



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 4, Episode 2

The Changeling: Madness Onstage and Off

Hosts: Aubree Gray and Grayson Fulp

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A note on content: This episode includes in-depth discussion of mental illness, specifically madness, in the early modern period, including details on the mistreatment of the mentally ill, violence against women, and use of loaded language.

Bonus Materials

Records from Bethlem Royal Hospital including estate papers, administrative records, and materials for both Bridewell Hospital and St. George's Fields can be found online here:

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F122001>

Episode Resources

Allderidge, Patricia. "Management and Mismanagement at Bedlam, 1547–1633." *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century*. Ed. Charles Webster. Cambridge University Press, 1979, 141–164.

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Andrews, Jonathan. "The Politics of Committal to Early Modern Bethlem." *Medicine in the Enlightenment*. Ed. by Roy Porter, Rodopi, 1995, 6–53.

"BBC Play of the Month: The Changeling (1974)." YouTube, 23 Sept. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU-ni2cuHkE.

"BST's The Changeling." YouTube, Brave Spirits Theatre, 4 Mar. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXi6Rs9jC0U.

MacDonald, Michael. *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

"Thomas Middleton and William Rowley: The Changeling." Films On Demand, Films Media Group, 1993, <https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=106481&xtid=7298>.

Episode Transcript

GRAYSON: Hello, and welcome to another episode of Writ in the Margins. My name is Grayson Fulp,

AUBREE: And I'm Aubree Gray.

GRAYSON: And today we will be talking about *The Changeling*, written by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, first performed in 1622, first published in 1652.

AUBREE: Before we begin, we want to give some brief content warnings. We will be talking about madness in the early modern period, so a content warning for discussing mistreatment of the mentally ill, asylums, violence against women, and use of loaded language.

GRAYSON: Specifically, we will be using the term 'asylum' quite frequently, as well as referring to the people within them as 'patients', acknowledging that at this time, they were much closer to inmates.

AUBREE: Listener discretion is advised.

GRAYSON: Alright, so, how much do you know about *The Changeling*, Aubree?

AUBREE: Well, it's most famous for its sort of twisted quasi-romance, a whole tragic tale of desire and morality, right?

GRAYSON: Absolutely, the main plot of *The Changeling* is rife with murder, betrayal, desire, there's even a bed trick!

AUBREE: There always is, somehow...

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GRAYSON: But, that's actually not what we are here to discuss today, if you want more about the main plot, you can check out this season's other episode on *The Changeling*. Instead, we will be focusing on *The Changeling's* B plot instead.

AUBREE: Sounds like a plan to me. Care to give us a quick recap of what happens in the B plot?

GRAYSON: Of course! After the first scene of the play, the action cuts to two men as Alibius – an old man, owner of a private asylum, and described by the Dramatis Personae as a 'jealous doctor,' – confiding in his servant, Lollo, about his anxieties that his young and beautiful wife, Isabella, will be unfaithful while he isn't at home.

AUBREE: It seems like almost every early modern husband has a such fear of cuckoldry...

GRAYSON: Well, Alibius decides to ask Lollo to effectively stand guard over her in his place, to confine her and keep her away not from his 'brainsick patients' as he describes them, but the 'daily visitants' that come to gawk at them.

AUBREE: So they just imprison her?

GRAYSON: Pretty much. And the thing is, it doesn't even work, two separate men are revealed to have snuck into the asylum, pretending to be fools in order to make advances on Isabella. One says to her face that he is not a fool, another is later revealed in a letter he wrote. Even Lollo makes advances on her while Alibius is away.

AUBREE: Oh jeez, that is...not great.

GRAYSON: Yeah, it happens a lot of times for just a couple of scenes.

AUBREE: Does this intersect with the A plot like, at all?

GRAYSON: I mean, a little bit. Amidst the drama in the asylum, Alibius reveals that he has been asked to bring his patients as entertainment for Beatrice and Alsemero's wedding, and the two fake madmen are briefly suspects in Alonzo's murder, before the truth is shortly revealed.

AUBREE: But on the whole, it seems like it's pretty self contained.

GRAYSON: Absolutely, which results in it being pretty easy to cut entirely if a production wishes to, like the 1993 BBC broadcast production. Otherwise, decisions will have to be made as to how the asylum patients are portrayed and othered onstage, whether it be through actor behavior, affecting a sort of infantilized innocence like the 1974 BBC Play of the Month broadcast, or more high-concept approaches like Brave Spirits Theatre's 2018 production which saw the asylum patients –including in the group Isabella herself– as a mix of puppet and costume that the actors wore and puppeteered.

AUBREE: Those are definitely big and sensitive decisions to make, ones that would require a lot of thought and research to portray respectfully.

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GRAYSON: Yeah, I can't say I blame productions that would choose to opt out of staging the B plot, there is a lot to consider.

AUBREE: Especially considering that we haven't even scratched the baggage that comes with asylums and the treatment of the mentally ill at the time at all yet.

GRAYSON: Yeah? Do you think that just adds an even more complicated layer onto all this?

AUBREE: Oh, without a doubt. But I think we should start by playing a game.

GRAYSON: Ohh, okay Jigsaw.

AUBREE: First question. True or false: husbands, fathers, and other male relatives could have female relatives admitted to asylums without any real reason or proof.

GRAYSON: Okay, well based on the time, I am going to say most likely true.

AUBREE: And you're correct! This continued until the Lunacy Act of 1890 in England, which prevented husbands from placing their wives in asylums without a legal process. Private asylums in particular tended to serve as a place of abandonment for relatives that were unwanted or whose behavior was embarrassing or inconvenient. Next question. True or false: patients had no legal protections against their mistreatment, which often included physical methods like restraints and ice water baths.

GRAYSON: How was an ice water bath mistreatment?

AUBREE: They were preceded by scalding water baths and accompanied by things like purging and bloodletting to try and "shock the system" into healing the mind. A lot of the "treatments" in asylums were more like torture.

GRAYSON: Oh... Uh, Well, it's sounding true, unfortunately.

AUBREE: And you're correct.

GRAYSON: Ahh...

AUBREE: Humor theory was alive and well, and a lot of practitioners like Richard Napier thought that imbalanced humors were the root cause of mental illness. This continued until the moral treatment movement during the Enlightenment when practitioners realized that treating the mentally ill like people was the best way to go, but physical methods of treatment for mental illness developed into lobotomies, and later electroconvulsive therapy. Last question! True or false. Bethlem Royal Hospital allowed members of the public to view and interact with patients as if they were animals in a zoo.

GRAYSON: I mean, False... I'm hoping... I thought this was a hospital, not a circus.

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AUBREE: Actually it's true.

GRAYSON: Wow, that really sucks. Why did they allow that?

AUBREE: As a way for the asylum to make money, (Ahhh..) before the era of government funding. The first asylums started as monasteries and convents, which served as centers for medical care and community outreach until Henry VIII, whom you might know as a minor character in *SIX: The Musical*, dissolved the monasteries between 1536 and 1541.

GRAYSON: I love the dissolution of the monasteries.

AUBREE: Few did back then, as it left the work they did either to the public or largely forgotten at all. The rise of the public asylum came later, and Bethlem Royal Hospital, later known as Bedlam, became its own institution. Private asylums were, as the name implies, privately owned with little to no oversight from the government regarding "care of" or treatment of patients. Bethlem was one of the best at keeping records and is the only reason we know so much about how they worked at all. It was, as the reputation implies, not a great place, and few asylums were. They were not somewhere to put people that you even remotely care about.

GRAYSON: Yeah. Well, thank goodness we're past places like that, and it's no longer open, right? (3 second pause) Right?

AUBREE: It is.

GRAYSON: Ohh..

AUBREE: Bethlem Royal Hospital is still open and operating under the same name in London, albeit with much better conditions and it is supervised by the NHS. It actually houses one of the only dedicated psychosis units in England. They also practice drama therapy there, which seems topical.

GRAYSON: Very nice, bringing theatre inside rather than making theatre out of places like that.

AUBREE: Yeah. One of the reasons that Bethlem became the poster child for asylums is because it had oversight and kept records, which are –most of which– are available on their website. And most private asylums were very bad at.

GRAYSON: So sources like *The Changeling* might actually be some of the better records that we have of these private asylums, being written during the time when they were still operational. Most likely not entirely accurate, of course, but could have the potential to inform what they may have looked like, at least.

AUBREE: You're completely right.

GRAYSON: Okay, so, considering everything we have talked about, should this B plot be performed at all?

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AUBREE: I think that performing it unedited but with care is the way to go. In this time period, when we know that imprisoning wives in mental hospitals is not okay. Very specifically the first scene of the B plot, where the two men are discussing this woman, bridges the gap between uncomfortable laughter and just plain discomfort.

GRAYSON: Absolutely, a level of uncomfortable laughter is something that would just need to be expected with this sort of plot, it is something we have already seen in our own experimentations in class performing scenes. But we do have to acknowledge that no matter what we do, there is the possibility that some people in the audience will laugh simply because they truly think this is funny. Do you think there is anything we could do to address this, diffuse this, discourage this, or something like that?

AUBREE: I do, and I think that a lot of the things we can do would be extratextual.

GRAYSON: What do you mean by extratextual?

AUBREE: Well, like I said above, I think that performing the B plot unedited is the way to go, but it will work best not on its own, in concert with elements that can give context to what is happening onstage. Director's notes, Dramaturg's notes, things that bring attention to the fact that we aren't trying to just stage and reinforce these ideas uncritically and maybe encourage other theatremakers to approach the B plot with the critical theory of disability in mind.

GRAYSON: Absolutely, it can be easy to forget that mad studies and other invisible disabilities are a big part of disability studies, and are just as important to consider.

AUBREE: Mhm. Disability studies covers an incredibly large field and extends from mental illness and invisible disabilities like you mentioned to more physical ones and the ethics of writing and portraying all of them. Disability theory is still a growing field and it needs to go into every aspect of a production that involves *The Changeling's* B-plot.

GRAYSON: Maybe it could even extend to the design choices of the production and its world as well, like maybe there is a distinct set that could appear when the characters are in the private asylum, one that really shows the rough conditions and plays up the fact that this is not a caring, charitable place for people to get better, but is more like a prison, and moreover one that it is absurd for people to willingly sneak into!

AUBREE: Well, that could be one way to do things, but I think there are different options as well.

GRAYSON: Yeah? What are you envisioning?

AUBREE: Well, my first thought is more along the lines of performing it as written, as closely as intended as possible, in an effort to explore early modern ideas about and depictions of madness. Not to reinforce them, but to dissect them, to use our bodies and our voices to inhabit these long-dead practitioners and hear their thoughts, so we can learn more from them. Maybe even make some sort of effort to reclaim the stories of people who suffer from mental illness.

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GRAYSON: I can definitely get behind that, though there is the possibility that audiences would not be as receptive as we would like, and would not be willing to engage with it critically. They could laugh because they somehow still find it amusing, as we talked about earlier, or could get uncomfortable with these sorts of depictions and try to distance themselves. How would you go about trying to account for those sorts of reactions?

AUBREE: That's very true, individual audience response is something that is difficult, and nigh impossible to control. Not to sound like a broken record, but I think that the best answer is still extratextual media, things that give notes, warnings, and context to what happens onstage. We can't guarantee that it will be thoroughly read or digested by every audience member, but we can guarantee that it is as available and accessible as possible to every audience member.

GRAYSON: Very true, that's about all we can do.

AUBREE: We just have to hope a broader audience takes the time to read Director's and Dramaturg's notes as thoroughly as you and I do, right Grayson? (3 second pause) (Concerned) Right Grayson?

GRAYSON: Ah, well, looks like we are reaching the end of our time today, so time for a rapid review! What did we learn today, Aubree?

AUBREE: (Sigh) We learned that *The Changeling*, Middleton and Rowley's tragic tale of sex, desire, murder, and betrayal actually has a B plot about a private asylum, a plot often cut entirely or performed a little problematically.

GRAYSON: Which isn't exactly a massive surprise, considering everything that we learned about the conditions of Bethlem Royal Hospital –still open and operating, by the way–, which would have been one of the central sources of cultural inspiration and understanding of Asylums at the time when *The Changeling* was written.

AUBREE: But, we also discussed that that doesn't necessarily mean that we couldn't perform it. It carries the echoes of a cruel and scary place, but there is great value and scholarly potential in excavating it for information about early modern ideas, or in using them as a vehicle to advance our own ideas.

GRAYSON: How very capital A Academic of you, Aubree.

AUBREE: Guilty as charged.

GRAYSON: Well, I hope you all enjoyed this dive into *The Changeling*, and if you want to hear even more about it or about Ana Caro's *The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs* and John Lyly's *The Woman in the Moon*, be sure to check out the other episodes in this season of Writ in the Margins. Thank you for listening.