

## ***The Rose of Versailles: Between Norms and Transgression***

By Alexandra Arana Blas

*Versailles no Bara*, translated as *The Rose of Versailles* or *Lady Oscar*, is a title recognized not only by fans of the *shōjo* genre but also by nearly every Latin American otaku born before 2000. The story centers on Oscar François de Jarjayes, the youngest daughter of the Commander of the Imperial Guard, who is raised as a man in order to succeed him.

The anime introduced transgressive themes for its time, such as cross-dressing. These themes make it relevant for younger otaku, who will find many refreshing and contemporary ideas in this manga.

### **Revisiting a classic: the background of *The Rose of Versailles* in Peru**

*Lady Oscar*, or *The Rose of Versailles*, is a title that resonates with many young otakus, especially those who grew up watching early anime on open television broadcasts or attended screenings hosted by Club Sugoi in the 1990s and early 2000s.

As part of the first group, I vividly remember the excitement of seeing Oscar's character for the first time when I was nine years old, watching *The Rose of Versailles* on Channel 5 in 2003. Now, at 27, I find myself revisiting this story through its first volume, published in Spanish by ECC Ediciones. What does it feel like to return to this work after all these years? And what new insights can I bring to this timeless classic?

*Lady Oscar* arrived in Peru in 1989, ten years after its original release in Japan. This work is firmly situated within the *shōjo* genre, and its themes align with the concerns raised by second-wave feminism in Japan during the 1970s, such as sexuality, family, labor, and reproductive rights. The manga also draws from the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female theater where performers are divided into two roles—*musumeyaku* (those who play female roles) and *otokoyaku* (those who play male roles). Additionally, *Lady Oscar* is influenced by *Class S* literature, a genre introduced by Nobuko Yoshiya during the pre-war era, which explored romantic relationships between girls in exclusively female environments.

By the time *Lady Oscar* reached Peru, the theme of "cross-dressing" was not foreign to our literary culture. Works like Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* or texts from the Spanish Golden Age, such as *The History of the Nun Ensign Catalina de Erauso*, had already introduced the trope of women disguising themselves as men to move unnoticed through public spaces. These narratives often feature ambiguous or transgressive bodies, creating romantic tensions between the cross-dressed woman and other female characters, as seen with Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, or Catalina de Erauso with her numerous fiancées.

*Lady Oscar* premiered at a time when feminism and LGBTIQ+ movements were gaining momentum in Peru. Since the 1970s, many Peruvian feminist writers and intellectuals had united to articulate their perspectives and become more visible in the local literary and critical scene. In the 1980s, the first LGBT organizations emerged in

Peru, including MHOL and GALF. This groundwork facilitated a boom in Peruvian LGBTIQ+ literature during the 1990s, producing works such as *Las dos caras del deseo* (1994) by Carmen Ollé, *Ximena de dos caminos* (1994) by Laura Riesco, *No se lo digas a nadie* (1994) by Jaime Bayly, *Efecto invernadero* (1992) by Mario Bellatin, and *56 días en la vida de un frik* (1996) by Morella Petrozzi. These texts featured characters with non-heterosexual sexualities and gender performances that challenged traditional masculine-feminine dichotomies. Beginning in 2000, literature began to emerge that combined queer identity with fan culture, exemplified by titles such as *Cromosoma Z* (2007) by Jennifer Thorndike, *Kimokawaii* (2015) by Enrique Planas, and *Compórtense como señoritas* (2019) by Karen Luy de Aliaga.

In addition to this historical-literary context, it is important to consider the influence of homosocial trends and the long-standing tradition of female, male, and Catholic schools in Lima. Until nearly the early 2000s, these female schools served as favored spaces for certain social and economic sectors of the population. They not only enabled young girls to develop their interests and identities without the constraints of adult or male scrutiny, which often reinforced traditional gender roles, but they also occasionally functioned as moderately transgressive environments. During festivals and celebrations, these all-girls spaces allowed students to perform masculine roles in school plays, performances, or dances. However, it is important to note that these settings were not immune to physical, psychological, or verbal violence among girls, contradicting the stereotype of women's "inherent delicacy."

Given this backdrop, Peruvian viewers, particularly the female teenage audience—who form the original target demographic of *shōjo*—would find the themes presented in *Lady Oscar* quite familiar.

### ***The rose of Versailles: shōjo and transgression***

The first volume of *The Rose of Versailles* was not only transgressive for its time; it also presents themes that may resonate strongly with contemporary readers.

First, the work showcases several classic *shōjo* tropes. These include the emotional and physical maturation of the young protagonists, as seen in both Marie Antoinette and Oscar; the development of heterosexual love, highlighted in the relationships between Marie Antoinette and Hans Axel von Fersen and later between Oscar and André; and the passionate friendships among female characters, exemplified by the bond between Marie Antoinette and Oscar and later between Oscar and Rosalie. Additionally, the principles of sisterhood and rivalry are particularly evident in the dynamic between Jeanne and Rosalie, while the contrast between *shōjo* and adult women is illustrated through the antagonism between Marie Antoinette and Madame du Barry.

Secondly, of the three main characters in the manga—Marie Antoinette, Hans Axel von Fersen, and Oscar François de Jarjayes—it is Oscar who embodies the most transgressive qualities and underscores the challenges faced by non-normative subjects in society. Despite being born female, Oscar is raised as a man by his father, who designates her as his heir. This not only allows Oscar to wear a man's suit in public but also enables her to occupy a role distinct from that of other women of his time. However, does this truly represent liberation and progress for Oscar?

The imposition of his father's will creates a queer subject in Oscar—a figure that exists on the margins of society. This marginalization is evident in various scenes throughout the manga, such as when Oscar chooses to remain neutral during the conflict between Marie Antoinette and Madame du Barry, or when court ladies express that they would consider marrying her if she had been born male. Thus, Oscar emerges as a character acutely aware of the ambiguous position in which she finds herself.

Regarding the ambiguity of his position and the concept of marriage, Oscar's father grants her access to spaces typically denied to women. However, the Court of Versailles does not guarantee equality among its subjects; there is a clear division of roles by gender, generally aligned with one's biological sex—except in Oscar's case. This structure denies Oscar equal rights, such as the opportunity to marry other members of the court, precisely because she exists as a body outside societal norms.

Should Oscar marry a woman, she would be unable to produce legitimate heirs, which is significant within the inheritance framework of the court and the upper classes, and crucial for understanding contemporary notions of family. Conversely, if Oscar were to marry a man, she would be precluded from fulfilling the exclusive maternal role, managing the household, or overseeing her husband's assets.

Moreover, Riyoko Ikeda emphasizes Oscar's marginality by consistently positioning her as an uncomfortable observer of the comments made by women regarding her "beauty" or "elegance." The narrative also draws attention to Oscar's "feminine qualities," which are presumed to be inherent to her sex. This brings us to a notable aspect of the Spanish translation, where there is a fluctuation between masculine and feminine pronouns used to refer to Oscar, further highlighting her ambiguous identity.

## **In conclusion...**

*The Rose of Versailles* is a *shōjo* manga that, in its first volume, presents the growth of Oscar François de Jarjayes, a character positioned as a marginal subject outside societal norms. Oscar exists in a classist and conservative society that parallels not only the Japanese context in which this manga was created but also the Peruvian society of the 1980s.

As noted in the article "Lady Oscar: cuarenta años de la serie animada que rompió esquemas," "It is curious that a product of Japanese culture—known for its attachment to traditions—originates these reflections. Andrea de Pablo suggests that this is because manga serves as a fictional realm where official ideologies are questioned through behaviors and reactions that would never be permitted in real life. However, it is widely acknowledged that such material impacts those who consume it. The undeniable power of fiction" (Subirana, 2019).

This power of fiction, particularly within *shōjo* manga and anime, highlights societal issues while fostering a utopian hope in the viewer. It generates a vision for social change, wherein all members of society—regardless of sex, gender, or sexuality—may one day enjoy the same rights and equality.

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