

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

1. What kind of place is Athens? (Why did Shakespeare set the play in "Athens" rather than, say, Paris? Or Rome? Or Russia?) What qualities, words, behavior, and so on, are associated with it? What does Lysander mean by "the sharp Athenian law" (1.1.162)? What kind of rulers prevail?
2. Everyone in this play eventually winds up in the forest. What motivates each character to go there? What kind of place is the forest? How is life different there? Compare the two sets of rulers (and their past histories), as well as other recurring features in the two places: the moon and attitudes toward it, a "dowager," (1.1.5–6; 1.1.157–58) the nature of love in each place, the time of day in each place, and so on.
3. Note the differences in male and female perspectives in the forest by comparing Oberon's talk with his favorite underling, Puck ("My gentle Puck come hither ..." [2.1.148]) and Titania's recollection of her votress ("His mother was a votress of my order ..." [2.1.123]).
4. Look at the love pairings of the four young Athenians. Note how laughably interchangeable they seem at times (and note how Shakespeare conveys this impression). But there are some differences, particularly between Hermia and Helena and between the men and the women. What are these?

(A) Hermia & Lysander

How well matched are they at the start of the play? When they think of obstacles to love (1.1.134ff: "The course of true love never did run smooth") what do they leave out as a possible source of roughness? Note the things Hermia chooses to swear by. What do you think Hermia's dream (2.2.145–50) means? (What would Freud say it means?)

(B) Helena & Demetrius

Why is Helena so infatuated with Demetrius? Why does he reject her love? Can you analyze their problems psychologically by referring to Puck's manipulations? What does Helena's reaction to her two enchanted suitors tell us about her? (Compare her reaction to suddenly becoming an object of affection with Bottom's.)

If we just think about the literal plot, fairy magic causes all the love problems, but think about what the plant "love-in-idleness" might symbolize and see if you can find evidence for a psychological equivalent of being under its influence. (Note what happens to each young man right before Puck zaps him with the love juice.)

5. Read carefully the scene in the forest in which the four young lovers woo, cross-woo, quarrel, and act "prepost'rously" as Puck calls it: 3.2.121–344. (Note that Puck and Oberon are watching them the

whole time — as if they were characters in a play). What do you make of their motives? How you would describe each character and the changes they undergo?

6. The play is “about” (among other things) a wedding. Many scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote it for performance as a private entertainment at an aristocratic wedding. What aspects of the play support this theory? But the play is also an examination of human relationship at various stages: from courtship to marriage to fights and separations to reunions. If this play were all you knew about human love and romantic relationships, what might you conclude? Is Puck’s comment “Lord what fools these mortals be!” Shakespeare’s own conclusion?
7. How does the plot about Bottom and his play fit in with the others, which are all about love? What does love have in common with putting on a play? Is Bottom “Athenian” like the others; does he share typical Athenian traits? How does the play-within-a-play (“Pyramus and Thisbe”) reflect on the main action in its content and in its form?
8. During some periods critics dismissed this play as Tinkerbell fairy froth, a mere celebration of love for indiscriminating but rich aristocrats. But think about the dark side of love suggested throughout the play, quietly it is true but persistently nevertheless. What evidence is there that Shakespeare presents a complex and perhaps pessimistic view of love? Note for example the myths and historical figures invoked in connection with the human lovers, and look at the list of potential wedding-night entertainments (5.1.44–55).
9. How does the performance by Bottom and his friends work as culmination of the action? Think of the subject matter or what is presented in the play; think of the way in which the subject is presented; think of the attitude of the actors toward the play and toward the audience; think of the audience’s attitude toward the play and the performers. Who is kindest toward the actors? Who is cruelest? Who doesn’t have any scripted reaction? What effect does the performance have on us? Do we learn anything new about the characters? About love? About art and imagination?
10. Why did Shakespeare end the play with the fairies instead of the humans? How would the play be different if it ended before Puck’s speech at 5.1.363ff (“Now the hungry lion roars / And the wolf howls the moon” — by the way, Why did Shakespeare start Puck’s speech with references to a lion and the moon?)