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Adaptation and Perception in the Works of William Shakespeare and Jane Austen

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ABSTRACT

The literary works of William Shakespeare and Jane Austen have long been regarded as part of the elite section of the literary canon. They have been studied thoroughly and are found in most high school curriculums, as well as in many college courses. These literary works have also been the subject of many film adaptations. While some of these adaptations are period pieces that attempt to recreate the time period in which the work was written, there are also adaptations that put a modern spin on the stories. This thesis will delve into three such modern adaptations: *10 Things I Hate About You*, adapted from *Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare; *She's the Man*, adapted from *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare; and *Clueless*, adapted from *Emma* by Jane Austen. Each of these films was received differently by scholars and film critics, and their contemporaneous reviews are very indicative of the social environment in which they were produced. This thesis compares and analyzes the reasons for the different critical reception of each film and how that reception correlates to the films' intended audiences being primarily women.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Works of literature are often viewed as more complex than films, especially when those films are literary adaptations. Many book-to-film adaptations have undergone intense scrutiny from film critics, contemporaneous audiences, and the scholarly community alike, but none so much as the novels and plays that have been turned into romantic comedies. This thesis will look at three such literary works and their adaptations: *Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare and *10 Things I Hate about You* by Gil Junger; *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare and *She's the Man* by Andy Fickman; and *Emma* by Jane Austen and *Clueless* by Amy Heckerling. In doing so, it will examine modern reviews by film critics as well as those contemporary to the films' release dates, scholarly criticism of the films, and how they relate to their literary source material.

Some people consider these literary works as highbrow cultural products and think of these film adaptations as frivolous “chick-flicks”. Conversely, some other people find the written source material to be boring and old but find the movies to be entertaining and worthy of merit. So why is it that so many scholars take issue with things that the general public typically find entertaining and worthy of their time? *A Theory of Adaptation* author Linda Hutcheon wonders in her first chapter, “Why, even according to 1992 statistics, are 85 percent of all Oscar-winning Best Pictures adaptations? Why do adaptations make up 95 percent of all the miniseries and 70

percent of all the TV movies of the week that win Emmy Awards?” (4). Clearly, audiences enjoy adaptations and find them to be award-worthy. However, many, if not all, of the films Hutcheon refers to are intense dramas or period pieces, nothing similar to the likes of *She’s the Man*, *Clueless*, or *10 Things I Hate About You*, which are often regarded with a much more critical eye by both scholars and the Academy of Motion Pictures.

While period piece adaptations that offer more drama – like Joe Wright’s *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) – or those that stick strictly to their source material – such as Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* (1996) – often receive praise, critical acclaim, and the stamp of approval from scholars, movies such as *She’s the Man*, *Clueless*, or *10 Things I Hate About You* are regarded as plebian, dumbed down, and – worst of all – for girls. A distinct decline in respect becomes apparent when a movie is marketed for women, particularly young women, even if the film is based on the exact same source material as a film that has been met with rave reviews and showered with awards. The general consensus in the zeitgeist is that adaptation is only valid and worthy when highfalutin’ and/or period pieces are adapted, while films that attempt a modern spin on the source material and shift their primary audience to women are routinely dismissed. These movies are seen as low brow and less complex than their source materials with the main reason often circling back to the fact that they are made for women – often by women.

The fact of these films being made for a –typically young – female audience seems to come into play quite frequently in reviews and scholarly articles written about them. Why is it that the intended audience can create so much vitriol for a film adaptation that is relatively faithful to its source material? Perhaps it is that those who consider the literary works as

something for elites dislike how these high brow works are being adapted and “dumbed down” into “low brow” romantic comedies for a “plebian” audience. However, these films still have important messages to convey and make significant points about contemporaneous society, while remaining entertaining and more accessible than their source texts to a broader audience. What is it about adaptations that creates the need for highbrow interpretations that can only be accessed and understood by the upper echelon of scholars? Should these movies be allowed to be just fun? Do they have a responsibility to dig deeper into societal issues like their source material before them? Many of these films do fulfill that responsibility, just dressed up in a different fashion than audiences/critics perhaps expected. *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She’s the Man*, and *Clueless* are three excellent examples of adaptations that turn works of literature into teen romcoms and show how the reception of a story can be altered through the format of its delivery.

Chapter 2

Critical and Public Reception

10 Things I Hate About You

Possibly one of the most well-known Shakespeare movie adaptations is *10 Things I Hate about You* (1999), famously adapted from *The Taming of the Shrew*. William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, believed to have been written between 1590 and 1592, follows Katherine and Petruchio in their upper-class society in Padua, Italy. Katherine, or Kate, is the eldest daughter of Baptista, a wealthy upper-class member of Paduan society. Her younger sister, Bianca, is the object of desire amongst many suitors – namely Lucentio, Hortensio, and Gremio – but is unable to marry until her older sister, Katherine, is married. Unfortunately for Bianca and her suitors, Kate is infamously headstrong, stubborn, and hot tempered. To fix this issue, Bianca's suitors encourage Petruchio to court and marry Kate. Since Petruchio is a newcomer to Padua who is in search of a rich wife, he readily agrees and quickly marries Kate and takes her back to his estate. Much of the rest of the play revolves around Petruchio's attempts to "tame" Kate, including by way of starvation and sleep deprivation, and the development of their married life. Now free to court Bianca, her suitors vie for her attention, and she eventually marries Lucentio. When Kate and Petruchio return to Padua to attend the wedding, Kate is transformed into a subservient wife who even goes so far as to lecture the other wives on their duties. The play's ending can be read in a variety of ways depending on the staging, with some portraying

Kate's tameness as the result of domestic abuse and some showing it as a joke that Kate herself is in on.

The Taming of the Shrew was adapted into the beloved romantic comedy *10 Things I Hate About You* in 1999 by Karen McCullah and Kirsten Smith, who wrote the screenplay, and Gil Junger, the director. In this teen romcom adaptation, the titular shrew Katherine becomes Kat, played by Julia Stiles, and Petruchio becomes Patrick, played by Heath Ledger. The film loosely follows the plot of the play on a much more scaled down level: instead of marriage, the film deals with the high school prom, and the "taming" of Kat is more suited to modern ideas and audiences, instead what is typically thought of as domestic abuse in the play. Instead of 16th century Padua, the movie takes place in 1990s Seattle Washington, set in the world of the fictional Padua High. Kat's younger sister, Bianca (Bianca), played by Larisa Oleynik, is a popular sophomore who is desperate to join the dating world, but she is held back by their father's rule that Bianca cannot go out with anyone until Kat – who is headstrong, fiery, and loudly against dating – is also doing so. Cameron (Lucentio), played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt, a new boy at school, has fallen head over heels in love with Bianca and starts tutoring her in French while he tries to figure out a way around her father's no dating rule. To solve the predicament, Cameron concocts a plan with Joey (Hortensio), played by Andrew Keegan, who also wants to go out with Bianca, to pay Patrick to take Kat out so Bianca will be free to date. The rest of the film follows the developing relationships between Kat and Patrick and Bianca and Cameron in a traditional romantic comedy plot that leaves behind the controversial domestic violence of the play in the 16th century; in place of what is now regarded as the domestic abuse

in *The Taming of the Shrew*, we get a very persistent Patrick willing to humiliate himself for Kat's attention, and public embarrassment for Kat when she realizes he is being paid to take her on dates. The boys' scheme is eventually uncovered at prom, leaving a hurt Kat and an angry Bianca, who punches Joey before leaving with Cameron. The film ultimately has a happy ending, with Kat and Patrick reconciling after he apologizes and Bianca and Cameron happily together. In addition to being one of the most well-known adaptations, *10 Things* is also one of the best regarded rom com adaptations of Shakespeare. Reviews of the movie, both current and contemporaneous of the time, are generally positive. One 1999 review by Marc Savlov notes of Kat, "[Kat's] a riot grrrl update of the traditional Shakespearean indie female, and both Stiles and Junger manage to breathe new life into an old character," and in a 2024 review, Akos Peterbencze writes, "*10 Things I Hate about You* has become a cult classic in the past 25 years because it nailed the universal truth about stereotypes: there's always more to them [stereotyped people] than what's seen on the surface."

However, reactions to the film were not all positive. Roger Ebert wrote in his 1999 review that the movie "doesn't remake Shakespeare so much as evoke him as a talisman, by setting its story at Padua High School, naming its characters Stratford and Verona, making one of the heroines a shrew, etc." Many negative reactions to *10 Things I Hate about You* stem from either the idea that the film has done a disservice to Shakespeare by diverging from his text or from the idea that, because Kat goes to the prom, the movie's idea of "taming the shrew" is to make Kat less independent in a way that compromises her feminism. L. Monique Pittman writes, "Transforming Shakespeare's Padua into upper-middle-class Seattle suburbia, *10 Things I Hate*

about You works hard to soften the obvious gender inequities of the original, but in many ways silences honest and serious debate over gender in the process” (146). However, such critiques do not take into account the changes that must be made to adapt the play to the present day and for modern audiences. It would be fair to say *The Taming of the Shrew* is a product of its time; that is to say, Petruchio’s “taming” of Katherine through domestic abuse as a comedic device is a remnant of the 16th Century. Adapting this taming for modern audiences then becomes a tricky task for the filmmakers, as, to maintain consistency with the play and not alienate part of their audience, the source material must be modified in a way that still allows the film’s Kat to maintain her identity, independence, and the feminist beliefs that contribute to making her a “shrew”. Though Pittman claims that those changes undermine Kat’s independence, they instead allow her to stop isolating herself emotionally and still be independent.

The writers of *10 Things I Hate about You*, Karen McCullah Lutz and Kirsten Smith, adapt these elements of the play by depicting Kat’s shrewishness and transformation in a way that is informed by 1990s feminist thinking. The Kat that the audience encounters at the beginning of the film can be read as a second-wave feminist; by the end, she has become a third-wave feminist. Michael D. Friedman writes that “Kat evolves from a second-wave feminist, a follower of the old-school feminism of the 1970s, to a third-wave feminist, one who embraces the contradictions and personal empowerment fostered by the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s.” This allows the “taming” of Kat in *10 Things I Hate about You* to be “not an enforced submission to male authority, but a rounding off of the sharp edges that makes the stereotyped

version of the second-wave feminist an anti-social force within the popularity-obsessed world of teen comedy” (46-47).

Throughout the film, Kat transitions from a second-wave feminist to a third-wave feminist, while slowly establishing her identity as a Riot Grrrl. Jan Haaken identifies second-wave feminism as the exposing of “the moral façades regularly installed to rationalize male domination, whether positioned as protecting women from the threats of other men or from the ambient anxieties of public life” (paragraph 7). Kat spends the first half of the movie loudly denouncing the patriarchal ways of society at every chance she gets, in class, at home, in a book store, and more. She criticizes the dating scene and announces her distaste for both men and girls who express a lot of interest in men, including her sister Bianca who desires to begin dating and go to the prom with a boy. However, as Kat gets to know Patrick and starts to bond with her sister, she moves away from the second-wave feminist ideology and begins exhibiting behavior associated with third-wave feminism. As Claire R. Snyder-Hall writes, third-wave feminism “seeks to reunite the ideals of gender equality and sexual freedom that came apart during the ‘sex wars’” and “insists that each woman must decide for herself how to negotiate the often contradictory desires for both gender equality and sexual liberation” (255). She goes on to write that “the third wave approach actually exhibits not a thoughtless endorsement of ‘choice,’ but rather a deep respect for pluralism and self-determination” (255). This description aligns with Kat’s journey throughout *10 Things I Hate About You* as she learns to accept that Bianca chooses to be interested in boys and the prom in a way that allows her to express her femininity in the way that feels right to her. Kat’s decision to go to the prom so that Bianca can also go completes

her transition to third-wave feminism as she has accepted Bianca's choice to be a feminist in a different way and has decided to help her do so. Kat's Riot Grrrl identity is seen throughout the movie through her music taste in bands like The Raincoats, the posters decorating her room that feature feminist icons, and her general demeanor, as "The Riot Grrrl movement was led by punk bands, zine makers and political activists" (Dunn, paragraph 1). Kevin C. Dunn writes, "the members of Riot Grrrl sought to construct an organic, non-hierarchical community that was responsive to the subjective needs of its participants," which is clearly reflected in Kat's distaste for hierarchical community and her eventual realization that feminism has many different avenues (paragraph 5).

Lutz and Smith's engagement with contemporary feminist ideals not only makes the film more marketable to modern audiences, it also makes the story more palatable to women of all ages, but particularly to the teenage girls living through the Riot Grrrl movement and the third-wave of feminism who are able to see themselves in Kat and understand that girls do not have to give up their feminism to be loved. Friedman writes that "By translating *The Taming of the Shrew* into the genre of teen comedy, *10 Things I Hate About You* expresses an idea that Shakespeare's play cannot convey: that the third wave of feminism represents the means to overcome the shrewish stereotype of the feminist that is holding back the women's rights movement" (62). This modern update of Shakespeare's story is able to evolve the stereotypes from Shakespeare's time period to those of the 1990s to "[launch] a compelling fantasy that speaks the desire of American teenagers to forge independent selfhood" (Pittman 151).

She's the Man

While *10 Things I Hate about You* is widely regarded as an excellent adaptation of a Shakespeare play, *She's the Man* is both less well known and more reviled for being adaptation. *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, believed to be written in 1602, follows Viola after she escapes a shipwreck in Illyria. To survive, she disguises herself as a boy, Cesario, and enters into the service of Duke Orsino. The duke sends Cesario/Viola to court the Lady Olivia for him, but Olivia ends up falling for Cesario/Viola, who has fallen in love with Duke Orsino. Unbeknownst to Viola, her twin brother Sebastian has also survived the shipwreck and was rescued by Antonio, a sea captain. The majority of the play revolves around the various hijinks and comedies that result from secret identities, misplaced love, and mistaken identity in the case of the identical looking twins. Eventually, Viola and Sebastian reunite, which reveals Cesario as Viola. The play ends happily, with Viola marrying Duke Orsino, Sebastian marrying Olivia, and comedic antagonist Malvolio locked away.

Twelfth Night was adapted in 2006 into *She's the Man* by screenwriters Karen McCullah and Kirsten Smith (who also adapted *10 Things I Hate About You*) and director Andy Fickman. Following their previous model of Shakespearean adaptation, McCullah and Smith set the film in a contemporary high school – Illyria Preparatory in Massachusetts. *She's the Man* follows Viola (Viola/Cesario), played by Amanda Bynes, after the girls' soccer team program at her high school is canceled at the start of the year and she and her teammates are denied the opportunity to try out for the boys' team. Desperate to get her team back and to play soccer in front of college scouts, Viola decides to impersonate her twin brother Sebastian (Sebastian), played by

James Kirk, at Illyria Prep, after he goes on an impromptu trip to England with his band. With the help of her teammates, Kia and Yvonne (Amanda Crew and Jessica Lucas, respectively), and their hairstylist friend, Paul Antonio (Jonathan Sadowski), Viola dresses as her brother and goes in his place to Illyria High to try out for their boys' soccer team. The rest of the plot revolves around Viola as she tries to keep up appearances as both Sebastian and herself, please her mother as a debutante, and keep up with her new soccer team. Along the way, she bonds with Duke Orsino (Duke Orsino), played by Channing Tatum, who happens to be both the star player on her new soccer team and her roommate at school. Duke has a longstanding crush on Olivia (Lady Olivia), played by Laura Ramsey, and persuades Viola/Sebastian to help him get a date with her in exchange for his help improving her game on the soccer field. Along the way, Olivia ends up falling for Viola/Sebastian, who has fallen in love with Duke. Hilarity ensues, kicking up a notch when the real Sebastian comes back from England and sends everyone into a state of confusion. *She's the Man* concludes happily: Viola gets the guy and proves herself on the soccer field, while Olivia and the real Sebastian connect over his song lyrics.

Though the film does a decent job of maintaining the integrity of the play and following its plot, it still faced heaps of criticism from scholars and film critics alike. A 2006 review by Jake Wilson states "From its source, the script retains little beyond character names and the assumption that Viola-as-Sebastian (Amanda Bynes) looks indistinguishable from her brother, a theatrical convention that doesn't work so well on film." Desson Thomson claims "For the teen audience this is aimed for, none of this will matter. But once again, Hollywood makes the mistaken assumption that cribbing Shakespearean plots and dumping the poetry will

somehow download the Bard's brilliance.” These reviews indicate that the film critics of the time found the movie to be silly, juvenile, and not a faithful adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. Even the kinder review from Roger Ebert states that although “The movie is good-natured and silly, and at the end there is a big soccer game between Illyria and Cornwall during which both Viola and the real Sebastian are able to offer proof of their genders,” he is “compelled to report that the movie includes none of the naughty bits. As a famous playwright once wrote in “*Twelfth Night*,” “Wherefore are those things hid?”” While the film critic reviews are generally negative, the movie did well at the box office, and Bynes in particular was praised for her performance as Viola/Sebastian.

However, the general public’s positive reaction to *She’s the Man* does not align with the scholarly community’s opinion of the film, which is more in line with the film critics’ thoughts. Jennifer Clement argues that the film is harmful to the feminist movement and the authority of Title IX because Viola must dress as a man to play on the soccer team, and can only get the recognition of being a good soccer player as a girl on the boys team because she is the “exceptional girl” as the protagonist of the film. Clement states that while on the surface the movie presents itself as a girl-power third-wave feminism narrative, it ultimately “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” (2). While the film does not represent what happens after the final soccer game and debutante ball, it seems unfair to assume that Viola’s actions throughout the movie were made with the intention of turning her back on girls’ soccer and never again playing soccer with her female friends. She also would also not

have been able to pull off her scheme without the help of her two best friends, Yvonne and Kia, and their gay hairdresser friend, Paul. Their aid complicates Viola's status as the "exceptional girl" as she rarely did anything completely solo. In fact, her friends frequently run interference for her while she tries to maintain her double identity. Clement also argues that "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" (18). While the final shot of the film is Viola playing soccer with the men's team at Illyria Preparatory, the film does not dismiss the idea of separate teams. Viola only pretends to be her brother for two weeks at the beginning of the school year. Logically, she will have to return to her old school, where it is almost a guarantee that the girls' team will be reinstated due to Viola thoroughly embarrassing the boys' team, which, if anything, reinforces the need for Title IX.

Another facet of *She's the Man* that Clement takes issue with is Viola's impression of her brother, Sebastian, which is not particularly realistic, in part so it can lend itself to the comedy of the film. Clement states that Viola's "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" (16-17). However, it stands to reason that Shakespeare's Viola/Cesario is more androgynous and not hyper-sexually male because the stereotypes of teenage sexuality were different in Shakespeare's time. In adapting the *Twelfth Night* to a film that takes place in 2006, the filmmakers must play off contemporaneous conceptions of masculinity, just as Shakespeare did with the conventions of his

time. Shakespeare's Viola was also in a different situation than movie Viola: play Viola is navigating the upper class as one of Duke Orsino's servants while movie Viola is navigating high school and a boys soccer team. The movie's scenario calls for more of the behavior seen in the film, which would be out of place in Shakespeare's scenario. Clement also argues that because movie Viola alternates between being herself and portraying her brother, the film promotes conservative gender role stereotypes: "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" (17). While this tactic could be read as reinforcing gender stereotypes, it is highly possible that most viewers would consider it simply a way to keep the audience engaged in the romantic plot of the film, which at times might employ gender stereotypes instead of always subverting them. After all, it is difficult for Channing Tatum's Duke to admit that he likes "Sebastian" as a friend, much less as a love interest. Therefore, for the romantic plot to unfold throughout the movie, it is necessary that Viola still plays some scenes as herself.

Although scholars and critics alike take issue with the mildly unbelievable performance of Viola switching between her own identity and that of her brother, it may be critical to note that in Shakespeare's time when the original performances of *Twelfth Night* were occurring, it was highly unlikely that the boy actor playing Viola would have been completely believable in his role as a woman playing a man. Even in subsequent and modern stage performances where women are playing Viola, it is still very unlikely that the onstage drag of Viola-as-Sebastian would be completely believable to the audience. Suspension of disbelief is almost always a

necessary facet of watching staged performances; without it, close to nothing in a play or musical would be believable. However, this same courtesy is much less frequently applied to movies, even ones that rely on the suspension of disbelief as the cost of entry to the world of the film, such as *She's the Man*. While stage-Viola's wig may be the same, or worse, than movie-Viola's wig, the stage performance will always have the benefit of the suspension of disbelief, while *She's the Man* faces criticism of their hair and makeup department from film critics and scholars alike.

This criticism comes along with some scholars' dislike of the number of instances where Viola's impression of her brother slips and she acts a bit more feminine than intended, unlike Shakespeare's Viola, who remains more consistently entrenched in her Cesario persona throughout the play. Clement writes that, "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" (17). However, this argument must also consider that Shakespeare's Viola faces a more extreme situation wherein she assumes the Cesario persona out of necessity for survival. The film's Viola, by comparison, is impersonating her brother under much less intense circumstances – using his identity to get a spot on the boys' soccer team – which allows her to be slightly less rigid about remaining completely in her performance at all times.

Clueless

While *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She's the Man* are modern adaptations of Shakespeare plays, *Clueless* by Amy Heckerling tackles the work of another renowned author who has maintained her popularity both in the academy and in the zeitgeist of popular culture: Jane Austen. Written in 1815, Jane Austen's *Emma* follows Emma Woodhouse, a beautiful and wealthy 21-year-old who is the mistress of Hartfield, where she lives with her father. The novel begins just after Emma's governess, Mrs. Weston, has married and moved out of the estate, leaving Emma feeling lonely, though she was the matchmaker behind the wedding. Emma decides to befriend the lower-class Harriet Smith, whose parentage is unknown, and direct all her attention to her new friend's happiness and matrimonial prospects. Though she has good intentions, Emma is a bit misguided and encourages Harriet to reject Mr. Martin, a farmer who Harriet has feelings for, and instead turn her eye to Mr. Elton, the local vicar. Mr. Knightley, Emma's brother-in-law and a longstanding friend of the Woodhouses, cautions Emma against her matchmaking pursuits, but she dismisses his concerns. Unbeknownst to either girl, Mr. Elton has his eye set on Emma, and all the praise he offers Harriet throughout the novel is actually an attempt to flatter Emma through her friend. After an embarrassing proposal from Mr. Elton to Emma leaves Harriet heartbroken, Emma vows to cease her matchmaking.

The town soon has two new arrivals: Jane Fairfax, a young woman visiting Mrs. and Miss Bates who is expected to take up a governess position, and Frank Churchill, the charming son of Mr. Weston. Frank frequently flirts with Emma, but she again attempts to forward his affections to Harriet, whom she believes has a crush on Frank. After being scolded by Mr.

Knightley for her rudeness towards the Bateses, Emma has a moment of self-reflection and decides to be more conscious of how her words affect others. The romantic interests of each character are mistaken, misconstrued, and miscommunicated amongst the others. After Frank's aunt Mrs. Churchill, dies, the characters' true intentions become clear. It is revealed that Frank has secretly been engaged to Jane, but flirted with Emma as a cover since his aunt disapproved of the match. Emma expects Harriet to be heartbroken once more, but she discovers that Harriet's crush is on Mr. Knightley, not Frank Churchill. This revelation sparks Emma's own realization that she is in love with Mr. Knightley. Emma is greatly disturbed by the thought of disrupting her friend's love life yet again. Fortunately, Mr. Knightley confesses that he loves Emma, not Harriet, and Mr. Martin offers Harriet another proposal, which she happily accepts. The novel ends with three weddings, Emma and Mr. Knightley, Harriet and Mr. Martin, and Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, leaving each character in a suitable and happy love match.

Austen's *Emma* was cleverly adapted in 1995 by Amy Heckerling into the cult classic *Clueless*. The film follows Cher Horowitz (Emma Woodhouse), played by Alicia Silverstone, in 1990s Beverly Hills, California. As happened with Emma, Cher's mother died when she was very young, so she has been mistress of the mansion that she shares with her father for most of her life. Cher's life revolves mostly around fashion, shopping, and matchmaking for the students and teachers at her high school. When a new girl named Tai (Harriet Smith), played by Brittany Murphy, joins the school, Cher and her best friend Dionne, played by Stacey Dash, take it upon themselves to "adopt" her and give her a Beverly Hills makeover. Cher discourages Tai's interest in Travis (Mr. Martin), a skater/stoner type, and instead urges her to pursue Elton (Mr. Elton),

who is actually interested in Cher herself. After she rejects him, Elton leaves Cher in a parking lot, and she is forced to call her ex-step brother, Josh (Mr. Knightley), played by Paul Rudd, to come pick her up. When a new student with excellent fashion taste, Christian (Frank Churchill), joins her class, Cher turns her romantic attention to him until discovering his homosexuality and deciding to remain friends. Tai's newfound popularity has caused her to turn a bit mean, and her relationship with Cher becomes strained, especially after she asks for Cher's help in pursuing Josh, which Cher denies, claiming they are not right for each other. When Cher goes shopping solo to try and sort out her feelings, she discovers that she is in love with Josh. She uses this revelation to try to live a more purposeful and genuine life, where she reconciles with Tai, who is now dating Travis. The film ends with the wedding of two teachers that Cher got together, while Tai is happily with Travis and Cher is with Josh.

Much like *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Clueless* was received well and has remained popular and culturally relevant since its release in 1995. Roger Ebert writes, "*Clueless* is a smart and funny movie, and the characters are in on the joke," and praises writer and director Amy Heckerling, saying she "walks a fine line between satire and put-on, but she finds it, and her dialogue could be anthologized." In another review for *The Washington Post*, Hal Hinson writes that the film is "light on plot but makes up for it in the precision of its observations and sharpness of its one-liners" and that Heckerling's writing enables the audience "to laugh at them [the 'materialistic kids'] and embrace them at the same time." *Clueless* was a surprise sleeper hit, grossing over \$55 million domestically in its initial run in 1995.

While the film received generally positive reviews from critics and audiences alike, not everyone liked the film. Marc Savlov takes issue with the film's failure, in Savlov's eyes, to live up to its predecessor in Heckerling's filmography: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, which follows the lives of high school students and their ups and downs. Featuring Sean Penn as Jeff Spicoli, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* is known for its at times crude humor and gained notoriety for its R-rating, which was unusual for a teen film at the time. Although Heckerling wrote and directed both films, it is unfair to expect *Clueless* to contain the same type of humor and content as its forebearer when the films revolve around different concepts. The film also faced academic criticism as an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Sue Parrill states that "*Clueless*, instead of attempting a realistic picture of life in either the nineteenth century or the twentieth, focuses on extreme behavior and parodies it" (paragraph 10). The argument that *Clueless* does not succeed as an adaptation of Austen because it highlights "extreme behavior" in a parodic fashion has a very obvious flaw. Jane Austen's novels are famously satires that intentionally exaggerate to emphasize societal norms to illustrate their flaws to the reader. As Genilda Azerêdo points out, "what is clearly at stake in the critics' negative evaluations of Heckerling's film is the question of (lack of) "truth" and that "fidelity" to Austen's world—as the opposition between "masterpiece" (Austen's *Emma*) and "comic-book size" (Heckerling's *Clueless*)" (239). The kinds of critiques featured in many of the film and academic reviews of *Clueless* are rarely, if ever, seen in reviews of adaptations that remain faithful to Austen's time period, which typically face criticism for inaccurate period costumes or omitted scenes.

Azerêdo notes that “the use of ‘real’ to refer to period-piece adaptations, and to distinguish them from *Clueless*, masquerades the fact that all of these films are textual recreations; the notion of “real” does not apply to one more than to the other” (239). Just because *Clueless* is an adaptation set in the 1990s does not negate the status of other period piece adaptations as adaptations. Instead, this modern take on *Emma* makes the novel arguably more accessible and digestible to modern audiences by changing the scenarios that Emma faces in the 19th century to ones that *Clueless*’s Cher encounters in the 90s. Heckerling executes this idea of making the Austen plot relatable to contemporary teens excellently through her script and, as Azerêdo writes, “the scenes in *Clueless* which have a direct relation to Austen’s *Emma* inevitably force the reader/viewer to re-dimension the question of irony in terms of new audiences, new targets and new interpreters” (245). This allows Heckerling to bring Austen’s story and social satire in *Emma* to a whole new audience, including young teenagers in the 90s who likely would not have gone out of their way to read *Emma* but flocked to the theatres to watch *Clueless*.

Heckerling uses Austen’s satirical formula to examine key aspects of American culture in the 1990s, such as consumerism, fashion, gender and class stereotypes, the educational system, and more in “an ironical look into our own time and culture” (245). Cher’s consistent care and attention to fashion and to her own popularity highlights the societal focus on the same things, particularly amongst affluent teenagers in 1990s Los Angeles. Although *Clueless* is a modern take on a Regency Era social satire, the modernization of Austen’s narrative does not rob it of its critical elements. As Claire Bevevino writes, “Though there is an expansive gap between the

19th and 20th centuries, Heckerling demonstrates, through Cher, that there is still evidence of Austen's world in contemporary society, specifically through her focus on social behavior, material items, and relationships" (23). While critics like Parrill argue that by placing Austen's plot in 1990s Los Angeles it loses its authenticity, the true outcome is that Heckerling is able to highlight the importance placed on frivolous preoccupations and societal expectations that are still present over a century after Jane Austen originally wrote *Emma*.

Although neither Jane Austen nor *Emma* are directly referenced at any moment in *Clueless* – whether in the film itself or in the credits – it is clear to audience members familiar with *Emma* that the film is based on the novel. In this way, Heckerling is able to keep an open dialogue with Austen's original work while still creating something separate that can influence and impact audience members both familiar and unfamiliar with *Emma*. This directly aligns with Linda Hutcheon's observation that, "seen from the perspective of its process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (8). Heckerling exemplifies this with her lack of promotion of the film as an *Emma* variant, instead asking the audience to recognize it on their own through their knowledge of Austen's novel. Rather than adapting the novel in a way that is completely faithful to the source material and time period, Heckerling modifies parts of Austen's narrative to fit the society and culture of the 1990s, thereby maintaining Austen's original purpose and agenda: to satirize contemporary society and offer social commentary to the reader/audience. Bevevino writes that by doing this "both Austen's *Emma* and Heckerling's *Clueless* demonstrate the evolution, or stagnation, of the

structure of social hierarchy, and the ways in which components of contemporary culture, such as irony and femininity contained in these texts, correlate and depart from 19th century culture” (38). By placing *Clueless* so firmly in the culture of 1990s Los Angeles, Heckerling is able to clearly highlight the differences between the film’s setting and that of *Emma* in 19th century England, while also making clear how some things are still the same – romantic interests are still of utmost importance to teenagers and class tensions and social norms still play a large part in romantic pairings.

Bevevino argues that as a result of using Austen’s plotline and methods in a 90s context, *Clueless* “becomes one of the most effective adaptations of *Emma*, for the scenes in *Clueless* which correlate with Austen’s text require the audience to reassess the presence of the commentaries contained in the text and the film in terms of current audiences and current culture” (14). Heckerling alters scenes that directly correlate to events in *Emma* to speak to the issues of 1990s society. One of the most notable examples of this centers on Christian’s sexuality. Instead of Frank Churchill falling in love with a woman below his station and financial status and subsequently deceiving Emma and her social circle, his film counterpart, Christian, cannot be with Cher romantically because of his homosexuality. By updating the reason that Emma/Cher’s preferred love interest is unavailable to her, Heckerling brings to light the attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community in the 1990s. In making Cher so blind to Christian’s obvious homosexuality, seeing instead only his taste in fashion and pop culture, and having the final resolution between the two characters be the formation of a strong friendship, Heckerling makes the audience reconsider their opinions and stereotypical, societal beliefs about the queer

community. This choice allows Heckerling to both reference *Emma* and update parts of the novel by choosing a route that leads to the acceptance of Christian into Cher's friend group instead of the rejection of Frank Churchill's socially unacceptable choices that cause his reputation to suffer.

Like *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She's the Man*, *Clueless* finds itself being examined in light of the postfeminist movement and its representation in film, and in romantic comedies specifically. María García Muñoz argues that "Cher (the protagonist of *Clueless*) represents a postfeminist heroine who, while making positive contributions to the reclamation of femininity as a progressive rather than an oppressive force, still reinforces patriarchal discourses which are damaging for women and feminism" (8). She states that "Women in postfeminist media culture, theoretically, have shifted from passive objects to active subjects who are empowered to act based on their free choice," but Cher's focus on her physical appearance and her urge to fit in in her 1990s Los Angeles high school setting reinforces the patriarchal belief that women are still passive objects to be looked at by others (10). However, this representation of Cher can also be viewed as a vehicle for Heckerling's satire of rich LA girls in the 90s. Cher may be focused on her looks and how others perceive her – which is a stereotypical archetype of 1990s LA girls– but her fashion prowess is part of her power; she knows how to form others' opinions of her through the clothing and accessories, and she is able to implement that knowledge to benefit others, such as when she gives Tai a physical and social makeover. She showcases this prowess when she informs the audience that sometimes "you need to show a little skin" to catch a boy's attention. Cher herself also undergoes a makeover – though more personality-based than

physical – throughout the film, mostly driven by the opinions of Paul Rudd’s Josh, her ex-stepbrother, who she finally falls in love with. However, instead of fundamentally changing herself as a person, Cher keeps all of her fashionista traits and simply shifts some of her energy into doing good for others as well as releasing herself from the anxiety of always being worried about others’ perception of her. The latter decision actually turns out to bolster her social status as queen bee of the high school as students follow her lead anyway and she is able to be more confident in herself. By turning the perceived patriarchal traits of Cher’s personality into things that Cher uses to define her own power and social intelligence, Heckerling confronts the audience with what appears to be a ditzy and fashion absorbed character, who is able to use her negatively perceived traits to shrewdly navigate the complicated social hierarchies of 1990s high school.

Chapter 3

Why So Much Controversy?

Although all three films employ different techniques and have different plot lines, when boiled down *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She’s the Man*, and *Clueless* are all essentially the same thing: adaptations of classic literature into modern teen romantic comedies. Despite their inherent similarities, the three movies were differently received by scholars and film critics, while public audiences tend to look favorably upon all three. *10 Things* and *Clueless* have their fair share of complainants, but are generally much better regarded than *She’s the Man*. However, the main difference in the way in which these works of literature were adapted to films is the

time period. Both *10 Things* and *Clueless* were products of the 1990s, while *She's the Man* was released in 2006, right in the midst of the so-called “death of the rom com.” As romantic comedies declined in popularity, it would be fair to consider that contemporaneous critics and academic scholars were giving such films less grace than similar movies that were produced in the earlier “golden age” of romantic comedies.

She's the Man is also the only film of the three that has a main plotline not centered on romance or romantic schemes. Unlike *10 Things I Hate About You* and *Clueless*, which have multiple subplots that all revolve around relationships, *She's the Man* spends a considerable amount of time on Viola's desire to play soccer and her determination to make the boys' team at Illyria Prep to prove that there should be a girls' soccer team. This plotline – arguably the main one of the movie – is what further separates this film from the other two. It is possible that this divergence from traditional, mostly romance-based romantic comedy movies is part of what leads *She's the Man* to be more reviled than other adaptation films. The soccer plotline also makes *She's the Man* stand out as the film that has the most “girl power” plotline of the three, while *10 Things I Hate About You* displays its girl power-ness through Kat's shrewishness and her refusal to participate in traditional high school girl stereotypes, and *Clueless*, which, although led by a strong and independent female character, does not quite focus on themes of feminism or girl power beyond acknowledging the strength that comes with femininity. Because *She's the Man* has direct connections to feminism and Title IX, it becomes more of a political and societal film and subject to more criticism.

In a similar vein, *She's the Man* is also the only film that deals with mistaken identity and gender swapping characters, which further plays into its perceived role as a film with a political agenda that is making societal commentary. While the original intention for the script was just to adapt a Shakespeare comedy into a contemporaneous romantic comedy, many critics argue that this intention is a moot point in the face of how the audience interprets it. Jennifer Clement writes that “reliance on the movie's screenplay to prove the more rigorously third-wave feminist intentions of the screenwriters ignores the fact that the cultural influence of the movie rises out of what viewers actually saw — that is, the final product on the screen, not what the screenwriters originally wrote” (3). However, her argument fails to recognize that if the concern is with audience reception and the film's cultural influence, it is important to consider that much of the target audience is not thinking deeply about these kinds of issues and is instead watching the film for the pleasure one derives from a good romantic comedy. Though academic critics might interpret *She's the Man* as a film with the underlying agenda of undermining Title IX and the need for female sports teams in high schools, the film itself will not have that impact on audience members if that issue is not at the forefront of their minds. Even audience members who go to see the film for its connection to Shakespeare are unlikely to have Title IX at the forefront of their minds when watching *She's the Man*; instead, they are likely thinking about the accuracy of the film to its source material of *Twelfth Night*.

Although *She's the Man* seems to be the film out of the three that is taking the brunt of the criticism of its political agenda and societal commentary, *Clueless* is the only one that is intended as a satire and it, like its source text, makes intentional and blatant societal commentary.

In fact, *She's the Man* and *10 Things I Hate About You* center around a lead female character who is either sporty or alternative, and both characters are seen as figures who spearhead the girl power essence of their respective films. *Clueless* is the only one out of the three that features a more traditionally girly girl whose passions include fashion and matchmaking, not sports and feminist literature. So why is *Clueless* not the film facing the most criticism concerning its political and societal agenda and potential anti-feminism? Perhaps the reason is that the source material is already a societal satire; therefore, the commentary that Amy Heckerling is making through *Clueless* already existed and has just been updated for the 1990s, making it less controversial than the feminist aspects of *She's the Man* that were added on top of *Twelfth Night*. There have also been many film adaptations of *Emma* in recent times that are almost completely faithful to the novel. This makes *Clueless* a breath of fresh air because, as Hutcheon writes, “films about Dracula today are as often seen as adaptations of other earlier films as they are of Bram Stoker’s novel” (21). *Clueless* is not only seen as an adaptation of *Emma* the novel, but also as an alternative to the various film and television versions of *Emma*, two of which, coincidentally, were released in 1996, just a year after the release of *Clueless*.

Another possible reason for *Clueless*’s escape from major criticism as an adaptation is that *Clueless* never mentions *Emma* or Jane Austen anywhere in the film or the credits; Heckerling does not even use the same names as the novel – with the exception of Elton – like *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She's the Man* do. This partially frees the film from the pressures so often faced by adaptations that are advertised as such. Unless the audience is familiar with Jane Austen’s *Emma*, they are unlikely to even be aware that *Clueless* is an

adaptation of classic literature. This strategy also allows audience members to watch the film for the first time without scrutinizing it through the lens of the novel; instead, they are able to experience the film by itself and perhaps even enjoy the process of putting the dots together themselves.

All three films also seem to suffer from the assumption that their existence as movies—especially ones created with a young female audience in mind—automatically diminish their central themes and the stories themselves as adaptations. Film adaptations of literature are almost always viewed as the lesser version of their source materials. Linda Hutcheon writes that “literature will always have axiomatic superiority over any adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form. But this hierarchy also involves what he [Robert Stam] calls iconophobia (a suspicion of the visual) and logophilia (love of the word as sacred)” (4). This is only made more prominent by the fact that the main audience for these specific movies is women. Hutcheon also argues that “Neither the act of looking at and interpreting black marks—words or notes—on a white page nor that of perceiving and interpreting a direct representation of a story on the stage or screen is in any way passive; both are imaginatively, cognitively, and emotionally active” (23). If neither form of consuming media is less passive than the other, it is unfair to place so much more value on the written word over visual storytelling. In fact, not all visual storytelling gets the same treatment as romantic comedy movies; writing about *Romeo and Juliet*, Hutcheon notes that it is generally acceptable to adapt the play into “a respected high art form, like an opera or a ballet, but not to make it into a movie, especially an updated one like Baz Luhrmann’s (1996) William Shakespeare’s *Romeo + Juliet*. If an adaptation is perceived as

“lowering” a story (according to some imagined hierarchy of medium or genre), response is likely to be negative” (3). Perhaps it is this imaginary hierarchy that dictates film is a lower art form than the written word that makes the reception of these films so polarizing for many.

However, these films are not downgrading their source material by changing the plot but are instead upgrading them for the times. The novels and plays that these films are based on are often the same style of comedy, just dressed up slightly differently to be funny for the audience of the time. Some, such as Ajay Arvind, et al., argue that “Many filmmakers have already noticed that Shakespeare's comedies in particular are perfect for the format of the modern teen movie.” Arvind and his co-writers go on to state that “One of the reasons that this transition [to modern teen films] works so well is that Shakespeare popularized many storytelling conventions that are still used today, comedy being chief among them” (paragraph 21). Shakespeare’s comedies in particular are very well suited for contemporaneous adaptations; they simply need a bit of an update for the times. Jane Austen’s work also lends itself to modern comedy movies besides *Clueless*, such as the adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* into the 2001 film *Bridget Jones’s Diary* by Sharon Maguire. A majority of these film adaptations do not fundamentally change the structure of their source material but instead just change some circumstances and the setting.

Another possible facet of the perceived superiority of literature is the audience that each form of the story – film, book, television series, etc. – is able to reach. Citing Linda Seger, Hutcheon observes that “A best-selling book may reach a million readers; a successful Broadway play will be seen by 1 to 8 million people; but a movie or television adaptation will find an

audience of many million more” (5). This raises the question of exclusivity and its value. By making these stories into films, they are now much more accessible to many more people, which causes some to feel that the perceived worth of their knowledge about certain classic literature is somewhat diminished. The concept of literature as something for the academically elite is partially dispelled by making the same stories accessible to those without the means necessary to consume them in the form of the written word. However, this does not negate the personal satisfaction and value that comes with having read the source material, as “For the reader, spectator, or listener, adaptation as adaptation is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text” (21). For many, the recognition of this intertextuality may even increase the enjoyableness of watching the film, as it creates a certain sense of being in on an inside joke.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Adaptation as a whole has always been an integral part of keeping stories relevant and making them available to wider audiences. By adapting stories into modern settings, these films are able to connect with new generations and make a deeper impact than they would have otherwise. Movies like *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She's the Man*, and *Clueless* take their original source material and transform it into a story that contemporaneous audiences will be able to better identify with, thereby ensuring the play or novel's core ideas remain impactful by modifying them to suit contemporaneous sensibilities. Modern adaptations, in particular, deal with the expectation that they will deliver profound social critique beyond the original work's statements. *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She's the Man*, in particular, suffer from the expectation that they will deliver bold feminist statements as "girl power" film adaptations. However, these expectations would likely be less present if the movies were not adaptations; *Clueless* was not advertised as an adaptation of Austen's *Emma*, and it received the kindest scholarly reviews out of the three films. By reframing the expectations so often set up around adaptations, the films are allowed to thrive and execute their original purpose of bringing classic literature to a worldwide audience.

Adaptation is a critical facet of keeping the message of stories alive. Without adaptations, many stories would likely fade out and be forgotten once their original time period transitioned to the next one. Adaptations, particularly film adaptations in today's world, are able to translate the original message of their source material into one that is relatable and accessible to

contemporaneous audiences. In this way, the message of the original author is able to stay relevant and recognizable, ultimately giving the original work a new life in the minds of contemporaneous audiences.

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