

SOMETHING MORE THAN CESARIO: *OBJET PETIT A* AND THE TRIANGULATION OF OLIVIA'S DESIRE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTH NIGHT*Laura Ribeiro Araújo¹

ABSTRACT: Departing from a confluence of the works of Jacques Lacan and René Girard, this paper aims to investigate the expression of Olivia's desire in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. I contend that, rather than a dormant aspect waiting to be awakened by another character's action, Olivia's desire acts as a continuous force elicited by certain characteristics that appeal to her lack and that simultaneously pulls and pushes her towards the (im)possibility of its fulfillment. Olivia's particular socio-cultural context, as well as her interactions with other characters in the play, backdrop the shaping of her desire and the selecting of her object-of-desire whilst expanding its possible interpretations. Placing side by side the concepts of *objet petit a* as well as that of the triangulation of the mimetic desire, I take advantage of the multiplicity of readings that marks the critical tradition of Shakespeare's works in order to assess the intricacies of Olivia's desire.

Keywords: Jacques Lacan; René Girard; Theory of Desire; Twelfth Night; William Shakespeare

ALGO PARA ALÉM DE CESÁRIO: *OBJET PETIT A* E A TRIANGULAÇÃO DO DESEJO DE OLIVIA EM *NOITE DE REIS*, DE WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

RESUMO: O presente estudo parte da confluência das teorias de Jacques Lacan e de René Girard a fim de investigar a expressão do desejo da personagem Olivia na comédia *Noite de Reis* de William Shakespeare. Neste artigo avalio como o desejo de Olivia atua como uma força contínua provocada por certas características que apelam para sua falta e que simultaneamente a puxam e empurram em direção à (im)possibilidade de sua realização. O contexto sociocultural particular de Olivia, bem como suas interações com outros personagens na peça, servem de pano de fundo para a formação de seu desejo e a seleção de seu objeto de desejo, ao mesmo tempo em que expandem suas possíveis interpretações. Os conceitos de *objet petit a* e da triangulação do desejo mimético surgem, lado a lado, como âncoras para a investigação de uma das personagens centrais dessa peça frequentemente tomada como a “comédia do desejo”.

Palavras-chave: Jacques Lacan; Noite de Reis; René Girard; Teoria do desejo; William Shakespeare

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*My desire,
More sharp than filèd steel, did spur me forth;
(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 3.3.5-6)*

Just like *Hamlet* is commonly referred to as a “tragedy of desire” in the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism, *Twelfth Night*, among William Shakespeare’s works, often receives the equivalent label of a “comedy of desire”. Written around the beginning of the 17th century, *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, has been thoroughly discussed in regard to the way desire is shaped according to one’s gender, social status, and mobility within the play. That, of course, does not come off as a surprise, especially considering its famous opening lines: “If music be the food of love, play on. / Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken and so die” (Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.1.1-3)².

From the beginning, duke Orsino, one of the main characters of *Twelfth Night*, sets the tone of the play by evoking an oversupply of music in hopes that it may help him overcome his own desire. David Schalkwyk (2010), in “Is Love an Emotion? Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and *Antony and Cleopatra*” argues that the duke’s “musings follow the contours not only of his desire but also of his desire for or against desire itself” (p. 105), opening up the play with the hesitating excess that constantly permeates a subject’s own quest for the (im)possible fulfillment of their lack. This duality of simultaneously chasing and rejecting an object that appeals to one’s desire delineates not only the very nature of desire but also the relationship major characters, such as Orsino and Olivia, for example, establish with their objects-of-desire throughout this comedy.

Twelfth Night, one of the three romantic comedies³ written by William Shakespeare, centers around the love triangle established in its first act: Viola, who separates from her twin brother in a shipwreck, disguises herself as Cesario in order to serve duke Orsino, who, in turn, is madly in love with countess Olivia. In the process of wooing Olivia in place of her master, Viola, dressed as a man, falls in love with Orsino while occupying the role of Olivia’s object-of-desire. A second and a third plot revolving around characters of the countess’s household, as well as Viola’s brother, happen in parallel, mirroring both the homoerotic tension and the instances of service present in the main plot.

For Schalkwyk (2005, p.87), “every instance of desire in the play is intertwined with service” and this argument holds true even as we fix our attention on Olivia, the countess of Illyria. Sitting at the center of *Twelfth Night*’s intricate web of relationships, Olivia is immersed in a society in which courtly love sets service as one fundamental aspect of courtship. As the

² Unless stated otherwise, all citations from plays from this point onwards come from William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*’s version provided by The Folger Shakespeare, ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Librarys, online at <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/all-works> Accessed on: 11 July 2024.

³ Also considered a mature comedy, *Twelfth Night* shares this classification with both *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing* within Shakespeare’s works — all three written around the end of the 16th century and beginning of 17th century.

one who falls in love with the duke's cross-dressed page, readings of her desire tend to thread around the dynamics of homoeroticism and service, keeping the subjectivity of the countess at the margins of the text: Olivia's desire is frequently interpreted either as a reflection of Orsino's melancholic state or as a homoerotic manifestation that arises solely due to Viola's cross-dressed body, ignoring Olivia's own character, context and socio-cultural aspects.

The sequestering of her individuality is not hard to spot: Marianne Novy (2017), for example, in *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, places Olivia's desire as something consequent of Viola's "speaking abilities" (p. 43), and androgynous appearance, with no mention of the countess's character or context within the play. Douglas Parker (1987), in "Shakespeare's Female Twins in *Twelfth Night*" discusses the frequent erasure of Olivia due to readings that treat her as a mere double of Orsino, but, even as he promises to "try to redeem Olivia from the critical slander she has suffered" (p. 24), his arguments weakens when he places both Olivia and Viola as "identical characters" (p. 25), since that leads to the erasure of erasing the particularities of the countess's character. William Dodd's (1993/2003) provides a more nuanced treatment of Olivia's desire as it departs from her own lines in order to understand the contours of her longing for Cesario, yet, as Dodd focuses on Viola's characteristics as the locus of her yearning, what we witness is the description of a desire that exists as a passive aspect rather than an active instance of demands within a subject. More recently, Chaeyoon Park (2019) claims that Olivia becomes a desiring subject only due to Viola's disguise (p. 799), erasing not only the countess's will and character, but, following Jacques Lacan's theory of desire, her whole entrance into the Symbolic Order as a process prior to Viola's entrance on the stage.

Departing from a confluence of Jacques Lacan's theory of desire and René Girard's triangulation of desire, I contend that, rather than a dormant aspect waiting to be awakened by another character, Olivia's desire acts as a continuous force elicited by certain characteristics that appeal to her lack and that simultaneously pulls and pushes her towards the (im)possibility of its fulfillment. Olivia's particular socio-cultural context, as well as her interactions with other characters in the play, backdrop the shaping of her desire and the selecting of her object-of-desire whilst expanding its possible interpretations. Following a post-structuralist approach to close-reading that rejects the idea of a single stable meaning within a text, in this paper, I take advantage of the multiplicity of readings that marks the critical tradition of Shakespeare's works in order to asses Olivia's desire.

1. Theory of desire and its triangulation

Before approaching the multiple manifestations of Olivia's desire within the specificities of *Twelfth Night*, I shall dissect the theoretical background that supports my reading of a desire set between Jacques Lacan's and René Girard's theories. While Lacan deals with a desire that works as a continuous force that drives people toward a never-ending quest for fulfillment, Girard suggests a fundamentally mimetic desire, focusing on the process of imitation, rivalry, and consequential violence that stems from it. Side by side, both theories,

when applied to the field of literary criticism, expand the possibilities of analysis and unveil the intricacies of paper and flesh beings alike. Even with their differences, it is possible to have both French theorists' writings working together to expand the multiple meanings often found in Shakespeare's works.

1.1. Lacan's theory of desire and the *objet petit a*

Jacques Lacan's contribution to the literary field is undeniable: from his tripartite model of the human psyche to the relationship established between the unconscious and language, Lacan's writings have been offering a new lens through which we are able to approach not only aspects of our own constitution as desiring subjects but also of our interactions with society and its norms. The rich interplay between language, the unconscious, and human desire proposed by Lacan makes his theory unique in the psychoanalytical field, providing a framework for analysis that considers the character not as an isolated paper being that inhabits the vacuum, but as a locus of reading that needs its symbolic dimension to be understood.

Desire, unlike needs or demands, cannot ever be satisfied. While it may push us to strive for fulfillment, it is never actually fulfilled, even as we reach for that temporary object-of-desire that we believe will be able to satisfy ourselves. Needs, much like our biological instincts, may be temporarily sated by something that comes from outside the subject, but what desire makes us crave is something unnamable — something that tempts us to fill that constant feeling of void that insists in propelling us only so that we may continuously fail.

Desire, as Lacan (2006) introduces in his *Écrits*, is “neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second” (p. 580). The insatiable demand that persists after the articulation and satisfaction of a subject's needs is, thus, the essence of desire about which Lacan writes. It is worth noting that this desire emerges from the process of entering into the Symbolic, a concept that directs our attention to the collection of signs and practices that comprise the social order. While not equivalent to language in itself, the Symbolic is essentially “the realm of culture as opposed to the imaginary order of nature” (Evans, 2006, p. 204), mediating the empirical world and making it possible for it to be represented in language. Entering the Symbolic order means severing our connections with the Real, acquiring language, and conforming “to the rules, customs, norms, standards, practices, laws and prohibitions of society” (Downs, 2021, par. 9). It is through this process that we experience our first “no”, the one that bars us from the presumed complete satisfaction we enjoyed before castration⁴ — *jouissance*.

It is in the process of trying our hands at fulfilling this unfulfillable void that the *objet petit a* emerges — also called object-cause of desire, this conceptual object is not equivalent to a material or sensible object, rather, it appears alongside the void that is formed from our entrance into the Symbolic Order. The *objet petit a* acts as an “emphasizer” of the characteristics

⁴ From 1958 onwards, Lacan places the process of castration within the effect of cultural laws, or of the acquisition of language — those that place us into a mediated world and bar us from experiencing *jouissance*.

we (un)consciously pursue in order to fill our void. This never-ending quest is backgrounded by the *object petit a* insofar as it informs our fantasies as well as the appeal of our objects-of-desire throughout the chronology of our desire. Rather than desiring someone or something, what we desire is the fantasy that whatever is being temporarily desired, once attained, would be able to fulfill our void and allow us to experience *jouissance* once again. But, “once attained”, what actually happens to the object being desired is that it loses its appeal and another object-of-desire emerges. In the words of Bruce Fink (1997, p.51):

Desire thus is not so much drawn toward an object (Desire → Object) as elicited by a certain characteristic that can sometimes be read into a particular love object: desire is pushed not pulled (Cause → Desire). For a while, that object is seen as "containing" the cause, as "having" the trait or feature that incites this analysand's desire. At a certain point, however, the cause is abruptly subtracted from the object and the object promptly abandoned

This possibility of changing one's object-of-desire without crumbling with one's structure of desire allows us to understand that, under Lacan's theory, it is not the object the one eliciting or sparking our desire, as previously suggested by authors that place Viola as the cause of Olivia's desire. Lacanian desire relates to one's subjectivity, and *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire is the one behind this process.

One last concept from Lacan's theory that shall help with the analysis of Olivia's desire is the logic of the “desire of the Other”. As we cross the threshold of the Symbolic Order and acquire language, we too are subject to the customs and laws that, albeit (un)consciously, frame our understanding of the sensible world. In his sixth seminar, Lacan (2019) explains that the “Other's desire is fundamentally articulated and structured in the subject's relation to speech - in other words, in disconnecting from everything that has to do with mere survival” (p. 480). Hence, the Other can be understood as the unconscious mediated by law, language, societal, and cultural customs that, in turn, inform us of what should be desired and how it should be desired. Bruce Fink (2004) explains that what we, as subjects, want, is being recognized by the Other, “and this recognition takes the form of being wanted: I want to be wanted. In order to be wanted, I try to figure out what the Other wants so I can try to be it and thereby be wanted. I desire the Other's desire for me” p. 119). The framing of the object-of-desire, thus, also takes as a reference one's particularized access to the Symbolic Order.

1.2. René Girard's triangulation of desire

Girard's theory of desire can be summarized in the shape of a triangle: at opposite sides of its bottom vertices sit the desiring subject (S) as well as its desired object (O). At the top vertex, we find the model (M), the one that mediates the subject's desire, irradiating its influence both toward the subject and the object. Girard (1965) explains that within the triangulation, “the mediator's prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value. Triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object” (p. 17). So, much

like Lacan's theory of desire, the object-of-desire in Girard's theory is framed through a reading of the sensible that is already shaped by factors external both to the object being desired and the subject that desires it.

That perspective naturally gives us a point of departure when conjoining both theories, but there is more to the process of mimesis that leads to the formation of Girard's triangulation. According to the French author, human desire points towards the intent of *being* something, rather than only possessing something material. In Girard's words, the subject desires being

something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being (Girard, 1977, p. 146).

This process of imitation, however, sparks rivalry: while desiring the same object, both subject and model tend to clash in their pursuit, and violence is likely to ensue. The closer the desiring subject is to its model, the higher the probability of a violent conflict befalling both participants of the triangulation. Victory over the model, however, does not implicate the attainment of that plenitude of *being* that the subject deemed possible. Similar to what happens in Lacan's theory, in surpassing the model and attaining the object, the subject simply selects a new model and forges a new triangulation.

1.3. The confluence of desire

For both Lacan and Girard, desire relates to a sentiment of lack within the subject: in Lacan's theory, this lack is an unfulfillable void that manifests itself from our entrance into the Symbolic Order, whereas in Girard's theory, this lack has to do with a feeling of self-insufficiency to the point that the subject desires *being* something that her or his model already is. It is in order to fulfill that lack that the subject, in both theories, pursues an object of desire that, when attained, is not able to provide the expected result.

For the analysis of Olivia's desire, the confluence of both theories of desire allows us to understand the role of Lacan's *objet petit a* in the process of the triangulation of her desire. It is the *objet petit a* as well as Olivia's particularized access to the Symbolic Order that frames both the selection of the model and the imitation of her or his desire. The object within the triangulation speaks to Olivia thanks to the *objet petit a*'s effect in highlighting whatever features appeal to the structure of her desire.

By itself, Girard's triangulation allows us to understand the dynamic established between Olivia, Viola and Orsino in terms of rivalry, but it fails to provide sufficient framework to approach the question as to why Olivia tolerates the exchange of siblings and how that triangulation relates to her own use of language throughout the play. Using Lacan's theory of desire alongside that of Girard's adds the intricacies of *objet petit a* as well as the robustness of

the “desire of the Other” to the equation of Olivia’s desire. Moreover, it allows us to move the source of a subject’s desire from a selected model towards the logic of the Other, since the subject’s perception of a model could only be framed by the Symbolic Order that mediates her or his understanding of the sensible world. With the interaction of both models of desire, Olivia’s desire can be approached not only from the perspective of her character but also from the perspective of the social, cultural and political context in which she is inserted in *Twelfth Night*.

2. Olivia’s desire as a motor of demands

Even if not the one holding the highest ranking in the play, Olivia, a countess, is the one sitting at the center of the web of relationships that connects all characters of *Twelfth Night*. John W. Draper (1950), in *Twelfth Night of Shakespeare’s Audience* suggests that Olivia’s influence is not limited to the characters that reside in her household. Besides Maria, Malvolio, Feste, Fabian, and Sir Toby, Olivia’s decisions drastically affect Viola’s, Sebastian’s, Sir Andrew’s, and even duke Orsino’s trajectory within the play. The countess’s importance, “is evidenced in the dialogue, in the plot construction, in the early actors who played the part, and in Shakespeare’s treatment of his source” (Draper, 1950, p. 169). Being an orphaned single woman at a marriageable age that detains a large amount of wealth, Olivia enjoys a particular level of freedom that is not often experienced by Shakespeare’s female characters. That, however, does not free her from the constraints of her time, place and gender: while marriage is expected of her, through the system of coverture employed in Early Modern England, it also promises a restraint on the autonomy she enjoys.

Autonomy, I contend, is the exact point to which Olivia’s whole structure of desire converges. It should be kept in mind that, for Lacan (2019), desire is not something possible to be named nor articulated in language. It can, however, lead to the identification of a pattern within a chronology of the subject’s desire. As I argue that Olivia’s desire is for autonomy, and that the pursuit of authority is a means of engaging with that desire, what I want to convey is that the chronology of both her actions and language within the play converge to her unpronounced search for that which she lacks and that which she (un)consciously believes to be able to fulfill her void and lead her to experience that supposedly primordial *jouissance*.

Her desire for autonomy is so transparent that, before her first entrance, we learn, through Olivia’s kinsman, that the countess imposes specific conditions to marriage at a time when egalitarian matches⁵ were encouraged:

SIR TOBY. She’ll none o’ th’ Count. She’ll not match above
her degree, neither in estate, years, nor wit. I have
heard her swear ’t. Tut, there’s life in ’t, man

⁵ Sarah Kemp (2010) explains that “proponents of the dominant ideology in favor of marriage also frequently invoke the language of ‘equality in marriage’, but we must be careful to understand that by ‘equality’ they usually are referring to similarities in age, social standing, and intelligence, not an equality of power after marriage” (p. 40).

(Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.3.107-109).

These lines introduce one of the core aspects of Olivia's character in *Twelfth Night*: by rejecting anyone who could be richer, older and smarter than herself, Olivia reduces the possibility of getting married to a man who might also exert any kind of authority over her — an argument supported by Olivia's proposal to her husband-to-be: "Would thou 'dst be ruled by / me!" (Shakespeare, *TN*, 4.1.67-68). That logic, then, is one of the main reasons for Olivia's continuous refusal of Orsino's advances: he is not only older and richer than her, but Orsino also makes it clear that his intention through this marriage is to fulfill Olivia's "sweet perfections with one self king" (Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.1.40). By wishing to become a sovereign and rule over Olivia's character, Orsino's aspirations for authority clash with the countess's desire for autonomy.

If, as Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford (1998) suggest, women at that time knew that "the powers granted them by their husbands were privileges to be negotiated, not rights to be defended" (p. 135), matching with Orsino — someone who, immersed in his own Petrarchism, focuses only on his own feelings — would definitely make it hard for Olivia to negotiate power and maintain autonomy. Her intent to marry someone of lesser standing, however, demonstrates that no matter how crippling a marriage could be, a woman's marital status still held significance enough that she would be willing to go through with it.

As going through marriage with Orsino and maintaining at least a speckle of her autonomy sounds daunting, the entrance of Cesario, the duke's cross-dressed page, seems to bring renewed hope for the countess. Olivia's assessment of Cesario, who is actually Viola in disguise, begins early in the last scene of the first act:

OLIVIA. Tell him he shall not speak with me.
MALVOLIO. Has been told so, and he says he'll stand at
your door like a sheriff's post and be the supporter
to a bench, but he'll speak with you.
OLIVIA. What kind o' man is he?
MALVOLIO. Why, of mankind.
OLIVIA. What manner of man?
MALVOLIO. Of very ill manner. He'll speak with you,
will you or no.
OLIVIA. Of what personage and years is he?
MALVOLIO. Not yet old enough for a man, nor young
enough for a boy—as a squash is before 'tis a
peascod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple. 'Tis
with him in standing water, between boy and man.
He is very well-favored, and he speaks very shrewishly.
One would think his mother's milk were
scarce out of him.
OLIVIA. Let him approach. Call in my gentlewoman
(Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.5.144-162).

Cesario's suggestion that he would assume the role of either a sheriff's post or of a supporter to a bench — two positions indicating some kind of submission — is exactly what sparks Olivia's interest and prompts her to ask Malvolio about this page that comes in Orsino's stead. Loreen Giese (2006) supports that reading when she affirms that Cesario's admittance to the countess's house happens precisely "because this messenger specifically acknowledges Olivia's position in relation to his" (p. 71) — a matter most certainly related to Olivia's desire for authority as a means of maintaining her autonomy. Not only that, Malvolio's description of Cesario as someone "not yet old enough for a man, nor young / enough for a boy" (Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.5.154-155) allows Olivia to read this cross-dressed page as someone inexperienced enough for her to both outsmart and reject without too much trouble. Both elements — Cesario's submission and young age — assure Olivia that the messenger sent by the duke does not pose a threat to her authority and, thus, that it is safe to allow him to approach her this time.

Cesario's demonstrations of submission continue as he delivers his "well penned" (1.5.72) message. In one of the most famous speeches of *Twelfth Night*, Cesario proclaims that, were he the one who loved Olivia, he would:

VIOLA. Make me a willow cabin at your gate
And call upon my soul within the house,
Write loyal cantons of contemned love
And sing them loud even in the dead of night,
Hallow your name to the reverberate hills
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out "Olivia!" O, you should not rest
Between the elements of air and earth
But you should pity me
(Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.5.271-279).

This speech is not only an outburst of the emotions Viola hides while disguised, but it is also a confession of Cesario's willingness to assume a type of subordination that is diametrically opposite to the expression of love professed by Orsino in the first act. When Cesario says he would make himself a willow cabin and wait by Olivia's gate while hallowing her name, what we witness is the page disassembling Ovid's myth of Narcissus⁶ in order to reframe his devotion as an act that places the loved being at its center. For Olivia, who wishes to marry someone of lesser standing to avoid submission, that kind of promise speaks to the core of her desire: the "You might do much" (Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.5.208) she professes right after his confession is Olivia's first positive answer to Cesario's discourse.

It is no surprise, then, that after this speech we are able to witness Olivia's sudden change in behavior through the placement of Cesario as her object-of-desire. If Olivia's

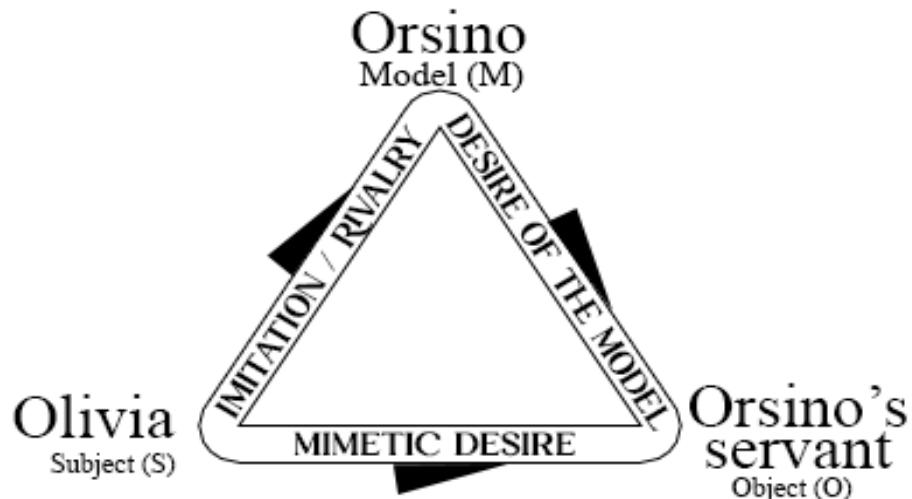
⁶ In Ovid's myth of Narcissus and Echo, before drowning due to being attracted to his own reflection, Narcissus pursues Echo in a forest, thinking her one of his lost companions. Echo, a nymph cursed to repeat people's last pronounced words, falls in love with Narcissus, but is promptly rejected by him. In Viola's speech, the "babbling gossip of the air" is a direct reference to Echo (Findlay, 2010, p.163), who, instead of having to repeat something that would go back to Viola in a typical narcissist behavior, what she has to repeat is Olivia's name.

structure of desire is always pointing toward the securing of her autonomy through the establishment of her authority, her *objet petit a*, highlighting the aspects that support the realization of her desire, allows her to see Cesario's promise of subordination as something that would fulfill her lack. By following the willow cabin speech with both "What is your parentage?" (Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.5.281) and "Get you to your lord. / I cannot love him. Let him send no more— / Unless perchance you come to me again" (Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.5.284-286), Olivia makes it clear that there is a sudden change in the way she feels about the cross-dressed page. Her transformation is noticeable even to Viola, who, in the following act, comments on the way "(. . .) her eyes had lost her tongue, / For she did speak in starts distractedly" (Shakespeare, *TN*, 2.2.20-21).

From this point onwards it is possible to establish the triangulation of Olivia's mimetic desire. If Cesario occupies the role of her object-of-desire, two, out of the three elements of the triangle are already positioned at its base. What is left is the role of the model who Olivia imitates and who, from her standpoint, is endowed with that which she lacks. Autonomy is exactly what Olivia seems to pursue, and the one character in *Twelfth Night* who holds it unquestioned is Orsino, the duke of Illyria.

The duke's autonomy is expressed not only through his title and gender but also through the way he is free to pursue whomever he wants with no detriment to his position. But Orsino only holds a position of authority that allows him a higher level of autonomy because there is, in Illyria, a hierarchical organization of society that places the duke at the top and those who recognize his authority at the bottom. When Cesario reaffirms his role as a servant to Orsino and rejects Olivia's money offer by saying "My master, not myself, lacks recompense" (Shakespeare, *TN*, 1.5.290), he highlights not only his loyalty but the fact that Orsino does have what Olivia lacks: authority, autonomy and, consequently, Cesario's submission.

FIGURE 1 - The triangulation of Olivia's desire



Source: Illustrated by the author

With that arrangement in place, Girard's triangulation (figure 1) is formed by Olivia as the desiring subject (S), Orsino as the model (M) and Cesario, under the configuration of Orsino's servant, as the object (O). Rather than Cesario himself, what Olivia desires is something in him that appeals to her lack: and that is why he occupies the triangle as Orsino's servant, because that seems to be the exact quality that makes him desirable to both vertex of the triangle. That logic follows Lacan's illustration of the concept of the *objet petit a* in his eleventh Seminar: "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you — the *objet petit a* — I mutilate you" (Lacan, 1998, p. 268). Under this triangulation, Olivia (un)consciously mutilates Cesario to extract the qualities that fit her (im)possible search for fulfillment.

As the model within the triangle, Orsino also assumes the role of a mediator, as it is the model's desire that alerts the subject "to the desirability of the object" (Girard, 1977, p. 145). The subject, for Girard, "desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess" (1977, p. 146). For Lacan, this lack is impossible to be articulated in language as part of an unconscious mechanism tied to the subject's insertion into the Symbolic Order, so what the *objet petit a* does in this process is to highlight the elements that give the subject the impression that the fulfillment of her or his lack is somewhat possible. With both theories together, we have Girard's triangulation helping the subject (Olivia) select the ideal object-of-desire (Cesario) via the observation of the model (Orsino) who seems, from the subject's point-of-view, someone with an already-fulfilled lack. The *objet petit a* backgrounds this whole operation: the subject's fantasy and lack frames the selection of a model, which, in this case, is not articulated in language, and the selection of an object-of-desire.

Rivalry, under this triangulation, ensues as Cesario keeps on limiting Olivia's access to his loyalty while reinforcing his allegiance to Orsino. Being denied not once, but multiple times

in the course of this scene, the countess ends up laying bare her romantic feelings for Cesario: “By maidhood, honor, truth, and everything, / I love thee so, that, maugre all thy pride, / Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide” (Shakespeare, *TN*, 3.1.158-160). Cesario, however, responds with yet another denial:

VIOLA. By innocence I swear, and by my youth,
I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth,
And that no woman has, nor never none
Shall mistress be of it, save I alone
(Shakespeare, *TN*, 3.1.165-168).

In his answer, Cesario not only rejects Olivia’s profession of love, but he rejects altogether the possibility of ever being ruled by her. To Olivia, who (un)consciously desires that specific servant of Orsino as a means of safeguarding her autonomy, the impossibility of being Viola-as-Cesario’s mistress is the impossibility of realizing her desire. Denial, in this context, participates in the structure of desire, allowing the object-of-desire to keep itself just enough to be both within and out of reach. Olivia, in typical Orsino fashion, does not give up in face of Viola’s straightforward rejection. While unconsciously imitating the model within the triangulation of her desire, the countess gets closer to her model and ignites the possibility of violence ensuing.

By the time subject and model face each other on stage, however, Olivia thinks herself in possession of the object disputed by Orsino, disassembling the triangulation and demoting the duke from his position at the top of the mimetic structure. That process happens when Olivia meets Sebastian, Viola’s twin and, mistaking him for Cesario, pleads him: “Nay, come, I prithee. Would thou ’dst be ruled by / me!” (Shakespeare, *TN*, 4.2.67-68). Her demand to rule over her soon-to-be husband is yet another proof of the way her desire converges to her search for authority. When Sebastian answers her plea with “Madam, I will” (Shakespeare, *TN*, 4.2.69), what Olivia hears is the consent she needs to support the marital authority she desires to safeguard the autonomy she currently enjoys.

Moreover, even when Sebastian accepts her rule and, together, they officialize their betrothal, Olivia is still unaware of the exchange of siblings. The countess still believes to be marrying Cesario or, rather, Orsino’s servant and, thus, to be triumphing over the model she imitates. For Girard, such movement allows the vanishing of the prestige of the model and, under this circumstance, the subject that imitates “then turn[s] to an even greater violence and seek[s] out an obstacle that promises to be truly insurmountable” (1977, p. 148). In *Twelfth Night*, however, we do not witness such change in Olivia’s behavior, and that is due both to the play’s ending coming right after her betrothal and to the reading that, by possessing the one Olivia believes to be Orsino’s servant, she is not endowed with the *being* she assumes Orsino is: as it is preconized by Lacan, one’s desire is never fulfilled.

Closing thoughts

Throughout the five acts of *Twelfth Night*, Olivia repeatedly hints at her desire for authority as a means of safeguarding the autonomy she is able to enjoy as a rich orphaned single lady. While marriage in early modern England presupposes a union under the system of coverture — meaning that a woman’s legal rights and properties were transferred to her husband through marriage —, Olivia, who is so keen on not being overruled by anyone, is not against the idea of marriage. Still, the countess imposes a set of conditions that would allow her to at least negotiate the authority she already possesses.

As Olivia meets Cesario, who is actually Viola in disguise, she (un)consciously engages in a process of mutilation: her *objet petit a* highlights all the qualities Cesario possesses that relate to the (im)possible fulfillment of her lack. Following Girard’s triangulation, Olivia’s reading of the desirability of her object-of-desire is also dependent on her interpretation of Orsino’s desire as well as Cesario’s role in this process. As Girard explains that it is “by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the subject the supreme desirability of the object” (1977, p. 146), it becomes relevant to remember that the interpretation of the examples provided by the model comes through the framing of the subject’s particularized access to the Symbolic Order. In short, Olivia’s interpretation of Orsino’s desire does not necessarily correspond to Orsino’s actual desire, but it is conditioned by Olivia’s particularized access to the Symbolic Order or, similarly, by the context from which she views this desire being expressed.

Believing to be able to incorporate the state of *being* that Orsino enjoys, Olivia, then, selects an object that she believes to be desired by the duke. This whole process is, naturally, backed up by her constitutive lack, her *objet petit a*, which informs Olivia, through an unconscious process, that what she needs to obtain in order to recover her supposedly lost *jouissance* is exactly what Orsino has at that moment. Orsino, through Olivia’s framed perception of the world, is the one currently enjoying that which she lacks: authority. By rivaling with Orsino, imitating his desire, and obtaining his object-of-desire Olivia would be able to surpass him and fill the void that prompts her to desire more.

In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia’s sudden change in attitude after exchanging vows with Sebastian is easily noticeable: after triumphing over the triangulation’s model, Olivia does invest herself with a renewed kind of authority — she ignores Orsino and shushes him with a “Good my lord—” (Shakespeare, *TN*, 5.1.107) before telling Cesario “Be that thou know’st thou art, and then thou art / As great as that thou fear’st” (Shakespeare, *TN*, 5.1.156-157) in clear defiance of Orsino’s authority. Even if Cesario were Olivia’s husband and, thus, a count, he would still not be as great as a duke when considering their social standings, but that confusion only reinforces the idea of attaining the model’s *being* suggested by Girard. In terms of authority, Olivia is still inferior to Orsino, but by having usurped that which she thinks he desires, she now sees herself as someone who has triumphed over the model within her triangulation.

Still, Olivia marrying Sebastian and not reacting negatively to being tricked by Viola-as-Cesario happens precisely because of the mutilation the *objet petit a* endorses in the process of making an object an actual object-of-desire. Sebastian, in all of his submissive acceptance of the countess's rule, carries with him the same "something more" that appeals to Olivia's desire and makes him the perfect substitute for Cesario. What Olivia loves is not Cesario, but the way Cesario could collaborate with the fulfillment of her lack.

While Olivia's interest in marriage may sound like a contradiction when considering her desire for autonomy, under the circumstances she imposes, it nevertheless allows her a certain level of authority while also elevating her social status to that of a married woman. Still, throughout the five acts of *Twelfth Night*, Olivia never sees the absolute fulfillment of her desire. The impossibility of it ever being satisfied is not only a result of the nature of the Lacanian desire or of the limitations imposed by the structure of the play but, within the context in which the countess is immersed, the impossibility of fulfillment can also be located in Olivia's own gender. As an early modern English woman, her autonomy is always disputed in favor of her male counterpart and, as I previously quoted, women at that time "acknowledged that the powers granted them by their husbands were privileges to be negotiated, not rights to be defended" (Mendelson and Crawford, 1998, p. 135).

Rather than a result of Viola-as-Cesario's speeches, or a consequence of Orsino's imitation, Olivia's desire emerges from the lack manifested from the countess's entrance into the Symbolic Order. While sitting at the center of the web of relations that connects all characters within the play, Olivia brings into the stage her own dilemmas as well as her own set of motivations that inform most of the character's lines and behaviors throughout the five acts that form *Twelfth Night*. Placing herself as well as the elements that constitute her subjectivity at the center of the analysis of her own desire, in short, comes as a movement of contesting Olivia's usual placement at the margins of the literary studies that revolve readings of desire within Shakespeare's works.

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