

Shakespeare in Love

In 1593 London, William Shakespeare is a part time player in the acting group known as The Lord Chamberlain's Men. He also works as an underpaid playwright for **Philip Henslowe**, owner of **The Rose Theater**. Since Shakespeare is quite poor, he does a few questionable things, such as selling his plays to two different theater directors. Both his present boss, Phillip Henslowe and another producer, **Richard Burbage** owner of the of **The Curtain Theater**, are receiving the same plays – and paying for what they think are their own properties. (When Burbage finds out, he'll be more than a little angry. But that happens later on.)

Shakespeare is working on a new comedy, *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*. Suffering from writer's block, he has barely begun the play, but starts auditioning players. **Viola de Lesseps**, the daughter of a wealthy merchant who has seen Shakespeare's plays at court, disguises herself as "**Thomas Kent**" to audition. The disguise is essential to her plan, because women were not allowed to act on the stage in the London of 1593. So dressed as a young man, Viola auditions well, and she captures Shakespeare's attention as a competent actor.

Shakespeare pursues this so called "Kent" to Viola's father's mansion, and he leaves a note with the servant lady asking this "Thomas Kent" to begin rehearsals at the Rose Theater.

Shakespeare then sneaks into the house with the musicians who are playing that night at the big party. At this great ball, Viola's rich father, Robert de Lesseps, is arranging her marriage to **Lord Wessex**, an old aristocrat who is out of money and in need of a wife who comes from a rich family. The arrangements are made in this sexist age between the two men – with no input from Viola herself.

So Viola dances the night away, not thinking about the marriage she is soon to be forced into. Shakespeare sees her as he hides among the musicians, and he promptly moves in for the score. While dancing with Viola, Shakespeare is struck speechless with infatuation, and makes a scene of his attraction. Wessex notices Shakespeare with his wife-to-be, and violently throws him out of the party. As he ejects Shakespeare, Lord Wessex asks what his name is. Will Shakespeare lies, and replies that he is **Christopher Marlowe** – his most talented competitor in the world of play writing. (That lie will come back to haunt Shakespeare.)

After being forcibly ejected by Wessex, Shakespeare decides to use Thomas Kent as his go between to woo Viola – not knowing that Kent and Viola are one and the same person. When he discovers her true identity, they begin a secret affair.

Inspired by her love, Shakespeare writes quickly, with a bit of help from his friend and rival playwright Christopher 'Kit' Marlowe. With time, he completely transforms the light comedy into the play which will become *Romeo and Juliet*.

Since her father is rich and Wessex is high status, a girl like Viola is summoned to court to receive **Queen Elizabeth's** official approval for her proposed marriage to Lord Wessex. Shakespeare accompanies her, disguised as her female cousin.

There, he persuades Wessex to wager £50 that a play can capture the true nature of love, the exact amount Shakespeare requires to buy a share in the Chamberlain's Men. Queen Elizabeth declares that she will judge the matter when the occasion arises... *as we shall soon see*.