



The Love Conundrum: A Comparative study of Shakespeare's Julia and Viola

Sonam

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Sonapat, India.

Received: 09 May 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Jun 2026; Accepted: 05 Jun 2026; Available online: 11 Jun 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Shakespearean comedies are widely recognized for their complex characters and sophisticated examination of themes. Through a comparative analysis, this research paper aims to study the labyrinthine themes of love and disguise in two of William Shakespeare's well acclaimed comedies, The Two Gentlemen of Verona from his earlier plays and Twelfth Night from his later plays. The study primarily focuses on analysing the selected monologues and soliloquies of the protagonists—Julia and Viola—to elucidate their inner worlds and motivations to pursue their love. By colligating these characters' self-expressions, the paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the subtleties of Shakespearean character development, growth of Shakespeare as a writer, portrayal of women in Elizabethan England and the thematic significance of love and disguise. It emphasizes how love and disguise go beyond mere manipulation and trickery, offering deep insights into human nature. At the heart of this study lies the analysis of significant themes of love and disguise, using the triangular theory of love proposed by Robert Sternberg. Julia and Viola tend to follow the traditional Elizabethan culture in general along with certain deviations from their traditional feminine roles which mark the uniqueness and individuality of these heroines. In the exploring the individual journeys of Julia and Viola, various similarities and differences become apparent which highlight the convolutions of love and identity, often intertwined with deception and self-discovery. Both Julia and Viola are projected as strong characters possessing the three basic elements in Sternberg's theory of love though their approaches are different.*



Keywords— *complex identities, deception and self-discovery, gender disguise, love, portrayal of women, Shakespearean comedies, traditional roles.*

Introduction

In the Elizabethan England, the idea of courtly love was en vogue. During these times, love was romanticized as a noble institute. Several popular Elizabethan poets such as Philip Sidney, Wyatt and Surrey, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Christopher Marlowe and others have produced profound poems for their inamoratas. One of the major characteristics of their works was that they were mostly concerned with the higher social class of England. Both, their enamoured ladies as well as their fictional characters belonged to the upper strata of the society i.e. they focused on the courtly love. "According to the ideal of courtly love, a knight or nobleman worshiped a woman of high birth, and his love

for her inspired him to do great things on the battlefield and elsewhere" (Hirsch et al., 2005).

This kind of love (courtly love) can further be elucidated by using the "Triangular Theory of Love" proposed by the American psychologist, Robert Sternberg in the 1980s. This paper aims to apply Sternberg's theory of love on two of Shakespeare's comedies, namely, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* from the early plays of William Shakespeare and *Twelfth Night* from his later plays. Through a comparison of these plays, one explores the evolution of Shakespeare's writing and a gradual shift from naïve and innocent Julia to sophisticated and mature Viola. Sternberg's theory argues that a stable relationship (love, here) must be based on more than one of the three

essential elements. According to Sternberg, the three indispensable elements that are necessary in love are intimacy, passion and commitment (Sternberg, 1986).

Intimacy

Intimacy is when someone starts to feel a deep emotional connection with someone else which results in a mutual understanding between them. When people get intimately connected with someone, they usually tend to accept the person as they are. Anais Nin, a twentieth century French-born American diarist has aptly said, "What is love but acceptance of the other, whatever he is" (Nin & Miller, 1989).

Shakespeare's heroine, Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* experiences this sort of deep emotional connection with her suitor, Proteus. In Act 1, Scene 2, Julia's soliloquy addressing her response to Proteus' love letter highlights her dilemma since she desperately wants to read the letter yet as expected from a young maiden, she tries to act in a modest way by avoiding it and eventually tearing it into pieces. Nonetheless, after the departure of her maid, she gathers all the pieces together and kisses each one of them to repent for her earlier misdemeanour. This desperate action of Julia stems out of the intimacy that she shares with Proteus.

Simultaneously, the adjectives used with their names in this letter such as "kind Julia", "love-wounded Proteus" and "Poor forlorn Proteus, passionate Proteus, / To the sweet Julia" also highlights the intensity of intimacy shown by Proteus in his love for Julia. As established earlier, according to Sternberg's theory, a stable relationship requires more than one of the essential elements of bonding between the partners. However, it is also necessary that these emotions are felt by both the partners to create a balance between them. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* shows fluctuations in the intimacy between Julia and Proteus. In the beginning of the play, though there is a lack of direct communication, both Proteus and Julia experience the same intensity of intimacy between them. In the middle of the plot, Proteus falls out of love with Julia and is infatuated with Silvia which in turn complicates the relationship of Proteus and Julia. Nonetheless, these complications are resolved in the end and both feel the same intimacy again.

Since, this play is written by Shakespeare in his early career Julia seems to be somewhat immature and juvenile in dealing with her circumstances. Thus, she winds up in taking up some rash decisions. For instance, in Act 4, Scene 4 of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* Julia's soliloquy addresses her emotionally vulnerable nature despite being aware of Proteus' betrayal in love.

Alas, poor Proteus! thou hast entertain'd
A fox to be the shepherd of thy lambs.
Alas, poor fool! why do I pity him
That with his very heart despiseth me?
Because he loves her, he despiseth me;
Because I love him I must pity him.

(ACT 4 SCENE 4)

Sometimes, the acceptance of one's partner as he is, takes an extreme and somewhat toxic form where people even neglect the flaws and foibles of their significant others. This soliloquy highlights the toxicity of the relationship shared by Julia and Proteus where on one hand Proteus has betrayed Julia's love and on the other hand Julia is blinded by her love for Proteus and still tries to justify Proteus' betrayal. She feels disrespected by him yet manages to find ways to pity him by finding faults in herself. Julia seems to be a vulnerable and hopeless romantic character who is at the mercy of her lover to achieve a sense of self-worth. With regard to this line of argument Azalea Rosario raises a question, "How can such a loving girl go through the misfortunate events that Julia goes through for her unfaithful boyfriend?" (Rosario, 2013). The answer, however, could be justified using a phrase coined by Shakespeare in this play i.e. "Love is blind". One reason for Julia's vulnerability can be the element of irrationality in her love for Proteus.

However, in a comparatively mature play, *Twelfth Night*, the Shakespearean heroine, Viola, appears to be a patient and mature woman who waits for an appropriate time to resolve the intricacies and complexities that have emerged due to her disguise. In this play, the first instance of infatuation is witnessed in the beginning where Duke Orsino is shown to have strong emotions for Olivia. However, later the element of infatuation is also witnessed among Olivia and Cesario (Viola in disguise) and ultimately it can be seen between Duke Orsino and Viola towards the end of the play after Viola's revelation. Nonetheless, the infatuation between Duke Orsino and Olivia; and Olivia and Cesario does not lead the characters to have an intimate relationship since in both the cases only one of the partners feels intimacy towards the other and that too is transient. As soon as the truth of Viola's disguise is revealed, all the complications and misunderstandings are resolved. Olivia realizes that Cesario is a woman and eventually finds her love in Viola's brother, Sebastian. Similarly, Duke Orsino comes to the realization that in a true sense he has always felt an intimate connection with Viola but never gave it a serious thought since she was disguised as a male persona, Cesario. The bard has interwoven this intimacy between Duke Orsino and Viola throughout the play in their inner

worlds which is reflected in the soliloquies and monologues of both the characters. Viola, being an intellectual woman understood about her feelings for the duke in a few encounters but decided to wait and analyse the prospect of this relationship in practicality.

My state is desperate for my master's love;

As I am woman, — now alas the day!

What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!

O time! thou must untangle this, not I;

It is too hard a knot for me to untie!

(ACT 2 SCENE 2 VIOLA'S SOLILOQUY ON OLIVIA'S RING)

This soliloquy by Viola hints at her strong emotions that she has developed for Duke Orsino during her stay in Illyria. This intimacy in due course leads to her state of desperation for Duke. In a tangible manner, Viola can also be considered as a hopeless romantic character as she leaves it all to her fate rather than responding to her immediate adrenaline rush. However, at the same time, her patience also highlights the maturity she possesses.

Passion

Viola's state of desperation further leads us to the second most essential element in Sternberg's Triangular theory of love i.e. passion. According to him, the stage of passion is achieved when the emotional bonding previously established via intimacy further leads to a sexual attraction towards the other person. It leads to a state of desperation and a strong desire to get hold of the person which may be expressed implicitly through the use of asides and soliloquies or it may be expressed explicitly through certain paralinguistic features as well as dialogues. Passion can also result into sexual jealousy, one of the prominent themes in Shakespeare's plays. In his tragedies, for instance, in *Othello* the sexual jealousy of the titular protagonist brings about death of many people. While in his comedies, Shakespeare hints at this possibility but immediately returns to the main plotline. For instance, in Act 4, Scene 4 of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia's soliloquy highlights her sexual jealousy when she compares her physical appearance with Silvia for the love of Proteus:

If I had such a tye, this face of mine
Were full as lovely as is this of hers:
And yet the painter flatter'd her a little,
Unless I flatter with myself too much.
Her hair is auburn, mine is perfect yellow:
If that be all the difference in his love,
I'll get me such a colour'd periwig.
Her eyes are grey as glass, and so are mine:

Ay, but her forehead's low, and mine's as high.

What should it be that he respects in her

But I can make respective in myself,

If this fond Love were not a blinded god?

(ACT 4, SCENE 4)

Here, Julia compares and contrasts her physical appearance with that of Silvia in order to establish the body features which might have appealed Proteus. She seeks to understand why his sexual desires for a beautiful woman like Silvia have made him impassive for Julia since looks can be much deceiving. This self-doubt and hint of an inferiority complex as witnessed in Julia's soliloquy takes another dimension in the form of a feeling of revenge in *Twelfth Night*. In the beginning of the play, Viola agrees to woo Olivia for Duke Orsino while she herself has feelings for him. Viola, too, experiences sexual jealousy for Olivia as reflected in an aside in Act 1, Scene 3 where she provides hints to the audience of her motivations and future actions to be the wife of Duke Orsino. This aside suggests the determination and passion Viola has for Duke Orsino.

I'll do my best

To woo your lady— [aside] Yet, a barful strife—

Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife.

(ACT 1, SCENE 3)

Nonetheless, both of these Shakespearean heroines come to this realization that neither Silvia nor Olivia is a threat to any of them. Silvia, herself condemns Proteus for betraying the love of 'kind Julia' while Olivia has never responded to the love of Duke Orsino throughout the play. This knowledge offers the characters a resolution to their agitated emotions and sexual jealousy. Julia's soliloquy in Act 4, Scene 4 suggests the same idea:

I'll use thee kindly for thy mistress' sake,
That used me so; or else, by Jove I vow,
I should have scratch'd out your unseeing eyes²⁰⁴⁵
To make my master out of love with thee!

(ACT 4, SCENE 4)

Julia had an unsettled anger and jealousy towards Silvia when she realized Proteus' betrayal and was determined to seek revenge on Silvia but hurting her. However, when provided with the knowledge of Silvia's love for Valentine and her sympathy towards Julia, she decides to remain calm.

Julia and Viola share similar feelings of agitation, rage and jealousy, yet their ways of dealing with their circumstances differ a lot. Julia, being a juvenile character presents her feelings towards Proteus and Silvia either in a very blunt manner or in a suppressive, self-destructive

manner; whereas in Viola, one appreciates her balanced approach to life. Viola, too, possesses the qualities of being a lively and high-spirited woman alongside being a confident, wise and mature character. Nonetheless, both, Julia and Viola following the tradition of other Shakespearean heroines have a remarkable quality of self-assertiveness for which the use of female disguise seems to be a prominent reason.

Victor Oscar Freeburg defines dramatic disguise as “a change of personal appearance which leads to mistaken identity. There is a double test, change and confusion... it results in the same sort of complication for the person under observation” (Freeburg, 1965).

In pre-Shakespearean theatre, women characters as well as the device of female disguise weren't much developed. For instance, Dorothea in Robert Greene's *James the Fourth* is a passive and insipid character who depends on the advice of her friends to disguise as a male persona in order to save her own life from her husband. Phillida in John Lyly's *Gallathea* was motivated by her father to disguise to save her from sacrificial death. *Sir Clyoman and Sir Clamydes* was one of the earliest plays having a premature use of the device of female disguise.

Traditionally, disguise has been observed as an evil practice. T.G. has criticized transvestism for both men and women: “Player's practices can hardly be warranted in religion: for a man to put on women's apparel, and a woman a man's, is plain prohibition...” (T, 1913). A year later, a contemporary traveller of Shakespeare, Fynes Moryson presents his disgust at transvestism, specifically dealing with female disguise as practiced by whores: “I have seen courtesans in the time of shroving, appalled like men, in carnation or light coloured doublets and breeches...” (Moryson, 1908).

These assumptions arise out of the belief that a person hides something only when he's ashamed or scared of it. Thus, writers and critics in Elizabethan theatre saw the device of female disguise as inherently wrong. However, like the author himself, Shakespearean heroines have emerged as progressive as well as timeless. Peter Hyland in his article *Shakespeare's Disguised Heroines: Disguise in the Romantic Comedies* suggests that indeed female disguise was associated with various negative connotations in the past but it becomes important to Shakespeare as it acts as a medium to give voice to the audience or the common man of the times. He argues “the disguised girl affords him (Shakespeare) to manipulate the audience's responses by drawing it into the action” (Hyland, 1978).

Through the plot device of disguise, Shakespeare has given his heroines a heightened sense of consciousness

which helps them to analyse the situation in its entirety and thus act accordingly. Even in his earlier plays such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, though Julia is a comparatively juvenile character yet she is an unconventional and self-assertive woman. She is determined and passionate to get hold of her lover and when circumstances tend to fall out of her favour, she's hell-bent to make it right for herself, even if it means to hurt Silvia as suggested in the above soliloquy from Act 4 Scene 4.

Commitment

This is where the third indispensable element of commitment in Sternberg's theory of love comes into play. Commitment is the thoughtful decision and a promise to stand alongside someone in future no matter what life offers. The decision to love someone may or may not result into commitment. Proteus loves Julia but he is not committed to her because he tries to court his friend's beloved, Silvia in the absence of Julia. Similarly, Duke Orsino isn't committed to Olivia either as suggested at the onset of the play. His infatuation to Olivia quivers throughout the play and ultimately he realises his love for Viola in the end when her disguise is revealed.

However, if commitment arises out of love between two people, it strengthens the relationship between those sharing the feelings of intimacy and passion for one another. The Shakespearean heroines, Julia and Viola, are committed to their lovers through the entire play. Both of them decide to disguise in order to be around their lovers. In relation to this evolving meaning of disguise, Julia in a monologue in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* comments:

In a disguise of love:

It is the lesser blot, modesty finds,

Women to change their shapes than men their minds.

(ACT 5 SCENE 4 JULIA)

It hints at the fickleness of love at the part of Proteus while Julia has always remained committed to him, even though she had to adopt the evil practice of female disguise. Though, disguise does not form an appropriate example of passion and intimacy as defined by Sternberg's theory. Yet, it is a plot device which is either an action taken by a character as a result of his passionate feelings towards the other person or it is responsible for the creation of certain situations where characters experience passion for one another. Julia's decision to take up the male persona of Sebastian resulted from her passionate feelings towards Proteus and her insatiable

desire to experience his presence around her. In Act 2 Scene 7, she asserts:

Then let me go and hinder not my course
 I'll be as patient as a gentle stream
 And make a pastime of each weary step,
 Till the last step have brought me to my love;
 And there I'll rest, as after much turmoil
 A blessed soul doth in Elysium.
 (ACT 2, SCENE 7)

Here, Julia asks her concerned maid Lucetta to not impede her impulsive yet very important decision to make a small visit to Proteus as Sebastian. She believes that a few days in the company of her lover would quench the thirst she feels to see him.

On the other hand, Viola in *Twelfth Night* disguised herself for almost the entire play. Her decision to take up the male persona of Cesario was not a result of her love for Duke Orsino, rather this decision stemmed out from the social conditions of Elizabethan age where it was extremely difficult for an ordinary young woman to live and prosper alone, having no male support in the form of a father, brother or a husband. Thus, in a monologue at the beginning of the play, she requests her ship captain, Antonio to help her in hiding her true identity from everyone else.

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid
 For such disguise as haply shall become
 The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke:
 Thou shall present me as an eunuch to him:

(ACT 1, SCENE 2, VIOLA'S MONOLOGUE TO HER SHIP CAPTAIN)

Though Viola's disguise gave her an opportunity to be around Duke Orsino through which she developed passion for him, yet at the same time, her disguise has also resulted in Olivia's infatuation for Cesario. Olivia unwittingly falls in love with Cesario, enchanted by Viola's false appearance. This instance highlights the evil nature of disguise as it was seen traditionally. It indicates Shakespeare's complex style which amalgams the tradition of the Elizabethan theatre and his own progressive ideas. According to T.S. Eliot, "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities" (Eliot, 1982).

Shakespeare presents disguise as a modern plot device which helps in producing passionate feelings among the lovers, by bringing a new aspect to its previous use. Simultaneously, he also hints at the negative

outcomes that may arise out of female disguise, thus following the theatrical tradition of his predecessors. Hence, the bard manages to leave a mark on the Elizabethan audience as well as their future generations. Moreover, the bard's androgynous mind is reflected in the portrayal of his heroines such as Julia and Viola who take up male personas. It makes them conscious of both masculine and feminine traits. Analysing their situations from an androgynous mind having complete knowledge of the feelings of their counterparts, Julia and Viola are able to make better decisions for their love life.

Conclusion

A person's true personality is seen only when they are not under observation i.e. when they feel free to express themselves without any kind of socio-cultural criticism. Hence, the soliloquies, monologues, speeches and asides delivered by Shakespearean heroines tend to unveil the complexities of their inner world in the Elizabethan era i.e. they express their emotions more efficiently when other characters are not around. Sternberg's theory of love provides us an understanding into the complex characters of Shakespeare's heroines, namely, Julia and Viola. It highlights the fact that love is not one-dimensional but a complex web of various elements which evolve through the narrative of the plots and provide insights into the character's feelings, motivations and inspirations. Both Julia and Viola are remarkable examples of characters possessing a combination of intimacy, passion and commitment for their lovers yet the use of disguise in the plays adds on new dimensions to their otherwise simple love stories.

REFERENCES

- [1] Cosby, M. (2014). *Twelfth Night: A Shakescleare translation*. LitCharts. <https://www.litcharts.com/shakescleare/shakespeare-translations/twelfth-night>
- [2] Eliot, T. S. (1982). Tradition and the individual talent. *Perspecta*, 19, 36–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1567048>
- [3] Freeburg, V. O. (1965). *Disguise plots in Elizabethan drama: A study in stage tradition*. B. Blom.
- [4] Hanțiu, E. (2013). She's the man: Gender dynamics in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. *Gender Studies*, 11(1), 100–113. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10320-012-0031-8>
- [5] Hyland, P. (1978). Shakespeare's heroines: Disguise in the romantic comedies. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 9(2), 23–39.
- [6] Joshi, A. (2017). Understanding the concept of love through Shakespeare. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 5(1), 312–314.

- <http://www.rjelal.com/5.1.17a/312-314%20ADITI%20JOSHI.pdf>
- [7] Kimbrough, R. (1982). Androgyny seen through Shakespeare's disguise. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 33(1), 17–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2870334>
- [8] Ma, F. (2014). The concept of love in Shakespeare's sonnets. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 5(4), 918–923. <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/jltr/vol05/04/24.pdf>
- [9] Moryson, F. (1908). *The itinerary of Fynes Moryson* (Vol. 4). James MacLehose and Sons. (Original work published 1617)
- [10] Hirsch, E. D., Kett, J. F., & Trefil, J. (Eds.). (2005). *The new dictionary of cultural literacy* (3rd ed., e-book ed.). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/courtly-love>
- [11] Nin, A., & Miller, H. (1989). *A literate passion: Letters of Anais Nin & Henry Miller, 1932–1953*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- [12] Romancikova, N. (2017, May 19). *The Two Gentlemen of Verona: A Shakescleare translation*. LitCharts. <https://www.litcharts.com/shakescleare/shakespeare-translations/the-two-gentlemen-of-verona>
- [13] Rosario, A. (2013). Becoming Julia. *Harvard Educational Review*, 83(1), 87–88. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.83.1.2k036k241271r2t5>
- [14] Shan, H.-C. C. (2006). *The master mistress of my passion: Cross-dressing and gender performance in Twelfth Night*. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:201050820>
- [15] Sternberg, R. J. (1988). *The triangle of love: Intimacy, passion, commitment*. Basic Books.
- [16] Sternberg, R. J. (1986). A triangular theory of love. *Psychological Review*, 93(2), 119–135. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.93.2.119>
- [17] Talley, C. L. (1970). *Elizabethan concepts of love and marriage and Shakespeare's sources*. In *Shakespeare's concept of love and marriage as presented in ten selected plays* (Chapter 1). Emporia State University. <http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/2825>
- [18] T, G. (1913). The rich cabinet. In J. Dover Wilson (Ed.), *Life in Shakespeare's England* (p. 220). The University Press.