



RE-READING *TWELFTH NIGHT* THROUGH HOLLYWOOD ADAPTATION, *SHE'S THE MAN*

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to scrutinize the different aspects of the movie and set it against the perspective of Shakespeare's play. It proposes to draw a parallel between the two masterpieces, belonging to different genres, while focusing on various aspects of a Shakespearean comedy. Twelfth Night received acclaim and adoration but as in the case of any remake, She's the Man too came under scrutiny on account of high expectation and obvious comparison with the original by the critics; however, the movie has its own brilliance when we talk of entertainment and comedy. The paper will compare the two great pieces of art while reflecting primarily on the proximity between the two in terms of setting, characters and the overall impact.

Keywords: *Adaptation, Films, Shakespeare, She's the Man, Twelfth Night*

INTRODUCTION

It has been rightly remarked that "Shakespeare is not of an age but of all ages". A number of Bollywood & Hollywood adaptations on Shakespeare's plays amply justify the statement. A playwright who entertained the 16th century audience is holding the same authority in the world of entertainment through films directly or indirectly inspired by his masterpieces.

Shakespeare's tragedies have been admired and imitated and we have a number of Hollywood and Bollywood adaptations on them, *Omkaara*, *Maqbool* and *A Thousand Acres*, to cite a few. However, his comedies are no less admirable, for there is more of variety in his comedies than in his tragedies. Dr. Johnson regarded Shakespeare's comedies as unparalleled works and remarked in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, "... in his comic scenes he seems to produce, without labour, what no labour can improve His tragedy seems to be skill; his comedy to be instinct."

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She's the Man directed by Andy Fickman is a Hollywood adaptation of Shakespeare's romantic comedy, *Twelfth Night* and enlivens Viola, one of Shakespeare's most charming heroines. As a 21st century adaptation, the movie is quite modern in its approach; yet it is very much Shakespearean and borrows a number of his elements of comedy for creating the humorous and witty impact. Very much in the line of *Twelfth Night*, *She's the Man* too relies on comedy of situation, disguise and mistaken identity, hence giving an impression of a characteristic Shakespearean comedy. However, on certain aspects, the director Andy Fickman has tried to experiment with plot, characters and setting and wherever he has done that, we notice a little digression from what we call truly a Shakespearean art.

Revisiting *Twelfth Night: She's the Man* as a Shakespearean Comedy

It has been rightly remarked that "Shakespeare is not of an age but of all ages". The timelessness of the works of the Shakespeare can be well gauged from the fact that even today almost five centuries later filmmakers have been using his creations to attract and entertain the audience. Shakespeare's works are well acclaimed for their universal appeal and that is one of the prime reasons not only in Hollywood but in Bollywood as well, we can enlist adaptations of his plays. A playwright who entertained the 16th century audience is holding the same authority in the world of entertainment through films directly or indirectly inspired by his masterpieces.

The relation of films and literature goes back to the late eighteenth century. The Industrial Revolution sparked technological advancements, such as the development of the iron press in 1798, which allowed literature to reach more consumers. Timothy Corrigan contends that "Throughout this period, from roughly 1750-1825, Western cultures grew increasingly fascinated by visual images and spectacles that drew on but transformed the traditional pictorial arts, as well as by the similarities and differences in images and words as separate means of communication" (*Film 9*).

John M. Desmond and Peter Hawkes point out five reasons as to why literature inspires films. First, literature exists as a great source for films because an author has already completed the creative process of inventing characters, plots, and worlds. With this process accomplished, an adaptation of an already established and successful work is easier to create than to begin a new work that might fail (Desmond 14). Second reason pointed out by them is movies adapted from the texts by classic artists like Shakespeare and Dickens appeal the elite audience more, owing to their existing familiarity with them and their works. Desmond and Hawkes described that "A third reason for adaptation comes from the notion that the purpose of motion pictures is to teach the masses about their literary heritage. In this view, film is a



pedagogical medium useful for introducing literary masterpieces to contemporary audiences” (15). In the present times, one of the main reasons for increasing popularity of adaptations is low risk of failure of the work which has already established its status in the literary canon. And finally, adaptations are inspired by the directors’ own liking or inclinations for a particular writer or work.

The close bonding of visual creations based on literary works gives rise to discussion around fidelity to the original. Fidelity deals with the faithfulness the film has or does not have towards the original material (“Literature” 31). In this context, Corrigan points out five questions to dwell upon the fidelity of these types of films:

(1) To what extent are the details of the settings and plot accurately retained or recreated? (2) To what extent do the nuance and complexity of the characters survive the adaptation? (3) To what extent are the themes and ideas of the source communicated in the adaptation? (4) To what extent has a different historical or cultural context altered the original? (5) To what extent has the change in the material or mode of communication (a printed page, a stage, 35 mm film) changed the meaning of the work for a reader or viewer? (Film 20)

Based on these points, the paper is an attempt to review and analyse the film *She's the Man* directed by Andy Fickman, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. The movie happens to be a 21st century make and has all the elements for the interest of modern audience. We have fancy settings, glamorous crowd and all modern slangs. But the best part is while watching the movie not even for once do we miss Shakespeare in it. As an adaptation, the movie relies on the all the elements of Shakespearean comedy like mistaken identity and disguised appearance for a successful and comic plot, however, the filmmaker definitely deserves huge credit for keeping the essence of the original play while also experimenting with his own creative skills. Being an adaptation, if the movie resembles the play, at the same time it also presents instances of being a piece of visual art, specifically meant for the modern audience. Rebecca Twitchell remarks in her blog, “*She's the Man* is a smart and modern twist on Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. The modernity of the film makes the context of the play seem more plausible while also maintaining Shakespeare’s original plot intentions. The film seemed to respect Shakespeare’s original play; taking into consideration little details in homage to the playwright, even including Feste’s “greatness” speech at the end.”



To begin with the plot, we have a story about identical twins marked with love triangles, plot and subplots, which are the characteristics of any Shakespearean play. The film maker's attempt to present this film as an obvious adaptation gets reflected in his use of original names for the characters viz Viola, Sebastian, Duke, Olivia and even for the place with name of school being highlighted as Illyria. Though in the modern context, some of these names sound a bit odd yet help the movie come out as a close remake of the play. There is a close parallel between the major characters of the play Viola, Sebastian, Duke and Olivia who all remind us of Shakespearean heroes and heroines but at the same time, they are very much modern in spirit and appearance. Unlike the old palatial setting, the movie is all set in the school premises however the names are definitely Shakespearean as we have Illyria not as a town but as a school in the movie. Another difference in the plot is that in the play Viola disguises herself as Cesario for the only purpose of entering the court of Duke and serve so as to able to trace the whereabouts of her brother Sebastian. The filmmaker slightly altered it since he was creating an adaptation meant for the viewing of modern audience. So in the movie he has used soccer as the central theme again to make it more attractive for the present day audience. It is because of soccer that Viola presumes the role of her twin brother Sebastian who unlike twelfth night isn't supposed to be dead but running way from school to live his passion for music by performing in a band in London.

The Shakespearean comedy was based on the plot marked with mistaken identity and love triangles. In the movie too we have the comic effect generated through the mistaken identity of Viola as Sebastian. The whole plan of her to find a place in the soccer team of boys disguised as her brother Sebastian leads to Olivia's getting smitten by this new version of hers and heartbreak for Duke who already loves her. The parallel drawn between Olivia of *Twelfth Night* and Olivia of *She's the Man* comes closer when the filmmaker introduces us to the reluctance of the latter to get into any kind of love relationship owing to her previous bad experience in love as against the former who is lamenting the death of her brother. Much like Viola in *Twelfth Night*, who disguised as Cesario, falls in love with Duke thus forming a love

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triangle between her, Duke and Olivia; in the movie, Olivia, Viola and Duke get into a triangle relationship. This confusion gets deepened further when Duke who happens to be her (Sebastian's) room mate requests for Viola's help as Sebastian in wooing Olivia in return of his promise to teach her, soccer. The parallel for another suitor of Olivia of the *Twelfth Night*, Sir Andrew Augcheek gets featured in Malcolm Feste of *She's the Man*, who is constantly doubtful of the actual identity of Viola.

The already complex situation gets messed up further leading to more hilarity when Sebastian comes earlier than his supposed return to school. Another reference to the Shakespeare's play is proposed here when the date mentioned for his return turns out to be 12th, showing another attempt by the director to keep it close to the adaptation. However, in the play, it is Sebastian who clears all the confusion whereas in the movie, it is Viola who resolves the situation by telling everyone about her being a girl.



Besides these major similarities and direct reference, we come across many indirect instances that allude to the presence of Shakespeare in the movie. Duke at one point of time in the movie quotes his soccer coach and utters the famous Shakespearean quote, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them!" (II. V. 129-130.). Another instance is when Viola is moving around the Illyria campus and in the background, one can see the bulletin board announcing the production of the play What you will, the alternative title of the play, *The Twelfth Night*. Finally, though we don't have Twelfth Night's Malvolio, Olivia's steward in the film, we don't miss his presence since he is there in the movie as Malcolm's Tarantula.

The movie thus not just recreates the Shakespearean plot but continues to refer to it in many subtle ways. Both these works have love, jealousy and mistaken identities as the central theme and the plot. Where Shakespearean setting is the Elizabethan country, Fickman's movie is based in modern day school. As an adaptation, Andy Fickman has done real justice

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to it by making it a contemporary piece of art, but at the time retaining its Shakespearean essence and outcome, thus ensuring fidelity to the original as pointed out by Corrigan. DeWitt Bodeen wrote "Adapting literary works to film is, without a doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood." (349) In the light of this statement, *She's the Man* can be called a real success for proving its allegiance to the source work and also emerging as an entertaining work of art and cinema. Kim Renfro, in appreciation of this remake, wrote, "'She's the Man' is not only an underrated teen comedy, but stands as the greatest Shakespeare adaptation since '10 Things I Hate About You.'"

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