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She Loves He Loves She:

A Defense of a Shakespearean Parody so Camp It's Good

Sweet lady, ho, ho!

"If music be the food of love," wrote William Shakespeare, "then play on" (*Twelfth Night* 1.1.1). What he never could have imagined is that pop rock song "Dirty Little Secret" by The All-American Rejects would one day be the food that fuels his story of comedically confounding love and gender-warping disguises. During my freshman year of college in 2024, at a watch party with a group of 18- to 23-year-olds, I could feel a thirsty anticipation coursing through the room as the DreamWorks little boy fishing atop a crescent moon melted away on the screen before us. In pitch-black darkness, a moment of silence was disrupted by a girl squealing, "You guys, this movie was my childhood!" For myself and many others my age, Andy Fickman's 2006 teenage romantic comedy *She's the Man* was our introduction to Shakespeare's original play *Twelfth Night*, and continues to be a cult classic.

Written by Shakespeare around 1601, *Twelfth Night* follows young Viola, who washes up on the island of Illyria after being shipwrecked and separated from her twin brother Sebastian. She disguises herself as a man named Cesario in order to work as a servant for the Duke Orsino and immediately falls in love with him. However, Orsino is already in love with a different woman, the Lady Olivia, whom he sends Cesario after to woo on his behalf. Olivia promptly falls in love with Viola (who is dressed as Cesario), ultimately creating a true 3-sided love

triangle. Shakespeare juggles this love polygon with multiple B-plots involving borderline abusive tomfoolery directed towards a pathetically yellow-stocking-clad Malvolio and a homoerotic friendship between Sebastian and his seaside trail angel Antonio.

Conversely, *She's the Man* (2006), written by Ewan Leslie, Karen McCullah, and Kirsten Smith, translates *Twelfth Night*'s original love triangle onto the soccer field of Illyria High School, forgoing most of the textual plot for what many critics and academics would deem little more than just teen antics. Like most critics of the film, David Rosenthal counts *She's the Man* among the "failures" of the many Shakespearean "genre adaptation" films to come out of the post-1990 era (xxvii-xxviii). Rosenthal cites the oversimplified storyline and obvious plot holes as his reasoning, though other critics do not hesitate to mention the superficial feminism, elimination of queer undertones, and reinforcement of gender stereotypes as well. Popular academic opinion suggests that *She's the Man* fails as an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* because it so drastically strays from the original script and goes out of its way to be relevant that it accidentally winds up offensive—Why is Illyria High School so randomly misogynistic? Why does a hug between two male-presenting people warrant a blood-curdling scream? Why does Viola/Sebastian talk like she swallowed an Alabamian fly? The whole film is so unnecessarily outrageous and offensive that it's almost funny.

I argue that that is exactly why the film succeeds; it's so wildly unbelievable that it appears to not take itself seriously, and in turn makes a mockery of its offensive elements. *She's the Man* may fail as an adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, but it succeeds as a camp parody of the film, and in turn exposes the ludicrous nature of second wave feminism, homophobia, and gender stereotypes for a contemporary audience.

She's as Good as Him

The translation of a 17th century play into an early 21st century teen romantic comedy comes not only with flying soccer balls and low-waisted skinny jeans, but also storyline simplicity. *Twelfth Night*'s original gay and brutal B-plots surrounding Sebastian and Malvolio (respectively) are traded for an overarching theme of second-wave feminism in *She's the Man*. The second wave of feminism, founded and largely practiced from around 1963 to the 1980s, was largely focused on the social and economic equality of women, tackling issues like equal gender pay, family household dynamics, and the woman's right to work (Grady). However, this wave of feminism, while inclusive of women of color and slightly in conjunction with the Gay Rights Movement, was primarily focused on the advancement of heterosexual cisgender "well-educated middle-class white women" (Grady; "Feminism: The Second Wave").

In *She's the Man*, after the girl's soccer team at Cornwall High School is cut and the Cornwall coach prevents the girls from trying out for the boy's team on the basis that "girls aren't as fast as boys, or as strong, or as athletic," Viola successfully rebels and proves him wrong (00:04:56-00:05:02). She disguises herself as her twin brother Sebastian, takes his place at Illyria High, subsequently works her way up to the first-string boy's soccer team, and finally beats Cornwall's boys soccer team, essentially broadcasting the message that girls can do anything that boys can do. While superficially a socially progressive sentiment encouraging gender equality, critics find fault with the film's simplistic and "didactic" message, saying it "flattens the systemic oppression of women" into a one-off "individual" issue (Elle Literacy, 33:00-33:15). At the end of the film, the audience celebrates because Viola proves she can run as fast as a boy, but is still left to wonder if her original teammates from the Illyrian girl's soccer team still don't have a team to play on, and the systemic power within Illyria's Board of

Education that decided to cut the girl's team instead of encouraging more sign-ups in the first place is never confronted (Elle Literacy 33:38-34:20).

But what critics fail to consider is that, like many post-1990 Shakespearean adaptations, *She's the Man* was marketed towards a young audience of viewers, especially young girls (Friedman 4). As mentioned by Rosenthal, the 2006 release of *She's the Man* grossed $41m in the US and UK because swarms of "tweenies" who idolized Amanda Bynes after her performance in *What a Girl Wants* (2003) swarmed to the theaters to see her in *She's the Man* (278-279). The simplistic and "didactic" approach that screenwriters and filmmakers use to translate Shakespeare's work for the "MTV generation" is not taken with the intention of creating a "lamentable [dumbed-down]" version of classic literature (as some critics may argue), but instead works to make Shakespeare "accessible" to an audience whose youngest members may have yet to encounter Shakespeare in an academic setting (Földváry 154).

I argue that this "dumbing down" for accessibility's sake applies not only to Shakespeare's plot, but also to its feminist themes. *She's the Man*'s PG-13 rating implies that the intended audience of the film spans to include middle schoolers as young as thirteen years old. While I do wholeheartedly believe that thirteen-year-olds are mature enough to handle feminist teachings inclusive of POC and queer experiences and dive deeper into the patriarchal system, I can also acknowledge that many thirteen-year-old girls still have to face gender inequality issues as trivial as not being allowed to play with the boys. If *She's the Man* does anything right, it's that it gives young girls the confidence to pursue their passions and rebel against individuals or systems that prevent them from doing so. The incorporation of simplified, relevant, and relatable themes into the story, even if employed as a marketing tactic to draw in younger viewers, allows

for the exploration of "difficulties" experienced by "adolescent teenage girls" in their "real-world milieu" (Friedman 4; Aranjuez 35)

Now I will agree that on a second pass of the film done by eyes that are older and more educated on feminist theory, *She's the Man* does come off as subtly counterproductive. While the message "girls can beat boys at soccer" might be comforting to a thirteen-year-old, the film contributes nothing new to the pre-existing conversation on gender equality and instead provides a lukewarm-to-cold take on feminism that never even uses the word "feminist." In fact, the film goes to great lengths to emphasize that boys and girls should be treated equally, then turns around and backhandedly reinforces hegemonic masculinity by pitting women against each other, making them get into cat fights in debutante bathrooms and call each other "biotch," characterizing them as overly emotional and irrational (00:06:30-00:06:33). This is not even to mention how gender stereotypes are constantly enforced; women are overly sexualized, Viola's Sebastian is overly macho, and men's sensitivity is deemed unmasculine (all of these aspects of negative gender normative reinforcement will be described later on). Paired with the over-the-top acting, unbelievable costuming, and funky editing to mid-2000's pop music, the movie really just appears to be bad.

But what almost every critic fails to consider is that the movie is not just a comedy adaptation that critically misses the point of Shakespeare's work and fails at creating a progressive product, but it is actively a parody that falls less under the genre of teen coming-of-age, and more under the umbrella of camp. Trevor Boffone and Danielle Rosvally take this into consideration, stating that the elements of "mistaken identity" and "gender play" in the original *Twelfth Night* are inherently "campy in a certain light," but that modern analysis, retellings, and adaptations of the show including *She's the Man* are what expose this campy-ness

(493). When diving deeper into the film, I find that what makes the movie so compelling and entertaining is the multiplicity of forehead-palm-worthy lines, events, and actions that pile on top of another. When the coach says "girls aren't as fast as boys," the audience can tell that actor Robert Torti's face is so uncomfortably flexed and his laughs are so glaringly theatrical that not only does he not mean a word he's saying, but he's actively trying to make a show of making fun of himself. When Viola puts on her throaty southern-draw-esque Sebastian voice, it's clear that she's making a mockery of how men are expected to sound.

Karen McCullah and Kirsten Smith are the writers not only of *She's the Man*, but also of *Taming of the Shrew* adaptation *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999). The Hollywood industry has, since its inception, been dominated by "male moguls" who perpetuate hegemonic masculinity by depicting women who are "emotional" and "vulnerable" against men who are "pragmatic" and "physically strong" (Aranjuez 36). As women in the Hollywood entertainment industry, McCullah and Smith overcome this perpetuity of masculine hegemony in their 2006 script through comedy; while *Taming of the Shrew* displayed openly straight-forward feminism, *She's the Man* makes a mockery of superficial feminism because it is so absurdly comedic.

She's the Man or He's the Woman?

As a play about a woman who dresses up as a man to woo a woman for the man she's in love with, *Twelfth Night* remains infamous today for its gender play and inherently queer undertones. To understand just how deep this gender-warping queerness runs, one must consider *Twelfth Night* as it was originally staged for an early modern Elizabethan audience. In Shakespeare's time, there was no such thing as the female actress; instead, all woman characters were played by boy actresses, or men "so young" their voices "had not yet changed" (Dorwick 76). In other words, in the case of Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Elizabethan audiences would thus see

"a man playing a woman posing as a man," giving the audience three genders for the price of one (Aranjuez 37). This means that every single romantic interaction, whether between Cesario/Viola and Orsino or Olivia and Cesario/Viola, was staged between two male bodies, presenting a layer of queerness to the audience which Keith Dorwick defines as bisexuality. Consider the Duke Orsino figure, who stands on the receiving side of coded affections from the masculine-appearing Cesario and ends up falling in love with the feminine Viola, all whilst playing across a male actor (Dorwick).

Conversely, *She's the Man* does not employ the use of the boy actress; Viola (Amanda Bynes) and Olivia (Laura Ramsey), as well as every other woman-identifying character in the film, is played by a woman-identifying actress. It is important to note that not a single critic attributes this change in casting alone to the film's failure as a Shakespearean adaptation; woman have been formally performing in Shakespearean works onstage since a production of *Othello* in 1660, and have been playing woman characters in Shakespearean film adaptations since the very first Shakespeare film in 1899 (Ziegler; Anderegg). In fact, one of the most revered 21st-century stage productions of *Twelfth Night* from 2009 casted popular movie star Anne Hathaway (*The Devil Wears Prada*) as Viola. However, critics point to a standard of queer connection set by the drastically layered gender play from the original staging that must be upheld in more modern reproductions of the story in order for it to be successful. Dorwick suggests that this means a more heavy reliance on "homosocial relationships" fueled with romantic tension, namely the male-male servant-master relationship between Cesario and Orsino, while Xavia Publius searches for deflected homoeroticism between the two characters in the love triangle who truly are the same gender—Viola and Olivia. What most critics can agree on is that *She's the Man* falls short of fulfilling the queer tension quota set by *Twelfth Night*. On an even more destructive

level, it actually perpetuates the idea that "same-sex attraction is abnormal" through the use of non-scriptural homophobic reactions (Aranjuez 39).

In the original *Twelfth Night*, Viola/Cesario has an infamous monologue in Act 2, Scene 4 often referred to as "She Never Told Her Love" in which she explains to Duke Orsino how her "father had a daughter" (slyly referring to herself) who loved a man (covertly hinting to Duke Orsino) but could never confess her love (2.4.122). This monologue is perhaps the most obvious example of Viola/Cesario confessing her love to Orsino while under the disguise of Cesario, but it is certainly not the only one. In the same scene, she tells Orsino that she fancies a lady "of [his] complexion" and "years," and before she reveals her identity at the end of the play, she claims that she would die "a thousand deaths" for Orsino (2.4.31; 2.4.33; 5.1.136). Act 2, Scene 4 is widely regarded as the scene in *Twelfth Night* with the most queer tension, and is often staged with Cesario/Viola and Orsino sitting mere inches apart, face-to-face. Some productions, such as the 2017 National Theatre's production of *Twelfth Night*, even seal the scene with a kiss between Viola/Cesario and Orsino.

She's the Man does none of this, but what it does do is sprinkle intertextual references to other Shakespearean shows over camp moments of attraction between Viola/Sebastian and Duke (Sebastian's roommate and the Duke Orsino equivalent). While Bynes' Viola does not get a "She Never Told Her Love" monologue, she does get her own Rosalind from *As You Like It* moment, where she (dressed as Sebastian) pretends to be her "sister" so Duke can practice talking to a girl. In her normal, feminine voice, whilst still adorned with sideburns and a polo shirt, Viola says to Duke, "We're flowing" as a soft, romantic guitar strums in the background (Dorwick 79; 00:43:05-00:43:11). However, they only get about half a second of semi-romantic eye contact before a tarantula spider crawls on Duke's foot and disrupts their so-called flow, forcing the

romantic guitar to be drowned out by splotchy noises that can only be described as unsettling and horrific.

The tarantula, however, does catapult Viola/Sebastian and Duke into another possibly romantic situation, as they both seek refuge atop Viola/Sebastian's bed and subconsciously retreat into each other's embrace as a form of protection from the spider. As the spider crawls out the door, Viola and Orsino once again get barely a millisecond of eye contact whilst in their hug, this time jumping apart and letting out deep-chested "shrieks" as the captions put it (00:43:18-00:43:35). They run to opposite ends of the room, Viola vigorously apologizing and Duke returning to their pre-tarantula interaction, saying, "You don't ever, ever do that girl voice again!" (00:43:36-00:43:45).

Either of these instances on their own would prove that Aranjuez is accurate in describing *She's the Man*'s avoidance of queer romance as an attempt to characterize same-sex attraction as unorthodox. However, the film's humorously over-the-top avoidance of queer depictions are no exception to the film's campy contributors. The pull-aways after the *As You Like It* moment and the tarantula embrace are most certainly "dictated by male hysteria," but are just two of the many instances in which there is a clear build up to romantic tension between Viola/Sebastian and Duke, only for either or both of them to pull away right before they cross too far over the romantic line (Aranjuez 38). Other instances of queer romantic avoidance include a late-night conversation where Duke admits that he wishes he could talk to a girl the way he can talk to Viola/Sebastian, then immediately jumps up and says, "If you tell anyone, I'll kick your ass" and a congratulatory hug that Duke envelops Viola/Sebastian in as soon as he finds out that Sebastian made the first-string soccer team, only to pull away as soon as he feels Viola/Sebastian's hand wander down his back (00:54:44-00:55:00; 00:57:05-00:57:11). It happens so many times that I

argue that it becomes a dependable pattern which forces the audience to recognize the ludicrousy of male hysteria. Anyone who is even partially familiar with *Twelfth Night* or the typical happy-ending structure of a 2000's teen romantic comedy can infer that the two leads, Viola and Duke, will end up together in the end, and since the film explicitly states that Duke is attracted to Viola and Viola/Sebastian is attracted to Duke, it simply becomes comedic how unwilling the two are to share a genuine, intimate moment as innocent as eye contact while Viola is wearing her Sebastian disguise.

She's Her and He's Him

One of the most compelling elements of *Twelfth Night* and arguably one of *She's the Man*'s most popularly scrutinized components is its depiction of gender roles and stereotypes. Looking past the layer of confounding gender presentation lost with the leave of the boy actress, *She's the Man* vastly distances itself from Shakespeare's original play by taking the little work that he did to characterize the independent and strong-willed Viola and running with it. It is widely known that Shakespeare was not good at writing women; though it is widely debated who Shakespeare was, it can be inferred that he was a man, and it can be confirmed that he was writing all of his parts for men, and so neither the character development done by the author nor the actor could have been completely accurate to the woman experience (Dorwick). Viola in *Twelfth Night* is a rather bland character; as the audience conduit, she is essentially a blank slate pushed and pulled by survival instincts and circumstance rather than her own desire and initiative.

She's the Man changes that. Amanda Bynes' Viola is able to remain the film's protagonist and the audience conduit while, as Aranjuez states, pushing the limitations on what counts as ladylike behavior. While the geographic location of *She's the Man* is left unspecified, the film

hints at a location somewhere in the American south where there are few people of color and high school athletes long to be North Carolina Tar Heels. This then explains the societal constraints placed on Viola enforced by her mother and other women of her mother's generation who urge her to act demurely and participate in the town's debutante ball. Before Viola even puts on the Sebastian disguise, she rebels against these feminine constraints, calling the debutante system "totally archaic" and storming away from her mother as she chases Viola with a fluffy white dress in hand (00:07:11-00:07:15). And during a practice banquet hosted by the debutante ball organizers, the refined and classically feminine Olivia "gracefully consumes morsels," while Viola can be seen "gorging on chicken drumsticks" in an act of defiance against the debutante system (Aranjuez 38).

What critics believe that the film does wrong is take this borderline masculine depiction of the feminine Viola too far in her Sebastian form. She becomes "butchy," letting overly "machismo" male stereotypes dominate her behaviors as a man (Aranjuez 38, 37). In order to prove to Duke and his friends that she is "one of the boys," she publicly rejects a long line of beautiful supposed ex-girlfriends, because apparently sexual prowess is what makes a man a man (Elle Literacy 27:00-28:00). She relies on hegemonic stereotypes in her portrayal of Sebastrian too, often objectifying women in order to increase her own social status among her male classmates. She sees Olivia and exclaims, "Check out at the booty on that blondie!" much to the dismay of the love-struck Duke who is openly crushing on Olivia (00:24:17-00:24:21). And in helping Duke choose between Viola (aka herself) or Olivia, she exclaims, "Which one would you rather see naked?" which Duke also has an adverse reaction to, expressing his discomfort with Viola/Sebastian's "graphic" descriptions of women's bodies (00:53:45-00:53:55). This is perhaps

the only case in the film where the movie is textually self-aware of its out-of-pocket campy-ness, using Duke as the voice of reason to combat Viola/Sebastian's inappropriate outbursts.

Ellen from Elle Literacy also argues that some of Viola/Sebastian's machismo is justified, for Bynes' depiction of Viola/Sebastian is supposed to be "absurd" and comedic (hence, camp), and actually helps in uncovering hidden social stereotypes. Amanda Bynes' reliance on typical American male speaking patterns "exposes" the absurdity of "hypermasculinity" (26:35-26:54). She even goes as far as to say that critics of Viola/Sebastian's overly macho mannerisms are hypocritical for scrutinizing Amanda Bynes' portrayal of Sebastian yet letting male actors portraying hyper feminine characters, like Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), get away with nothing but praise for their comedic performances (26:18-26:35).

What all critics can agree on is that *She's the Man* succeeds in communicating the idea that gender is performative, yet fails at reinforcing it. As Dorwick explains, original audiences of *Twelfth Night* existed in a time where many subscribed to the belief that anatomical sex was fluid. He cites Thomas Laquerer's medical journal called *Making Sex* which describes a "one-body model" where male and female bodies could physically morph from form to form (Dorwick 75). In this sense, the Viola's gender ambiguity may have been more widely acceptable to audiences of the 17th than the 21st century. Ellen from Elle Literacy cites *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler, which outlines gender as a social construct that is dictated by gender presentation rather than sex assigned at birth. She claims that Viola in *She's the Man* gets away with her facade because her gender presentation is inherently more masculine than it is feminine. Viola/Sebastian wears a boy's uniform, her voice is lower than a typical woman's, and her hair is cut short, which are all societal indicators that a person identifies as male. In this way, *She's the Man* proves that gender is fluid and dictated by how one chooses to present to the world. While

Viola's disguise as Sebastian may not allow her to pass as a cisgender man outside of the confines of the *She's the Man* universe, in its own camp and comedic way it suggests that there are forms of gender presentation that do not have to adhere to one's sex assigned at birth.

Adieu, Good Madam

Fickman *She's the Man* is by no means a perfect retelling of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, but it certainly succeeds at inventively parodying the original play for a contemporary audience. *She's the Man* can easily be described as misogynistic, hegemonic, and homophobic, but it leans so heavily into its offensive elements that it in turn ends up exposing the ludicrousness of these conservative ideals. In fact, the film's camp genre was perfect for disguising it as a conservative narrative following a straight, white couple likely somewhere in the American south, allowing for the film to reach a broad audience inclusive of adolescents with less-than-liberal guardians. In truth, the film exposes the absurdities of a masculine hegemonic system and the demure stereotypes that women are held to whilst introducing an idea of gender fluidity that many young viewers in 2006 had never considered prior to the film's release.

I offer this counterargument to academics and film critics who fail to consider genre when deciding the extent to which *She's the Man*'s storyline and subject matter is harmful. I go back to the *She's the Man* watch party I attended my freshman year of college and consider how such a so-called offensive film could have sparked so much joy and unity among well-educated students in the liberal San Francisco Bay Area. The answer lies past childhood nostalgia, into something more deeply-rooted within the movie. On the very surface level, the film is a positive piece of feminist media. On the deeper level, the film is an offensive piece of superficial second-wave feminist media. At its core, the film is a hilarious mockery of offensive and superficial works of second-wave feminist and conservative media.

I contribute this argument to the pre-existing conversation surrounding not only *She's the Man* and other Shakespearean adaptations/retellings/parodies, but also to the conversation surrounding cancel culture. *She's the Man can* easily be dismissed as problematic by those who see its offensive elements and fail to look closer, and it certainly has been by many academics who have published their scholarly considerations of the film. But in order to judge a piece of work, one must consider it holistically, seeing how its operating parts work together to create an impact, just as *She's the Man* builds on its own offensive parts, spiraling into a piece of work so unserious that it exposes the outlandishness of its offensive elements together. On its own, women catfighting is counter-feminist. Disgusted reactions to queer attraction is homophobic. Oversexualizing women is misogynistic. One could easily take the confirmation bias route and argue that these individual elements add up to extreme offense and end their analysis there. But intensely multiplying these instances of offense and placing them in a situational comedy with glaring plot holes, comedically far-fetched costuming, and theatrically loud acting, the audience understands that the film is unserious.

Lastly, in the words of benjimaninthecan, a transgender Reddit user who cultivated an unlikely connection with *She's the Man*: "All in all, I think She's The Man is a fairly decent movie for… reasons it probably didn't set out to be."

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