

THE ART OF STEALING: EÇA DE QUEIRÓS AND KLEPTOMANIA

A ARTE DE FURTAR: EÇA DE QUEIRÓS E A CLEPTOMANIA

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Portugal's best-known filmmaker who died in 2015 at the age of 106, Manoel de Oliveira, made several films based on literary works,¹ including an adaptation of a short story by one of Portugal's greatest writers, José Maria de Eça de Queirós (1845-1900). Oliveira's 2009 film, *Singularidades de uma rapariga loura*, is based on Eça's homonymous story, which was published for the first time in 1874.² The film is particularly faithful to the story in the sense that it is a transposing of text to film and many of the dialogues are reproduced word for word. On the other hand, Oliveira makes significant changes, including rendering the interlocutor of the protagonist Macário's story a woman, and thus removing Eça's first-person narrator from

1 Some of these films include Oliveira's well-known adaptation, *Amor de perdição* (1981), of Camilo Castelo Branco's most famous romantic novel, as well as, *Palavra e utopia* (2000), based on Padre António Vieira's writings, and *Vale Abraão* (1993), an adaptation of Agustina Bessa-Luís's 1991 novel.

2 The story was part of the first collection of Eça's short fiction, *Contos*, which appeared posthumously in 1903 and was edited by Luís de Magalhães. Marie-Hélène Piwnik organized the critical edition of Eça's short narratives, *Contos I* (2009). Piwnik's edition follows closely the first publication of the story: *Brinde aos senhores assignantes do Diário de Noticias em 1873* (Lisboa, Typographia Universal, 1874, pp. 7-40).

the picture. The most notable difference, however, is the contemporary setting of the film. Instead of being set in the late nineteenth century, the action takes place in present-day Portugal in the midst of the country's current financial troubles. In my view this is the most striking feature of the film and this is why I begin my reading of Eça's story by bringing up Oliveira's film as a point of departure for my analysis of the text. It seems as though Oliveira understood that Eça's narrative is a story about commerce. Indeed, there is a lot of buying, selling, borrowing, and stealing, of not only money and luxury goods but also of human affection and social recognition in Eça's tale. The narrative connects romantic sentiments and emotions with capital suggesting that material and affective exchanges evolve and shift our perceptions of rich and poor. Like Oliveira, I realize that the compelling economic subtext in the story profoundly resonates today. Exactly how it does this, the film does not make clear, partly because it downplays what I argue is one of the most prominent and fascinating features in Eça's story – the fact that the blonde-haired female protagonist, Luísa, appears to suffer from kleptomania. Taking the film's reading of the narrative's economic subplot as a basis, this article will focus on Eça's careful treatment of the impulse control disorder in the story, and the symbolic relations created between the stealing and the narrative's socio-economic critique. In the story, the art of stealing is in fact a complex reflective and subversive technique, and thus a meta-fictional metaphor, representative of a crucial disruption not only to an established set of literary conventions, but likewise to an economic, social, and patriarchal order. Luísa's kleptomania suggests that gender is capable of challenging not only the realist imperative but also the commercial system of exchange central to the story's structure.

Readings by literary critics, like the film, have also tended to underplay Luísa's malady, and have instead focused on the highly

multilayered narrative construction of the story, which is irrefutably one of its most significant traits. But it is not, as I hope to show, unrelated to the leitmotiv of stealing. Thus, let us begin with Eça's peculiar narrative structure. The male first-person narrator appears briefly in the beginning. Readers know very little about him, but enough to know he is not completely reliable. He is traveling and arrives at an inn in northern Portugal, in the Minho region, on a cold September evening. He claims to be normally positive and realistic, "naturalmente positivo e realista", but on this peculiar evening the somberness and stillness of the mountainous landscape has manipulated his imagination and filled him with mystical and dreamy visions and ideas, and as he forthrightly admits: "Não se pode ser mais estúpido. Mas eu estava assim, e atribuo a esta disposição visionária a falta de espírito – a sensação – que [me] fez a história daquele homem dos canhões de veludilho" (Queirós, 2009: 168). The man with the velvet cuffs is Macário, the protagonist of the story we are about hear and who will relate the story to the narrator and to the readers. He is a wealthy well-dressed man approaching sixty that the narrator meets at the inn during dinner and with whom he later ends up sharing a room. As the two lay in their separate beds, Macário recounts his ill-fated story, and tells the narrator how he fell in love with Luísa, the blonde-haired girl, when he was a young man in his twenties living and working for his uncle in Lisbon, thus almost forty years earlier. The love story has an unhappy ending, as Macário breaks off the engagement when Luísa is caught in the act of stealing a piece of jewelry while shopping with him. He calls her a thief to her face and orders her to leave, and there is no reason to believe they ever see each other again.

The majority of Eça's story is this long flashback narrated by Macário, with the occasional significant interruption by our first-person unidentified narrator. Curiously, we never return to the intimacy

of that dark and cold fall night in the rustic inn in northern Portugal. Maria Adelaide Coelho da Silva and Arlete Miguel in their *Leitura de um conto de Eça de Queirós* divide the story into these two sequences. Because of its brevity, the first is clearly a secondary sequence to the main narrative. As the co-authors explain, this “*segunda sequência, a mais longa e de maior importância, deverá ser, por isso, considerada primária*” (1991: 46). Thus, our somewhat aloof narrator is also a narratee, and the story is clearly one that is preoccupied with identifying differences and boundaries, even if subtle and shifting, between authors, narrators, readers, and characters. As Coelho da Silva and Miguel write, “Este conto parece assim querer estabelecer a diferença entre *autor, narrador, narratário e personagem*” (1991: 51). But more than establishing concrete differences between these possible boundaries, I would argue the story is more interested in complicating these limits, questioning whether they exist at all. I will return to this highly reflective narrative construct when I explain how the text’s forms are mirrored in the economic structure and thematic concerns of the story. But, now let me turn to the materiality in the text, which is crucial for our understanding of what I contend is the narrative’s self-reflexive socio-economic critique.

The narrator refers to Macário as the man with the velvet cuffs, just as Macário’s friend, who introduces him to Luísa, is always mentioned as simply the friend with the straw hat, the “*amigo de chapéu de palha*” (2009: 187). In fact, clothing and accessories are the marked identifiers of most of the characters – and their personalities – in the story. This metonymic style is evident from the onset and so prevalent throughout that it seems to be one of the “singularities” of the story itself. At the beginning when the narrator is walking down the inn’s hallway looking for his room number, he describes the other guests according to the type of shoes or boots they own, which he sees placed outside the doors for the innkeepers to shine

overnight. Luísa's alleged mother, with her plentiful black curly hair, is assumed to be in mourning, and presented as distinctly sensual in her clothing. She appears to Macário for the first time on the balcony of her window, "a sacudir um vestido" (2009: 171). Macário's uncle wears a grave and long coat, "cor de pinhão", and "de botões amarelos" – exactly like the coat the older Macário wears – while Luísa has a "vestido de cassa com pintas azuis", an image which reappears throughout the story (2009: 174; 172). This is the dress she is wearing the first time Macário sees her through the window of his office on the second floor of the uncle's "armazém de panos" (2009: 171). Incidentally, his uncle owns a fabric warehouse and shop in downtown Lisbon, where he works as the bookkeeper. Macário often refers sentimentally to Luísa's dress at different times in the narrative. It is made of "cassa", a typical white, rather transparent fabric, of cotton or linen, or a blend of both – this one in particular is sprinkled with tiny blue dots. It is a feminine, youthful, simple dress, suggesting, it would seem ironically, since we know she is not altogether innocent, Luísa's virtuousness. The dress further evokes her inferior social status because "cassa" is not a luxurious or expensive fabric, something Macário can easily notice since he is, as we shall see, quite the fabric connoisseur. Most importantly, the white dress, lightly-touched with blue, stands as a marked contrast to "um vestido de lã azul" or the entirely blue wool dress Luísa wears at the end of the story on the sunny winter day when the recently engaged couple walks into a downtown jewelry shop and Luísa's singularities, or tendencies to steal, are revealed (2009: 191). Curiously the shop's showcases or "*montres*" are "fornadas de veludo azul" as well, and the narrator refers repeatedly to the beautiful day with its clear blue sky, "um grande céu azul-ferrete profundo, luminoso, consolador" (2009: 189). Luísa's wax-like hand, which Macário holds as they walk out of the shop, reveals its "veias docemente azuladas"

(2009: 192). If we connect the blue dots on the white dress with the clear skies and the veins on her otherwise porcelain pale white skin, then these features represent the heavenly innocence associated with Luísa. Yet a contradiction emerges when contrasting this innocence with the luxurious blue velvet of the shop's showcases, her velvet winter dress, and her supposed kleptomaniac guilt – and of course, it is important to remember that Macário is the guy with the velvet cuffs. Thus, Luísa's dresses conceal ironic messages. Because the blue velvet also represents the economic gain and higher-class status she would have enjoyed by marrying Macário, it identifies her loss of innocence with the capitalist order Macário embodies. It seems the guilt is reflected back on the economic and luxurious setting that have tainted her innocence. As we shall see, the story is full of materials and objects hiding secret codes that credit, discredit, and question our moral, literary, and material constructions.

The story's materiality is particularly notable in its associations with the protagonist. Out of all the characters, Macário is portrayed, albeit subtly, as a fashionist, and is clearly the most fashion and material conscious, and the one especially linked to his clothing and material milieu. The narrator describes in great detail Macário's attire when he first meets him at the inn:

Trazia uma gravata de cetim negro apertada por trás com uma fivela; um casaco comprido cor de pinhão com as mangas estreitas e justas e canhões de veludilho. E pela longa abertura do seu colete de seda, onde reluzia um grilhão antigo, – saíam as pregas moles de uma camisa bordada. (2009: 167)

And later he notices his thick shoes “de casimira com sola forte e atilhos de couro” (2009: 169). Macário's habits of dressing well, similar to his uncle's style, seem to highlight the protagonist's fash-

ion – and class – consciousness, as his coat makes a direct reference to his continuing in his uncle’s footsteps economically and socially. The narrator notices in addition Macário’s intimate attire when he finds him in his room getting ready for bed:

quando abri a porta vi o homem dos canhões de veludilho, que amarrava na cabeça um lenço de seda; estava com uma jaqueta curta de ramagens, uma meia de lã, grossa e alta, e os pés metidos nuns chinelos de ouro.
 – O senhor não repare, disse ele.
 – À vontade – e para estabelecer a intimidade tirei o casaco. (2009: 170)

This description not only suggests a feminization of Macário but more importantly it translates the communication and narrative intimacy between the narrator and the protagonist into a material language. The narrator establishes intimacy by taking off his coat, and dressing or undressing serve as subtexts, an enigmatic discourse throughout the story. Thus fashion and material objects are methods with which the narrator works to write the story and communicate with his source material. In fact, clothing and accessories seem literally to speak, making subtle noises and communicating furtive messages, such as the “*frou-frou* de vestidos enormes” or “um brando palpitar de leques” (2009: 176; 177). Apparently Macário has always taken great care of his clothing and of his private quarters. For example, when he first moves to Lisbon we are told he is a timid young man highly concentrated on his work but one who does not ignore his wardrobe: “Um trabalho escrupuloso e fiel, algumas raras merendas no campo, um apuro saliente de fato e de roupas brancas, era todo o interesse da sua vida” (2009: 171). Later when his very scrupulous and rigid uncle refuses to grant him permission to marry Luísa, since he is – justifiably – suspicious of her and her mother, and kicks him out of the business because of his nephew’s romantic wishes, Macário

has to fend for himself. On his own, and as he begins to fail in the endeavor of accumulating his own wealth and respectable position in the economic order, he is forced to sell his fine clothes piece by piece, and this is why he prefers to have his daily visits to Luísa at night. This way she would notice less “a roupa usada, as botas cambadas”, and he is able to hide “o seu fato decadente” (2009: 184). Macário tries to procure his uncle’s help one last time presenting himself as entirely broke and saying to him, “Roupa, estou sem ela. Vendido” (2009: 185). After all, his line of business, his family’s fabric enterprise, seems to be in his blood, as the narrator tells us he comes from an old northern family, “quase uma dinastia de comerciantes, que mantinham com uma severidade religiosa a sua velha tradição de honra e de escrúpulo” (2009: 170).

Furthermore, Macário is the protagonist’s family name, and we are never told his first name. He is not so much an individual as he is representative of a collective, a social class, a family comprised exclusively of males. We know the warehouse has the family name, Macário, in which case the protagonist is a kind of brand, as well. Materiality is literally embedded in the name of the protagonist. Furthermore, his knowledge of fabrics and accessories is evident throughout the story. He knows which textiles are best for each season, whether men or women should wear them, and whether they shrink upon washing or not. This characterization of Macário problematizes readings³ of the story that see Luísa and her mother as the materialistic figures in the narrative, the ones interested in Macário solely for his money, when clearly he emerges as the one more attached, identified, and associated with a material culture of accumulation. The story links his material and thus economic interests to a dominant male authority and capitalist system, which is

3 See Coelho da Silva and Miguel, and Barreira.

opposed to Luísa's weaker and vulnerable position. In describing her pale nature and fragile features, she is compared to "uma estriga de linho", which "fiava-se como se queria" (2009: 184). Luísa is thus a piece of fabric, or even more specifically a line or a thread of fabric, something that can be sewn together or written up at will by the more powerful orders, either socio-economic, patriarchal, or literary. The language of materiality is in fact a way of manipulating material, thus underpinning the economic and social order of the male-dominated business world that the women attempt but fail to join. While they fall short of becoming part of the established order, they successfully unsettle its premises, and more importantly, they ultimately get away with it. As Maria Manuel Lisboa writes, Luísa is one of those "escorregadias protagonistas que por acaso não morrem (...) e que permanecem como perigosas possibilidades, ameaças a um *status quo* que nem as classificou nem as castigou como devia" (2008: 51).

The materiality emphasized in these repeated references to clothing and fabrics also reinforces, as we shall see, the layering of narrators and the reflective formal inquiries the story structurally makes. Furthermore, besides the leitmotif of materials, the objects that are supposedly stolen by Luísa play an important role in the economic subtext of the story and are telling of Luísa's subversive and ambivalent purpose. These things or scenes, as they are presented to the readers, create suspense and function like clues in a detective story. There are four objects and moments or scenes that set up the mysterious developments in the crime-story plot and reveal Luísa's kleptomania. The first takes place when Macário sees Luísa for the first time as she rests seductively on her windowsill. The protagonist is most struck by an oriental fan that Luísa is holding. He is able to describe and appreciate this exotic item in a way only a connoisseur could. It is a beautiful round oriental fan made of white silk, exquisitely embroidered and decorated with gold, ivory, and mother-of-pearl:

“Era um leque magnífico e naquele tempo inesperado nas mãos plebeias de uma rapariga vestida de cassa” (2009: 173). The allusion to the material of Luísa’s dress stresses once again her social class, but also underscores the obvious incongruities in the dubious living standards of mother and daughter, which raise the uncle’s suspicions, but are ignored by the ingenuous love-struck young Macário. But just before we encounter Luísa with her Chinese fan or “ventarola de mandarina” the narrator makes an intriguing reference to the curtains that Luísa draws when she catches Macário observing her, and which, like her dress, are also made of “cassa bordada”. This fabric is portrayed visibly as being emblematic of romantic sentiments. For example, when Macário has difficulties finding a job after his uncle fires him, it is due to the fact that some of the tradesmen would have heard that he was kicked out “repentinamente, por causa de uma rapariga loira, vestida de cassa”, and as we are told, “O comércio evita o guarda-livros sentimental” (2009: 183). As the narrator explains ironically, these small curtains “datam de Goethe e elas têm na vida amorosa – um interessante destino – revelam: levantar-lhes uma ponta e espreitar, franzi-la suavemente, revela um fim (...) são velhas maneiras com que na realidade e na arte começa o romance” (2009: 173). The curtains, as critic Marie-Hélène Piwnik also notes, have a language of their own, like the material of Luísa’s dress, but in the case of the curtains their language is a literary one (1993: 874).

As we have seen, the curtains are not alone in having a language of their own in this story. Fans, shoes, hats, and dresses have a lot to tell readers as well. While in the past it provided a language for romantic lovers, the transparent soft fabric of the curtains, the same of Luísa’s dress, also acts as a figurative layer or veil. Thus foregrounding the processes of revealing and hiding that characterize Eça’s own story – which, as we shall see, is a realist narrative that borrows, or steals, a romantic plot. The fabric points both to

the thematic concerns of the story – the materiality and its socio-economic critique – as it does to the narrative construction. Some scenes and references in “Singularidades de uma rapariga loura” are unmistakable parodies and ridicule of romantic settings, mentalities, and conventions, most notably the *soirée* in the house of the wealthy notary public. But the romanticism/realism dichotomy, a significant thematic concern in Eça’s work, and evident in the story from the initial ideological identification that the narrator makes with realism, is complicated and problematized here. Because while the narrator is, as he tells us “naturalmente positiva e realista”, he also admits that the story he and Macário recount to the readers is not (2009: 168). Piwnik argues that the story sets off as a fervent critique of romanticism. She writes, “*Singularidades* é colocado, de chofre, sob o signo da irrisão do romantismo” (1993: 873). But in fact, Eça’s story is more than a critique of romanticism because it is exactly about the problem and challenge of telling, narrating, and writing realist stories in a world full of irresistible temptations, and repressed, hidden, and ambiguous desires. It is a self-reflective story that asks not only about differences between authors, narrators, and characters, but also about the difficulties of distinguishing between realism and romanticism, original and copy, the singular and the common, and is thus ultimately a narrative more interested in showing the artificiality and fragility of creating and sustaining these types of boundaries, orders, and structures.

But let us continue with the stolen objects. After this oriental fan makes a strong impression on Macário, the next suspicious scene is when the two women, mother and daughter, walk into the uncle’s fabric shop and Luísa apparently shoplifts some “lenços da Índia”, or Indian handkerchiefs. As the uncle laconically and furiously says later to his nephew, who seems to ignore what has happened, “são doze mil réis de lenços. Lance à minha conta” (2009: 175). The curi-

ous detail here is that the women come into the store looking initially for “casimiras pretas”, which supposedly is not a cloth or material women would typically need. Both Macário and the narrator deliberate over this peculiarity. The narrator says, “elas não usavam *amazonas*, não quereriam decerto estofar cadeiras com casimira preta, não havia homens em casa delas” (2009: 174). In the end, however, it is the Indian handkerchiefs or small scarves that go missing. In the scene that I referred to earlier, when Macário presents himself to his uncle, broke and on the verge of losing all his clothes, Macário says he finds “O tio Francisco, que fazia a barba à janela, com o lenço da Índia amarrado na cabeça” (2009: 185). This descriptive detail catches our attention. First, because Luísa and her mother are obviously not the only ones that exhibit themselves on the windowsill; secondly, because it reminds us of the older Macário getting ready for bed in the northern inn with “um lenço de seda” on his head; and finally because it seems to emphasize that the objects the women are buying and stealing belong to and are indeed the material and private pleasures of men (2009: 170). Even if initially the two women are presented as not transgressing their feminine role – in other words, they are not horse-mounting women wearing “*amazonas*” or mounting attire, and by extension thus not women warriors – , they are, ironically, taking the possessions of men away from them, even if these are less than masculine. Luísa’s stealing is an attempt to own what is denied to her, and thus an indirect challenge to Macário and his uncle, and to his uncle’s bank account. In her own way, that is on her singular terms, she is fighting a system, and the uncle’s word choice “Lance” does indeed remind us of an action by a female-warrior or *amazona* (2009: 175). Furthermore, both the Chinese fan and the Indian bandanas or handkerchiefs can also be read within the historical framework of Portuguese imperialism. Lisboa alludes to this when she writes, “Esse lenço (porque proveniente da Índia) torna-se ironicamente

alusivo a heróicas navegações de outrora” (2008: 89). Luísa’s stealing, then, seems to be undermining bank and historical accounts.

Reading these commodities as symbols corresponds to the psychoanalytic explanations of kleptomania developed toward the end of the nineteenth century, which interpret the objects stolen as symbolic action. Further, these and later studies, most notably, those of Sigmund Freud’s pupil, the Viennese psychotherapist Wilhelm Stekel, whose well-known essay on the topic, “Die Sexuelle Wurzel der Kleptomanie” or “The Sexual Root of Kleptomania” was published in 1908 in *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft (Journal of Sexology)*, were reading in the things taken a sexual significance. For these theorists, the theft is often emblematic of suppressed sexual desires or can serve as a substitute for sensual gratification, although the subject is seldom conscious of the erotic motive. The objects are not merely fetishistic but highly symbolic, and the key to comprehending kleptomania is knowledge of the emblematic implications. Like hysteria, kleptomania was diagnosed mostly in women, and discussions about its cause linked the disorder to the female reproductive system and to female sexuality. As an avid reader of the international press, Eça most likely followed some of these developments in psychology, but having written this story as early as 1873 indicates the text’s allusions to kleptomania are anticipatory and instinctive of these later advances as opposed to having borrowed from these ideas. Luísa’s personality, which is secretive, guarded, indifferent, apathetic, almost nonverbal, seems to fit the description of a characteristic woman suffering from this compulsion, which was often accompanied by other mental disorders, such as melancholy or depression. One could understand the acts of theft as forms of relief from stress, tension, and anxiety, which is what stealing provides to kleptomaniacs.

Still, although the objects Luísa steals have noticeable sexual overtones they are not limited to this figurative constellation out-

lined by early theories on kleptomania. Furthermore, the repression of sexual desires seems to be even more noticeable in Macário's character – thus suggesting that control and suppression characterize the socio-economic, male-dominated order he epitomizes. The objects Luísa takes do not merely represent her unconscious wishes and insecurities, but often point to the femininity or sexual inability of the male characters. Piwnik's readings of the sexual implications in the varied meanings of these objects highlight Macário's sexual immaturity, or what she calls his "infantilismo prolongado" as exemplified in his crying outbursts and in his sexual passivity or repressed erotic feelings toward the mother and daughter (1993: 875). Piwnik notices in his choice of attire "certa feminilidade subjacente" and uses the term "femininas fraquezas" when describing his character (1993: 876). Piwnik also attributes sexual meaning to the pearl ring Luísa tries on at the end of the story in the jewelry store. I will return to this interpretation when discussing the last stolen object, the diamond ring.

But first, before this final ring-stealing scene, there is an important third object, a further significant moment when Luísa's kleptomania comes into play. A valuable coin belonging to Macário disappears during a card game he plays with Luísa and others at the *soirée* that the mother and daughter attend regularly. Macário takes the coin out of his pocket and begins playing with it in front of Luísa:

Macário conversava com Luísa, e fazia girar sobre o pano verde a sua peça de ouro, como um bilro ou um pião. Era uma peça nova que luzia, faiscava, rodando, e feria a vista como uma bola de névoa dourada. Luísa sorria vendo-a girar, girar, e parecia a Macário que todo o céu, a pureza, a bondade das flores e a castidade das estrelas estavam naquele claro sorriso, distraído, espiritual, arcangélico, com que gira, gira, a peça de ouro nova. Mas de repente a peça correndo até à borda da mesa

caiu para o lado do regaço de Luísa, e desapareceu, sem se ouvir no soalho de tábuas o seu ruído metálico. (2009: 180)

It seems from the above account, an apparently ironic description of Macário's blindness and naïveté, that there is no denying she takes the coin. On the other hand, the description is so self-consciously ambiguous, dizzying, dreamy, and playful. The coin falls on her lap, a visibly phallic action. While Macário appears child-like frolicking with his coin as if with a toy, he is the one trying to seduce and tempt her, as if he were bidding to buy her like one buys a plaything. Luísa, by taking the coin from him, usurps the manipulative and economic power that he imagines he has over her. Piwnik also sees in this act of stealing an attempt for Luísa to work against those that force her into positions of inferiority and vulnerability, such as Macário and her mother. The critic asks when referring to the coin: "Não a faz Macário girar em frente de Luísa, para comprar simbolicamente a rapariga que, subtilizando o 'preço' do seu acesso à boa sociedade, recusa ser contabilizada como um sinal exterior de riqueza e procura escapar a uma estratégia materna que a reduz a simples valor de troca?" (1993: 877). In taking the coin, Luísa once again challenges an economic and social order that attempts to force her into a subordinate role. At the same time, if the coin stands figuratively for Macário's sexual prowess or lack thereof, then robbing him of this phallic gold coin is akin to castrating him and underlies his impotence and inability to possess her.

The last object on the sequence of Luísa's kleptomaniac acts, and the final clue in the story that Luísa suffers from this condition, appears when the couple – now finally engaged and with the uncle's blessing and economic support – go jewelry shopping. Piwnik's reading of Macário's sexual impotencies as manifest in this scene is worth quoting at length here:

E é a partir da impossibilidade e que se encontra Macário de consumir a união carnal incestuosa que se deve interpretar a penúltima sequência do conto, a da escolha do anel, objecto simbólico tradicional por excelência: o primeiro anel é comparado pelo próprio Macário à boca de Luísa, utilizando a isotopia metonímica “pérola/dente”, anel/boca que assim remete para o anel da virgindade. Isto leva-nos a ver, no acto de “meter” o anel “no dedo” da rapariga, uma prefiguração do acto sexual, acto falhado no caso decorrente, visto o anel ser demasiado largo, o que equivale a dizer que o dedo – símbolo fálico clássico – é demasiado pequeno. (1993: 876)

Macário chooses a pearl ring for his future bride, one that Luísa initially seems perfectly satisfied with as she says, “É bonito, disse ela. É lindo!” Perhaps, however, he is a bit more enthusiastic about it than she is. He says emphatically and repeating the adverb, “é muito bonito. Não é verdade? As pérolas muito iguais, muito claras. Muito bonito” (2009: 190). The pearl ring not only symbolizes his sexual fragility, as Piwnik explains, but more importantly, it stands for a type of order, “muito iguais, muito claras”, imposed and embodied by Macário.

Meanwhile as he looks at some matching earrings in another section of the shop, Luísa continues trying on a variety of rings, and when they are walking out we discover from the salesman’s subtle comments that she has taken “um anel com dois brilhantes” (2009: 191). Luísa is a few weeks away from her wedding day and she does not need to steal. Still, she is unable to resist her compulsive urge to choose a different ring. The theft allows her to make her own choice, to outdo Macário’s soft, small, perfectly arranged pearl with the more powerful and expensive two diamonds. The two diamonds while symbolizing companionship also serve as a relief from the stress and anxiety Luísa must feel facing the future prospect of a loveless and lonely union. By stealing the diamond ring she seeks to interrupt the

patriarchal order that denies her and women more broadly any choice at all. This is her message or plea to him: that she is not willing to accept his form of desire nor his ordered and structured sense of reality or society's economic imperatives for that matter. Macário fails to read the signs and, at the end of the story, all he is left single, childless, and with nothing but his velvet cuffs (and his uncle's business). While pointing to her own choice, autonomy, and subversive potential, the two diamond ring is perhaps also foreshadowing Macário's destiny to forever repeat the economic order or the tradition of commercial and material integrity, as he becomes a double of his uncle, or in other words a mere imitation or copy of former models.

Unlike the women diagnosed with kleptomania later in the century, Luísa seems rather unafraid to commit a forbidden act, and her inability to control her impulse to steal can be understood as the strength to remain nonconformist and evidence of an unconscious refusal to accept the exclusivity of an economic order that dictates her future decisions. Even with the knowledge of a possible and impending punishment, Luísa still decides to choose and take her own ring. She begs for Macário's clemency, thus giving him a chance to understand her actions and position, but he refuses to forgive:

– Vai-te, podem reparar. Não chores. Olha que vêm. Vai-te.

E chegando-se para ela, disse baixo:

– És uma ladra.

E voltando-lhe as costas, afastou-se, devagar, riscando o chão com a bengala. (2009: 193)

While some critics⁴ interpret her ailment as pure weakness, an inability to control her impulses, the fact remains that she is willing

4 Coelho da Silva and Miguel speak of her "reação de medo" (1991: 65).

to take risks and face difficult circumstances all because she is unwilling, even if only unconsciously, to be forced into an unhappy marriage. This final scene, as well as all of the scenes, objects, and clues that tell the subversive subtext or counter-narrative in the story of Luísa's stealing or kleptomania, can also be read as pointing to the weakness in Macário's character and as a critique, and as an underscoring of the impossibility of defining clear lines between the strong and the weak, the male and the female, the winners and the losers. Macário loses his love interest – the entire motivation for this romantic plot, which is the story within the story – and is left scratching or writing on the ground with his walking stick – a symbol that can both point as a phallic image to his erotic failure in the relationship and to his compromised narrative authority if we see the walking stick as his writing or narrative pen. Whose story does he tell and with what authority?

We are back to the many narrators, authors, and shifting voices that write or attempt to tell this story from the beginning. How does the stealing then relate to the structural and formal complexity of the text, to the multiple narrators, different perspectives, two narrative sequences, as well as to the dialogic juxtaposition between romanticism and realism? First of all, as Piwnik writes in a follow-up essay to her first reading of Eça's story titled "Uma loira singular (2)", Balzac published in 1832 a story, "La Bourse", that has strong convergences and differences from Eça's. She claims the parallels "mostram com vigor a passagem do romantismo matizado de Balzac ao realismo militante de Eça" (2012: 222), and concludes that what is interesting about "o empréstimo – aqui de resto hipotético – (...) é a refundição e a variação, o jogo de espelhos deformantes, que põem em confronto a mudança das mentalidades, mas também a evolução estética que a acompanha" (2012: 235). I would add that more important than whether Eça steals or borrows this story from Balzac, is

how he intensifies and complicates the stealing motif – Luísa’s counterpart in Balzac’s story, Adelaide, is not a kleptomaniac – and, furthermore, how Eça folds the theme into the formal fabric or material of the story. Furthermore, including an unidentified narrator, who finds himself trapped in a room in a Minho mountainside inn with Macário gives the story a narrative structure that resembles the art of stealing. It is easy to interpret the narrator’s insistence on extracting a story out of Macário as an impulse to steal his secrets and this past love story. The narrator seems intent on getting a good story out of Macário, which he eventually does, and it is not obvious to whom the story belongs. Stealing is not only Luísa’s disorder, but also a narrative technique both for Eça and for the first-person narrator, and it is at the same time a meta-narrative metaphor. “Singularidades de uma rapariga loura” is not a stolen plotline; it instead stages the stealing of plotlines. There is a narrative art to stealing, and its purpose seems to be to disrupt and create disorder, thus undermining literary conventions, and economic and social structures of power. This art involves an ongoing self-reflective narrative technique as well, one that mistrusts and recognizes the limits of both romanticism and realism, while at the same time accepting the role repressed and subconscious desires play in complicating differences.

My purpose in quoting Oliveira’s film at the beginning of this essay was to read this story for its present-day relevance. The plot of “Singularidades de uma rapariga loura” is full of commercial dealings, lending and borrowing, buying and selling, gaining and losing. Human affection is regulated by financial contracts. Macário, his uncle, and his uncle’s business associates are portrayed as honest, but severe workaholics, placing integrity over all disorder, work over pleasure. While upholding a façade of honorability and loyalty this collective or social and economic class also represents an all-male, stifling, sterile, materialistic, and avarice order. Macário’s actions are

consistent with this economic imperative, deferring impulses and desires, like he does when he postpones the wedding for a year in order to accrue sufficient funds, or when he rejects Luísa instantly upon discovering she is a thief. Whether stealing objects purely for their aesthetics, or because they belong to men who believe pleasure and wealth are their exclusive domain, Luísa's kleptomania stands as a reminder that, when faced with the inflexibility and exclusivity of the world they inhabit, the most significant and subversive technique left to many is one that challenges the bottom line, refuses complicity, disrupts expectations, and reveals fragilities.

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes an important early short story by José Maria de Eça de Queirós (1845-1900), “Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl”, first published in 1874. The female protagonist’s kleptomania plays a major role in the story, and is far more significant than has been previously noted by criticism. While her impulse to steal serves to challenge and undermine the social, economic, and patriarchal order it also functions as a meta-narrative technique. Through a focus on the materiality of the story, on the objects stolen, and on the symbolic and metonymic references, this essay connects a critique of economic and literary conventions with the story’s narrative structure. As Marie-Hélène Piwnik has noted, “Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl” resonates with an earlier short narrative by Balzac, just as the ambivalent first-person narrator seems to steal the romantic tale from the protagonist Macário. This instability of narrators and authors is part of Eça’s art of stealing and narrating, and Luísa’s kleptomania, as an extension of the author’s own, is thus a mark of autonomy, creativity, and critique, a revisionary shaking of established orders.

Keywords: “Eccentricities of a blonde-haired girl”; Eça de Queirós; kleptomania; materiality; commerce; patriarchy

RESUMO

Este ensaio analisa um conto importante de José Maria de Eça de Queirós (1845-1900), “Singularidades de uma rapariga loura”, publicado pela primeira vez em 1874. A cleptomania da protagonista desempenha um

papel fundamental na história, e é muito mais significativa do que tem sido observado anteriormente pela crítica. Enquanto o seu impulso de roubar serve para desafiar e minar a ordem social, econômica e patriarcal, também funciona como uma técnica meta-narrativa. Através de um foco na materialidade da história, nos objetos roubados, e nas referências simbólicas e metonímicas, este ensaio tenta ligar uma crítica das convenções econômicas e literárias com a estrutura da história. Como Marie-Hélène Piwnik já observou, “Singularidades de uma rapariga loura” tem ecos de uma narrativa curta anteriormente escrita por Balzac, assim como o ambivalente narrador em primeira pessoa parece roubar o conto romântico do protagonista Macário. Esta instabilidade de narradores e autores faz parte da arte de roubar e narrar de Eça, e a cleptomania da Luísa como uma extensão da do próprio autor é, portanto, uma marca de autonomia, criatividade e crítica, uma perturbação revisionista de ordens estabelecidas.

Palavras-chave: “Singularidades de uma rapariga loura”; Eça de Queirós; cleptomania; materialidade; comércio; patriarcalismo