

# Translating Homosexuality: Manuel Puig's, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*

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## **Abstract**

Spanish is a very gendered language since each word has gendered pronouns built into the verb tense. Looking at the translation of a text from Spanish to English becomes interesting because the English language is not gendered, rather it is very gender neutral. Therefore, when translating from Spanish to English, it is debatable whether there is a gain or a loss in the translation. This paper looks at Manuel Puig's 1976 novel, *El beso de la mujer araña* (Kiss of the Spider Woman) two English translations by Thomas Colchie and Alan Baker and compares each texts treatment on gender. In addition to analyzing Baker and Colchie's translations, a third translation is created and compared to the two, analyzing how gender can be implied even when pronouns are not being used. This paper will analyze how masculinity and femininity are still present in translations, even when gendered pronouns are not used. Regardless of whether the language is gendered or not, the translations still hold a sense of gender in all versions of the text.

**Keywords:** Manuel Puig, Gender in Translation, Homosexuality, Transgender

Manuel Puig's 1976 novel, *El beso de la mujer araña* (Kiss of the Spider Woman) was written during a time of military repression in Argentina (Wynia 1216). Puig's novel explores sexuality through the relationship between the two main characters, a man, Valentin, and a transgender woman, Molina, in a time of political warfare. The novel is originally written in Spanish and is set in the cell of an all-male prison in Argentina, shared by Valentin and Molina. Though the prison is all-male, Molina identifies herself as a transgender woman and Puig makes this very clear in the novel. Valentin is obviously labelled as a political

prisoner. However, Molina is in prison for “corrupting” a minor and it is never made clear what her conviction was. Puig’s novel is originally written in Spanish, which is a very gendered language since each word is predetermined to be masculine or feminine, and these affect the usage of verb tenses. The gendered language allows Spanish users to be especially specific when discussing topics that are gendered themselves, such as homosexuality. This is particularly useful for Puig since his novel, “shows how traditionally defined sex roles are personally limiting and self-destructive” (Wright 315). However, how does a topic that began in a gendered language evolve when translated to a language that doesn’t focus on gender as much? Puig’s novel, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, can be analyzed and translated within the theme of ‘Lost and Found in Translation’ because gender is a reoccurring theme in the novel which is emphasized by the language in which the novel is written in a way that not all languages are designed to do. This text, in its translations done by Thomas Colchie and Alan Baker, gains in translation due to the ability to free the characters from gendered pronouns and allows the reader to do as they please with the gender or the characters based on the dialogue. Through translation, the text reinforces the idea of traditionally defined gender roles because though English is not as gender focused, the dynamic is still present. When the text is translated to English, the language no longer places constraints on the character since English has a larger variety of pronouns, however, the gender binary is still made clear. This paper will compare two translations of the original novel; one translation is the novel translated into English as a novel, and the second translation is the novel translated into English as a play. I will also provide a translation done by myself and compare it to the other two translations of the original. The scene that will be focused on in all three cases is the scene where Valentin and Molina get mentally and physically intimate. Though the translations compared above are of different genres, I’ve chosen to follow the original form of the novel for my own translation, staying closer to the length of Colchie’s translation, but using more gender fluid language like Baker’s translation. Though Puig’s novel explores sexuality, translating the novel into English gives the text the potential to explore gender more effectively due to gender not being framed by pronouns and verb tenses, but in dialogue itself.

Oana-Helena Andone's article, *Gender Issues in Translation*, provides a framework for understanding how gender manifests in text and how translation is no longer only seen as a bridge between cultures but also a creative cultural activity (136). In her article, she discusses how masculine identity is still the norm when the two sexes are compared, and how women complement the male characters (136). This dynamic of complementing is seen in Puig's novel. When looking at Puig's original version of the novel, gender is built into the framework of the narrative. Molina is the character who is always overpowered by Valentin, who is perceived as the masculine. In Thomas Colchie's translation of the novel, the difference between masculinity and femininity is still present in the text, however, it is not limited to one character, based on their sex. When leaving the gendered language of Spanish, the text can be more ambiguous in the way femininity and masculinity is shown. In Colchie's translations, the use of language makes it easy to pick out who is the masculine character and who is portrayed as the feminine. Though Colchie does not write in a script format, the use of the word 'buddy' gives away the masculinity held by the character because its usual masculine usage. Also, Molina says, "don't touch me", which suggests that Valentin is making moves before Molina has given any consent.

<p>-Let's just... stop talking          - Come on...don't be that way...          Molina          - No... don't touch me          - Can't a buddy pat your back?          (Colchie 216)</p>	<p>Molina: Let's... skip it          Valentin: Come on, don't be like that...          Molina: I'm asking you... please don't touch me          Valentin: Can't a friend pat you on the back? (Baker 60)</p>
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Now if we look at the same passage from Allan Baker's translation, this version of the play evenly distributes the femininity by equally distributing the power dynamic between the characters. Baker's version equally distributes the power dynamic by allowing both characters to hold equal weight in conversation. As Andone mentions, one is not complementing the other, like in Colchie's

version where Valentin has the more aggressive tone. Baker's version is keeping the tone neutral for both characters, since both are equally holding the power. In Baker's version, by saying "please" don't touch me, Molina is being less demanding and defensive and by saying "friend," Valentin's masculinity is kept neutral. This way both characters are equally in control, complicating the intention of the original Spanish version. Words such as 'buddy' and 'friend' hold different connotation when being used in a translation and imply different things. Andone outlines this when she mentions, "a society's attitudes are revealed in its vocabulary and speaking practices" (140) and continues to discuss how vocabulary reveals the attitude towards women (140). In Colchie's translation, it is obvious who is in control. By Molina demanding that Valentin doesn't touch her, she is reacting to his dominance. In Baker's version, the conversation appears tamer, alluding that neither are in control and therefore there's no tension between genders, or less of it. Baker is able to keep the neutrality between gender and capture the complexity of translating someone who is transgender. However, the nature of the novel does not allow for gender to be neutralized so easily. By giving the dialogue neutral weight, he is allowing the reader to not assign power to one character over the other, but to focus more on the story at play.

In "Gender Metaphorics in Translation," by Lori Chamberlaine, looks at the Oedipal model to analyse texts. In the paternalistic model, "the text becomes the object of desire, that which has been completely defined by the paternal figure" (96). This is visible in both translations of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, as Valentin can be seen as the powerful male in the paternalistic model, for example when he tells Molina, "you need me and I can be of some use to you" (Baker 60), putting Valentin in the superior position, both as the male figure in the equation and as the lover, powerful male figure looking to take care of the inferior. Valentin is defending the power dynamic between himself and Molina by trying to make it self-evident that Molina needs him. In both translations this dynamic, where Valentin is taking care of Molina, again putting Molina in the inferior feminine position.

The 'Style in Translation' section of *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide*, by Dr. Clifford E. Landers helps pry apart the differences in the two versions of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Landers discusses how, "individual translators do have

styles, which are impossible for them to avoid for the SL author” (90). This is valuable in the comparison of the two versions of the novel, as the translators’ different styles of translation influence the visibility of gender. In Colchie’s version, the gender dynamic is more obvious as Colchie assigns Valentin a more aggressive tone than he does Molina, whereas Baker is more neutral because there doesn’t seem to be an obvious patriarchal male figure. For example, the translators differ on how they translate: “Enough is enough. God... you... you make me nervous with your crying” (Colchie 215) compared to, “How many times have I seen you cry? Come on, you annoy me with your snivelling” (Baker 59). Colchie’s version implies that Valentin does not cry because by saying “you make me nervous”, he’s suggesting he doesn’t know how to act around someone who cries—alluding to the common stereotype that men don’t cry therefore they don’t know how to deal with emotion. Baker’s version uses “you annoy me”, which does not carry these implications about crying. Getting nervous implies that crying is foreign and he doesn’t know what to do in reaction, and getting annoyed implies he’s exposed and therefore familiar with the emotion. Both translations have a style and Baker’s style is more open to not stereotyping and assigning genders where they are not needed whereas, Colchie’s version is staying truer to the original Spanish version and assigning feminine traits to Molina and making Valentin a more masculine figure.

After comparing the translations done by Colchie and Baker, I have translated the same portion of the text. I chose to translate this portion of the text because it is a portion that does not have any predetermined gender connotations within it, however as seen above, gender has been brought into it through dialogue and translation (in Colchie’s version) but has also liberated the characters from having to perform a specific gender (in Baker’s version). Though the translations compared above are of different genres, I’ve chosen to keep the original form of the novel, staying closer to the length of Colchie’s translation, however, more gender fluid like Baker’s translation. The reason I have chosen to keep the novel format is because I find that it allows for the depth in the original novel to be carried forward without having to be concise.

In framing the approach in this new translation, André Lefevere’s text, *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context*,

was the tool used as a reference for the approach I used. Lefevere mentions in his article, how translators either produce translations which are dictated by the shape of the course text or they complete translations that stay true to the ideology of the text (10). Though my translation will be sticking to the style of the source text, the translation itself will focus more on being faithful to the ideology, since the complexity of the original and the target will not be the same. The genre of the text will remain the same as the original text, in the form of a novel. Another aspect of the new translation that changes is the grammar. Lefevere mentions that: “translators should try to match the grammatical error in the source language with a grammatical error in the target language if they consider the error of sufficient importance within the framework of the overall composition of the source text” (35). The grammar in the new translation is different because it does not use as many ellipses as the original text does. The original text uses ellipses to portray dialogue, however the new translation follows more of a narrative style than a dialogue style, keeping the text the same but changing the way it is read.

The goal of the new translation is to stay with the original novel style of writing but to be more fluid with gender, allowing the translation to gain within this ambiguity and giving the reader the opportunity to experience the text without such solid gender constraints. The purpose of the new translation is to allow for the text to better portray the chemistry in the scene between Valentin and Molina without making obvious their sexuality. By keeping the gender dynamic neutral and by doing this, the scene gains by allowing for the scene to play itself out rather than the gender of the characters overpowering the action taking place. The gender dynamic is still present however, it is not through the language but through action and dialogue. The new translation of *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*, pages 149- 151:

- Then you have no choice but to deal with it
- Let's just leave it
- C'mon Molina, don't be like that
- No...please...please don't touch me
- Can't a friend caress you?
- It makes me feel worse than I already do

- Why? Come... I think it's time we trust one another. I'm being serious
- Molina, I want to help you. Please, tell me what's wrong
- I just want to die. It's all I want
- Don't say that. Think about the sadness this would cause to your mother, your friends... think about me.
- It wouldn't matter to you Valentin
- Why wouldn't it matter to me?
- I'm exhausted Valentin. I'm tired of all the suffering. You don't know the magnitude of pain I have inside of me
- Where are you hurting? Pain in your chest, a lump in your throat. Why does sadness always felt in the chest?
- It's true
- And now... You've made me stop crying. Now I can't even cry anymore. And it's making the lump in my throat worse. It's as if the pressure is building inside and it's horrible.
- You're right Molina, that is where all the sadness is felt
- Is it really strong? The squeezing of the lump in your throat?
- Does it hurt here?
- Yes
- Is it okay if I caress it?
- Yeah
- Here?
- Yes
- Does that make you feel better?
- Yes, that feels better. I feel better.
- Really?
- Yeah, it's a nice break
- Why a break, Valentin?
- Well... I'm not sure
- Why?
- It must be because I'm focusing on something other than myself
- You make me feel good

- It must be because I think you need me and I may be able to do something for you
- Valentin... you're always looking for explanations... you're crazy
- I don't like when things just happen... I want to know when they're about to happen
- Valentin... May I touch you?
- Yes... I want to feel... this mole, the one that's above your eyebrow
- And can I touch you here?
- And Here?
- It doesn't disgust you when I caress you?
- No
- You're too nice to me
- I'm being honest, you're very nice to me
- No, you're kind to me
- Valentin... If you want, you can do as you please with me... I want you to do as you please with me
- If I don't disgust you that is
- Don't say such things, please. It's almost better to not say anything
- I've run my back up against the wall
- I'm unable to see anything... in this darkness
- Slowly
- No... That's hurting me too much
- Wait, no, let me lift my legs... it's better if I do
- Gentle, please Valentin
- Yes
- Thank you... Thank you
- No, I want to Thank you
- I have you here before me and I can't even see you, in the darkness. Ahhh, It's still painful
- I'm starting to enjoy it now Valentin, there's no longer pain
- You feel better?
- Yes
- What about you Valentin? How do you feel?



- I don't know... don't ask me questions about my feelings because I'm not sure how I feel
- Oh, how sweet
- Please, no more talking for a while, Molina
- I don't know how I feel... these feelings are unfamiliar
- Right now, I touched my eyebrow looking for the mole
- What mole? I'm the one who has the mole, not you
- Yes, I'm aware but I want to feel the mole that I don't have
- It looks so beautiful on you, it's a shame I can't see you

The goal of the new translation is to keep the tension between the two characters the same, not allowing either to be predominant in controlling the situation through language. Andone's article suggests that in literary works, the male characters are often the leads and the female characters play the supporting role, which is why the goal of this new translation is to keep the tension even between both character, not allowing one more weight than the other. It is important to keep in mind that the character of Valentin does not hide his new exposure to the exploration of sexuality, it is made very clear that he has never been with anyone of the same sex. However, the goal of the translation is to not allow the masculine and superior and the feminine and inferior, knowing that Valentin is heterosexual. By changing the way, the characters interact, and letting there be equal demand of desire on the part of both characters. An example of how this is done in the new translation is as follows:

- You're too nice to me
- I'm being honest, you're very nice to me
- Oh no, you're too kind to me
- Valentin... If you want, you can do as you please with me... I want you to do as you want with me
- If I don't disgust you that is
- Don't say such things, please. It's almost better to not say anything

By translating Valentin's lines as "Oh no, you're too kind to me," is allowing Valentin can shift the embedded power dynamic back towards Molina, keeping the playing field equal. Whereas, in the original text, Valentin consistently takes control of each scene, showing gender superiority. Also, by have Molina say, "Valentin... If you want, you can do as you please with me... I want you to do as you want with me", by first asking and then later in the sentence demanding, Molina is taking back the power she was starting to give away. By translating this text from Spanish to English, the text is able to gain the neutrality that comes along with the language.

By comparing the two translations of Manuel Puig's novel, *El beso de la mujer araña*, it can be seen how the translations bring different power dynamics to the characters. The original text must follow gender dynamics since the source language is gendered, however the translators had the choice of keeping the gender norms or keeping them out of the language. By comparing how Colchie kept true to the original dynamics and how Baker created a more neutral translation, my translation is trying to create a middle ground between the other two. By staying true to the genre of the original text but staying neutral towards gender, the new translation's aim is to gain gender neutrality in the translated passage, allowing the character to explore their sexuality without the stereotypes that come along with gender. The original version of the novel, in Spanish is using the stereotypes of gender to tell a story and this works well in Spanish because the language supports the dynamic Puig is trying to convey. However, when the text is translated to English, in all three versions, this gender dynamic continues to stay as Puig has intended it to. The text does not gain or lose in translation, it simply carries the same issues of gender stereotypes Puig intended for his novel to carry.

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