

Choose one critical article about *The Changeling* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and write a response to each, evaluating and reviewing the key ideas expressed.

“Contrast Rather than Interaction” – G. K. Hunter (MSND)

“Love’s tame madness” – Andrew McCulloch (Changeling)

G K Hunter claims in his article “Contrast Rather than Interaction” that the comedy of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” comes from a lack of self-awareness of the lovers and the way that their passions change without any real character development. He compares and contrasts the characters to those from other Shakespearean plays and states that the main difference is that others such as Beatrice and Rosalind have an awareness of themselves which the lovers from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” lack, and states that it is this which prevents them from correcting their behaviour. At times, the text supports this analysis as the most comic moments, such as the fight between Hermia and Helena, are at the points when the lovers have been influenced by the fairies’ magic and blinded by lust, whilst being completely unaware of the irrationality of their behaviour. Shakespeare uses wordplay to create insults, an example being puns centred around height such as “grown so high”, “dwarfish” and “thou painted maypole” which highlight the perceived irrationality of the females and their supposed inability to see past each others’ appearances. The repetition of the insults also creates a cumulative effect which brings their female irrationality and hysteria to a climax. At this point, as Hunter claims, they are completely unaware of why their fight is so comic and simply exchange snide insults, showing a lack of self-awareness and development which supports his idea. Furthermore, the male behaviour whilst under the influence of the fairies’ magic is completely irrational and the comedy of this is that they are unaware of this. For example, Lysander uses overblown words such as “that vile name” referring to Demetrius and believes he is being gallant by using heroic images with words such as “perish on my sword” when in fact the audience can see that the emotions he believes he is feeling are ridiculous. This idea is emphasised by the line “The will of man is by his reason swayed” which is ironic as his sentiments have nothing to do with reason itself and yet he is convinced that they are.

In “The Changeling,” the lack of self-awareness also presented but in a different way – as subconscious desires and fears rather than outright comedy. This subtlety contrasts “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” as it is a tragic play and not a comic one and so the blindness of the characters when it comes to their true emotions can be approached from a psychological and post-Freudian point of view, whereas Hunter acknowledges that Shakespeare’s characters contain “no personalities” and that there is no “psychological dimension of inner debate.” However, this is the opposite to “The Changeling” and this is an idea that Andrew McCulloch explores in his article “Love’s tame madness” which compares the representation of love in this play to Freud’s theory of the unconscious and the ego. Whereas in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” the audience can laugh outwardly at the obviously false sentiments, in “The Changeling,” the subconscious attractions are shown in a much subtler way and instead draw the audience into the inner worlds of the characters. McCulloch concentrates initially on the conflict between Beatrice’s urges towards Deflores (in Freud’s terms, her subconscious) and the repulsion that she believes she feels (the restraint exercised by her ego and superego). This theory can be substantiated by the text as Beatrice often betrays her true feelings towards Deflores through her speech.

She refers to him as a “serpent”, which is intended as an insult and yet has connotations with temptation and the Garden of Eden – and, by association, the fall of women through sin, prophetic of the way that their storyline plays out. She describes how he “more disturbs (her) / than all (her) other passions” which is meant to show loathing but in fact shows the profound effect that he has on her for somebody that she claims to not care about. McCulloch goes on to argue that it is the conflict within Beatrice that destroys her and makes her descent inevitable – whilst the lunatics, being outwardly mad, avoid this fate, suggesting that the outward and free expression of madness and the subconscious without restraint is better than Beatrice’s attempted control of her emotions. This can then be compared back to the points made about “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” where, again, the storyline with outward madness and irrationality is comic rather than tragic.

Both articles also make reference to the links between the main plot and the subplot, a feature of both plays. Hunter suggests that the storyline between Titania and Bottom, set against that of the lovers, creates a parallel situation which exposes the true blindness of the lovers. As Titania believes that Bottom as “as wise” as he “is beautiful”, similarly Demetrius believes Helena is “goddess, nymph, perfect, divine.” Neither of these sentiments are true and so the link drawn between them emphasises the irrationality of the lovers’ feelings by placing their changes of affection as equal to the relationship between a fairy queen and a man with an ass for a head. Similarly, the mechanicals are unaware that they are ruining their tragic play and turning it into comedy and are as “ignorant” as the lovers are “innocent” – just as the lovers were unaware that they were only figures in the play of the fairies’ manipulation. Theseus touches on this through his ironic line “our sport shall be to take what they mistake” – exactly what the fairies did. In these ways, the worlds are intertwined and all of the different layers of ignorance play against each other to emphasise the comedy of the play. However, in “The Changeling”, McCulloch argues that it is contrast rather than similarities which drive the play – Isabella remains sane surrounded by madmen whilst Beatrice becomes mad surrounded by those who are sane. The plots also work by being opposites – whilst Beatrice betrays the trust of all around her, Isabella proves that she can be trusted to win her freedom. Additionally, whilst Isabella shows insight and intelligence by suspecting Antonio to be false – something that the characters of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” cannot see in themselves – Beatrice believes throughout that she is acting rationally and yet is doing the opposite, submitting to her subconscious. The link between Beatrice and Isabella is emphasised by the link between love and illness or madness – Deflores is referred to as an “infirmity”, just as Shakespeare draws comparisons between “lovers and madmen”.

Overall, the two articles explore similar areas of these two plays and whilst both deal with similar themes there are in fact some subtle differences which account for the difference in tone of the plays. The comedy of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” lies in the lack of self-awareness of the protagonists, whereas in “The Changeling” it is exactly this which leads to confusion and ultimately a tragic end.