

# The Postfeminist Mystique: Feminism and Shakespearean Adaptation in *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She's the Man*

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## ABSTRACT

"The Postfeminist Mystique: Feminism and Shakespearean Adaptation in *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She's the Man*" focuses on two recent teen adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night*, respectively. While I agree with those critics who read these films as conservative appropriations of Shakespeare's cultural capital, I focus specifically on how both movies exploit the generational divide between second and third-wave feminism in order to discredit feminism in general. As I show, *10 Things I Hate About You* associates feminism with unproductive anger, absent or threatening older women, and the inability to form or maintain close relationships, while the more recent *She's the Man* suggests that the second-wave victory of Title IX is no longer necessary, since the really good female players can play with the "guys" and the others will not want to play, anyway. In other words, both movies flatten out the complex and often disturbing patterns of gender and sexuality in Shakespeare's plays to authorize a "postfeminist" view of society and to suggest that feminism is outdated, irrelevant, and even harmful.

In *10 Things I Hate About You*, the 1999 adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherine the shrew becomes Kat, the strident teen feminist who learns how to relax her feminism, help her sister, and fall in love. More recently, in *She's the Man*,<sup>1</sup> the 2006 adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, Viola becomes a tomboy who poses as her brother in order to try out for the boys' soccer team at his school, Illyria, and assert her right to play sports. Both movies invoke Shakespeare's cultural authority through character and place names and basic plot similarities, and both use feminism to suggest that they endorse the freedoms of modern girls to shape their own futures. As I will show, this is far from being the case. Rather, *10 Things* and *She's the Man* should be read as postfeminist movies that advance a conservative view of gender and identity.

More specifically, I argue that both movies exploit the generational divide between second and third-wave feminism in order to ridicule both forms of feminism and to suggest that feminism in general is outdated, irrelevant, and even harmful.

Postfeminism has come into general use as a term used to describe the world after feminism — sometimes in line with third-wave feminism, but more usually to imply that feminism is no longer necessary. As Angela McRobbie puts it, postfeminism describes the conservative backlash that "positively draws on and invokes feminism . . . to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (2004, 255). Here, McRobbie highlights the postfeminist gesture as a kind of cultural shorthand that enables the death of feminism to be taken for granted. In *10 Things* and in *She's the Man*, this postfeminist shorthand is used to stereotype second and third-wave feminisms: In *10 Things*, older women are threatening or absent, and for younger women, feminism becomes a barrier to establishing close relationships with other people, especially romantically and within the family circle; in *She's the Man*, third-wave feminism, and specifically the movement towards "girl power," also drives its story of a girl who poses as her brother to prove that she can play soccer on the boys' team at an exclusive private school. But the film negates the second-wave achievement of Title IX by suggesting that only exceptional girls really want to play sports, and that kind of girl can find a place on boys' teams.

(at this point, part of this article – most of it dealing with *The Taming of the Shrew* and *10 Things I Hate About You* – has been omitted. I have copies of the entire journal article for anyone that wants to read the entire thing)

## "GIRLS CAN'T BEAT BOYS"

Like *10 Things*, *She's the Man* deploys Shakespeare's cultural capital to validate its essentialist views of gender and sexuality and to promote a conservative view of class and education through a canonical text, in this case *Twelfth Night* — a play in which, as Stephen Greenblatt puts it, "The transforming power of costume unsettles fixed categories of gender and social class . . . In *Twelfth Night*, conventional expectations repeatedly give way to a different way of perceiving the world" (1997, 1762). However, although *She's the Man* employs the cross-dressing plot of *Twelfth Night*, it carefully reinforces "conventional expectations" about gender and sexuality by constantly reminding us that Viola is in fact female, through flaws in her performance of masculinity and through scenes in which she is dressed as a properly feminine girl. Furthermore, the movie's use of upper-class markers of privilege, such as private boarding schools, debutante balls, cars for the students, and enormous houses, naturalizes those privileges even more than *10 Things* does.

*She's the Man* portrays Viola as the exceptional female who proves her ability to play with boys' team, implicitly suggesting that Title IX's landmark assertion of girls' rights to play sports is irrelevant to contemporary girls. Viola is the only girl who manages to circumvent her school's cutting of the girls' soccer team, and her solution — to disguise herself as her brother Sebastian so that she can try out for his school's boys' team — isolates her as the exceptional female who can play with the boys, yet never lose her femininity or her attractiveness to males. Though Viola — like Kat, who also plays soccer — can be regarded as a kind of third-wave, girl-power feminist who combines athleticism and tomboyishness with makeup and romantic relationships, in fact the movie repeats *10 Things*'s split between second and third-wave feminism by deprecating the second-wave achievement of Title IX and reducing third-wave feminism to a single girl who displays only the most superficial signs of that feminism. Viola's dilemma is recast one not of survival, as in *Twelfth Night*, but rather as asserting her right to play soccer with the boys. More significantly, the blame for this dilemma rests with the girls of her school (Cornwall Academy), not enough of whom have signed up to play soccer to constitute a team. By assigning the blame for this problem to the girls themselves, who apparently do not appreciate the advantages granted them by Title IX, the focus on the split between second and third-wave feminism so central to *10 Things* is used here to endorse the stereotype of third-wavers as frivolous girls and simultaneously suggest that the concerns of second-wave feminism are irrelevant to today's young women.

Like *10 Things*, *She's the Man* restricts the primary adult female characters to one — Viola's mother — who is, however, no feminist, but rather a silly, upper-middle-class socialite. She is no Ms. Perky either, despite one brief moment of lust for Viola's ex-boyfriend, and in fact *She's the Man* avoids embodying second-wave feminist stereotypes in any specific character. However, the film does critique second-wave feminism through the specter of Title IX, the 1972 legislation that ensured equal support for male and female sports and academic activities in both public and private schools. Title IX was and is a major second-wave feminist triumph, and was one particular advance that allowed third-wave feminists to feel that they grew up with many opportunities that their mothers lacked. However, it has been much attacked by those who assert that it discriminates against male athletes and that it weakens all sports for both men and women. Title IX's status as the basis for non-discriminatory practices in educational athletics received a blow in 2005, when the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of the Department of Education released a statement that purported to clarify Title IX's provisions. Assuring schools that they may use surveys to determine student interest in athletic participation, the statement argues that "results that show insufficient interest to support an additional varsity team for the underrepresented sex will create a compliance with part three of the three-part test [to ascertain a school's adherence to Title IX requirements] and the Title IX regulatory requirement to provide nondiscriminatory

athletic participation opportunities" ("Additional Clarification" 2005). In other words, lack of interest, as defined by a survey, would justify cutting girls' and women's teams and allow the school to avoid being censured under Title IX, an interpretation that has justifiably earned criticism from advocates of women's rights.

*She's the Man* begins as Viola learns that her high school girls' soccer team has been cut because not enough girls signed up. Horrified, the girls who want to play soccer confront the boys' coach, who is mildly sympathetic and tells them, "If there's anything I can do, just say the word." But when Viola suggests that she and her teammates try out for the boys' soccer team — a right that is, in fact, guaranteed them under the provisions of Title IX (Women's Sports Foundation) — the coach and the members of the boys' team laugh incredulously, and the coach slips into near-rhyme:

It isn't me talking,  
It's scientific fact,  
Girls can't beat boys,  
It's as simple as that.

When Viola reminds her boyfriend — the star of the boys' soccer team — that he has previously praised her as a better player than half the boys on his team, he chooses to lie rather than break solidarity with the other boys. The incident portrays males as smugly certain of their physical superiority as backed up by "scientific fact," yet also as threatened by athletic females.

Although if the girls had researched their legal rights at all, they would have had stronger grounds for their protest, there is a definite feminist element to this early scene, one that has considerable potential for a girl-power strategy. By grouping the girls tightly around the figure of the coach — who, as we see from a medium long shot, is actually watching the boys' team practice, while the girls are watching him — the scene suggests a female solidarity that empowers these girls to demand the right to play soccer. While Viola has most of the lines in the scene, she does not have all of them, and the girls seem to be united in their friendship and their athleticism, a unity reinforced when Viola breaks up with her boyfriend for his attempt to dominate her. The camera leads us to identify with the girls, and especially with Viola, who gets several close-ups, as opposed to the boys, who get only medium shots, and the coach, whose only close-up is in profile and clearly intended to show his arrogance, as he laughs off Viola's request to be allowed to try out for the boys' team.

So far, so feminist, more or less. But the scene's portrayal of a female solidarity opposed to male insensitivity and discrimination does not last long. Viola counts on the help of three friends to support her impersonation of her brother — two fellow girl soccer players, and one apparently gay male hairdresser, Paul. But the primary ways in which she "proves" her maleness draw uncritically upon the most stereotypical aspects of American masculinity, ranging from groping her crotch to using an excruciatingly awkward form of hypermasculine slang — "What up?," "You know it bro," and, addressed to a woman in a bar, "Foxy momma" — to asserting her sexual potency through the display of what appear to be former girlfriends, dressed in tight revealing clothes and in sexy high heels, in front of her male teammates at a local restaurant. Viola's "girlfriends" are in fact her soccer friends, and all of them are being coached in their performances by Paul. But in spite of these faint elements of solidarity, the scene not only defines masculine behavior as aggressive, rude, and sexually harassing, but it also naturalizes that behavior as an essential part of what being male is all about. As the climax to the parade of "girlfriends," who have been patronized and slapped on the butt, Sebastian's actual girlfriend Monique shows up and thinks that Viola is in fact Sebastian. Monique has already been established as an insensitive [girl] who is relentlessly pursuing Sebastian, and by humiliating her

in front of the entire restaurant (Viola proclaims that "When my eyes are closed I see you for what you truly are — which is uuugly!"), Viola earns the applause and approval of her teammates, who include her own love interest, Duke. After this "taming" of the unruly woman, the males now address her as "man," and Duke tells her, "You're officially my idol now, man." After their assistance at the restaurant, Viola's friends reappear in a helpful way only once more, at the carnival, where they help Viola escape Monique's attentions. Thus, although Viola's success as a male impersonator does rely significantly on her friends' support, the movie restricts the implications of such support by its increasing focus on Viola's growing love for Duke and the complications that ensue once Sebastian returns from London and turns up at Illyria.

The name of the restaurant — Cesario's — in fact calls attention to a significant difference between *10 Things* and *Twelfth Night*. Cesario is the pseudonym Viola uses in the play, because she does not pretend to be her brother but rather invents a new persona for herself as a "eunuch" who can sing to the duke: ". . . for I can sing, / And speak to him in many sorts of music / That will allow me very worth his service" (1.2.53-55). In *She's the Man*, Viola is more constrained than Shakespeare's Viola. She has to use her brother's identity because this is the only way she will be accepted at Illyria as a possible soccer player, and her performance of "Sebastian" is marked by a hypersexual masculinity that is far removed from Shakespeare's Viola's construction of an androgynous persona that draws on both masculine and feminine gender stereotypes. This is all the more noticeable since the film's real Sebastian is actually a rather nuanced character, one who prefers rock music to sports and who writes sensitive song lyrics. Audiences are clearly meant to ponder the irony: The girl acts like a boy! The boy acts like a girl! However, Sebastian's rare appearances do not seriously disturb the film's essentialist view of gender, especially since his "sensitivity," which appears only on the paper on which his lyrics are written, does not prevent him from dropping his trousers to prove his maleness at the climactic soccer game, an act that thrills the girls and makes his father say, "That's my boy!"

### SHE'S THE WOMAN

The movie avoids the potentially subversive implications of Viola's male impersonation by reminding us over and over that she is, in fact, female. Though Viola's act as "Sebastian" apparently fools everyone she meets, it is actually so inadequate that a charitable viewer can only assume that all the people around her are supposed to be blinded by their assumptions that no girl could act such a role. As Sebastian, Viola speaks in an inconsistently deeper voice that frequently shoots up the register towards a more "girly" high voice; displays inappropriately "feminine" sensitivity to feelings and injury; and seems oddly fashion-conscious, as when she notices Olivia's shoes and is surprised and pleased to hear that Olivia "got them at Anthropologie." While in real life these traits are hardly incompatible with maleness, in the world of the film they are clearly intended to remind viewers that Viola is only acting a role. These slippages in Viola's impersonation reinforce the film's conservative belief in essential gender roles; Viola may act tomboyishly at times, even when she is not in character, but she is so fundamentally a girl that she cannot maintain the "Sebastian" act consistently. More significantly, by interposing scenes of Viola's debutante activities with "Sebastian's" more masculine activities, the movie rarely goes more than one or two scenes without presenting Viola as a feminine, nubile, and desirable young woman. Her body-obscuring boy's clothes are regularly displaced by body-revealing dresses, and her short-hair wig comes off to remind viewers that, in fact, she has reassuringly feminine long hair — like Kat, in fact, who has long wavy blond hair that tends to be tightly tied back, but that is more loosely arranged in her more "feminine" scenes at Club Skunk and at the prom.

Even in Viola's triumphant debut as a girl player on the boys' team, the film reminds us that she is still not quite one of the boys. After winning acceptance as a "man's man," Viola is able to earn a place on the first-string boys' varsity team, but only because she has been coached by Duke. The team's coach, played by the English former professional soccer player Vinnie Jones, routinely addresses his team demeaningly as "ladies," intimidating them with his special brand of "hard man" masculinity. Viola's performance as her brother is dramatically unmasked at the game between her school (Cornwall) and her brother's school (Illyria), but the coach, rather against character, tears up the rule book that forbids girls to play on boys' teams and declares, "We don't discriminate based on gender!" However, though she plays a central role in the game, Viola makes no goals. Instead, she assists Duke to one goal and, through a slightly miscalculated foul shot, enables him to make the game-winning goal, as well. She may be good, but even within this team sport Viola supports the more effective male player, rather than becoming a star herself.

Between the game and the final shot, Viola makes her debut at the Stratford Country Club ball — no class-mixing prom for this movie. Dramatically late, Viola finally appears in the spotlight with Duke, dressed in a light green gown that reveals her figure extremely well, especially her cleavage. Once again, we are reminded that Viola is really female, a fact that Duke underscores right before the ball when he tells her, "Everything would be a whole lot easier if you just stayed a girl!" Viola says "I promise." The fluidity of gender so marked in *Twelfth Night* — in which Viola is never out of her boy's clothes — is firmly tamped down here in a strictly conventional and upper-middle class vision of female adulthood as sexually attractive, privileged, and heterosexual. This vision dissolves into the movie's final shot — Viola playing with the boys as a girl, her long hair flying — a filmic technique that suggests she may be able to move between her tomboy athleticism and her more conventionally feminine identity with ease. However, the final shot also suggests a vision of girls' athletics in which separate teams — and, implicitly, Title IX — will be unnecessary, as the best female players will rise to the top and be able to compete with even the toughest males. Such a vision, of course, endorses an individualistic, male-dominated hierarchy and relies on the antifeminist dismissal of sisterhood and its insistence that women must compete on men's terms and rely on themselves in order to succeed.

For both *10 Things* and *She's the Man*, Shakespeare's plays are sources for romantic narratives that simplify the plays' far more complex and disturbing representations of gender, sexuality, and class into apparent celebrations of "girl power" and the opportunities today's girls enjoy for personal fulfillment. In the process, they also employ media stereotypes of second and third-wave feminism, playing one against the other to support essentialist views of gender and identity, and to suggest that late 1990s and early 2000s America is, indeed, a postfeminist society. In these fantasies of upper-middle-class American education, the principles and victories of second-wave feminism are portrayed as irrelevant to the current generation of girls; and third-wave feminism is reduced to being able to play with the boys while also remaining attractively girlish enough to guarantee romantic male attention. Given the influence films have in helping to shape teenage female identity, these representations of feminism deserve close attention, especially when they so clearly demonstrate how much the pinnacle of achievement in our society remains to be "the man." *10 Things* and *She's the Man*, released seven years apart from one another, show graphically how Shakespeare's work continues to be invoked as the basis for conservative critiques of feminism that oversimplify feminist debates and market the movement as, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, harmful for teenage girls.