

# Diffraction Patterns of Homoeroticism and Mimesis between *Twelfth Night* and *She's the Man*

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## Abstract

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is well-known for its homoeroticism, whereas the critical consensus concerning *She's the Man* (dir. Andy Fickman), a 2006 film based on *Twelfth Night*, seems to be that it dampens the play's homoerotic strategies and meanings in the translation to film. This paper argues that while specific elements are indeed dampened, homoeroticism is still firmly present in the movie, and the perceived curtailing of much of the play's subversive energy does not explain the film's queer legacy. Because of the different codes surrounding homoeroticism for Elizabethan drama and Hollywood cinema, the different contours of homosocial space within the two societies, and the Western invention of the homosexual as a distinct category in the time between the two eras, the queer potential of *She's the Man* resides in different moments of the story, and is filtered through capitalist strategies of queerbaiting. Therefore, I aim to show the diffraction patterns of queer and trans desire between the two works. Specifically, the different approaches to mimesis shape this intra-action, including the place of women in mimetics; the specters of realism and psychoanalysis; shifting notions of gender and sexuality; and changes in audience tastes regarding bodily spectacle in cross-dressing stories.

Keywords: homoeroticism, *Twelfth Night*, *She's the Man*, mimesis, adaptation

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## Introduction

Much has been written about Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, including ample discussion of the homoerotics of both its text and its staging. Regarding *She's the Man* (dir. Andy Fickman), a 2006 film based on *Twelfth Night*, a considerable amount of conversation around its approach to the play's homoerotics has also taken place. While accepting the general consensus that the homoerotic strategies of *Twelfth Night* are dampened in the translation to film, this paper argues that homoeroticism is still firmly present in the movie. Because of the different codes surrounding homoeroticism for Elizabethan drama and Hollywood cinema, the different contours of homosocial space within the two societies, and the Western invention of the homosexual as a distinct category in the time between the two eras, the queer potential of *She's the Man* resides in different moments of the story, and is filtered through

capitalist strategies of queerbaiting. Therefore, I aim to show the diffraction patterns of queer and trans desire between the two works. Specifically, the different approaches to mimesis shape this intra-action, including the place of women in mimetics; the specters of realism and psychoanalysis; shifting notions of gender and sexuality; and changes in audience tastes regarding bodily spectacle in cross-dressing stories.

*Twelfth Night* is by no means the only Shakespeare play where a cross-dressing female character is a vehicle for homoerotic desire; in fact, the scene in *She's the Man* where Viola-as-Sebastian impersonates herself for Duke to practice talking to girls is a borrowing from *As You Like It* (Klett 76; Osborne, "Cinematic" 18). And yet, "[o]f all Shakespeare's comedies it is perhaps *Twelfth Night* which takes the most remarkable risks with the identity of its central figure. [...] [I]t is only in *Twelfth Night* that the protagonist specifically says, 'I am not what I am' (3.1.139) where 'seem' would

have scanned just as well and preserved the unity of the subject” (Belsey, “Disrupting” 185). Indeed, much of the scholarship on queer possibility in the play notes how Cesario<sup>1</sup> is a destabilizing figure who, depending on the theory, represents carnivalesque reversal of norms (Coddon 74), apocalyptic transitory identity (Martin), narcissistic doubling (Bate 61; Dodd 95), cisgender heterosexual identity formation (Bate 62; Balizet 129; Kahn 207-11), the homonormativity of Renaissance marriage (Osborne, “Marriage”; Shannon), the fluidity of gender (Massai 10-11), female mobility (Hutson 99; Schiffer, “Long View” 27), and bisexuality of both the characters and the actors (Dodd 94; Dorwick). While the symbolic value of Cesario’s identity (or lack thereof) seems the most obvious locus of queer energy in the play, the contours of the discussion surrounding *Twelfth Night*’s homoerotic elements encompass several other key points, namely Antonio and Sebastian’s relationship (e.g. Atkin 93-98; Kostihová), the Elizabethan practice of employing boy actors to play women (e.g. Case; Orgel), Cesario’s relationship with Orsino (e.g. Dorwick; Osborne, “Marriage”), Cesario’s relationship with Olivia (e.g. Belsey, “Modern”; Carroll 75-76), and the parallel class boundary violations by Sir Toby, Maria, and Malvolio (e.g. Schiffer, “Long View” 27).

There is considerable disagreement about whether *Twelfth Night*’s ending neatly and miraculously returns Illyria to Lenten order, or whether the disruption caused by Cesario and Sebastian’s arrival extends beyond the curtain (Traub 119-20). Even if the carnivalesque is successfully contained by the ending, the complex tone of the play, especially Feste’s notoriously somber ending song, brings into question whether such closure is indeed a happy ending, or instead a bittersweet necessity (Bate 63; Klett 82-83). At any rate, there are significant questions left unanswered by the closing of the curtain, many of which are of interest to the queer spectator: What do Sir Andrew and Antonio do after going home empty handed? Can Olivia’s feelings for Cesario be successfully transferred to her new husband? Given Orsino’s sexist ideas about women, will his relationship with Viola be acceptably similar to his

relationship with Cesario? What if the sea captain cannot be found?

Most of these questions are left just as open in *She’s the Man*, although some are given interesting solutions. The plot of *Twelfth Night* is well-known, but a summary of *She’s the Man* may prove instructive in the ways it adapts the story. Viola is a prominent member of the Cornwall women’s soccer team; we see her athletic prowess before learning her name. When the women’s team is cut and the men’s coach refuses to let the girls try out, Viola decides to impersonate her brother Sebastian, who is disappearing to London for two weeks. Both an attempt to prevent him from getting expelled and a chance to face off against the Cornwall boys, her decision to attend Illyria in his place is met with confusion and begrudging assistance from her gay<sup>2</sup> best friend, Paul Antonio. After a lengthy makeover montage, she arrives at school and attempts to fit in using hypermasculine bravado and rampant cultural appropriation, all of which is met with considerable distaste by Toby, Andrew, and her roommate Duke. Their annoyance eventually dissipates, however, when Paul orchestrates a parade of women—i.e. Viola’s friends Kia and Yvonne—to flirt with ‘Sebastian’, only for Sebastian’s actual ex Monique to show up. It also helps that Olivia has already taken a liking to her lab partner Viola, a position Duke exploits to try and score himself a date with Olivia in exchange for helping Viola with her soccer. There is also a subplot where Viola is roped into participating in a debutante ball, which adds tension to her ruse, as does the prying of Principal Gold, Malcolm Festes, and Monique. Eventually, the love triangle comes crashing down when Sebastian returns a day early and is immediately kissed by Olivia, and at the soccer match between Illyria and Cornwall, both Sebastian and Viola end up exposing parts of their bodies to ‘prove’ that Sebastian is a boy (his penis) and Viola is a girl (her breasts). Duke, initially upset, comes around and escorts her to the debutante ball, where we find all the lovers united: Duke and Viola, Sebastian and Olivia, Toby and Eunice, Monique and Viola’s ex Justin, and Paul and Andrew.

<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the *Twelfth Night* character as Cesario instead of Viola and use he/him pronouns for two reasons: first, from a practical perspective it is useful to distinguish Cesario, the main character of *Twelfth Night*, and Viola, the main character of *She’s The Man*, unless explicitly collapsing them as *the Violas*; secondly, the name Viola famously only appears in the dialogue at the very end (5.1.238-50) and in the script, whereas the only name the audience has access to until this point is Cesario. Indeed, even when the name Viola is revealed, he is only ever addressed as Cesario, “for,” as

Orsino mischievously remarks, “so you shall be while you are a man; /but when in other habits you are seen, /Orsino’s mistress and his fancy’s queen.” Since we never see him in these “other habits” except at the very beginning—when the character has no name as yet—I feel no qualms about continuing to call him Cesario. Another convention I have adopted is to use Orsino to refer to the play, Duke the film, and Duke Orsino both.

<sup>2</sup> While the word gay/queer is never used for him, he is very strongly coded gay (Klett 84 n. 5; Mathijs 95 n. 23).

Most reviews of the movie were fairly lukewarm-to-negative<sup>3</sup>. Setting aside the somewhat farfetched scenario and perceived dilution of *Twelfth Night* into a simplified popular text<sup>4</sup>, the criticism most interesting for my purposes is the seeming consensus that the homoerotic elements of *Twelfth Night* are downplayed—if not removed entirely (Klett 75-76)—in the film: “with Viola’s friend, Paul Antonio, who is strongly coded as gay and fully accepted (though not partnered [*sic*]) throughout the movie, the filmmakers have relocated Antonio and in effect eliminated the passionate male friendship between Antonio and Viola’s brother. Instead, Sebastian is pursued by his girlfriend Monique. Similarly, Olivia’s attraction to Viola in disguise is markedly less homoerotic than in Shakespeare’s comedy [...]” (Osborne, “Cinematic” 17-18). Even the homoerotics that are still present are necessarily constrained by the hegemonic narrative; Elizabeth J. Meyer writes that films like *She’s the Man*

are not violently homophobic, but they demonstrate how heterosexism and homophobia operate. [The] love interests provide comic moments for the audience who are “in the know” about [Viola’s] female sex [...], but also illuminate how same-gender desire is marked as scary, gross, or threatening and is to be avoided at all costs. These situations are acceptable and presented as comedic to the audience because [...] Viola’s feminine “het cred”<sup>5</sup> was established in the first frames [...] and was never in question; therefore, there is never a real “threat” of queer desire or behaviors. (236)

I do not necessarily disagree with any of these assessments; it is certainly the case that *She’s the Man*, however much it plays with gender and sexuality, reinforces hegemonic values of heteropatriarchy (Aranjuez 39). But I worry these critiques undervalue the homoerotic elements that are still present, albeit relocated (Dorwick 78), especially since Valerie Traub’s argument that *Twelfth Night*’s “transvestism [...] has a more generalized erotic effect, dispersed throughout the entire fabric of the text, rather than located and fixed within one character’s desire” is equally applicable to *She’s the Man* (118-19). Instead, if we agree that many of the elements of the homoeroticism of *Twelfth Night* have disappeared in the

adaptation process, then I think it important to trace where they went, why they shifted, and what if anything took their place.

### Adaptational Diffraction

In literary criticism, what constitutes homoerotic energy in a piece has a specific history braided using three strands—psychoanalysis, the lesbian continuum, and queer coding—all of which analyze the suppression of queer content as (respectively) taboo, his-torically unimportant, and subversively immoral. Because of this suppression, queer possibilities were relegated to the subtext, and in order to locate these queer subtexts, audiences had to know what to look for (Tyson 326). Even though these strictures are (mostly) no longer in place, they shaped the language of cinematography and character development so fundamentally that 21<sup>st</sup> century offerings still utilize these codes and tropes to encode queerness. Moreover, content producers know that the audience knows these codes, and deploy them to cash in on the queer market share without alienating conservative consumers with explicit queer representation, a strategy known as queerbaiting (Nordin; Remple).

There are three levels of reception in play that need to be identified in order to understand how homoeroticism is perceived in these works: early modern reception of *Twelfth Night*, contemporary reception of *Twelfth Night*, and contemporary reception of *She’s the Man*. While most of the literature on *She’s the Man* explores the differences between what *Twelfth Night* would have meant for early modern audiences and what *She’s the Man* means for contemporary audiences, the implication is that *She’s the Man*, as an adaptation of the play, also by proxy communicates what *Twelfth Night* means for contemporary audiences, hence the dilution narrative (Balizet *passim*; Hutcheon 121-22). That is, by adapting *Twelfth Night* in such a way that the homoerotic aspects readily accessible to an audience familiar with Elizabethan codes are removed or displaced, *She’s the Man* changes the meaning of *Twelfth Night* for a contemporary audience for whom it might be their only knowledge of the play (Hutcheon 120). *She’s the Man* does not just reflect contemporary views of *Twelfth Night*, it provides avenues for interrogating and “re-cognizing”

<sup>3</sup> The film has 43% critical approval on Rotten Tomatoes, but 79% audience approval (“*She’s the Man* (2006)”).

<sup>4</sup> See Friedman, “To Think” as well as Hutcheon for a complication of this dilution narrative.

<sup>5</sup> *Cred* is borrowed from African American Vernacular English (AAVE), simultaneously denoting ‘credibility’ and

‘credentials,’ with the contextual meaning of believability as a member of a group or as legit/authentic. Meyer’s critical deployment of the term occurs after a discussion of the ways that Viola “appropriat[es a] Black urban masculinity,” thus she’s emphasizing the ways that racialized gender is used in straight circles in her formulation “het cred” (235). I have adopted this critical usage of *cred* as a framework for understanding appeals to authenticity both by characters and by the film’s creators.

*Twelfth Night* and what it means to today's audiences (Balizet 123). Because of this, the change in homoerotic strategies is seen as making the movie more conformist than *Twelfth Night* was/is (Klett 70). I argue that *She's the Man* is no more beholden to the foreclosure of the carnivalesque than *Twelfth Night* is, and that while the movie's foreclosure is tighter than the play's, it retains and reshapes some of the same unanswered questions mentioned above that are left offstage by Shakespeare. The simultaneous presentation of "both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements" allows "the latter [...] to disseminate viewpoints that interrogate the status quo" (Aranjuez 41) as well as the same type of fancy of alternative ways of being that fixation of the body in one authoritative form cannot fully erase (Smith 78).

Attention to *She's the Man* as an adaptation requires us to chart the similarities and differences between the two texts, because part of the pleasure of encountering an adaptation lies in "the interplay between works" (Hutcheon 117). The translation from Elizabethan theater to contemporary film retains some strategies of representation and transforms, adds, or eliminates others, such that adapting the story to its new context provides occasion to observe and appreciate both thematic and structural strategies of reinterpreting *Twelfth Night*. To this end I utilize diffraction as a metaphor in reference to Harlan Weaver's work on the subject, who explains that texts "in close proximity to each other act as slits for the [...] intense feelings that move, wave-like, through both of them, [...] creating] points of constructive interference that demarcate the emergence of differences between them" (3236-38). That is, instead of the differences and similarities being concrete aspects of two separate texts, the interactions and intra-actions between the texts open up points of sameness, difference, amplification, and interference. As Weaver presents Karen Barad's usage of the term, *intra-action* means that "self and other do not encounter one another, boundaries intact, and then separate with the same boundaries; rather, self and other become separate through the process of encountering" (3445-46). In other words, how do *Twelfth Night* and *She's the Man* shape each other, as opposed to a unidirectional influence on the supposedly derivative text?

While I am focusing on homoerotics instead of affect proper, the diffraction strategy seems to be an effective trans methodology of tracing movements and intra-actions between texts. It is clear that both texts are involved in homoerotic projects, yet sometimes those projects reinforce each other and sometimes they interfere given the shift in

context between them. The methods of encoding eroticism have changed; nevertheless, in both cases mimesis is the vehicle through which the text carries its homoerotic content. Thus, the diffraction patterns between homoerotic codes in Elizabethan dramatic theory and in contemporary film theory emerge through the lens of differing conceptions of mimesis and verisimilitude<sup>6</sup>. Aristotle describes the difference between history and art such that, respectively, "the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be" (52). Mimesis is thus not necessarily about truth 'itself' but a representation of that truth (Nuttall 55). Throughout the history of theater, theorists have debated the proper relationship between the stage and reality, and in fact the nature of this relationship can be seen as one of the characteristic features of a region or time period's theatrical practice (Nuttall 59-61). Whether or not a piece has verisimilitude depends on one's perception of reality, on which aspects of reality are salient in one's conception of what is 'realistic' (Nuttall 55-56). The diffractive nodes between our two texts regarding these salient aspects of reality center around shifting notions of female representation, psychology and interiority, sexuality, and spectacle.

### Node #1: Women and the Stage

In *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case argues that the entire mimetic project is a masculinist one, and that the practice of men playing all the roles, including women, means that in the case of the feminist spectator, "mimesis is not possible for her. Perhaps the feminist reader will decide that the female roles have nothing to do with women [...]" (15). Thus, the stage is not truly a mirror of reality, but a male projection of what women are/should be (Case 11). This rigidly homosocial stage opens up homoerotic potential between characters, between actors, and between the actors and the audience (Case 22-23). When combined with crossdressing plots, such as Cesario being seen as a boy playing a woman playing a man, juicy layers of homoeroticism emerge: are Olivia and Cesario's scenes a woman flirting with a man? A woman flirting with a woman? A boy flirting with a boy? All of the above?

My curiosity joins that of Stephen Orgel's students in how "increasingly [they] want to confront the question of what Renaissance audiences saw when they went to the theater: the female character or the boy beneath the costume," and I too am partial to his notion that "the indeterminacy of the transvestite stage, the persistent sense

verisimilitude is the degree to which a work approximates reality within a given artistic framework, and realism is one such historical framework (i.e. psychological realism).

<sup>6</sup> I recognize that the distinctions between mimesis, verisimilitude, and realism are muddy, but as I use them in this paper, mimesis is the process of imitating reality,

of either and both” is precisely the point (109). The very polyvalence of positionalities is the occasion for the heat of Cesario’s interactions with Olivia and Orsino. It is also important to acknowledge that this polyvalence was often specifically about male sexuality and eroticism (*pace* Traub): Keith Dorwick’s central argument is that the male romantic leads in Shakespeare’s plays (and their theatrical descendants) are bisexual due to the simultaneity of the female character and the boy’s body, which dramatizes the tension at the heart of heteropatriarchy (75). Heteropatriarchy is structured around a careful balance of promoting homosociality and homoeroticism, to maintain bonds between men over those with women, while eschewing homosexuality, so as to continue female subjugation through reproduction of more men (McConachie 193; Traub 139). Thus, while women are ostensibly represented onstage, their presence is occasion for men to flirt with each other and explore male sexuality without the threat of not reproducing heteropatriarchy.

That Viola, Olivia, and all other women’s roles in *She’s the Man* are played by women removes one of these homoerotic layers by enforcing a congruity between actor and character gender (*pace* Dorwick). Fortunately, what the film loses in male homoeroticism, it gains in female homoeroticism. While Laurie Osborne argues quite successfully that such Sapphic energy is dampened (“Cinematic” 17-18), the situation is more complex than at first glance. Firstly, even if *She’s the Man* does diffuse the Viola-Olivia interactions, *Twelfth Night* did the same thing in relation to *Gl’Ingannati*, the play on which it is based, which could indicate, as Lorna Hutson argues in analyzing the two plays, a shift in focus from eroticism to rhetorical engagements with female advancement, soccer in the film’s case (98). I do not wish to imply that female homoeroticism is not already central to *Twelfth Night*; several theorists have examined this aspect (Carroll 75-76). However, the presence of female actors certainly foregrounds female homoeroticism more than it had been.

Secondly, unlike in traditional performances of *Twelfth Night*, in the movie Viola and Olivia interact with each other *as women*. Even when stage productions cast women in the roles of Cesario and Olivia, he is traditionally dressed as Cesario when they are onstage together. *She’s the Man* has several scenes where Viola is wearing a dress (something we are assured is a rarity) and talking to Olivia. Analyzing the scene leading up to the bathroom fight, Elizabeth Klett observes that when Olivia is unwittingly gushing about ‘Sebastian’ to the very object of affection,

Viola’s reaction to the praise is ambiguous (69). While her daydream-y gaze in the mirror is played for laughs, that Viola is so moved by Olivia’s affections calls into question the one-sidedness of their relationship. Indeed, the roles seem to have reversed in relation to the play: instead of Viola’s words stirring unexpected passion in Olivia, Olivia’s words stir unexpected passion in Viola (1.5.271-79), although the wooing speeches Cesario composes are transposed into Sebastian’s, not Viola’s, written lyrics (Osborne, “Cinematic” 18), another reversal of the situation in *Twelfth Night*, where the inauthentic written word gives way to extemporaneous speech (Massai 14).

Olivia is not the only woman pursuing Cesario, an even more radical departure from *Twelfth Night*. Whereas *Twelfth Night* has been described as the story of Olivia and her many (male) love interests (Draper 215), *She’s the Man* could cheekily be described as the story of Viola and her many girlfriends. Eunice is creepily clingy to ‘Sebastian’, including watching her sleep in a sequence that reads like a send-up of lesbian boarding school films<sup>7</sup>. Kia and Yvonne hang all over her, albeit for show, and the other girls at school flirt with her after she ostentatiously breaks up with Monique in Cesario’s (the pizza joint in the film). While collecting women in this manner is designed to establish her diegetic het cred, this time as a guy, it also trades in butch/femme dynamics. Viola, the most butch woman in the film, throws into relief the femininity of her potential partners through her camp masculinity. This is deliberately toyed with in the sequence where Kia and Yvonne pretend to flirt with ‘Sebastian’, with the beat of the accompanying song suggesting Kia’s strut in heels towards her to be a well-choreographed dance that may appear heterosexual to the untrained eye but is a playful caricature by women who know each other to be women (Nestle 141). This charade has a second layer of homoerotic content: Paul, who’s orchestrating this scene, mouths Kia and Yvonne’s lines as they say them, thus implying this is Paul talking to some dream straight boy (Sebastian perhaps?). The playfulness of this exchange is interrupted by the arrival of Monique, a representative of cis heterosexual femininity who would be able to blow the whole scheme with her knowledge of its artifice.

Other choices about adapting the characters, while less drastic than the move to female actors, diffuse the homoerotic energy differently, avoiding queer implications in some places and creating them in others. Viola, Duke, Olivia, and Sebastian are fairly straightforward transplants from the original. Toby Belch, Andrew Aguecheek, and

<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the debt of *She’s the Man* to the horror genre, which has several queer implications, has yet to be explored.

(Paul) Antonio also get to retain their names, however their characterizations are dramatically different and they have switched their allegiances, with Paul being Viola's friend instead of Sebastian's and Toby and Andrew being part of Duke's retinue instead of Olivia's. As Osborne notes above, Paul becoming Viola's friend removes the intensely homoerotic bond between him and Sebastian, however his affection is instead bestowed upon Andrew in a blink-and-you-miss-it moment at the debutante ball (1:39:45). These shufflings accomplish several things. Most directly, they emphasize the rigidly homosocial atmosphere of Illyria Prep; despite being co-ed, the school is strongly associated with chaotic hypermasculinity starting with the sequence where Viola first arrives at the dorms (14:14-15:00). This underscores the overarching theme of the film, which is the battle of the sexes epitomized by Viola's soccer career. Whereas class has been argued to be the more important boundary in *Twelfth Night* (Massai 42), in *She's the Man*, gender firmly takes center stage as the overdetermining barrier to be turned upside-down<sup>8</sup>. Because of the stronger thematic emphasis on gender and the attendant shift to more female roles played by women, strategies of homoeroticism move to other moments and characters to accommodate the change.

## Node #2: The Specters of Realism and Psychoanalysis

Despite his romantic life being all but expunged from the text, Paul Antonio does not end the story empty-handed; by pairing him off with Andrew, *She's the Man* solves one of the many issues with staging *Twelfth Night*, namely what to do with these characters once their lines are done. In fact, replacing Andrew for Sebastian could be said to avoid two problematic tropes that would not be palatable in contemporary media: the predatory gay and the gay guy with unrequited feelings for his straight(?) best friend. Since Paul's love life has nothing to do with Sebastian, his happiness is not dependent on the whims of a character who ends up in an impromptu heterosexual union at the end. Furthermore, Graham Atkin has described an inequality in the affection between Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* that today comes off as controlling and creepy<sup>9</sup> (93-

96). While there are certainly other ways to interpret Antonio and Sebastian's lines to each other, Paul not being even remotely associated with Sebastian removes any specter of the predatory gay, an extremely harmful and homophobic trope that dominated queer representation in the U.S. throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tyson 320). Because Paul's presence is homosexual instead of homoerotic, there is a different responsibility towards his representation to which Hollywood is marginally more attuned than it is towards the problems with queerbaiting<sup>10</sup>. At any rate, Andrew's pairing with Paul queers the original Sir Andrew and adds another potential homoerotic ghost for the contemporary player (see Quick), in addition to de-heteronormalizing the three-weddings ending in *Twelfth Night*.

And yet, Monique's presence encourages us to interpret Sebastian as explicitly straight, whereas in the play his relationship with Antonio provides little context for his sudden desire to marry Olivia ("it's a guy thing," the movie's Sebastian claims, echoed by Duke). A parallel straightening occurs with Viola through the addition of Justin—who in part serves as the catalyst for Viola going to Illyria—and even with Olivia, who is mourning a bad break-up with a college guy instead of her dead father and brother. This is probably the most damning evidence that queer possibilities are being evaded. That said, a large part of this evasion has to do with the comparatively panoptical regulatory apparatus in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. high schools, particularly as presented in the film (Mathijs 93-94; Meyer 237). The coaches, parents, debutante coordinator, and especially Gold provide visible social constraint not immediately present in *Twelfth Night*'s Illyria (Klett 73). For Shakespeare, Illyria serves as a sort of fantasy realm wherein the characters have more license to be excessive and play with identity, the site of the carnival as it were (Carroll 80-81; Martin). Whereas Cesario could theoretically have played his part indefinitely, Viola's disguise had a predetermined timeframe (two weeks), the identity of an already existing person (her brother), and the complication of social obligations as a daughter (the debutante ball) to parents who are not dead. This reduced social location of the cast also means that in the play Orsino and Olivia as nobility have tangible legal and social power

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that issues of class are not germane to an analysis of *She's the Man*; Osborne notes how the immense class privilege of all the characters in the film shapes their access to social clout and transgression ("Cinematic" 23). Furthermore, the racialized class politics of Viola's mimicry of Black urban masculinities, especially her egregiously unidiomatic deployment of AAVE, have a lot to do with both her ambiguous success as a man (e.g. Duke's reaction in the first boys' bathroom scene) and the film's success as a comedy invested in critiquing gender at the expense of

racialized realities (Meyer 235). I also recognize that Orsino and Olivia's courts are themselves gendered spaces (Stanivuković 122).

<sup>9</sup> Dorwick's observation that Monique takes the structural role of Antonio bolsters this reading (80).

<sup>10</sup> That is, as the Antonio character, "any interpretation of" Paul and Sebastian "is in a contemporary production political" because of the ambiguity in the play and the current climate for LGBTQ2PIA folk (Kostihová 138).

they do not have as students (Duke's performative acceptance of post-reveal Viola on the team notwithstanding). Furthermore, it should be pointed out that being minors, all three of the leads have even more limited access to full self-expression, which along with the other social constraints could explain why *She's the Man* feels less overtly homoerotic—too many people are watching.

While the film itself presents soccer as Viola's main reason for pretending to be Sebastian, the theatrical trailer argues something different. According to the voiceover, "Viola was facing a fate worse than death, until her twin brother Sebastian showed her a way out" ("Trailer"). This is intercut with scenes from the rehearsal luncheon (emphasizing her masculinity) and the scene in Sebastian's bedroom. Not only is soccer not mentioned, but Viola's disguise is presented as a "way out" of an enforced femininity. The agency of the decision switches to Sebastian, who now tells her to "pretend to be [him]," but his absence and the invited opportunity to take his place induct Viola into a world where "everyone's got a secret" ("Trailer"). In this way, the central conflict is implied to be Viola exploring her gender identity, not soccer. "What," Stephen Greenblatt provocatively asks, "if Olivia had succeeded in marrying Orsino's page Cesario" (66)? Quoting Michel de Montaigne's report of an actual case from the period, he presents a bleak potential answer: "the matter was brought to justice, and she [the cross-dresser; *sic* throughout] was condemned to be hanged, which she said she would rather undergo than return to a girl's status; and she was hanged for using illicit devices to supply her defect in sex" (qtd. in Greenblatt 66). Let us extend the parallel: what if Sebastian never came home and Viola quietly transferred to Illyria as him; or even more subversively, what if Viola had transferred to Illyria under a completely different identity? The real-life counterpart in this analogy would undoubtedly be *Boys Don't Cry* (1999, dir. Kimberly Peirce), which documents the rape and murder of Brandon Teena. When trans or gender-non-conforming people are presented seriously in film, we are often subjected to violence and death; when presented comically, we are the butt of the joke, and *She's the Man* is no exception.

Because of psychoanalysis, much of recent literary criticism focuses on interiority and on the character as an actual person instead of a structural element (Hutson 97). By the same token, the larger theatrical move to neoclassicism and then Stanislavskian psychological realism after the writing of *Twelfth Night* and their attendant expectations prevent some of the more fanciful elements of *Twelfth Night* being carried over in-tact (Massai 39). While rom-coms certainly have their own fanciful conventions, Hollywood film in general keeps to realist conventions and thus believability becomes paramount—especially in a film set in

the present and especially concerning gender as a presumed marker of sex. This is why *She's the Man* requires much more context for why Viola is dressing as a boy.

The first 14 minutes of the film are dedicated to rationalizing why she must cross-dress and how, whereas in *Twelfth Night* the decision takes a couple lines and the transition happens off-stage. The passages wherein these decisions are made reward close study:

VIOLA. O, that I served that lady,  
[Olivia]  
And might not be delivered to the world  
Till I had made mine own occasion  
mellow,  
What my estate is.

CAPTAIN. That were hard to  
compass  
Because she will admit no kind of suit,  
No, not the Duke's.

VIOLA. ....  
I prithee—and I'll pay thee bounteously—  
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 shalt present me as an eunuch to him.  
(1.2.43-59)

DAPHNE. Picture this: we're at the country club,  
they call your name, and you emerge in  
this— [*She dramatically unveils a  
debutante gown.*] Ta da!

VIOLA. [*Gagging noise.*] No. Sorry, mom, I have a  
strict no-ruffles policy.

DAPHNE. Sometimes I just think you just [*sic*]  
might as well be your brother.

[*Exit DAPHNE. Dramatic music. VIOLA looks at a  
picture of SEBASTIAN, wearing the same  
hat he's wearing in the photograph.*]

VIOLA. Hmm. You know what? If you can't join  
'em, beat 'em. (9:19-49, author's  
transcription)

Despite the shift in length of time devoted to this choice, in both *Twelfth Night* and *She's the Man*, the obvious solution is denied the Violas, and instead of applying pressure to the barrier, they view crossdressing in the image of their brother to be easier than, say, begging Olivia anyway for admittance

to her court—she obviously is not as closed off as thought if Cesario could be granted audience<sup>11</sup>—or filing a Title IX complaint against the school which the girls could easily win given the coach’s virulent misogyny<sup>12</sup>. Clearly there would be no story if the characters simply avoided the perceived need to cross-dress, but the relative speed with which they acquiesce to these limitations and reach their decision to cross-dress is curious. Diegetic interpretations of this decision also vary significantly. Whereas Cesario legally being a woman is seen as a miraculously convenient solution to the characters’ problems, the students and principal at Illyria Prep view Viola as at best odd and at worst mentally ill: during her outing, Gold says of Sebastian over the megaphone: “In fact, yes he is, he’s a big girl. He’s actually specifically his own sister, Viola, who’s been impersonating him for reasons which will become very clear after extensive psychoanalysis” (1:19:43-53).

The history of conversion therapy and the pathologization of transgender identity makes this statement jarringly dark. As with Aristotle’s stage, the idea that performing arts hold up a mirror to reality serves to erase the actual beings who inhabit the positionalities represented (Case 15). In *She’s the Man* and other cross-dressing films, the possibility of transgender people is rarely considered. In the film’s reality, there are no trans people, only boys, girls, and girls pretending to be boys; Viola is the exception that proves the rule that boys are one way and girls are another way, and never the two shall meet.

### Node #3: Gender and Sexuality

As previously mentioned, the world in which Viola finds herself is portrayed as an extremely patriarchal, homosocial space that she has to navigate as a tomboy; indeed, the metaphysics of the tomboy is a central concern with transerotic implications. The techniques employed by the film of “downplaying *Twelfth Night*’s homoeroticism [...] embrace the strategies of adolescent female athletes who distance themselves from peer assumptions about their homosexual orientation” (Osborne, “Cinematic” 19); this allegorical presentation of the plight of the female athlete

establishes a border identity from which Viola can call the gender system into question (Meyer 241), but it also requires significant energy to justify and maintain. Because tomboys as a trope are masculine without being male/men, they allow men an indirect form of homosocial bonding without the risk of homosexuality. That is, the tidiness of Viola and Duke ending up together, and hence its erotic appeal, is that they can both play men’s soccer and still be straight. In the opening sequence, it appears Viola can have it all: she can flirt with her boyfriend in a bikini *and* kick ass in soccer (Meyer 233; Osborne, “Cinematic” 22). However, this moment of freedom and honesty occurs without tangible markers of social regulation, a peace broken by the next scene at the school where the gutting of the women’s soccer team ends both her soccer aspirations and her relationship. Viola must now make a familiar choice: her career, or her femininity? By sacrificing her femininity, she quickly demonstrates how little she fits into either the hypermasculine world of Illyria’s soccer team or the hyperfeminine world of the debutante ball. In either scenario, her actions are incongruous, and wearing a suit and tie is presented as just as much a costume as her in a dress.

Both texts employ dramatic irony for laughs at/with the gender play by emphasizing the incongruity between the Violas’ ‘real’ gender and their disguises<sup>13</sup> (Belsey, “Disrupting” 180). *She’s the Man* has an added layer of dramatic irony through queer coding, such as during Gold’s wig speech where he encourages ‘Sebastian’ to come out... as a baldy, or in the rehearsal luncheon when Cheryl asks the debutantes, “who’s ready to come out<sup>14</sup>?” (39:09-45, 1:03:28). One benefit of this campy in-between space is that the Violas can bridge the gaps between Duke Orsino and Olivia, who represent opposite sides of the “two-culture approach” of gendered communication (DeFrancisco et al. 64). In the popular imagination, “communication problems between women and men are similar to problems that arise when persons from different language groups attempt to communicate” because men and women are thought to have completely different cultures despite ample evidence to the contrary (DeFrancisco et al. 64). Cesario is able to secure audience with Olivia when no one else in Orsino’s court can,

when Daphne says “my little girl, you’re finally gonna be a lady!” right before we see the ‘Sebastian’ costume in full (13:39; 12:08).

<sup>14</sup> Historically, “gay people in the prewar years [...] did not speak of *coming out* of what we call the ‘gay closet’ but rather of *coming out into* what they called ‘homosexual society’ or the ‘gay world’ [...]” in reference to the debutante tradition (Chauncey 7, emphasis in original).

<sup>11</sup> To be fair, this is in no small part due to Olivia’s intrigue about the cute new guy at her gate, which might not have obtained were Viola not Cesario (1.5.145-63).

<sup>12</sup> It is implied that Cornwall Academy is a private school, and therefore likely—but not necessarily—exempt from Title IX, but going over his head or taking legal action is never even considered.

<sup>13</sup> In *She’s the Man*, these moments tend to be one-liners, such as when Paul sends her off with a “be a good boy!” or



and furthermore improves upon Orsino's outmoded and ineffective speech to woo her (1.5). Viola, as a representative of both men and women, is the only thing Duke and Olivia have in common, and *both* of them are desperate for 'Sebastian' to arrive and rescue them from their disastrous date. The dialogue between Duke Orsino and Olivia can only begin when someone fluent in both styles can translate, but also because each of them has a stronger connection with the Violas than with each other. This preference for sameness echoes Laurie Shannon's insights into the homoeroticism of marriage: "the ideological work of much comedy, then, is less to celebrate or to critique [heterosexual] marriage and its approach than to find a means to make it plausible or even thinkable in parity terms" (187).

Nonetheless, the Violas' intermediate positions are found to be unstable as both of them come up against traditional markers of hypermasculinity. Cesario is called upon to duel with Sir Andrew, although neither of them could be considered fighters. Cesario's reticence to fight serves as foil to 'real' men Antonio and Sebastian, who are competent swordsmen. The fight scenes in *She's the Man* reverse this characterization; Viola—as Viola—is squarely in the middle of both three-way fights, one where Justin and Duke are competing for Viola, and one where Olivia and Monique are competing for 'Sebastian'. Her willingness to jump headfirst into a scrape is in stark contrast to Cesario's reluctance. In both of the movie's scenes, the fight is over ownership of Viola/'Sebastian', and in regards to the film's quasi-feminist gender politics, it is illuminating that it allows Viola to fight as a woman for ownership of herself. Sir Andrew's greenness in dueling points to just how ill-fitting masculinity can be for men as well, a theme that emerges in *She's the Man* (Massai 46). In both texts, Duke Orsino's sensitivity is coded feminine, and a large part of the Violas' project is helping channel his sensitivity to their benefit (Aranjuez 37; Stanivuković 127). Parallel to Viola's soccer dream is Sebastian's music career, currently a feminine-coded pursuit.<sup>15</sup> Both Sebastian and Viola take advantage of the confusion of their parents' divorce to flee the social constraints that inhibit pursuit of their careers. The closing scene emphasizes this parallel to show the double standards of perceptions of gendered labor, as well as Sebastian's privilege in being able to maintain his gender presentation at the same time. This parental double standard of dis/approval appears earlier, though inverted, during the twins' flashings; in both scenarios, markers of masculinity are approved while markers of femininity are put under closer scrutiny.

<sup>15</sup> The shirt he wears when first introduced, which advertises punk band Violent Femmes, seems a visual pun on the gendered complexity of musicianship as well as the gender play of the film. It also connects in with the film's

This reflects a larger femmephobia issue in the film. Monique and Daphne, as ultra-feminine upper-class women, are consistently portrayed as frivolous, excessive obstacles to be overcome. During the rehearsal luncheon, "jump cuts contrast traditionally feminine Olivia gracefully consuming morsels (accompanied by a non-diegetic flute melody) and 'butchy' Viola gorging on chicken drumsticks (with dopey bassoon music)" while she glares at Olivia (1:03:32-1:04:11; Aranjuez 38). This sequence occurs at a moment when Viola thinks she and Olivia are competing for Duke, thus Olivia's emphasized poise draws a link between femininity and antagonism. The pizza scene, where 'Sebastian' dumps Monique by calling her crazy and ugly, is met with peculiarly enthusiastic applause from the other diners and immediately cements both her ladies-man reputation and her place in Duke's social circle. Gold's comments about high heels and Justin's propensity for crying also feminize them and encourage us to laugh at gender transgressions of (presumably) cis men antagonists.

Oddly, whereas in *Twelfth Night*, Orsino holds sexist views that Cesario has to correct, it is *Viola's* rampant misogyny that *Duke* challenges throughout the film (e.g. "why do you always talk about girls in such graphic terms?" [53:53]). While masculinity is just as fragile for the film's men as it is for 'Sebastian', Viola feels more pressure to present a hypermasculinity to (over)compensate for not being a man. This contrasts sharply with Cesario's strategy, wherein he occupies the relatively settled position of an attending boy, an already feminized position for youth that helps justify his androgyny<sup>16</sup>. Importantly, Viola's exaggerated masculinity unnerves the guys just as much as her moments of femininity, because both point to a lack of internalized masculine maleness. Whereas the guys' moments of femininity and compensation are in a larger context of settled masculinity, the rapid oscillation between extremes in a person they are just meeting constructs her as a "freak" (16:54). Just as Viola fails to inhabit a convincing male masculinity, she also has an unconvincing female femininity for most of the film. The entire rehearsal luncheon scene is based around Viola's resistant deployment of masculinity, which is equal parts deliberate (Klett 77), natural, and residual from her disguise. Interestingly, her masculinity is almost corruptively effusive. Monique and Olivia, until this point constructed as exemplary debutantes, have a rare failure in (white upper-class) femininity during the bathroom fight; as Cheryl admonishes, "when debutantes disagree, they say it with their *eyes*" (1:08:23). Sebastian's

femmephobia, subtly suggesting femininity as a source of violence.

<sup>16</sup> Klett points out that perceived age also helps Viola pass because "Duke assumes she is a freshman" (75).

penis has a similar corrupting power: during his reveal scene, an extra can be heard saying, “Kevin, close your eyes!” (1:20:11). Masculinity is so contagious and powerful that it can turn anyone queer.

Why doesn't Viola simply say ‘Sebastian’ is not straight? This would probably be easier for her to maintain and provide a convincing ‘secret’ justification for her antics, although since her brother has to attend school there after she leaves, giving him a reputation as queer is not helpful, considering here he is firmly straight-coded. Moreover, when she does express what appears to be same-sex attraction, “her profession elicits aghast looks and gasps from both teams [...]” (Aranjuez 39). While Shakespeare is indeed deployed as a marker of so-called high culture, in the particular case of *Twelfth Night*, his queer cred is also called on to lend legitimacy to its sexual politics even as it edits those politics. Queerbaiting elements such as this are littered throughout the film. The tarantula (named Malvolio) scene is probably the best example (Klett 76): to teach Duke how to talk to girls, Viola pretends to be herself, and while they “flow” as she calls it, Malvolio crawls on Duke's foot causing the two to panic. They jump on the bed and hold each other screaming, then turn to face each other and scream again. Malvolio leaves the room and Duke shuts the door, the evil contained, but then the phone rings, scaring them again. Wherefore Duke's line: “you, you don't ever, ever do that girl voice again” (43:38). Every time Duke and ‘Sebastian’ start to enter homoerotic territory, its indulgence is laughed off as Viola being creepy, and because we queer-decoding audiences are trained to see these characters as individuals with motivations for these actions that could indicate queerness as opposed to pieces of a comedic whole<sup>17</sup>, we are expected to tolerate or filter out these bait-and-switches as the price for seeing gender and sexual ambiguity.

#### Node #4: Body, Cross-Dressing, and Spectacle

Not only do these moments approach queerness before “swerving towards nature's bias” (Greenblatt 68), but the overall carnivalesque nature of both texts frames these moments of destabilized heteropatriarchy as a temporary aberration that inevitably results in proper induction into the social order (White 43). In both the play and the film, Duke

Orsino shares erotic energy with someone whom he perceives to be a man, but ultimately the disguise is removed and he resumes heterosexual courtship. Besides these carnivalesque elements, the presence of a literal carnival in the middle of the movie plays up the farcical elements of the scenario and occasions a spectacle of cross-dressing that is much more in keeping with Hollywood conventions. The spectacle of cross-dressing in *Twelfth Night*, besides the boy actors playing women, is the “double-vision” of Cesario and Sebastian, culminating in the final scene (Elam 110-11); for *She's the Man*, the spectacle lies in exposing the methods of production for the illusion. The transition from Viola to her masculine persona is moved from off-stage to on-screen in an extended make-over/“field research montage” (10:28-11:23; Aranjuez 39). At the carnival, Viola has no less than three on-screen costume changes, many with very thin justification. The locations of these changes, and of her fight with Paul when they arrive at Illyria, are fascinating because they hold the illusion of privacy within public view. When first we see ‘Sebastian’ fully outfitted, she immediately assumes she has been clocked by a random guy and gets back into the car to leave, only to have a shouting match with Paul in the open vehicle. Somehow no one around them has heard this exchange. It is equally implausible that no one would notice or comment on her tilt-a-whirl or moon bounce costume changes given there are witnesses to the transformation<sup>18</sup>.

These moments of fantasy privacy allow for a different scopophilic pleasure than does Cesario in tights<sup>19</sup>; not only do we see various states of exhibitionist undressing, but we also see the costume-like aspect of gender inscribed on the body dynamically instead of statically. We are never permitted to forget that Viola is leading a double life—she now has two images for one body instead of two bodies for one image. It would seem *prima facie* that this emphasizes the arbitrariness of gender and Judith Butler's conception of gender parody, but on the contrary Viola's gender is presented as much less performative than Cesario's. The more Cesario presents as a man, the more he is accepted as a man, to the point that even after revealing his legal gender and birth name, the other characters (or at least Orsino) still treat him as a man. His performances of gender congeal to

<sup>17</sup> Although, Mathijs discusses how the acting and directing choices make deliberate use of an ensemble cast to provide the queer cred of a cult film by emphasizing referential humor instead of psychological realism.

<sup>18</sup> Many of these witnesses are children, which could explain how she gets away with it but also carries unfortunate implications given the predatory gay stereotype. At any rate, George Chauncey reminds us that the search for “privacy in

public,” to use Laud Humphreys' formulation, has a long queer history due to reduced privacy in the home and a lack of public institutions in which queer people could gather (197).

<sup>19</sup> When women were allowed on the English stage and took over the role of Cesario, part of the scopophilic pleasure was to see the actress's legs (Schiffer, “Long View” 11); this also connects in with the homoerotics of breech roles (Reynolds).

stabilize his perception such that returning him to the social role of a woman is a difficult project that exceeds the bounds of the play (Butler *passim*). For Viola, her deployment of gender is increasingly fractured until finally her body is called in as the final say on her gender. Before confessing, she says “I can’t do this anymore,” the stress of being two people finally rupturing the world she has created (1:27:12). To restore order, “both Viola and [...] Sebastian must prove their gender, [...]” as defined by their genitalia/sex characteristics (Osborne, “Cinematic” 31, emphasis in original). While we are denied visual confirmation, the conventions of PG-13 movies imply that the diegetic audience has more than enough proof to decree Sebastian a man and Viola a woman (Pittman 131). Especially since shirtlessness has been a metonymic stand-in for masculinity throughout the film, she is required to demonstrate her difference through presentation of the chest.

This scene is disturbing on several levels. Besides the “psychoanalysis” comment discussed earlier, that two minors need to expose themselves publicly to satisfy everyone’s curiosity is problematic. Moreover, the circumstances of this outing cast serious doubt on Gold’s judgment. Instead of privately discussing the issue with ‘Sebastian’, he makes an extremely public announcement in the middle of gameplay, as if this is a school emergency. In a deleted scene, he explains to Malcolm and Monique that he believes ‘Sebastian’ requires an intervention, not realizing that interventions should ideally be done in a context where the person feels safe. It is never appropriate to out someone, especially in so public and ostentatious a way and especially surrounded by so many people who can do her physical harm. Thankfully, Viola is granted slightly more agency in coming out than Sebastian is, but her confession is still in a larger context of coercion and public humiliation.

There is some slight resistance to the association of genitalia with truth; when Sebastian exposes himself, Kia takes out her binoculars and says “nice work, Paul!” approvingly (1:20:07). For Kia, Sebastian’s penis is just one more part of the disguise, a recognition of the expectation that men have penises of a certain shape and size without necessarily assuming the fixedness of the body. Granted, Kia is portrayed as a ditz and the moment is played for laughs, but she comes closest to referencing the body as constructed instead of deterministically essential. More subversively, because the people in the bleachers aren’t given a full explanation of the situation for Viola’s reveal, they receive the illusion of a body with both a penis and breasts, until both iterations of Sebastian are seen side-by-side. By proving her worth on the soccer field, Viola has obtained the elusive female phallus.

One final note on the carnivalesque: as mentioned, the tone of *Twelfth Night* is notoriously complex. Even as *She’s the Man* eliminates much of the melancholic elements (Klett 70), it retains the ambiguous and destabilizing tonal power of Feste’s final song—in this case “Move Along” by the All-American Rejects—perhaps even more enigmatically given that so much of the other serious material is purged. Though Viola’s femininity is supposedly embraced through her sudden change of heart about the debutante ball, the song’s imploration to “move along [...] even if your hope is gone” implies the matter is not quite settled after all.

## Conclusion

*She’s the Man* is a more faithful adaptation of *Twelfth Night* than it seems at first glance, but this faithfulness is obscured by the radical adjustments necessitated by the changes in genre, historical context, and casting strategy. The influx of women as actors and characters—as well as the different responsibilities towards gay representation—shifts the circulation patterns of homoerotic energy. Capitalist strategies of queerbaiting and the endemic surveillance of a post-9/11 world constrain the available modes of disseminating counter-hegemonic ideas about gender and sexuality. Changes in audience taste drive alternative approaches to spectacle. And yet, even if we read Viola as cis, her blurring of norms of gender and sexuality occasion a smattering of homoerotic moments that, while distinct from the homoerotic elements of *Twelfth Night*, qualify *She’s the Man* as a queer film in its own right. While queer representation and aesthetics have certainly progressed since its release (though not exactly consistently), even despite its misogyny, heteronormativity, ciscentrism, and queerbaiting it remains a camp cult classic. In this manner, *She’s the Man* successfully translates both the possibilities and limitations of *Twelfth Night*’s gender disruption by relocating the homoerotic elements in different moments of the story and by virtue of its mainstream popularity.

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