Shakespeare in Love:  
 The Romantic Comedy Portrayal of the Master of Romantic Comedies.

*Shakespeare in Love* (1998) is a romantic comedy whose title nearly spoils its plot. The film, a subtle tribute to the dramatic works of its hero, tells the unlikely fictional tale of the bard himself, William Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) and his encounters with Viola de Lesseps (Gwyneth Paltrow), the daughter of a wealthy, well-respected merchant whose passion for poetry and the stage has driven her to defy the laws of society and impersonate a man in order to audition for the impending Shakespearean production which would become Romeo and Juliet. Awed by the performance of the seemingly talented man, Shakespeare chases after his actor only to discover her true identity and embark upon a sordid and inevitably unsmooth love affair. Unfortunately, in addition to defying the rules of society by participating in the theatre, de Lesseps, in participating in romantic intrigues with the playwright, also defies her mother and father who have already arranged for her to marry another, Lord Wessex (Colin Firth), an arrangement which the Queen of England, Elizabeth I (Judi Dench), has approved of. Drama and comedy ensue on and off the stage as de Lesseps faces the consequences of her headstrong defiance and our hero, the great William Shakespeare, attempts to cope with it all.   
 As our plot progresses, the traditional conventions of the RomCom genre are not absent. We have, firstly, and arguably most importantly, a love affair with a beautiful and engaging heroine, who, as it turns out, begins our tale dressed as a man. Viola is obviously most engaging as a woman who pursues her passions in the arts of theatre and love, though she is frowned upon on both accounts. The circumstances of Viola de Lesseps position in life are not foreign to even the earliest of romantic comedy heroines; the unfortunate situation of having both a father and a member of royalty impose upon a woman a disagreeable marriage is one which the true Shakespeare dreamed up and imposed upon his own characters in the genre’s inaugural work*.* The difference, however, between *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s Hermia and *Shakespeare in Love’*s Viola de Lesseps is that in the end our on-screen heroine is actually joined with the man who has been chosen for her. The course of her true love, it would seem, was too rocky to repair.   
 In this way *Shakespeare in Love* plays a clever game which succeeds in simultaneously conforming with and subverting the traditional elements of a romantic comedy. On the one hand, the audience is faced with the doomed and failing love affair of the couple which they are meant to support. The difficulties which separate Shakespeare and his Viola are never truly overcome. On the other hand, however, the courtship between Viola de Lesseps and her Lord Wessex, an equally unsmooth pairing, has been subject to several difficulties which are, in the end, overcome in order to form union which, though not looked on favorably by our heroine, is at least happy by virtue of its compliance with the demands of authority figures.   
 While the writers of the screenplay toy with the genre created by the Bard, as the film progresses the plot continues to make seemingly unashamed allusions to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream.* After the “happy” union is formed between Wessex and his bride, the now Viola Wessex retreats to the very place which initiated the twists in her life’s plot. At the theatre, from which she was banned after being discovered as a woman player, the married Viola takes the stage with Shakespeare, who has assumed the role of Romeo, despite the fact that in the audience is the Queen of England who is well aware of the actress playing Juliet. The play within the screenplay, another nod toward *Dream’*s Pyramus and Thisbe, becomes a temporary green world, in which our hero and heroine are briefly allowed to escape the trials of the outside world and be, without consequence, true lovers. Within this green world enemies are reconciled only because within the world of Romeo and Juliet the enemies which plague Viola and Shakespeare do not exist. Similarly, the injustices of the outside are resolved on this stage simply by virtue of the fact that they do not exist. In this way, the stage also represents a brief move from law to liberty, a staple element of the romantic comedy according to Northrop Frye; within the context of Romeo and Juliet, Viola and Shakespeare are allowed to act freely and escape the laws of the outside world in favor of the strange liberty which resulted in playing a part. Additionally, as she knowingly allows Viola to play Juliet in front of an audience, the Queen herself plays a role in facilitating this move, albeit quite brief, from law to liberty.   
 When the curtain falls, so to speak, on Verona and the tragedy of one story ends, the tragedy of our story truly begins. When *Romeo and Juliet* comes to a close, Viola must leave the temporary green world which the stage has provided for her and return to a reality which includes the relocating to the Colony of Virginia with her husband, Lord Wessex, while Shakespeare remains on the streets of London. This version of reality is not one which the bard chooses to accept, however, and thus we, as an audience, are presented with another subversion of the traditional elements of the romantic comedy. As the movie itself comes to an end, its hero embarks upon another beginning. It is within the last few moments of the film that fictional Shakespeare begins to write *Twelfth Night*, intending to make his true love a timeless heroine. In this way, the film’s William Shakespeare not only immortalizes his true love, but creates a permanent shift to liberty which exists within an eternal green world unregulated by any law but his own where he will forever be united with his heroine.

Works Cited

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