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Bella V. Smith

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, smithv16@unlv.nevada.edu

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Bella Victoria Smith
Sheila Bock
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“Man? Where’s a man? Don’t let him go!”: Molina’s Trans/gender Web in Interpretation and Performance

Originally written in Spanish as *El Beso de la Mujer Araña* in 1972, Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has captured the attentions of audiences for its romantic drama, political outcry, and postmodern style portrayed through its two main characters, Molina and Valentin. The plot follows two characters that pass time incarcerated in an Argentine prison by remembering and reinventing movies. What at first seems a simple and straightforward, if not lackadaisical story of two people who appear opposites – the romantic and the revolutionary – is revealed to be a story of political intrigue and double-crossing. *KOTSW* has enjoyed multiple adaptations into performance – including a stage adaptation written by Puig in 1983, a cinematic adaptation directed by Héctor Babenco in 1985, and a musical adaptation with a book written by Terrence McNally and music scored by Kander and Ebb in 1993 – which depict the identities of Molina and Valentin and their relationship differently. Of these adaptations, Babenco’s film has lasting legacy, second only to the novel. In all adaptations, Molina is often considered to be a homosexual male, but the text also offers the interpretation of Molina as a heterosexual transwoman. This essay explores Molina’s subjective articulation of gender and sexual identity and explores the hurdles of delivering such an interpretation in performance. By understanding what factors contribute to an adaptation’s construction of gender, we can learn how to make create more diverse gender interpretations in performance.

Kiss of the Spider Woman follows two prison cellmates – Molina, incarcerated for corruption of a minor, and Valentin, incarcerated for liberal political activism – who pass time by

retelling plots of old movies. At first the prisoners seem to share nothing in common; Molina is a romantic escapist who indulges in emotions, sentimental, and physical pleasures while Valentin sacrifices his freedom, rational, and physical comforts for Marxist ideals. However these binaries are inverted at the end of the novel when Molina takes political action and Valentin opens himself through human sentimentality through his connection to Molina. These inversions of romance and politics, escape and reality, and passivity and action culminate in the sexual union of the two characters at the end of the novel. This brings up another one of the most important binaries: Molina is proudly homosexual while Valentin is inflexibly heterosexual. Valentin's sexual union with Molina has been perceived by many critics as an inversion of the heterosexual binary – at least for Valentin – but this inversion fails to account for that of Molina's sexuality. I propose that instead of inversion, this union paradoxically affirms the characters' individual genders and sexualities through their difference: Valentin as a heterosexual man and Molina as a heterosexual woman. This contradicts the narrative's given circumstances which prescribe that Molina is biologically male and that Valentin is performing a homosexual act, which allows for an interpretation that simultaneously subverts and affirms status quo. This paradox of subverting and affirming can be seen throughout the entire novel, which is why I suggest that it is Molina's gender and not sexuality that subversion and affirmation of the social structure occurs.

The negotiation of Molina's gender and sexuality remains a heated topic of contention among scholars. Some critics, like Roberto Echavarren, maintain that Molina is an "effeminate homosexual" while others maintain that Molina is "A transgendered homosexual" or "a heterosexual woman at heart" (581, Teorey 5, Davis 7). The latter two interpretations of Molina as a transgender character are less prevalent than the former interpretation of Molina as a homosexual male, but criticism distinguishing between gender and sexual identities has begun to

emerge, particularly within the past decade. Such disparities of a key aspect of a character's given identity demonstrate how ambiguous and open to interpretation the novel is.

The many different descriptions of Molina's gender and sexuality also represent a common conflation of gender and sexual identities. Gender identity is how one identifies on the spectrum of gender, regardless of one's sex, which is determined by one's biology. Western society institutionalizes a gender binary based on a spectrum of man and woman, which is determined by biological sex of assigning male or female at birth. This system upholds the belief that people are only limited to being cisgender, which is the term to describe people who identify as the gender of the sex they were assigned at birth are called cisgender. This belief of exclusively and biologically determined sex and gender is known as essentialism, which was the prevailing attitude toward gender until recently. Essentialism conflates sex and gender, meaning that one's gender and biological sex are symbiotic. This approach to gender denies the existence of transgender identity, which is an umbrella term for any person whose gender identity that is not the same as their sex. Essentialism is not favored by transgender critics, who prefer the non-essentialist view of gender, which believe gender is a series of social constructions regardless of biological sex. Non-essentialism safeguards transgender identity as a valid gender expression and also explains why genders and gender roles vary culture-to-culture.

Gender and sex are further separate from sexuality, which is the sexual attraction one feels toward one, more, or no genders, and gender expression, which is the performance of gender regardless of gender identity. Sexuality is determined by how one identifies, not by one's biology. If Molina is determined to be a cisgender homosexual man, that means he is biologically male, identifies as a man, and is attracted to men. However it is also possible to interpret Molina as a transgender heterosexual woman, which means she is biologically male,

identifies as a woman, and is attracted to men. Sexuality is dependent on personal identification, not the essentialist assumption of biological sexual and gender conglomeration. Gender expression is separate from gender, sex, and sexuality because it is a performance. Performance of gender does not necessarily dictate how one identifies. For example, if one determines Molina to be a cisgender homosexual man, Molina's performance of feeding and cleaning Valentin is considered to be feminine gender expression. In this case, Molina's gender identity and gender expression would be different, although this interpretation is no less valid than interpreting Molina as a transgender heterosexual woman performing feminine gender expression. What should be remembered about all these labels is that they are fluid. Although they may not change for some people or characters, some people may experience one or more changes in their sex, gender, sexuality, or gender expression throughout their life.

Gender and sexual politics are crucially important when it comes to writing about Molina because there is disagreement over how Molina should be labeled and the significance of these labels. All critics may comfortably assume that Molina is biologically male by the fact Molina admits to having male genitalia. However, critics do not agree on Molina's gender or sexuality because Molina articulates feminine identity and performs feminine roles, which may lead to either interpretation of Molina as an effeminate cisgender man or a transgender woman. Molina is also undeniably sexually attracted to men, which, when combined with Molina's exaggerated feminine behavior, leads to the schism of understanding Molina as a homosexual stereotype or a subversive gender revolutionary. It is easy to label Molina as a cisgender homosexual man, but when one understands that sexuality is a result of personal gender identity and not perceived gender or sexual identity, one may interpret Molina as a transgender heterosexual woman. This is an important distinction because the academic community is becoming more aware of more

nuanced understandings of gender, sexuality, and the transgender community. It is no longer acceptable to overlook the way language shapes gender; both Teorey and Chabot hint that Molina is transgender, but both refer to Molina in masculine pronouns and language. This essay interprets Molina as a transgender woman, so in respect to this increasing knowledge of language and gender, I describe Molina as a heterosexual transwoman and refer to her using feminine pronouns and language.¹

One might look to authorial intent for the definitive clarification of Molina's gender and sexuality, but Puig himself offers an ambivalent explanation. In an interview with Ronald Christ, Puig described "his belief in total, not specialized sexuality ('With a person of your own gender, with a person of the opposite gender, with an animal, with a plant, with anything')," which, if authorial intent is to be followed, would suggest that sexual labels are arbitrary (574). Puig similarly declares that "There are really two men and two women" in the novel, again resisting identity politics in favor of a more inclusive understanding of gender as a coexisting rather than contradictory binary (Christ 571). This corresponds to the footnotes in the novel which explore Theodore Roszak's "concept that the kind of woman who is most in need of liberation, and desperately so, is the 'woman' which every man keeps locked inside the dungeons of his own psyche" (Puig 196). Puig's interpretation scraps the tenancy to simply write off Molina as a homosexual man. Indeed, he goes on in this interview to say that he "wouldn't call it [Molina and Valentin's relationship] a homosexual affair" and that "In that cell there are only two men, but that's just on the surface" (Christ 574). Puig's intention is to unfold a complex and dynamic

¹ I consciously choose the term "transwoman" because it values Molina's character as transgender and a woman rather than erasing either of those identities. Terms like "transsexual," "transvestite," or "drag queen" will not appear in this essay because they refer to biological transitioning, sexual pleasure in wearing another gender's clothing, and temporarily performing a gender other than one's gender identity for the sake of performance. These do not align with Molina's identification, so they will not be used. For more information on transgender terminology, I recommend Nicholas Teich's *Transgender 101*.

understanding of gender and sexuality that transcends gender and sexual labels. However Puig's resistance of labels is problematic because he is trapped in using these labels to describe his characters Valentin and Molina: "One is heterosexual, the other one isn't" and describes Molina as "The gay one" (Christ 572). In the same interview that Puig defies labels, he succumbs to them, similar to that of the characters' performances of gender and sexuality in the novel; while it seems that Molina and Valentin have reached an understanding of another perspective that challenges their identities, their sexual union reaffirms Valentin's belief that he is a heterosexual man and Molina's belief that she is a heterosexual woman. It may also be seen as reaffirmation of Argentine sexuality where the macho is not limited to homosexual labels even when he engages in a homosexual act of penetrating. It is only the penetrated partner that is labeled as homosexual. Puig's interview suggests the latter interpretation. It is clear by Puig's use of masculine pronouns that although he wishes to portray a fluid sense of gender, there are embedded indications of gender in the way he talks about his novel. It is also important to note that Christ might be projecting and reinforcing his interpretation of Molina's gender given that he repeatedly refers to the character throughout the interview as "the homosexual" and conducted this interview specifically for Christopher Street, a gay man-oriented magazine that operated in New York City from the mid-1970s until its last publication in 1995 (573).

Luckily *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is a text that allows for multiple – and even contradictory – interpretations to exist simultaneously, even if the novel offers novel interpretations Puig did not necessarily intend. Kimberly Davis Chabot argues that "*Kiss*, in all three of its media forms [as a play, a movie, and a musical], offers its audiences a means of reflecting upon their own ambivalent or shifting feelings about gender and sexual identities" (3). While it is not wrong to interpret Molina as a homosexual male, the text is written in such a way

that it also supports a heterosexual transwoman interpretation of the character. The few scholars that have suggested that Molina is a heterosexual woman fail to describe what the implications of this interpretation are, and virtually nobody has described the possibilities of this interpretation in performance. This essay seeks to fill this interdisciplinary gap between textual and performance analysis by providing the foundation for interpreting Molina as a heterosexual transwoman and then evaluating the complications of performing this interpretation by analyzing Héctor Babenco's 1985 cinematic adaptation of the text.

“And since a woman's the best there is . . . I want to be one”: Molina in Interpretation

The very first words of Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* invite his audience to interpret Molina as the heroine of the story Molina is telling. The book begins by Molina describing, “Something a little strange, that's what you notice, that she's not a woman like all the others,” which may very well apply to Molina (Puig 1). Puig's construction of Molina's dialogue is masterful because it provides insight on Molina's character through construction Molina's feminine ideal. When this possibility is applied to Molina's description, it could mean that Molina is not a woman and that “all the others” are women or that Molina is an exceptional woman from all the others. Either interpretation supposes Molina a woman, allowing for a transwoman interpretation of Molina by the very first words of the novel. Critics are quick to point out that such interpretations are anachronistic compared to the original Argentine context and recontextualized within the Western binaries of gender and sexuality and the Western construction of personal identity. This is however not necessarily the case because “Puig reveals the extent to which the Yanks have colonized the Argentine subconscious” in his novels, and the same is true of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Williams 85). In the novel, Molina recalls European

and Hollywood movies that subscribe to Western ideology. Consumed in the Argentine world of Puig's narrative, these movies purport Western ideological colonization of the psyche through media, such as Molina's subscription to Western gender binary and gender roles – especially that of the submissive woman – her performance of femininity and gender identification. It is possible to read Molina's character as subscribing to Western gender roles and notions of identity through the influence of this media in the novel and its context. Using Western transgender constructions of gender allows for a new interpretation of Molina as a transgender woman.

In fact, *KOTSW* welcomes Western interpretations through the footnotes sprinkled throughout the novel. Besides the characters' individual constructions and articulations of their identities, the novel describes the differences between gender, sex, and sexuality through Puig's many – often long – footnotes, which offer social theories of sexual construction ranging from homosexual men being biologically inverted heterosexual women to homosexuality being a result of anal fixation as children. Puig has admitted that the footnotes' purpose is “directed at Spanish-speaking readers, most of whom have been denied information about the origins of homosexuality,” which means that Western interpretations are embedded in the text in order to inform a non-Western audience about gender, sex, and sexuality (Chabot 5). This in no way dismisses the importance of Argentine context when reading the book; it simply demonstrates that between the movies Molina decides to describe and the footnotes supplied by the reader, Puig has encouraged Western interpretations to be applied to the text.

The reigning interpretation of Molina as a homosexual male is likely the result of the many homophobic remarks directed toward Molina in the text. David William Foster acknowledges that “Molina is defined as a queer and then as a criminal before the [the novel or]

film begins, and it is only that prior interpretation of him that gives his role any meaning, both in the cultural document we view and in the society it purports to interpret” (“Cinema” 129). This sets a presupposition that Molina is a queer character, usually a homosexual man, before audiences can interpret the character for themselves. Molina is judged similarly within the text by facing transphobic and homophobic reactions from virtually every character mentioned in the text. Molina’s crush, later revealed to be a waiter named Gabriel, at first avoids Molina entirely. In Molina’s perspective, Gabriel’s avoidance is only homophobic: “It was because gay that he didn’t want to let me come near him. Because he’s an absolutely straight guy” (Puig 65). It is only when Gabriel recognizes Molina as a genuine person through gradual small talk that Molina befriends Gabriel, which Molina attributes to mutual respect. Other characters, like all the institutional figures, never get to the point of understanding that Molina is more than her perceived sexuality. Molina says that the prison warden and the guards treated her “No way special. Like a faggot, same as always” (Puig 82). Molina’s language here is a reflection of what the other characters say about Molina. It is not how Molina identifies or describes herself, and thus saying that she is treated “Like a faggot” refers to how institutional homophobia oppresses those who may or may not identify as homosexual; it is only the perception that warrants such treatment from these systems of power. Molina’s mother is of no exception. Her response to Molina’s capture as a sexual deviant is disappointment. In fact Molina’s retelling of her mother’s reaction to “the hardship of having a son steeped in vice” is the only time Molina refers to herself in masculine language (Puig 105). Molina calls herself a “son” instead of a daughter, most likely because this is how Molina’s mother perceives her to be rather than how Molina views herself.

Homophobia reinforcing a masculine perception of Molina is most evident by Molina’s indictment. Judge perceives Molina to be “a revolting fag” and sentences Molina harshly “in

order to keep me away from any other kids, he wouldn't allow me one single day less than the full weight of what the law permitted" (Puig 106, Puig 106). Puig resists describing just how young of a boy Molina was romantically or sexually involved with, which leaves an undecided conundrum of passing moral judgement on Molina's sentence, but it is clear that what is politically threatening about Molina is corrupting the masculinity of young boys. Molina's personal transgression against the law does not warrant the maximum sentence, later revealed to be eight years of incarceration. It is the determination "to keep me away from other kids" as if homosexuality were an ideology to be indoctrinated or spread. The historical context suggests that Molina might not have been caught engaging in a sexual act with a minor because

Relying on the concept of public decency rather than personal sexual acts . . . , the military regime persecuted an array of signs that it considered to be evidence of sexual deviancy, one major cluster of which was attributed to male homosexuality: flamboyant clothing, long hair, overt body language, preference for certain types of music in certain types of public or semiclandestine spaces, and a generalized nonmasculinist persona. (Foster, "Argentina" 70)

Even without reading the novel historically, one recognizes that Molina's feminine behavior is more threatening than Molina's sexuality. Indications of sexuality, such as Molina's flamboyant presentation and speech, disrupt masculine authority more than the way Molina chooses to have sex. Foster acknowledges that in a homosexual act in an Argentine context, "the inserter retains his masculine and heterosexist privilege," meaning that only the recipient in anal sex is considered to be homosexual whereas the penetrating partner retains his heterosexuality in the Argentine framework of sexuality ("Argentina" 70). Molina proclaims to be a woman who has sex with men, suggesting that Molina is always the receiving partner sexually, so there is no way that Molina's sexuality threatens the masculinity of any potential partner.

Overall, Molina is the recipient of homophobic reactions and slurs because she is not accepted as the woman she presents herself to be. Many of the homophobic reactions and

anxieties described emphasize fear of Molina's sexuality – Gabriel's fear that Molina will flirt with him and the judge's fear that Molina will "corrupt" the masculinity of young men – which later becomes the dominant theme of Babenco's film. These remarks focus on what other characters project onto Molina rather than what Molina says about herself. By viewing the character from a feminist lens that values subjectivity instead of objectification, we can better understand how Molina represents resistance of essentialist constructions that conflate her sex, gender, and sexuality. Now understanding how homophobic responses in the novel have transgressed into dominant interpretation, we can view Molina through Molina's subjective expression.

Molina's identity as a transgender woman relies on a non-essentialist interpretation of gender, one of the philosophical binary differences between Molina and Valentin usually overlooked. Early in the novel, Valentin and Molina have a little scuffle over how a person can identify a woman:

- And don't call me Valentina, I'm no woman.
- How can I tell?
- Sorry, Molina, but I don't give demonstrations.
- Don't worry, I'm not asking for any. (Puig 38)

Valentin reinforces the essentialist approach to gender when he says "I don't give demonstrations" because giving a demonstration usually requires a physical component as proof. A physical demonstration of one's gender is often represented through one's sex, conflating the two identities that essentialism mandates. Molina's chide of "How can I tell?" hints that gender is not something physically seen, even with "demonstrations," and this is further inferred by the fact Molina jokes about reservations toward Valentin's gender even if physical proof were provided. There is a sexual component that heralds back to homophobia as well, since Valentin refuses to prove his masculinity through a demonstration, which he interprets as sexual because

he makes assumptions about Molina's sexuality. Babenco later uses passages like this to reinforce homophobic attitudes of the text, even though it may be included here to subvert homophobic assumptions.

Another instance where Molina proves that gender, sex, and sexuality are separate things is when she describes the societal belief that homosexuality is conditioned. Molina describes that many people believe her gender and sexuality are a result of "How they spoiled me too much as a kid, and that's why I'm the way I am, how I was tied to my mother's apron strings and now I'm this way, and how a person can always straighten out though, and what I really need is a woman, because a woman's the best there is" (Puig 19). She points to the assumptions that delicate and indulgent treatment of a male child can cause that child to become homosexual. Molina's frustration of addressing this issue implies that Molina does not believe her sexuality was conditioned. It is curious that gender is seen as innate and unchangeable while sexuality is fluid and possibly volitional. The societal beliefs Molina challenges point out the hypocrisy of believing that heterosexuality is fixed while accepting that heterosexuality is a performance. Molina's existence proves that sexuality – Molina's attraction to men, regardless of how it is labelled – is innate, but society believes Molina can be "straightened out" by performing masculine heterosexuality.

Essentialism is further distanced from the text by the ambiguities of the novel. Many of the given circumstances, such as the sex or gender of the two speaking characters, remain ambiguous during the first chapters. The names of the characters are not stated until halfway through the first chapter, and it is not revealed that the characters are in a male prison until later in the novel, which might also lead a reader to believe that this is a space where two characters of different genders can interact. This allows a reader to interpret the characters according to their

articulated and negotiated gender constructions of identity rather than physical signifiers such as body or sexual descriptions. Of these ambiguities, Molina's name is the most important. The name Molina chooses to refer to herself by is feminine in Spanish, suggesting that perhaps Molina truly sees herself as a woman (Puig 18). This is a gender hint that is unfortunately lost in English translation. Molina's name is "Luis Alberto Molino," but Molina changes her name into the feminine because Molina wishes to present and be identified as a woman (Puig 264). In Spanish, Molina's legal name expresses a masculine identity because of the masculine ending *-o* rather than the feminine ending *-a*. Therefore Molina's decision to identify as *Molina* instead of *Molino* expresses a reiteration of a feminine identity that remains constant in the novel. This is even recognized by the institutional powers, though this is because they refer to inmates by their last names. The legal documentation in the last section of the book appropriately includes the correct spelling of Molina's name, but colloquially and informally, the institutional powers refer to Molina in the feminine. In a contextual interpretation, this is probably unlikely, but Puig's fictional universe allows Molina's subjective identity, an identity which happens to be feminine, to be recognized and accepted – to an extent – by the institution.

Indeed, Molina identifies as a woman throughout the novel. While one might conclude Valentin and Molina's banter, such as

—So you're a regular bourgeois gentleman at heart, eh, Molina?
 —Bourgeois lady, thank you. (Puig 44)

are teasing, they hold significant value of Molina correcting Valentin every time he misgenders her. Molina's consistency throughout the novel indicates that these corrects are sincere rather than parodic. There is one major moment where Molina equates her feminine identity with Gabriel and thus, conceivably, her sexual partners:

- So the next week this woman heads straight to the same restaurant, but this time alone.
 —What woman?
 —Listen, I'm sorry, but when it comes to him I can't talk about myself like a man, because I don't feel like one. (Puig 60)

The context of this excerpt is that Molina is sharing her history with Valentin, particularly her relationship with the waiter Gabriel and the unreciprocated feelings she has for him. It would seem from this quote that Molina only thinks of herself as a woman when it comes to Gabriel because it is the only situation where she doesn't "feel like" a man, but this is not the only instance where Molina "can't talk about [herself] like a man" precisely because she doesn't "feel like one." While it might be argued that Molina only refers to herself as a woman when sexuality is concerned because Molina is the receiving partner in sex, this is not the case because Molina refers to herself as a woman in situations where sexuality is not concerned at all. When Molina mistakenly eats a plateful of poison food, Molina moans and Valentin responds,

- What's wrong?
 —Nothing, argh . . . this girl is in a bad way, that's all.
 —What girl?
 —Me, stupid. (Puig 85)

Here Molina refers to herself as a girl and, as seen in previous instances, rebukes Valentin for not respecting her gender. This topic of this conversation is free from any kind of sexual implications, yet Molina continues to label herself in the feminine. In at least two other instances, Molina says, "Hey, what do you take me for, an even dumber broad than I am?" and "I can't believe what a stupid girl I am, it never dawned on me that they open letters here if they want to," referring to herself as a woman in both instances and sarcastically chiding the stereotype that women are intellectually inferior to men (Puig 89, Puig 134). In all of these examples, Molina proves that she is a quick witted, teasing but serious woman aware of transphobic and misogynist discourse and consistently resists or mocks these insults. Valentin reinforces the institutional

oppression against Molina's non-essentialist identity. At one point Valentin even reduces one of Molina's reprimands of Valentin's misgenderings, saying, "Okay, cut the jokes and get on with the story," which encapsulates Valentin's minimizing of Molina's identity (Puig 30).

In addition to identifying as a woman and correcting Valentin every time he tries to misgender Molina as a man, Molina performs three important functions as a woman: that of heroine, mother, and storyteller. The first kind of femininity Molina performs is that of the heroine of the stories she tells. She always identifies with the heroine of the movies she recounts and tells the story as much as possible from the perspective of the heroine, regardless of if the movie follows the heroine or not. When asked, "Who do you identify with? Irena or the other one [woman role]?" Molina immediately responds, "With Irena, what do you think? She's the heroine, dummy. Always with the heroine," not because these are the only women's roles in the movies but because the heroine represents the epitome of romance, drama, and femininity that Molina wishes to embody (Puig 25). Most scholars are keen to relate Molina's death in relaying a political message to Valentin's comrades as the living embodiment of Molina's role as the tragic heroine, but Molina compares herself to other tragic heroines and historical women in order to reinforce her identification as a woman. She calls herself "Carmen, like the one in Bizet," who is a dramatic heroine from a genre other than melodrama cinema, and in another instance she compares her anticipated insanity to "Charlotte of Mexico" and "Christina of Sweden" (Puig 65, Puig 78). The main heroine does not die in all of the movies Molina retells for Valentin, which also suggests that Molina sees alternate options for Molina's fate, even when identifying as the tragic heroine. This is especially important because it trumps the prevailing notion that Molina chooses death by political action in an attempt to fulfill the role of the diva heroine Molina so admires. One may interpret Molina's death in passing on a message to

Valentin's comrades as the fateful demise and wish fulfillment of the tragic heroine Molina wishes to be, or one may consider that "his [Molina's] death may be a reminder of the costs as well as the glory incurred when a heroine challenges patriarchy" (Weigmann 401). This alternative interpretation means that Molina's death is the result of an attempt to subvert the harmful patriarchal views that limit women to traditional roles rather than submitting to the limitation of feminine roles in Western media. Ultimately the women Molina chooses to identify with are heralds of femininity rather than solely dying for the sake of their lover.

Another role Molina performs is that of mother through feeding, cleaning, and generally taking care of Valentin. Molina soothes Valentin when he soils his pants, removes the dirtied garments, and offers her own clothes to Valentin until she is able to clean Valentin's pants, an act which mirrors a mother changing the diaper of a baby. If the cell Molina and Valentin shared can be considered a domestic, Molina is the one who fulfills all roles pertaining to it. Molina often mentions boiling water or cleaning, which are often attributed as traditional tasks for women. Valentin even says, "if it wasn't for you remembering, we'd be stuck without water later on," which means that without Molina operating as this feminine role of caretaker, they would be doomed because in Valentin's essentialist perspective, men – including Molina, in Valentin's perception of Molina's gender – do not traditionally fulfill these roles (Puig 8). Molina's conflation with her mother, who never appears in the book is most revealing of Molina's performance of mothering. Molina's gift of fresh food to Valentin is attributed to her mother although it is actually Molina composing a list for the warden to buy and delivering these groceries to Valentin. Molina assumes the responsibilities from determining the ingredients to preparing the meals. Valentin assumes Molina's mother exists because Molina consistently and successfully appears with groceries supposedly chosen and delivered by Molina's mother when

in actuality this is a role Molina performs individually. Molina's descriptions about her mother's supposed visits are convincing because Molina invents and embodies this role. Her protection of Valentin may also be seen in a maternal way rather than a way to bide time and negotiate immediate release from prison. One scholar noted "As the conventions of traditional womanhood/motherhood would have it, Molina is drawn to those he can rescue," linking the core facets of Molina's performance with the ideals of traditional femininity (Zimmerman 111). She links Molina's befriending of Gabriel as another example of Molina's mothering nature, which allows this interpretation to be seen as consistent and genuine. In the original Spanish, Molina "playfully call[s] him [Valentin] a *cagón* (one who moves his bowels a lot), a term in Spanish that a mother might use affectionately with her small child," which means that some gendered inscriptions of the maternal and feminine have been lost in translation (Santoro 128). Even in English, Molina's acts of motherhood are represented to be consistent and feminine.

The final way Molina performs femininity in the novel is through Molina's association with the oral tradition and the most important image from the stories, the Spider Woman. Oral tradition has been tied with women in Latino culture and is associated with Molina throughout the course of the novel. While Valentin relies on letters and reading books – literary mediums, Molina relies on film – a visual and auditory medium – and recitation – a solely auditory medium. We therefore can associate Molina with the oral, which has been primarily a medium of the disenfranchised, especially women. The oral medium is also linked to the mothering nature Molina demonstrates throughout so much of the novel. Multiple scholars have linked Molina's stories to act as a form of lullaby for Valentin to sleep as well as sustenance for Valentin's soul. Raquel Oxford surmises that "In nature, the spider builds a web to prevail and feed her offspring. In the *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, this is totally apparent by the stories that Molina relates to

Valentin which, in turn, are associated with his feeding of food” (Oxford 155). Molina’s role as a mother may be interpreted as significance of the spider woman. Although the spider woman is an enigmatic figure whose meaning is dubious in interpretation, nearly all critics agree in one way or another that Molina is the spider woman, most likely because Valentin says to Molina, “You, you’re the spider woman, that traps men in her web” (Puig 260). It is a rare occasion when a critic maintains that “Both men are the spider woman” or an alternative view of what the spider woman represents in the novel (Boccia 424). While it is not enough to argue that Molina is a woman because of her association with the spider woman, Molina’s connections to the spider woman are apparent through her nurturing of Valentin through stories.

Besides how Molina talks about herself and behaves, we can better understand Molina’s gender identity through how Molina talks about others – namely, how Molina separates herself from cisgender men through her language and interests. By understanding how Molina identifies separately from men, we can understand Molina solely as a woman instead of as a bigender, androgynous, or otherwise non-binary character. Instead of identifying as “we men” or “us men,” Molina refuses to include herself when speaking about men in the plural. She refers to them as “You men” on multiple occasions (Puig 58). This might suggest a different kind of distinction, separating Molina from a group of specific men, but Molina’s exclusion from men is more likely. The most significant example is when Molina says, “Don’t be so jealous, there’s just no talking to a guy about some other guy without getting into a fuss, *you’re all* like women that way. ... See how you react, even insulting me. *You men* are just as competitive as women” (Puig 62, emphasizes mine). Molina addresses Valentin in the plural, referring to all men, not just Valentin, and then argues how different gender expectations are trivial because all genders are jealous. Molina implies that she identifies as a woman by separating herself from the inclusion

of men, and she constructs masculinity in terms of femininity, subverting the usual oppression of femininity by analyzing it in comparison to masculinity. There is also the suggestion that men are alike women, which implies that gender difference is arbitrary; men and women are alike in sexual competition and jealousy. In fact Molina implies that men are more competitive than women because men can't even hear about other men without placing themselves in competition with them.

The other way Molina separates herself from men is her choice of movies. Foster describes the movies Molina enjoys as movies "that might appeal to the stereotypic feminine spectator that such movies both defined and perpetuated" ("Cinema" 125). During the racetrack story, Molina says, "it's not my kind of film. ... It's one of those films men usually go for" (Puig 114). Molina's choice in movies aligns with that of feminine interests, especially melodramatic romance, and because Molina is proud of being a true woman, she considers anything outside her interests, like racing, to be stereotypically masculine. It is not that Molina does not know about the story because it is not feminine – obviously she knows the story well enough to try to recite it – but she actively reinforces her gender identity and ideas about femininity by displacing racing from feminine interests. In the first place, Molina only picks this story, the racing story, for Valentin, who Molina recognizes as a man and therefore has masculine interests. Molina forgets crucial details about the movie which Valentin instantly supplies, to which Molina sighs, "How do men always remember all about auto races?" (Puig 116). Valentin proves his masculinity by supplying facts about the racetrack while Molina reinforces ideas about femininity through her lack of knowledge. Both implicit language and explicit demonstrations of gender, Molina distances herself from men.

Molina also distances herself from homosexual men, making it clear that Molina wants to be viewed as a heterosexual woman. She draws differences between how she identifies – as a woman – and what homosexual men do when she says, “But as for my friends and myself, we’re a hundred percent female. We don’t go in for those little games – that’s strictly for homos. We’re normal women; we sleep with men” (Puig 203). Molina says this in response to the kinds of relationships homosexual men seek. Some homosexual men engage in relationships with each other, which Molina describes as “those little games” she refuses to play. Molina’s description of her ideal relationship with a man is a domestic and life partnership, unlike how homosexual relationships are stereotyped. Molina means heterosexual men when she generalizes men because she identifies as heterosexual. She also distinguishes herself from her friends, which she describes as “queens” (Puig 60). This term is of course slang for flamboyant, homosexual men, and could presumably describe Molina if she identified as a man instead of a woman. Other terms she calls her friends are “harlots” and “slutty friend,” and she describes their behavior as “bitchy” (Puig 59, 60, 60). These negative constructions of homosexual men separate Molina from them because she describes herself as a loving, constant woman. Molina’s construction of homosexual men is not only alienating from how Molina views herself, it is denigrating.

Although Puig’s novel offers a strong basis for interpreting Molina as a heterosexual transwoman through her feminine social behavior and separation from men, masculinity, and homosexuality, it is not the only interpretation. Ken Burke points out that it is easy to dismiss Molina as a stereotype for homosexual men. He writes that “We gain much in our encounter with Molina, especially in the eyes of those who see him as more than a drag queen stereotype or at least see this stylization as a self-chosen Leni on the surface but with more of the complex aspects of the Panther Woman lurking beneath,” but interpreting Molina in these ways are not

necessarily incorrect (Burke 121). A cynic of Molina's gender identity as a woman might look to some of the more questionable remarks Molina makes. Molina makes statements like "But if men acted like women, there wouldn't be any more torturers," which glamorize femininity rather than facing the reality that women are capable of the same cruelties men are (Puig 29). Similarly, Valentin's criticism of, "If you were a woman, you wouldn't want that," points out a difference of what Molina perceived to be femininity and the experience of cisgender women (Puig 44). Of course, we must be skeptical; Molina's generalization could be that the world would be more peaceful if femininity was respected instead of seen as threatening, and we must remember that Valentin, a cisgender man, is not in a position to decide what women want. In both instances, the feminine traits Molina points to are "a celebration of certain qualities typically associated with women," so we may view Molina's rejection of masculinity not as an unrealistic idealization of femininity but as a realistic rejection of negative masculine behavior, thus subverting binary gender norms by valuing femininity more than masculinity (Zimmerman 107). Still, reading Molina as a transwoman is significant because, as Chabot points out, the text offers so many ambiguities on sexuality and gender that the interpretation a reader is likely to find is one that confirms or challenges that reader's beliefs. The lack of a transgender reading from Molina's point of view (rather than the dynamics of Molina and Valentin in contention) implies that gender is not viewed as self-determined and that individual gender-nonconforming identity remains an overlooked or marginalized interpretation. There are two objections to reading Molina as a transwoman: that this interpretation affirms the gender binary and that Molina's interpretation of being a woman further oppresses women.

The first critical objection to this interpretation is that reading Molina as a woman reduces the character to the gender binary the text strives to subvert. This is not true because

transgender identity inherently resists the essentialist gender binary by proving that gender roles are socialized and that gender is not determined by biology. Zimmerman argues that “Molina’s very conception of himself as female suggests that gender is a construct: . . . it challenges the very assumption that maleness and/or femaleness is bound by physical nature” and that Molina’s femininity proves that feminine characteristics “may be neither essential nor *exclusive*” as is argued in the binary system of gender (112, 107 emphasis mine). It is not the case that “In Molina’s terribly conventional heterosexual world, those who act sensitively are simply women” because Molina encourages sensitivity in Valentin without the intention of transforming Valentin’s identity into a woman (Zimmerman 110). Molina also takes a feminist stance in attacking the oppressive patriarchal views of masculinity when she says, “And what’s so bad about being soft like a woman? Why is it men or whoever, some poor bastard, some queen, can’t be sensitive, too, if he’s got a mind to?” (Puig 29). Molina does not necessarily have to refer to herself here to point out that sensitivity ought to be a genderless trait and in doing so encourages the dismantling of the gender binary’s rigid categorizations of certain characteristics.

Molina’s sensitivity does not mean she inherently ascribes to any particular gender; it is her articulation of a feminine identity that makes her a woman. Still, critics who argue that Molina’s sensitivity is the driving force of Molina’s feminine identity often look to Molina’s proclamation of, “great! I agree! And since a woman’s the best there is . . . I want to be one. That way I save listening to all kinds of advice, because I know what the score is myself and I’ve got it all clear in my head,” as proof of wanting to be a woman only because it allows Molina to exist within the gender binary (Puig 19). However it is more likely that in this quote, Puig means to show Molina does not have to listen to any “advice” on how to be a man because she is not one. When Molina says, “the score is myself and I’ve got it all clear in my head,” Molina is saying

that she knows her gender identity and the only one who can determine it is herself. It is true that Molina has a traditional view of gender roles and heterosexuality, but Molina's world is not so rigid that Molina decides to become a woman simply because she performs feminine roles. Rather than criticizing Molina for failing to perform femininity acceptable to critics, it must be recognized that Molina's definition of femininity does not further oppress women or reaffirm the gender binary, so criticizing Molina's traditional views of her gender is an example of transphobia in academic communities.

Another argument is that Molina's interpretation of what it means to be a woman is limited to the melodramatic and unrealistic depiction of women in popular culture, thus reinforcing a false stereotype of weak, submissive women. This argument is the more persuasive of the two, but it also fails to acknowledge that Molina learns how to be a woman in part by mimicking her mother, an essential woman, through her performance as a mother. Furthermore, Mira Wiegmann points out that the movies Molina enjoys feature strong heroines that resist stereotypical roles of femininity. She says that "Heroines in many of these films were strong women who embodied traits that are frequently defined as 'masculine' in patriarchal cultures. These qualities include intelligence, courage, forthrightness, and integrity," all of which Molina embodies as well as sensitivity, nurturing, and love of physical comforts (Weigmann 398). The Leni story, which is one of two stories from the novel retained in the film, is especially important for this because she operates as a covert spy for the French resistance and refuses to settle down to a life of domesticity with Wagner, which would seem to be Molina's fantasy. While some critiques maintain that Molina's ideas about femininity are as harmful as patriarchal oppression, these traditional gender roles are not entirely feminine or masculine.

Even in a contextual reading, it is not Molina who is the site of subverting gender roles because she fits into either side of the gender binary depending on the interpretation of Molina; it is in Valentin in which gender subversion exists. In the Latin American module of sexuality, it is “Only when the masculinity of the macho is challenged publicly is there any questioning of the division of sexual roles” (Foster, “Sexual Textualities” 4). However, because of this, Molina’s role subscribes to masculine dominance no matter how Molina is interpreted. Either Molina may be interpreted as exclusively the receiving partner in a homosexual relationship or as a woman assumed only to be penetrated. Any reading of Molina will ultimately create a reading whereby Molina’s gender identity reaffirms heterosexist and masculine power structures, either as “a screaming queen” effeminate homosexual stereotype or as a stereotypical feminine heroine (Foster, “Cinema” 127). Molina’s subversive gender statement is not in creating new statements about femininity in the Western understanding in gender but rather in proving gender construction is not essential or exclusive to the Western gender binary. By the end of the novel, Molina’s view that a man “has to give the orders, so he will feel right. That’s the natural thing, because that makes him the...the man of the house” is reformed to fit a structure of gender equality also contributed by Valentin: “No, the man and the woman of the house must be equal with one another. If not, their relation becomes a form of exploitation” (Puig 243-44). The gender subversion in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is not the result of Molina alone; it occurs as the result of the hyper-feminine, represented by Molina, and the hyper-masculine, represented by Valentin, consolidating their power in a balanced and positive way.

Molina’s gender may be interpreted in multiple ways but a transgender interpretation has been overlooked despite multiple critics labeling Molina as transgender. Contextual meaning of the novel proves problematic given that Molina bases her identity on media that relies on the

Western constructions of an essentialist gender binary. Her identification and performance as a woman demonstrates that the binary is obsolete. Moreover, Molina distances herself from other men, allowing for a solely transgender interpretation of Molina rather than other kinds of androgynous or non-binary interpretations. Molina's femininity has been rejected on the basis it is too traditional or rigid, but Molina advocates for greater gender equality through sensitivity. Molina learns how to be a woman through mimicking her mother as well as the movies she recounts, which prove to be less stereotypical feminine than previously viewed.

“a woman’s VOICE”: Molina in Performance

Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has been such a sensation that it has inspired three performance adaptations: a stage play adapted by Puig, a film directed by Hector Babenco, and a musical written by Terrence McNally. Of these adaptations, Babenco's film is the most famous, earning multiple awards and remaining a popular site of study even today. The role of Molina, performed by William Hurt, presents an interesting predicament where the performer interpreted the character as transgender but the film presented an alternative view of the character as a drag queen. Hurt often receives the brunt of the objections to the performance of Molina, but the entire production creates a holistic rejection of the ambiguous nature of Molina in the novel. Understanding the production's intent and the semiotic constructions will demonstrate how multiple facets of the film limit interpretations of Molina.

Although Babenco's film alters a number of moments from Puig's text, it is still a faithful adaptation. A faithful text is that which follows the source material, and in *Kiss of the Spider Woman's* case, the film still retains the basic setup of two characters incarcerated and spending time by telling stories. Although a lot of material is streamlined and many of the side

conversations are lost, crucial character foils, such as their un/requited loves and attitudes toward the movies, and plot moments, such as the poisoned food and Molina's encounters with the guards and warden, are retained. Performance translator Phyllis Zatlin lists "outside locations, movements, images and characters to the film" as well as dialogue replaced by visual effects as some of the many alternatives to make up for losing the dialogue (171). It is not true that any adaptation adding or losing source material makes the production flawed because some of the new material might be compensating for lost material. Babenco's film is particularly successful at this because many a critic has brought up the fact that "In neither the conversion from films to novel nor from novel to film does the source translate literally; instead the narrative is recast to highlight significant themes" (Boccia 418). In the novel, Molina embellishes, reduces, and manipulates the films she retells rather than presenting the movies exactly as they were seen, and this manipulation of texts is incorporated into the movie. It cannot be critiqued that Babenco's film does not follow the source of Puig's text because this is one of the many issues the novel demonstrates through example. What is concerning about Babenco's translation of the novel is that the "significant themes," such as the interpretation of Molina's gender, are not always represented faithfully for a number of reasons.

Changing, scrapping, or adding new material is not a problem, but decontextualizing the novel, meaning the film removes the story from its original context, is a major issue in Babenco's film. Chabot argues "The fact that the later film and musical were produced in English also gave audiences justification for reading the texts in a U.S. cultural context" rather than that of the Argentine context (5). This allows interpretations beyond the strict guidelines for Argentine gender and sexuality, allowing for bisexual interpretations of Valentin and transgender interpretations of Molina as well as other non-binary gender and sexual interpretations. Further

decontextualizations are caused by temporality. To this Chabot says “The temporal conflation is further fueled by the fact that the film and musical adaptations were created in the 1980s and 1990s, when discourses concerning sexuality were rapidly being transfigured,” meaning how the text would have been interpreted in the 1970s at the time of Puig’s writing is different from how we interpret the text today in 2014 (Chabot 6). Another decontextualization Chabot doesn’t expound on is language. The novel was originally written in Spanish, but all the performance adaptations, including Puig’s play, were performed and delivered to an English-speaking audience. It has already been explained how gender nuances in Molina’s name or her mothering performance to Valentin is lost when translated from Spanish to English. Performances need to be aware of what meanings may be lost in translation and what meanings may be added when adapting the text in another language. The geographic, temporal, and linguistic decontextualizations invite us to understand performance adaptations according to our own context rather than that of the novel, depending on the production. Of the many decontextualizations that have been imposed on the text, internationalization of the film remains the biggest decontextualization of Puig’s novel.

David Weisman, the producer of the *Kiss of the Spider Woman* film adaptation, and Leonard Schrader, the writer for the play screenplay, have some problematic opinions about the movie’s direction, represented best in their declaration that the intention of the movie was to create the first Brazilian blockbuster for the international market. The biggest problem was Weisman’s intent to “make the first really international Brazilian movie” because he decided this before he decided to produce *KOTSW* (Weisman 6). It is as if the choice of movie was arbitrary because any project would do as long as it could achieve Weisman’s objective of becoming the first international Brazilian film. Furthermore, Weisman was excited that “This would be the first

time a South American film was made into English with American stars for the international market,” but this would make it seem that the film’s focus was to create a Brazilian movie, not to accurately portray the novel and the casting for actors was determined by commercial value rather than who would convey the characters best (Weisman 7). In fact Burt Lancaster was originally cast as Molina, and William Hurt came into the role only after Lancaster had serious medical complications that prevented him from filming. Babenco worried about “Latino integrity” due to the main star being a white North American actor and so Raúl Juliá was recruited as Valentin only as a physical representation of Latino integrity in the film (Weisman 8). Weisman and Schrader’s endeavors to internationalize the text is problematic because “Internalization really means homogenization: that is, more and more, movie directors are bringing together a cast of different nationalities to make a film in English set nowhere in particular about a theme that is universal, supposedly with which we can all easily identify” (qtd in Williams 85). It dilutes the significance of particular aspects of the setting (such as Molina’s and Valentin’s incarceration as political and social dissidents in Argentina’s Dirty War) and recontextualizes other elements (such as how homosexuality is treated differently in Argentina and Brazil; homosexuals were persecuted in Argentina whereas there was a level of freedom in Brazil). On a superficial layer, the cinematic choices seem like arbitrary production decisions, but actually in making this homogenized version of Puig’s text, it loses value as a subversive cultural object because it has been repurposed to conform to dominant cultural context that the text attempts to critique. In the case of Molina, this gross recontextualization limits the interpretation of Molina as a woman.

Hurt wanted to portray Molina as a woman, in line with my interpretation of the text, but unfortunately he conflated gender and sexuality like many of the critics writing about Molina. In

an recent interview about the role, Hurt admits, “I didn’t play him as gay. I played him as a woman,” and insists, “I don’t think Molina’s gay. I think he’s a woman. I think he really is a woman, he’s just caught in a man’s body” (Gross). Hurt’s interpretations of Molina support a non-essentialist performance that separates gender and sexuality as different performances.

Unfortunately Hurt’s research methods were problematic because he describes going to gay bars and relying on dance as a means of conveying Molina’s gender to be feminine rather than using cisgender or transgender women as a source of research or movement. This demonstrates, contrary to what Hurt says, a conflation of gender and sexuality. Although Hurt’s intention was to portray Molina as a woman, the reception of his performance of exaggerated femininity is often seen as a stereotype of flamboyant, homosexual men.

Hurt’s performance was ultimately too flamboyant to be read as a performance of femininity. Foster critiques Hurt’s performance for “vamping it up outrageously” throughout the film (“Cinema” 130). This brought about the unwanted perception that Molina is a mere stereotype without development from the beginning to the end of the movie, unlike that in the novel. This is further problematic because the stereotype Molina ascribes to is “among those who adhere to popular homophobic mythologies, to the one defining behavior patterns of the queer,” referring to the Western stereotype of the effeminate, hypersexual, and predatory homosexual man (Foster, “Cinema” 133). While Foster admits that Hurt’s reliance on stereotypes in portraying Molina might be endearing to some for the easy identification of Molina’s character as a homosexual icon for audience, Hurt’s performance welcomes the danger of “reinforcing homophobic attitudes” (“Cinema” 133). Hurt’s interpretation of Molina as a woman also comes into conflict with implicit constructions of gender embedded in the screenplay.

One such implicit factor changing Puig's text and embedding gender cues occurs in the stage directions of the screenplay. The screenplay diminishes interpretations of Molina as a woman by using masculine language and pronouns to refer to Molina. Molina is introduced in the screenplay as, "He is LUIS MOLINA, 41, his red-tinted hair no longer hiding the gray. He has the seasoned face of a man who has seen it all, and been hurt by it" (Schrader 17). The novel lacks any language that is not spoken or written, so there are no gender cues in the text that label Molina as a man, which would support interpreting Molina to be a man. However, the stage directions in Schrader's screenplay clearly construct Molina to be a man. Another indication of Molina's masculine construction in the film is that Molina's name is not only written in the script with his masculine given name but also that Molina is forced to name himself as, "Luis Molina!" during role call multiple times throughout the film (Schrader 23, 31). Both of these instances are new creations, never appearing in the novel or Puig's play because such forced identification would obstruct the ambiguity of Molina's gender identity.

Other screen directions in the play refer to feminine characteristics about Molina that unfortunately fail in performance. His voice is described as "a woman's VOICE" and one guard's direction is to look "at his 'female' prisoner. He's not sure if this 'actress' is really naïve – or just pretending" (Schrader 15, 56). In both of these instances, the screenplay stresses Molina's effeminacy. Calling Molina's voice a "woman's" offers the ambiguous illusion that Molina might be a woman, but this is shattered in the performance because Hurt's voice does not sound feminine at all. This is problematic because if Molina considers herself a woman, then whatever Molina's voice is should be a woman's voice. However because the screenplay relies on interpreting both of the characters in traditional cisgender stereotypical roles with Valentin as the *macho* and Molina as a queen, then this reference to a woman's voice is a cisgender

difference, which Hurt seemingly does not try to perform at all. In the second instance, the feminine words appearing in quotations are a snide suggestion that Molina is not the “female” or “actress” she would like to be.

The inclusion of stage directions at all disrupts the ambiguities of Puig’s text, which relies strictly on spoken word and written documents. Because performance adaptations are innately action-based, there should have been more scrutiny in how gender is being presented. In the play, “The stage directions tell the actor to speak as if . . . relenting, like a middle-class mother” (qtd in Santoro 123). The play’s stage directions are different from those in the film because the play stage directions construct Molina’s gender expression to be feminine in the same way Puig writes into his novel. The difference in performing gender of Molina in film and play may be a result of the different gender language used in either script. Given that Puig adapted the play himself and included feminine references in the play, it is likely that Puig’s conception and the film team’s perception of Molina’s gender were different. The screenplay’s language is one of the many barriers that prevented Hurt from playing Molina as a woman.

Regarding content, the film retains a number of key passages from the novel that signify Molina’s gender to be possibly feminine. Molina proclaims to identify with “the singer. She’s the star. I’m always the heroine,” and a number of Molina’s quips of referring to herself as a woman are maintained (Schrader 27). Like in the novel, Molina’s “maternal concern” is preserved and it is perhaps more effective in the film than in the novel because these actions may be translated explicitly onto film through performance of wiping down Valentin, feeding him, and hovering over him as if telling him a lullaby (Schrader 49). In keeping this unity of femininity, one might believe that Babenco’s film conserves Puig’s representation of Molina’s gender through sensitive and flamboyant feminine performance. However, Babenco’s many additions to the film create a

new understanding of Molina's gender and sexuality. A shocking addition to the screenplay attempts to affirm the construction of Molina as a transwoman, but ultimately this passage upholds essentialism:

Valentin: Stop crying! You sound just like an old woman.

Molina: That's what I am, that's what I am.

Valentin: What's this between your legs? Huh? Tell me, "lady"!

Molina: It's an accident. If I had the courage, I'd cut it off.

Valentin: You'd still be a man! A man in prison, just like the faggots the Nazis shoved in the ovens. (Schrader 44)

The passage does not appear in the novel, and Molina upholding essentialism has no origin in the novel. Although Molina claims to be a woman, Valentin reduces her to her genitals, indicative of the essentialist gender binary. Molina claims to be "an old woman" and would "cut it off" to prove her feminine identity, which the Molina in the novel does not deem necessary to validate her gender identity. Although Molina claims she would undergo some type of physical gender reconstruction, Valentin tells Molina that she would still be a man. In Valentin's perspective, neither individual gender identity nor conformity to the physical biological changes can change Molina's gender because Molina was born biologically male. For Valentin in the film, gender and sex are symbiotic and fixed. Unlike in the novel, Molina does not fight to refute the essential scheme of gender the film's rhetoric presents.

The film resists the transgender interpretation also by emphasizing Molina's sexuality, which is secondary to gender expression for the Molina of Puig's novel. At one point in the film, Hurt-as-Molina sighs, "Why couldn't they give me that handsome leading blond man to keep me company – instead of you. . . . Afraid to talk about sex?" (Schrader 24). The screenplay stresses Molina's sexual desires with a man rather than Molina's domestic desires with a man as is portrayed in the novel. It is also in direct contrast to Molina's claim in the novel that she can't talk about men to Valentin without Valentin getting jealous. Rather than demonstrating how any

gender acts similarly in jealousy, this quote upholds the harmful stereotype of the sexual predator homosexual man. Molina in the film is often the first one to initiate any conversation about sex, even though this is not the case for the novel. In the novel, it is Valentin's homophobic assumptions about Molina that distort Molina's harmless remarks of gender into sexual threats. This divergence between the novel's sexual uncertainty and the novel's sexual overtness occurs at least two other times, when Valentin indulges in a cigarette and food to which Molina jokes that sex is the only thing that could possibly feel better and when Molina sighs about how many years and nights he's been looking for a man, implying that Molina has bedded many men but found that none of them fit his idea of the ideal or compatible man.

Knowing that the film frames Molina within a sexual rather than gender context, we can then interpret the film's semiotics to construct Molina as a drag queen instead of Molina as a woman. Sonia Braga's performance as Leni becomes the feminine ideal Molina performs throughout the film. Bruce Williams argues that "The camp excesses of her acting and demeanor coupled with her husky, sexually-ambivalent voice have rendered her the model of many a drag queen," in which we are to understand Molina as one of the many drag queens inspired by his Madonna, Leni (88). The viewer is supposed to connect Leni and Molina because "Sonia Braga's campy extremes appear totally in sync with Molina's drag" and in doing so connects Molina with the other characters Braga portrays as well (Williams 91). Film critics like Santoro and Williams point out that Molina and Leni occupy similar spaces on screen, always in the center of the screen and positioned to occupy much of the viewing space. Hurt-as-Molina's mimicking Braga-as-Leni's – or construction of Leni mimicking his – gestures supplies a link to understand the two characters as identical entities rather than separate ones. Other connections are that of wardrobe because "The two were connected by Molina's dressing and acting like Leni (as best

he could in a bathrobe, hair towel, and confined space)” (Burke 114). One of Hurt’s prison outfits is the costume of a kimono robe evokes a sense of exotic otherness and of feminine charms, since it is associated with Japanese women and geishas. However Molina in the film is not seen consistently in women’s clothing, so making the argument that Molina is a cross-dresser or feminine presenting is not valid. Through the costuming, the film represents Molina as a drag queen with Molina mimicking Leni’s gestures, such as the parallels between Molina’s and Leni’s towel headdresses, and donning the feminine clothing, the kimono, when it is time for a performance of the movie.

Added scenes of exposition, such as the addition of the drag club scene, further support interpreting Molina as a drag queen. Leni is linked to the drag culture when “Leni’s campy song is echoed in the final sequences of Babenco’s film as it is sung by a drag queen who welcomes Molina back into the gay scene following his parole” (qtd in Williams 88). This sequence interprets Molina’s friends as literal (drag) queens rather than queens in the sense of acting flamboyantly and feminine. The performer calls Molina by the name Luisa, which never appears in the novel. This addition suggests that Molina might very well be a drag performer who goes by the feminine version of Molina’s given name rather than Molina’s last name. Even Hurt admits his performance of Molina was a drag queen despite his assertion that Molina is a woman. When asked about the role, Hurt admits,

GROSS: Yes, because you’re kind of a drag queen in it.
Mr. HURT: Yeah. (Gross)

These additions support the understanding of Molina as a drag queen, meaning Molina only performs the role of a woman for the purpose of a limited performance, rather than identifying as a woman and performing femininity throughout the entire film.

The addition of Sonia Braga as Leni, Marta, and the Spider Woman also limits Molina's role and the interpretation of Molina as a woman. Originally Braga was not intended to be in the script, so the roles she performs were created specifically for her rather than taking origin in the transposition from the novel to the screenplay. According to Weisman, "On the plane, Hector [Babenco] ran into Sonia Braga and spontaneously invited her to play the cameo role of Marta, Valentin's girlfriend," meaning she did not have a crucial role in the film's creation and that the roles she performed were originally insignificant in comparison to Molina and Valentin (9).

Among the revisions of the script, her roles were increased by two. Weisman recalls, "Sonia was also cast as diva Leni La Maison . . . and the enigmatic Spider Woman, linking the three woman characters in the story," creating new metaphors for this cisgender female presence (10). Puig's novel and play adaptation however focus only on two actors, and there are no additional bodies to enact the stories Molina and Valentin develop and share unlike in the movie. This allows for Puig to maintain the novel's ambiguous nature of storytelling in performance. However the addition of Braga eradicates this ambiguity and even combines figures that should not be related.

In the novel, meanings of the characters in the movies are intrinsically tied to Molina because Molina is actively elaborating and changing the movies to best suit her needs, but the film's physical depiction of Braga playing out Molina's movies skew the interpretation that these movies are solely Molina's creations and minimize Molina's role. While Braga-as-Leni may be identified as Molina's innermost desires, the film is still too vague to provide a definitive connection between Molina and Leni because the films Molina tells may be interpreted as Valentin's imaginings of the films as well. For instance, Valentin corrects Molina's description of the Jewish characters in the play through their hat, which is displayed in the film according to how Valentin sees the depiction of the Jewish characters rather than the arbitrary fashion

decision in Molina's memory of the film. Williams reminds us that these movies "could well represent 'his' [Valentin's] imagined reconstruction of Molina's story, for he envisions his lover Marta . . . as Leni LaMaison, and subsequently sees her as the lonely spider woman in Molina's second film" (91). Therefore while we may connect Braga's character as Leni to Molina, Braga's character as Marta complicates this association. It creates multiple interpretations of whose construction of the film it is – Valentin's or Molina's or both – and in this way it fails to undeniably connect Molina to Molina's stories.

The addition of Braga in the film also complicates Molina's association with the spider woman, which is undeniably the most important figure in any adaptation of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. The stage directions hint that Molina is the spider woman through implicit spider imagery such as "Molina spins his delicate web" and "Molina is rapt in his web," but it is Braga who physically appears as the Spider Woman, which distances these directions with Molina's performance, especially because we do not visually see Molina's association with the spider imagery (Schrader 60, 63). Unlike in the novel where Valentin names Molina to be the spider woman, there is no direct connection between Molina and the spider woman, which overlooks a prime opportunity to have Molina's actor or actress perform the role of the spider woman.

One interpretation that remains ambivalent at best is that Braga's body represents Molina's innermost desire to be a cisgender woman as the heroine of her stories and the lover of Valentin because Molina's heroines reflect what Molina wishes to be. For example, Leni "is the mirror image that Molina desires to be because she is constructed by her film text to entrap the viewer with her beauty and charm" (Santoro 136). There is textual basis for this because Molina imagines herself as the heroine in the woods story, a stream of consciousness sequence in which Molina envisions herself as the leading lady. In this sense, we may understand Braga to be

Molina's idealized self, who not only cares for Valentin when he washes ashore but also the woman Valentin may live happily with for all of time when Valentin hallucinates running away with the Leni-Marta-Spider Woman figure in a morphine-induced dream. In any case, unlike the novel where the spider woman represents nurturing and entrapment, the spider woman of the movie represents a freedom from suffering in which neither of the leading characters may be understood to be the spider woman. This is the most significant textual difference because the spider woman is represented not at the end of the film but just before Molina leaves. This makes the spider woman story less important in a way because it is not the final visual narrative the audience is left with. Valentin's happily ever after does not include Molina at all, a gross reduction of the significant emotional journey the characters undergo in any adaptation of the narrative.

Hurt's performance of Molina is important because the movie continues to influence contemporary productions of the play and musical. Lee Ji-na's 2011 production of the *Kiss of the Spider Woman* musical borrows heavily from Hurt's Molina in the costuming of this contemporary South Korean Molina. Jeong Seong-hwa, the actor playing Molina in this production, wears an identical kimono (which has a different meaning in the South Korean production than it has in the exotic appropriation in the film) and towel head wrap as Hurt's Molina when impersonating Leni. Similar is John Simpkins' 2009 production of the musical at New York University. With a blue kimono and a red scarf-cum-towel, the lead actor portraying Molina is fashioned similar to that of Hurt in the film. Davis' study in *Postmodern Texts and Emotional Audiences* also demonstrates that many encounters with *Kiss of the Spider Woman* begin with the film before consuming other media adaptations. Besides those that read the book in an academic setting, most of the participants Davis interviewed had watched the movie before

reading the book or watching other performance adaptations of the novel. Regardless of what medium is consumed first or whether or not a production intentional mirrors Babenco's film, Hurt's Molina has had a profound effect on subsequent Molinas in performance.

Ultimately while Babenco's film differs from my interpretation of Molina in the novel, it does not represent a disingenuous interpretation of Molina. Many barriers in the film minimize Molina's role, especially of addition of Sonia Braga, and while the film makes it clear Molina should be understood as a cisgender homosexual drag queen through performance. Hurt's reflection of his role resists understanding Molina as a woman, but this is not the interpretation that exists in the film. Zatlin explains how film adaptations might only retain "the skeletal story" but lose "the spirit of the original text," but this is not the case for Babenco's film (173, 173). Although Babenco chooses to portray Molina as a drag queen, this is one of the many interpretations of Molina one might infer. This interpretation is achieved through the supplemental aids to the screenplay such as costuming and visual exposition. Babenco's film is therefore not problematic for choosing to represent Molina as a drag queen, but it is problematic in presenting Molina *only* as a drag queen. Babenco's film offers no ambiguity, unlike the novel or play, and it is only in this way that Babenco loses the spirit of the novel. So many subsequent stage performances of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* have looked to Hurt's performance of Molina, so we must be aware of why and how Babenco's interpretation of Molina continues to influence future performances of the novel's performance adaptations.

"I'm always the heroine": Existing and Future Performances

After scrutinizing both textual source and performance adaptation, we can better understand the translation of gender from interpretation to performance. Textual interpretation

allows for greater freedom and more ambiguity, while a production must make many decisions that alter the text according to the visual reception of the film's rhetoric. Directorial intention in a movie determines meaning rather than authorial intention, which offers meaning. When multiple elements of the movie – like artistic performance liberties, casting choices, or added scene exposition – clash, it reduces the spiritual meaning of a text. Future productions of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* might learn from Babenco's production to incorporate more inclusive performance semiotics.

One distinction we may make between text and adaptation is that while a text may be ambiguous and allow for multiple interpretations, a visual adaptation limits textual ambiguities. This is most evident in Molina's gender expression. While the text is capable of presenting Molina as an effeminate homosexual stereotype, a transgender woman, or an androgynous figure, a cinematic text must make a decision on how to present Molina. In the case of Babenco's text, the decision to make Molina into a drag queen is obvious. Unfortunately Babenco's film does not allow for alternative interpretations of Molina's feminine gender expression. A future production of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* might attempt to offer a more ambiguous performance of Molina rather than choosing a single interpretation of Molina's gender.

Another important distinction between interpretation and performance is that authorial and directorial intentions are not alike. Within the written text, the only influence a reader has is their own personal bias – and perhaps other critics, if they have read criticism on the novel beforehand. It simultaneously allows for contextual and non-contextual readings. However a performance is complicated chiefly by commercial gain. In Babenco's film, the cinematic production team was concerned with making a Brazilian movie, not in making a radical statement about gender. While Molina's gender does not have to be the primary focus in order to

make a statement about it, Babenco's film exhibits bad communication between the script's understanding of Molina as a cisgender man and Hurt's attempted performance of Molina as a transgender woman. Additional film differences, such as the addition of Sonia Braga, detract from making a statement about Molina's gender because many of the subversive meanings are lost on Braga's characters. Better cohesion among individual elements and greater attention in meaningful casting and script changes might allow for a more successful production overall.

Future adaptations of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* might be able to incorporate a transgender interpretation of Molina with minimal considerations. The first, obviously, is casting a transgender woman in the role of Molina. In the case where a cisgender person is cast as Molina with the intention of performing Molina as a transgender character, coaching from a transgender performer is always ideal, if not necessary. This has proved successful in previous performances of transgender roles performed by cisgender actors such as Calpernia Addams' and Andrea James' coaching of Felicity Huffman for her role in *Transamerica*. What may be more effective than using a cisgender woman in the roles that represent Molina is to have Molina perform in these movies. Puig's stage adaptation of his novel hints that Molina should perform the roles of the stories because the lack of any other characters besides Valentin and Molina means Molina must perform the role of Irina in the Panther Woman story as a spectacle for the audience and Valentin. Again, the novel provides evidence of Molina envisioning herself as playing a role in the film, so allowing Molina to enact these roles allows for a more succinct relationship between Molina and the characters rather than Molina's relationship between the characters in the plots and a body acting as a vessel for those characters.

Other small considerations should be that of costuming and setting. Usually an actor completes some kind of character study in which an actor decides small nuances to the character

such as what kind of belongings the character cherishes and such. This may change depending on a performer's acting background, but it is a simple exercise for any consideration of gender. In the case of Molina, even within a highly restricted prison, it is possible to create colored lip balms or dyes out of some of the foods Molina requests (in order to make makeup) or to conceivably reward Molina with more feminine garments for Molina's upstanding prison behavior (mentioned in the novel). Including visual exposition of Molina's desperation to maintain feminine appearances in a men's prison might greatly enhance a production rather than limiting Molina's feminine performances to recollections of the movies, which creates the interpretation of Molina as a drag queen like in Babenco's film.

While transgender narratives and visibility have been gaining mainstream attention in the past decade in North America, the fact still remains that few representations of transgender people exist, especially in academic spheres. In interpreting Molina as a transgender character and writing about the character in a way that is respectful to the transgender community, the academic community welcomes *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a possible candidate for a body of literature that can support a transgender canon. Although criticism arguing for Molina's inclusion as a transgender character exists, the representation of that interpretation has yet to exist in performance. Now understanding the ways in which film depicts interpretation allows future performers to create more thoughtful and dynamic productions – not only of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, but hopefully a growing number of transgender-inclusive literature and drama.

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