of vulnerability, a condition which means “being given the touch of the other, even if there is no other there, and no support for our lives” (2004, p.32). It is the object of this gaze that we see in the baby on stage; the image of a tiny girl, born into violence, where the ontology of me and mine has wrecked the order and left her with no protection. The rest of the play proceeds to ask what might come out of this darkest place, what mechanisms of repair and forgiveness would need to take place in order for recovery to happen. The play works pedagogically, coaxing us towards a deeper understanding of our own vulnerability so that we can begin to apprehend a different way of dealing with ourselves and each other which is posited at the end of the play. In fact the baby grows up to be a feisty and highly intelligent survivor, called Perdita. Her survival is, as I have argued in previous work (Hoult, 2012) a literary archetype of resilience.

Hélène Cixous has meditated on vulnerability in her writing, most notably in her novel, *The Day I wasn't There*, comprehensively analysed in terms of what she has to say about vulnerability by Sonja Boon (2013). Boon (2013, p.92) argues that “for Cixous the practice of vulnerability requires us to imagine generation through loss”. This engagement with our own vulnerability and experiences of loss opens up the potential for creativity and loving relationships with others. As Boon goes on to say (p. 103), “Absolution, if possible, comes only through keeping the wound open by enabling porosity and recognizing that the haunting comes from within. In the practice of vulnerability it is the journey itself that matters, not the arrival. The *entredeux* is a constantly shifting space: it is our commitment to exploring it that allows for the possibility of transformation.” And from this acknowledgement of vulnerability comes the ability to mourn. As Butler argues:

“Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is a losing, as we know,

but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned.” (2004, p. 21).

So there is something that happens when we look – really look – at the raw vulnerability of the other and allow ourselves to remember our own vulnerability that opens up to mourning. And from that mourning we can proceed to something deeper than the shrill, macho versions of resilience that dominate the political scene. At the end of *The Winter’s Tale* there is a reconciliation of all the players who have survived the violence. Return (economic) displaced by return (coming back). Cixous (1991, p.42) writes, “Love can’t be exchanged for social adaptation, its life signs have no market equivalents.” None of this is possible without acknowledgment of the full force of loss. If we cannot allow ourselves to acknowledge the loss, we will continue to be haunted by that loss in ways that prevent us from reaching out to others and living full (and I would add, resilient) lives, as Stephen Frosh has argued (2013). But the chasm between vulnerability and resilience as we know both terms, seems too vast, too difficult to cross. How do we get there?

**The performance of resilience in the play** Having set out how we first understand the baby Perdita as highly vulnerable, now I want to concentrate on her as resilient for a while before considering how the qualities work together. In *The Winter’s Tale* resilience is performed by the text itself and the capabilities are played out in different ways by different characters. The text not only contains characters who inhabit the roles of less or more resilient learners but the text itself takes on a pedagogical purpose, coaxing the audience/readers into a more resilient, open position by the time the final scene is reached. Perdita has survived the following events: <sup>10</sup>

- 1) her birth in prison;
- 2) the death of her brother;
- 3) her father’s rejection of her and its violent expression;
- 4) her father’s psychotic behaviour towards her mother;
- 5) abduction from her mother before she is weaned (and her mother’s subsequent disappearance);
- 6) abandonment as a baby in a dangerous place;
- 7) the death of her first guardian in a gruesome attack by a wild animal;
- 8) exile from her family, her nation and her class.

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<sup>10</sup> A version of the content of pages 12-15 previously appeared in Hault, E.C. (2012). *Adult Learning and la Recherche Féminine: Reading Resilience and Hélène Cixous*, pp 72-78 New York: Palgrave Macmillan

This is not an auspicious start to life. She has, however, been described as, “Lusty and like to live” in the first few moments of her life (II, 2, 28); we know that she has at least a fighting chance. For anyone to survive at all in these circumstances would be remarkable but the miracle of Perdita is that she retains and develops the capacity for faith (5/3, line 95) and playfulness (4/4, line 135), the ability to inspire (4/4, lines 134-146) and to feel (5/3, lines 45-46) profound love and the courage to resist oppression (4/4, line 423). She has been born into the excesses of opprobrium and tyranny. Death precedes language for her. Imprisonment and then deportation are realities before she finds a safe home. Survival is, from the very beginning, inextricably bound up with Perdita’s identity. She is lucky enough to be spared by the bear and then found, rescued and adopted by two ‘fathers’ – a clown and a shepherd in a foreign and more generous land than the one from which she is exiled. She grows up to be a feisty, intelligent and happy young woman.

Her original homeland was a place where patriarchy had gone mad, gone murderous, and in order to survive, the little girl had to be taken to another world where she can have the necessary space and enough love to develop resilience. Perdita is lost, then found, in the most Cixousian of locations – the coast. The coast is always changing, land and sea meet at a point that is never constant but subject to tides, erosion and deposition. As Schwartz (2005, p.6) points out, the coast is a place “that demarcates fluidity and solidity, change and fixity, and also brings them into interplay.” This sets the tone for her identity from then on. Perdita is constantly changing, adapting and moving.<sup>11</sup> Like the sea, she is nomadic, in perpetual transit. Later, her beloved, Florizel is to see it in her and love her capacity to “change in continuity, not loss”, (Schwartz, 2005), reflecting her fluidity in the beautiful lines he addresses to her:

. . . When you do dance, I wish you  
A wave o’ th’ sea, that you might ever do  
Nothing but that: move still, still so,  
And own no other function. (4/4, lines 140-143)

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<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that she displays a kind of Keatsian negative capability – as Li Ou describes it (cited in Driche, p.24)

“. . . to be open to the actual vastness and complexity (of) experience, and one cannot possess this openness unless one can abandon the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge, safely guarding the self’s identity, for a more truthful view of the world which is necessarily more disturbing or even agonizing for the self.” (p.2 in Ou)

Her fluidity and her ability to change are the only things that are fixed about her. She is bisexual in Cixous' (1975/1986, p. 84-85) sense of the word – of truly allowing for masculinity and femininity to co-exist in a way that depends on a profound commitment to the “non exclusion of difference”. When she arrives in Sicilia, for example, the servant says of her (5/1, lines 110-112):

Women will love her that she is a woman  
More worth than any man; men, that she is  
The rarest of all women.

This ability to change and act in fluid ways allows Perdita to resist the consequences of internalising exclusion at all levels. Shakespeare subverts the female stereotype robustly throughout the text, and it is in Perdita that he realizes the capacity for multiplicity and liberation most extremely. Schwartz (2005, p.16) argues that “Perdita encompasses sexual differences (virginal *and* erotic), social differences (shepherdess *and* ‘queen’), mythic differences (Flora *and* Persephone) and in imagistic terms, differences in the substances of life itself (earth *and* water).” This capacity to exist across the boundaries and to resist categorization is highly protective. Her capacity to embrace difference and to resist the distinction between self and other allows her to survive and thrive in exile. This, it could be argued, is a source, or at least a characteristic, of her resilience.

The performance of resilience is therefore encapsulated in this ability. Cixous' argument that bisexuality which is founded on “the admittance of difference” (Sellars, p.40, 1994) is the route to challenge the violence and destruction of the masculine economy because it allows for the emergence of the feminine gift – the basis on which Cixous argues for a full scale social and political revolution. Perdita's ability to admit the other in her own identity is thus the space in which resilience can also develop. Bisexuality is core to Cixous' argument for the resistance of the masculine economy. She argues that, “the non-exclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this ‘permission’ one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body.” (1975/1986 p84-88). But there is a problem here. Cixous bases this psychosocial argument on psychoanalytical theories that women remain closer to the m/other and love. But the point about Perdita is that she is wrenched away from her mother's body in her first hours of life.

There is no mother's body – indeed her mother make a long and dramatic speech about the way that this deprivation will lead inevitably to Perdita's vulnerability<sup>12</sup>. The fact is that Perdita is brought up – from her earliest baby days, through toddler, girl and adolescent, by two men who are not biologically related to her. So for all that one can argue that she represents a Cixousian understanding of fluidity and difference, the theoretical basis on which Cixous seems to found her argument is undone by the facts of Perdita's upbringing. With Cixous, however, we are always dealing with constantly changing morphology, and it is never wise to assert fixed meanings.

In the natural world of Bohemia, that is so different from the place of her birth, Perdita is brought up by a father and son who have no time for the currency regulations of the masculine economy – “I should be rich by the fairies” (3/3, line 105) says the shepherd. In this alternative, pastoral, feminine world these men know how to bring up a baby and are able to give her the good enough love she needs in order to develop resilience. Here she can flourish and survive and develop resilience and she has been left in an environment that can foster resilience in her. Perdita is exiled from her family and from her social class. The pagan, feminine world in which she is raised provides her with more resilience than she could possibly have been allowed to develop at home. It is not a sentimentally produced idyll, though, nor is it the full realization of Cixous' economy of the feminine. As Snyder and Curren-Aquino note, (2007, p.20) it is the most complex and diverse pastoral environment of Shakespeare's works.

When the shepherd finds Perdita she is just a “bundle in a box” wearing “a bearing cloth for a squire's child” (3/3, line 103) but thereafter she is always wearing somebody else's clothes. After she is a baby in a box, she is a shepherdess (4/1, line 27), then a shepherdess dressed as Flora (4/4, line 2), the queen of the sheep-shearing festival (4/4), then she escapes in disguise, only to be recast by her lover as the daughter of Smalus, the king of Libya (5/1, line 156), before being revealed as she 'really' is, the daughter of a king. A traditional reading of the play might suggest that her 'real' identity as a princess is what has protected her all along, providing as it does her innate intelligence, beauty, confidence and eloquence. The reading of the play as a text that can support a performative understanding of resilience falters at this point. If resilience is already 'in' the resilient person in the way that this reading would suggest that royal blood is in Perdita all along, then this investigation has limited applications. But Shakespeare is more playful than that. Perdita does not dismiss her identity as princess as false but she presents it as yet another set of clothes - a point that is supported by her adoptive fathers' (or father and brother's) simultaneous

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<sup>12</sup> See Act III, Scene 2, lines 92-115.

acquisition of the clothes of gentlemen (5/2/ lines 111-113). She is aware throughout these transformations of what is going on and she finds it ridiculous, “and me, a lowly maid,/Most goddess-like pranked up.” (4/4, lines 9-10). Perdita understands what is subversive and incendiary about so freely taking on and putting off different costumes. She knows that those in power disapprove of dressing up because they believe so firmly in their own clothes. There is something very threatening to rulers about those who can see through the sham. The little boy who points out that the emperor is naked has the potential to rock an empire to its foundations. Perdita can see through her own disguises and she does not see the “borrowed flaunts” as fixed elements of her identity unlike the two kings who are trapped in their roles/clothes. Resilience is therefore constituted in the conscious knowledge that one is dressing up/undressing and the knowledge – the revolutionary knowledge – that if these clothes don’t fit it is easy enough to find some more. She knows the meaning of choosing to wear particular costumes:

. . . sure this robe of mine

Does change my disposition (4/4, lines 134-135)

So there is no pre-existing worldly disposition that is stronger than the clothes it wears. With this knowledge comes courage. Perdita’s language is playful and highly eloquent. Her resilience allows her to see through other people’s clothes in a way that is remarkable for a Jacobean woman. She has a sense of her equal value and will not accept the categorization that is afforded her. But it also makes her vulnerable. Exiled as she is, she can only operate subversively if she is to survive. When she escapes from danger, she does so in true Cixousian style<sup>13</sup> she flies away with her lover, wearing the clothes of a thief.

### **‘The ‘source’ of Perdita’s resilience**

Let us return to the main scene – the abandoned baby, the bear and the fleeing man. Permit me a brief lapse into literalism to ask why doesn’t the bear eat the baby if s/he is hungry? Why risk a fight with an adult human? There are at least two embodiments of vulnerability in the scene – the pure and innocent vulnerability of the abandoned and the culpable and defended vulnerability of the abandoner. Antigonus complicates matters. How does the vulnerability of the aggressor fit into this alternative reading of resilience? Perdita’s ‘pure’ vulnerability leads to resilience, whereas Antigonus’ culpable and defended vulnerability

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<sup>13</sup> (“To fly/steal is woman’s gesture, to steal into language to make it fly. . .” 1975/1986, p.96)

does not. I want to suggest that the 'source' of Perdita's resilience emanates partly from the foundational experience of vulnerability in her encounter with the bear. We know it is always dangerous to search for origins, or 'the centre', as Derrida (1978) calls it but still, it is reasonable to ask, what precedes, if not generates, the performance of resilience. What do we make of this bear then? The pairing of him or her and the baby is maybe a demonstration of what Tim Morton calls the ecological ethic and perhaps goes some way to answering his question "What would a truly democratic encounter between truly equal beings look like, and what would it be – can we imagine it?" (2010, p.7). Let us assume that this bear is not a representation of nature as symbolically evil, as Pafford (1963/2014, p. 1xi) has suggested, but rather what Tim Morton describes as the 'strange stranger' that other who is both outside of us and part of us and who triggers a response in us which either leads us back to the chain of violence, domination and rejection, or to something entirely different:

"When I encounter the strange stranger, I gaze into the depths of space, far more vast and profound than physical space that can be measured with instruments. The disturbing depth of another person is a radical consequence of inner freedom . . . strange strangers are right next to us. They are us. Inner space is right here." (2010, p.78)

Perdita's survival, and therefore, one source of her resilience, is located in the open encounter with the strange stranger and her own defencelessness in the face of it. "We should think like losers, not winners" says Morton (2010, p.73), countering Nietzsche. Perdita's defenceless, pre-linguistic openness allows her and the bear to encounter each other beyond the co-ordinates of the conventional encounters with Nature – sentimentality and ferality – and to surrender to a gaze which is characterised instead by what Morton calls "uncanny familiarity" (2010, p.75). This is perhaps what Cixous means when she talks about the feminine gift which is given without thought of return. We could argue that the ethical encounter with the strange stranger is a mechanism which subverts the logic of aggression and imposes a break on space-time that allows a different kind of economy of exchange to emerge. That new economy is echoed in the pagan ecology of Bohemia – her new home. The 'source' of Perdita's resilience, then, is not located in her royal 'blood', as an authoritarian, patriarchal reading would suggest. It is constituted partly in her fluid and 'bisexual' subjectivity, which a Cixousian reading leads us to consider and partly in the restorative and therapeutic adoptive parenting that she receives from the shepherd and the clown, as a Winnicottian reading might suggest. But it is this foundational encounter with the strange stranger and her subsequent irreversible baptism into the web of interconnectedness that sets up the ecology in which those other performances can flourish.

The encounter with the bear amazes her and thereafter it can never be reconstructed in the way that the dominant culture prescribes. As Morton says,

“The stranger is infinity . . . So before we get to mutual recognition, we must have radical openness. Because the strange stranger is uncanny and uncertain, she he or it gives us pause. The fact that the strange stranger might bite is the least of our worries.” (80-81)<sup>14</sup>

The march of individualism has been interrupted. There is no going back from this looking into the inner space of the eyes of a bear. In *The Winter's Tale*, the reconnection with primal vulnerability is portrayed as quintessential to the performance of resilience.

### **Now and in the Future**

So, to return to the question posed at the beginning of the chapter what would a version of resilience look like that exists instead *beyond* the law, in a remote and lawless place where symbolic codes have different meanings? It would perhaps look like the encounter between the baby Perdita and the bear. But where does that leave us, in the real world, not the world of Jacobean romance? At the time of writing, the world has never seemed more dangerous. The stockpiles of resilience that political leaders have been collecting since 9/11 are already being ripped apart. The imaginary safety net – that fantasy of first world privilege – has been exposed as a sham. Drones regularly drop bombs in rural communities where children are killed. Aeroplanes are shot out of the sky, killing everyone on board, apparently without any accountability. Schools and hospitals are blown up and apparently nobody can call a halt to the carnage. School girls are abducted. Chemical weapons are used in crowded areas, maiming and killing thousands of children. And the West's worst nightmare has happened - radicalised, angry young men, bent on violent and vengeful world domination turn out to be home grown. We in the West are experiencing the invasion of the Selfsame, exactly as Cixous predicted (1976).

But something else has also changed. The violence that has marked the recent international political scene has represented a breakdown in many people's ability to look and not see death in the smooth and practised way with which we have become accustomed. The events of 2014 seemed to represent a sea change. It not been the first time that local people armed with smart phones, have been able to disseminate images of atrocities through social media faster than the mediated accounts of official news channels, but it was the first time that so many people globally have been watching. Recently it has been

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<sup>14</sup> Morton cites Levinas' (1969) *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority* as the main source for this idea but adds that the Dalai Lama 'concur ("others are infinity")'. See endnote 103, p. 149 in Morton (2010).

possible to find oneself looking, without warning, into the eyes of a mutilated child on a tablet computer or a mobile phone. The sudden sight of a new born, apparently wrenched from her dead mother's womb is probably the equivalent of the first time an audience sees the new born baby abandoned to die on stage in *The Winter's Tale*. The horror and revulsion at this deliberate destructive act is visceral. Social media technologies have brought the eyes of the victim close to us. We look at photographs of dead and maimed children on the same tablets and mobile phones that we look at the photographs of our own children's birthday parties.. Like Antigonus, our hearts bleed as we abandon those babies and move onto the next image. But while we still gaze with boredom at the picture of the death of Alexander on the wall, when a photograph of death is right here, in our hands, on our mobile phones, it feels different. And perhaps in this technological encounter with vulnerability lies a sliver of hope. Judith Butler argues for the recognition of loss as a crucial component of growth and the capacity for interdependence which could be worked through politically if enough of us had the will:

“Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war. We cannot, however, will away this vulnerability.” (2004, page 29).

Out of that emergence of empathy, perhaps, can grow something more like a deeper form of resilience. One which fundamentally challenges the version of resilience as a psychosocial weapon, ever armed and always on the lookout for the next attack. It also challenges the assumption that the avoidance of loss is of itself a protective factor against vulnerability.

By the end of *The Winter's Tale*, a new reality has been established, one in which resilience can only take place in full cognisance of vulnerability – our own and others'. Unlike the version of resilience that is put forward by the writers of the UK and US defence documents, in Shakespeare's play, resilience is manifested in the ability to deliberately shed defences and boundaries in order to be open to new knowledge and new understandings of the other. It is constituted not in the arrogant anxiety of national security strategies, but in the silent image of the abandoned, but surviving baby.

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