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An Analysis of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* Film Adaptations

Since it was first written at the beginning of the 17th century, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will* has stood the test of time as one of the world's most recognizable romantic comedies. Although the play has undergone numerous adaptations from the time it was first performed on the stage, central themes of both familial and romantic love, the deconstruction of gender roles, and its comical undertones have remained in-tact and prevalent with little variation from the original plot. The films being analyzed include the first film adaptation of the play from 1910 which was a silent film a part of a larger *Silent Shakespeare* project, the BBC's 1980 adaptation, director Trevor Nunn's 1996 adaptation, and the 2006 blockbuster hit *She's the Man*. To better understand an analysis of these four *Twelfth Night* film adaptations, we must first complete a short synopsis and criticism of the text itself.

The Rhetorical Situation

One of the first scenes of *Twelfth Night* shows the devastating effects of a shipwreck that causes the main character, Viola, to be separated from her brother Sebastian. Once Viola washes up on the shore of Illyria, a region now known as modern day Croatia, she believes her brother to be dead and begins to mourn him. She soon devises a plan with the ship Captain to crossdress as her brother. In doing so, Viola is able to befriend Duke Orsino and join his court under the

pseudonym Cesario. The Duke then employs Viola to be a messenger to his love interest Olivia; however, Olivia has vowed to abstain from courting for seven years in response to her brother's death. After meeting Cesario, Olivia begins to fall in love with the character Viola has created and Viola begins to fall in love with Duke Orsino (see Figure 1: Love Triangle). Meanwhile, Olivia's servants entertain themselves by convincing Malvolio, steward to Olivia, that she is in love with him after he finds a forged love letter. Much to Viola's surprise, her twin brother Sebastian arrives alive and well in Illyria in search of her. While searching, Olivia mistakes Sebastian for Cesario and asks him to marry her. Shocked by Olivia's beauty and her quick pursuit, Sebastian agrees and they immediately elope. Things come to a head after their elopement when Viola, still under the false pretense of Cesario, and Orsino appear at Olivia's home. Here, Viola's disguise as Cesario is exposed and everyone is baffled. After her reveal and learning that Olivia is now married, Duke Orsino proposes that he and Viola marry one another.

Love triangle in Twelfth Night or What you will

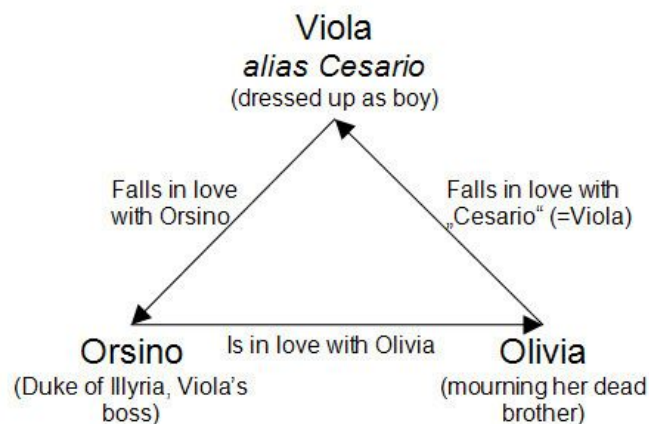


Figure 1

Shakespeare does a wonderful job of illustrating the complicated relationships between characters in *Twelfth Night*. Yet, there are a few major discrepancies we have with some of the choices his characters make. However, these particular omissions allow for various directors to exercise creative license and morph the play to fit their own theatrical needs while remaining loyal to key parts of the original plot structure. When Viola first cross dresses, the stage directions say, "... *Viola [as Cesario] in man's attire*" (1.4). Before this point, there is no mention in this edition of *Twelfth Night* that Viola has chosen or been given the name Cesario, leaving the audience to wonder where it was derived from. After searching through the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, there is no clear reason why Shakespeare chose the name Cesario. The closest comparison to be made is with the word Caesarean meaning "the delivery of a child by cutting through the walls of the abdomen when delivery cannot take place in the natural way" ("Caesarean"). It can be inferred that Shakespeare chose the name Cesario because Viola is artificially birthing, or creating, a new identity in a similar way to how Caesarean births were considered unnatural, as seen in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Macbeth*.

Another concern is Viola's motivation to cross dress and impersonate her brother, whom she believes to be dead. The only logical explanation is that Viola wants to see what it is like to live life as a man free of the repressive bounds associated with the feminine gender identity. If this were true though, Shakespeare would have focused more so on pivotal scenes that showcase the different ways women and men are treated, right? Not really. Shakespeare was a playwright, thus, one of his motivations for writing was to create something entertaining that would draw in a crowd. Meaning, he had to avoid making outright criticisms of society. In the final act of the play, Sebastian meets Olivia and agrees to marry her despite her being a complete stranger.

Although Sebastian's character is not very well established, due to his initial absence from the first half of the play and having very few lines, this impulsive action seems very out of place and leaves audiences wondering how crazy he must be to marry a woman he knows nothing about. The same is true for Duke Orsino's choice to propose to Viola right after finding out she had been lying to him about her true identity and gender for what one can assume was weeks without any hint of remorse. Of course, Viola is in love with Duke Orsino so she accepts his hasty proposal even though the Duke was previously using her, as Cesario, to pursue Olivia's hand in marriage. The sudden shift to openly being in love with Viola contradicts how Duke Orsino's character previously interacted with Viola when he was under the impression that she was a man. It is no secret that Shakespeare enjoys toying with the idea of homoerotic love in ambiguous ways. In other words, Shakespeare was likely using Duke Orsino to plant the idea in his audience's mind that androgynous features and traits, which Viola had to undergo to portray a man, are attractive. The same idea is also found in Sonnet 20 after describing someone with a beautiful mix of feminine and masculine features, Shakespeare claims that the androgynous person described is found attractive to both men and women. "Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth" (l. 8). The ending of everyone neatly falling in love seems very rushed, like Shakespeare wanted to tie up the loose ends of the story as quickly as possible. Grappling to find a storyline that does Shakespeare's ending poetic justice, directors who have created adaptations have made slight alterations to the play but have largely clung to its timeless themes of romance, comedy, and cross dressing.

Silent Shakespeare: "Twelfth Night" (1910)

Silent Shakespeare is a series of some of William Shakespeare's plays, including *Twelfth Night*, that were adapted into silent films by Milestone Film & Video in 1910. Like other silent films, *Silent Shakespeare* must work around the lack of audio. This obviously creates a huge constraint for directors and actors to convey such crucial moments of the plot using only body language and facial expressions. They must also make up for the lack of audio in post production by writing out major plot points consolidated to only a couple of sentences and displaying the text on the screen so their audience can better understand the story line (see Figure 2 as an example). In altering *Twelfth Night* to fit the silent film form and creating a more abbreviated version of the original play, into only about eleven minutes in length, the film directors had to condense many of the scenes and introduce each turning point. The time constraint on this film made it difficult for every plot point to be explored, leaving many gaps in the storyline but the overall narrative the same.

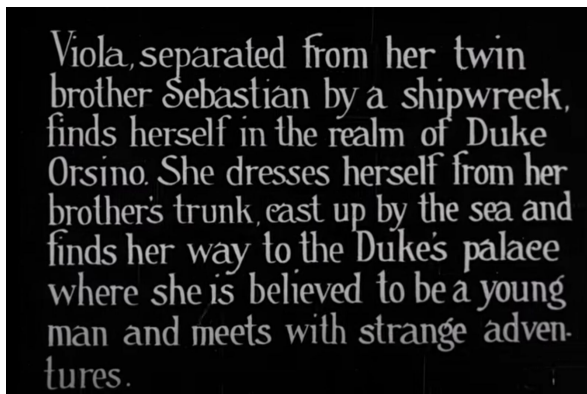


Figure 2

One of the main concerns we had with *Twelfth Night* that *Silent Shakespeare* alters is Viola's name while cross dressing. In the text, Viola goes by Cesario while passing as a man. In the *Silent Shakespeare* adaptation, they never mention her taking on the name Cesario or any other man. Instead, they say that Viola was forced to dress in her brother's clothes as that was the only clothing that washed onto the shore with her after the shipwreck (see Figure 2 again). She is

then mistaken as a man by Duke Orsino, so instead of correcting him, like any rational person, Viola goes along with it so she can join his court. This change in Viola's actions leads to a change in her character's overarching motivation. By having Viola be mistaken for a man instead of purposefully trying to pass as a man, her character remains more absolved of guilt when her true identity and gender are later revealed than it does in the text. Although in the text there are no consequences for Viola lying to those around her once they learn of her deception, her purpose for crossdressing was to trick Duke Orsino into allowing her to serve him on his court (1.2.52-60). In *Silent Shakespeare*, her goal was to simply clothe herself and, in turn, imply it is Duke Orsino's fault for misgendering her in the first place. Overall, however, Shakespeare's original plot and character relationships are still kept intact. *Silent Shakespeare* was inventive enough to even include the ensemble of characters, Maria, Toby, Andrew, the Clown, and Malvolio, that make up Olivia's servants despite their miniscule effect on the plot as a whole. However, they do provide comedic relief to lessen the seriousness of the romance side of the story. In general, *Silent Shakespeare* does an excellent job at tailoring *Twelfth Night* into a film in 1910 despite the many obstacles.

Twelfth Night (1980)

From 1978-1985, according to IMDb, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced a series of film adaptations of William Shakespeare's plays called *The BBC Television Shakespeare Collection* with the goal of staying as loyal to the text as possible. Although these films are very well known for staying so true to Shakespeare's text, it is both a blessing and a curse in a way. For instance, for their 1980 adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, it is great to see the text

come to life in a theatrical style that is only enhanced by some of the technological advantages of film. For example, their use of close ups on certain characters to highlight their emotions, quick scene transitions, and setting changes. However, the film comes across as very two-dimensional as if we are watching it performed on a stage because it lacks intricate camera angles, a music score, and an array of creative lighting that could enhance the play's natural dramatic appeal. While the refusal to drift from the original text ensures that Shakespeare's work is honored, it disregards the many advances the film industry has made by declining to produce a dramatization that has nothing new to add to the business of entertainment.

As we said, the BBC's film version of *Twelfth Night* stays almost completely loyal to the text - word for word. The only slightly major variation from the text is that they changed the order of scene Act 2 Scene 1 to follow Act 2 Scene 2, based on *The Norton Shakespeare* 3rd ed.'s copy of *Twelfth Night*. Of course, the BBC may have used another transcription of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* than what we have that has these scenes switched. Unlike the previous film analyzed, *Silent Shakespeare*, the major problems found in this adaptation is the artistic liberties that the director, John Gorrie, took pertaining to Viola's portrayal. Viola, played by Felicity Kendal, can be seen with the very popular feathered hairstyle of the 1980s and wearing quite a bit of makeup. As you can see below in Figure 3, the actress has on a lot of makeup around her eyes, her brows were made to appear thinner, and she has blush and possibly lipstick on. Sebastian, whom she should be modeled after since he is Viola's twin brother and, thus, a more masculine example of herself, can be seen wearing no makeup, bushy, hairy brows, and hair that curls in all different directions like it naturally would (see Figure 4). Noticeably making Viola more feminine while she is cross dressing, BBC misses Shakespeare's main point

of *Twelfth Night* entirely. The point being that androgynous traits and features are attractive. Focusing too narrowly on following the play word for word, producers overlooked technological advancements that could have improved the production of the film. While they did do a great job at conveying *exactly* what Shakespeare wrote, by declining to establish any autonomy in their filmmaking, BBC did a subpar job in adapting *Twelfth Night* into a film.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Twelfth Night, or What You Will (1996)

Unlike *Silent Shakespeare*'s and the BBC's exact rendition of the play, director Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* film from 1996 stays fairly true to the text while employing various aesthetic tools to create one of the most popular film adaptations of *Twelfth Night*, despite its major deviation from the text's setting. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* does not take place in a specific year or time period defined in the text, however, one can assume that Shakespeare intended it to take place in his present time of the early 17th century. The directors that would have interpreted his plays also would have likely understood this present day

setting— present being their own time— so he did not necessarily need to write it out in the play. Nunn takes artistic liberty and uses this undefined time period to his advantage, by tailoring *Twelfth Night* to fit into the 19th century, around the time of the Victorian Era. Although we know that *Twelfth Night* takes place in Illyria, not England, the characters are assumed to be English. In other Shakespeare plays, like Caliban from *The Tempest*, it is clear that the indigenous characters described are viewed as savages, or less than, the English colonizers. Shakespeare usually makes this clear and it does not indicate otherwise in the play that the people of Illyria are not English, thus, explaining the film’s costumes that resembles English attire. Nunn and his crew for *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* do a phenomenal job of utilizing music, lighting, and other creative elements that are only further emphasized by the Victorian Era’s well-known amplification of detailed, intricate art.

Nunn’s decision to place the story in the 19th century heightens the aesthetics of the show tremendously through the use of beautiful period appropriate costumes, hair, intricate props as well as extravagant landscaping. In Figure 5, from left to right is Olivia, Sebastian, Viola, and Duke Orsino at the end of the film. Here, you can see not only the beautiful Victorian style dresses and suits used, but also how Nunn allowed light to shine through the windows and give dimension to the people and set — something that was lacking in the BBC’s adaptation. In



Figure 5

Figure 6, when Viola, under the guise of Cesario, gives Olivia a message from Duke Orsino.

This screen capture also shows one of the more creative camera shots utilized to give the



Figure 6

characters depth and make the scenery come to life, as though the audience is observing this scene from another spot in the same courtyard. At the end of the same scene when Cesario has to leave, Olivia realizes she has developed feelings for this new man in town and a romantic themed music score

is played to coincide with and enhance the tone of the scene. Of course, no film could be done without the help of actors. In Nunn's film adaptation, Helena Carter plays Olivia, Ben Kingsley plays Feste (the Clown), and Imelda Staunton plays Maria. The actors portraying these characters had to create a unique depth to their stories that is not always well established in plays. This creativity added emotional substance to a slightly askew work of art. Both actors and producers took risks and veered from the traditional renditions of *Twelfth Night* that had preceded them: these risks paved the way for future dramatizations to take even larger risks and adapt the story to fit their own unique time while still remaining true to the overall message.

She's the Man (2006)

She's the Man, directed by Andy Fickman, was released in 2006 as an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* that was specifically marketed to teenagers; something that had not been done before. The film uses the main plot of a woman crossdressing as her brother who is later outed, but strays far away from the text by setting the story in an early 21st century American high

school. Some of the names of characters were also changed to fit the contemporary setting but main characters were largely accounted for. Duke Orsino, played by Channing Tatum, kept the same name; however, his title is not as Duke, but rather his first name is Duke and his last name Orsino. Fickman cut most of Lady Olivia’s court, which included Maria, Toby, and Andrew.

Although the ensemble of servants do not play a major role in the plot itself, they do provide comic relief to lessen the seriousness of the romance side of the story and their names are referenced as a homage to their role in *Twelfth*

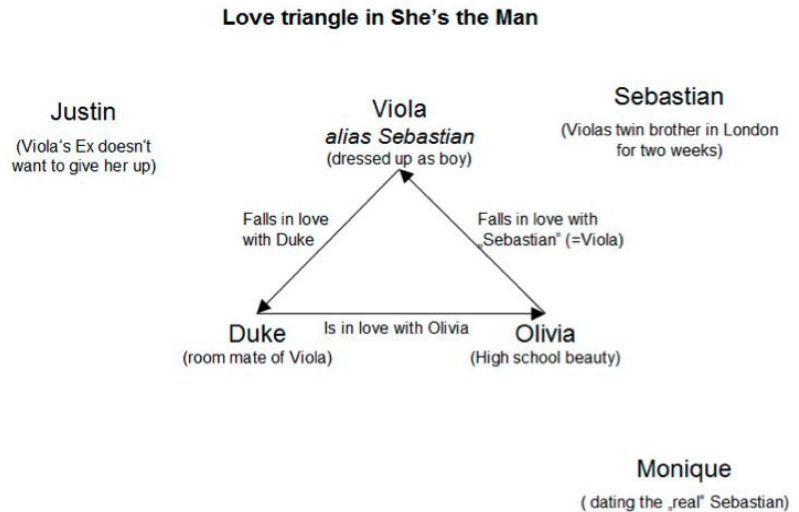


Figure 7

Night. It becomes clear that Fickman compensates for the removal of their comic relief through the addition of numerous other characters, such as: Justin, Viola’s ex-boyfriend; Yvonne and Kia, Viola’s friends that aid her in transforming her into Sebastian; and Monique, Sebastian’s crazy ex-girlfriend. Some of these additional relationships that add to the already intricate relationships between characters in *Twelfth Night* can be seen in Figure 7, below. Although Fickman strays far from the text, he does make lots of nods to the original text to ensure it is not forgotten and even furthers Shakespeare’s argument to extend into the feminist agenda.

Some of the most explicit parallels and connections linked to *Twelfth Night* in *She's the Man* are seen in the names of people and places in the film. For instance, Illyria Academy is the



Figure 8

name of the high school that Viola goes to disguised as Sebastian (as seen on Viola's sweatshirt while disguised as Sebastian in Figure 8) and the restaurant they frequent is named Cesario. Like the *Silent Shakespeare* film adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, Fickman chose to not have Viola's crossdressing name be Cesario, but Sebastian instead. Of course, this makes more sense but it especially makes sense in *She's the Man* because Viola is impersonating her brother while he is away in London. Another plot hole they fulfill is the overarching conflict of the story. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola creates the conflict out of thin air because there is no initial action that pushes her to crossdress; she seems to want to crossdress just to see how far she can go with tricking those around her into believing she is a man. Then, once Sebastian arrives in Illyria to find his sister, a major conflict emerges as to whether or not her true identity and gender will be discovered. However, in *She's the Man*, the conflict arises when the women's soccer team at her own school is cut because not enough people signed up. When Viola asks the soccer coach if the women's soccer players that did sign up could try out for the men's team, he immediately shuts her down and claims that women cannot perform as well as men. Viola sees this as a personal challenge for her to beat her own school's men's soccer team by impersonating her brother at Illyria and joining their men's soccer team. This changes Viola's motivation to promoting feminist ideas by proving she, a woman, is just as good if not better than the men soccer players. Changing Viola's motivation then adds to

Shakespeare's rhetorical argument that androgyny is attractive to say that women deserve equal opportunities and rights as well. The 21st century setting also allows for a whole new audience to digest Shakespeare's content in a new context that makes it easier to understand the politics since the drama filled high school experience seems to be a cultural right of passage for American teenagers.

Conclusion

Twelfth Night film adaptations have evolved immensely since the first one, *Silent Shakespeare*, from 1910 was released to almost 100 years later when *She's the Man* was released. Although each adaptation varies from not having any audio to incorporating 21st century American teenage dialects, all of the films remain true to Shakespeare's original manuscript. Yet, some, like Trevor Nunn, were more successful at using film to their advantage by enhancing the comical undertones and choosing a more appropriate time period to illustrate Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* than others.

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