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Unraveling the Web: Power in Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*

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El beso de la mujer araña (1976) is the fourth novel of Argentine author Manuel Puig. The plot of the novel is deceptively simple: two men share a prison cell, passing the time with conversation and eventually becoming friends. To do this, the two characters must overcome their own personal and ideological differences, as at first, they seem to have nothing in common. Luis Alberto Molina, a homosexual, is emotional, romantic, and apolitical, serving the first of an eight-year sentence for corruption of minors. Valentín Arregui Paz is a Marxist political activist, a macho heterosexual revolutionary without feelings who devotes his life to the cause, already having sacrificed two years of detention for "promoting disturbances." However, their close physical confinement will force the creation of a dialogue, and, eventually, an emotional relationship between the two men. Through Molina's own behavior as well as his cinematic narrations, Puig examines gender roles and sexuality. He uses sources of popular culture such as movies and songs, to further highlight societal stereotypes and emphasize the extent to which they are ingrained in our Western cultural norms. Valentín's situation raises questions about the nature of political power and its potential for arbitrary abuse. While the themes of politics, gender, and sexuality raised in *El beso de la mujer araña* are disparate and may seem unrelated, they do have one common denominator: power. The purpose of my study is to examine such power relations throughout the novel.

To do so, I believe it is useful to consider some ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who has written extensively about the concept of power and the relationships that it produces. While, historically, power has been considered a force used to repress and oppress the masses, for Foucault, "[i]t needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (*Power/Knowledge* 119). Power is not limited to what this French thinker terms "juridico-discursive" representation (*History* 82), that is, to only a systemic or governmental level, but instead it "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge,

produces discourse" (*Power/Knowledge* 119). Relationships of power are plural, constantly modifying themselves and encountering varying points of resistance. Keeping these concepts in mind, *El beso de la mujer araña* is a novel with rich possibilities for thematic analysis within the context of power.

Before addressing the relationship between Molina and Valentín within their cell, it is important to examine the most traditional power relation that exists in the novel: the one established between the penal system and the prisoners. The system is represented in the text by the prison's Director, with whom Molina has direct contact as he has consented to be an informant. At first glance, it seems that the Director controls this situation as he holds Molina's freedom in his hands. More precisely, he represents those with power. The Director himself asserts that he is nothing more than a representative when he reminds Molina that ". . . a mí me están presionando mucho. . . . De donde me presionan es de Presidencia" (201).

However, the situation is more complex than the mere exercise of systemic power would indicate because Molina employs his own power strategy within the relationship. Although it is true that the resources available to Molina with which to exercise power over the Director are limited, he nonetheless has the ability and the opportunity to give the Director something that he has been unable to obtain with his own methods of interrogation—information about Valentín's activities. The Director tells Molina that ". . . esperamos que usted sepa hacer las cosas" (153), and, in reality, for at least awhile, Molina does manage the situation. He convinces the Director to stop poisoning Valentín. In addition, thanks to Molina's manipulation, it is actually the Director who suggests that the prisoner use his mother's supposed visits to the prison as a pretext for being absent from the cell. Thus Molina manages to receive food from the outside and to share it with Valentín. Through this ruse Molina's own existence in the cell is improved and he is able to provide something for Valentín. Obtaining the food is symbolic, then, of how Molina's manipulation of power allows him to win something from the system and simultaneously gain power in the cell.

Foucault writes, ". . . power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is directly proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (*History* 86). This is certainly true of Molina's power in his dual situation. His position is ambiguous and depends upon his own ability to mask both his intentions and his information from the Director and from Valentín. He has the power to frustrate the plans of the Director and his superiors, albeit temporarily. If he receives information from Valentín, he can choose whether or not to pass it on. This capacity to decide whether he wants to cooperate with the au-

thorities puts Molina in a privileged position as he is the only one who can affect the outcome of this dilemma. At the same time, he has power *vis à vis* the Director due to the possibility of obtaining information that the prisoner represents. Eventually, the Director will be willing to free Molina because he erroneously believes that the inmate has obtained information and will contact Valentín's people. It is interesting to note that when the Director decides to free Molina, the prisoner does not really know anything. He has successfully hidden his objectives from both the Director and Valentín; by Foucault's definition, this is his most powerful moment. In fact, if Molina had been able to resist Valentín's pleas, he would have been able to beat the system. In other words, Molina dies not due to a lack of power, but rather, because of his affection for Valentín.

Although the prisoners and their cell are closely linked to the network of power in the prison, they are alone in the cell, and create, to a certain point, a relatively isolated world apart in which they can play their own power games. These power plays are structured around the production, content, and control of discourse. The conversations between Valentín and Molina are filled with shifts of power and demonstrate how "each is seduced and controlled by the other; each seems to be at once more and less powerful than his partner" (Kerr 192). According to Foucault, the production of discourse is essential to the employment of power. Citing *Power/Knowledge*, Mark Cousins and Athar Hussain write, ". . . Foucault makes the uncontroversial point that there is no exercise of power without an associated regime of discourses" (250). This idea is well reflected in the discourse of Molina and Valentín in which there is a constant struggle for control of the dialogue and the power that this control represents.

The novel begins with Molina's voice, telling Valentín the story of a film. This is the first of several similar narrations that account for a large portion of the text. Given the extent of his narration, one might assume that Molina controls the dialogue. Certainly, Molina does try to use his narration to gain power. However, from the beginning, Valentín interrupts him with questions and observations that have the purpose of criticizing or underlining contradictions in Molina's narration. With this technique, Valentín asserts himself, inserts his opinions, and fights for control of the dialogue, demonstrating how the speaker is, to some extent, more vulnerable than the listener for having exposed him/herself to criticism.

In this case, it is the listener rather than the speaker who imposes rules and restrictions on the discourse. Valentín decides the time of the narrations, saying that they are ". . . mejor[es] a la noche, durante el día no quiero pensar en esas macanas" (15). It is also Valentín who transforms Molina's monologue to a dialogue when he explains that ". . . me gustaría que fuéramos comentando un poco la cosa, a medida que vos

avanzás, así yo puedo descargar un poco con algo. Es justo, ¿no te parece?" (22). His control continues even when they change the subject and begin to talk about Valentín's life. Molina wants Valentín to continue talking, but Valentín clearly defines his rules declaring: "Hagamos una cosa: cuando yo sienta que te pueda contar algo te lo voy a contar con todo gusto. Pero no me lo pidas, yo sólo te voy a sacar el tema" (53).

Although Valentín tries to control the discourse, he is not completely successful, as he becomes dependent on Molina's narration to pass the time and to escape a little from the harsh reality of their circumstances. Because of this dependency, Molina is able to initiate a series of almost infantile games when he stops telling the story in the middle in order to ". . . sacarte el dulce en lo mejor, así te gusta más la película" (32). When Valentín leaves the story of his girlfriend the next day, Molina calls him "vengativo" (52), for doing the same thing. Another example of Molina's games deals with their lovers' names. Valentín does not tell Molina the name of his girlfriend because he does not want to compromise her; however, this too becomes a tool in their power play. When Valentín asks Molina the name of his beloved waiter, Molina tells him "[n]o, el nombre no, eso es para mí, no más" (66), so that Valentín will not be able to gain an advantage over him.

As already mentioned, the exertion of power is always met with some type of resistance. In fact, it cannot exist without it. Molina's ploy of withholding information is one type of resistance, the extension of which becomes yet another: silence. Puig describes in an interview with Ronald Christ the dialogue between the prisoners as one "where what isn't said is very important, where what's skipped expresses maybe more than the rest" (572). While, as we have seen, the characters struggle to establish the rules for what is said, there is another level of discourse in the novel represented by changed subjects, shortened sentences, and words like "uhm" and "no sé". Julia Cuervo Hewitt writes

El narrar se convierte en un juego irritante de no decir, de callar, o decir entre líneas, como hace Molina en lo que concierne a sus sentimientos hacia Valentín, y, también, a su función de espía en la celda. (52)

She goes on to suggest that this silence reflects the political situation of the moment—both outside of the prison and outside of the novel itself (54).

The Argentine government during this period certainly understood the value of silence and the power of discourse. Puig parodies governmental discourse in the bureaucratic language of the police reports and of the Di-

rector. While the threat of torture is clear, it is never named, but rather hidden behind such euphemisms as "técnicos," "métodos," and "contraofensiva" (154, 250, 249); its mention is completely omitted from the otherwise detailed official description of Valentín's incarceration (151-52). Thus, it is language, or rather its absence, which hides the truth, trying not to reveal its suppressed subtext. This method is also effective outside of the penal system: "Concealed torture and execution . . . have controlled the society outside the prison almost as much as they have controlled the society within the prison" (Conniff 232). How was the torture concealed? Through silence—censorship—and duplicitous governmental discourse.

Valentín and Molina's behavior reflect the effect of such a political climate on the individual.¹ Molina refers constantly to his fear of being tortured should he learn anything, gain any information. Valentín refuses to go to the infirmary for fear of developing a dependence on drugs that could be used to make him talk. It is clear that both men have been conditioned by their surroundings—both inside and outside of the prison—to be extremely careful of what they reveal and to whom. An atmosphere of such extreme distrust and fear of betrayal has profound consequences on the development of personal relationships. This is especially true these for two men who, as a homosexual and political activist, are marginalized, and thus accustomed to an even greater need for self-preservation.

It is presumably not coincidental that the novel's representation of the Marxist organization is in many ways analogous to that of the right-wing military government. The leftist group puts the same value on secrecy and protection of their activities. Molina is as wary of the Marxists as he is of the government. Although pretending not to want information is part of his plan to get information from Valentín, Molina's insistence that "[e]sos son asuntos jodidos y yo no quiero saber nada de tus cuestiones políticas, secretas y qué sé yo" (135-36), is not completely removed from the truth. Valentín dedicates his life to not betraying the cause. In Valentín's description of Marxism, his language echoes that of the governmental discourse: ". . . todo me lo aguanto. . . . porque hay una planificación. Está lo importante, que es la revolución social, y lo secundario, que son los placeres de los sentidos" (33). Valentín is completely indoctrinated; he has voluntarily "suspended" his rights as an individual, as a human being, to feelings and pleasure, and has denied his bourgeois background so that his loyalty will not be questioned. In the end, it is the Marxists who kill Molina; thus they choose to sacrifice his life for their cause. The juxtaposition of his murder, simultaneous to Valentín's torture by the "legitimate" government clearly demonstrates that the blind abuse of power is not limited to any particular political ideology.²

The Marxists kill Molina to prevent him from revealing any information

if caught by the police, further highlighting both the need to protect information and the value of silence. Knowledge is power, whether for the prison officials or for the prisoners. Whoever controls the flow of information, controls the (un)informed. The poisoning of the food clearly illustrates this link between knowledge and increased power. Molina knows of the Director's plan to debilitate Valentín with poisoned food. When Molina gets sick and Valentín will not change his routine to entertain him, Molina tells him that "[a]lgún día que vos estés mal yo te voy a hacer lo mismo" (108). To Valentín, this surely seems an empty threat, but in reality it reflects Molina's intentions. However, when Valentín finally does become ill, Molina takes care of him, increasing his power position through Valentín's dependency.

In *El beso de la mujer araña*, it is knowledge that motivates the two prisoners to enter into a power relationship. Obviously Molina, first because of his role as spy and later for his own motives, wants to learn about Valentín's life. His narrations and his desire to control the discourse stem from his desire to know Valentín. According to Foucault, "[f]ar from preventing knowledge, power produces it" (*Power/Knowledge* 59). This idea is reflected throughout the novel: whoever has the power to control the production and content of discourse has control over the knowledge that this discourse produces.³ Molina controls the film narrations, thus he is able to choose stories in order to provoke a particular discourse, such as the race car driver movie that seems to lead naturally to a discussion of family relationships.

During Valentín's illness and recuperation, the two prisoners "reproduce a familial relationship—that of a parent and child, mother and son—that has inscribed within it significant relations of power" (Kerr 202). Valentín loses control not only over the dialogue but also over his own bodily functions and Molina cares for him, washing and feeding him as though he were a baby. The image of Valentín ". . . en la frazada, como un matambre" (146) reflects perfectly the parallel with the maternal relationship. After the worst of his illness is over, Molina continues treating Valentín like a child. Valentín warns him that "no me gusta que me manejen la vida" (197), but Molina will not leave him alone. The scene culminates in an open attempt by Valentín to regain control of the situation; he becomes angry with Molina, yells at him, and throws the stove across the floor. Molina's reaction is an aggressive silence that demonstrates his own anger. Valentín's attempt to impose his control fails because he is forced by Molina's silence to open the dialogue that he had been trying to avoid. With his apology—" . . . Si me ponía nervioso que vos fueras . . . generoso, conmigo, . . . es porque no me quería ver obligado a ser igual yo con vos"

(205)—Valentín shows that he is conscious of the power dynamics that are at play between him and Molina.

In the first part of the novel, this dynamic is structured around the popular concept of a relationship between a man and a woman. Valentín is the dominating "masculine" and Molina is the dominated "feminine." In her article "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," Evelyn P. Stevens clarifies the societal definitions of these gender roles. On one hand, machismo is the "cult of virility" whose chief characteristics are "exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships" (90). Marianismo, on the other hand, is "the cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (91). While the above definition of marianismo may sound attractive, it actually contributes to the self-denial of Latin American women who maintain the moral high ground through submission to the demands of the men in their lives: father, brother, husband, son (95).

In *El beso de la mujer araña*, both characters are obviously products of these societal constructs; however for Puig, these images are not necessarily bound to physiological gender or sexual orientation. In Puig's novels, "[Lo "femenino"] es más estilo que sustancia, sazón o superficie que hacen prescindible al cuerpo o, más bien, lo constituyen" (Yudice 43). Molina, a homosexual, does not desire the stereotypical, dominated woman, rather he identifies with her, emulates her. Puig himself explains to Christ that Molina is

the type of homosexual who rejects all experimentation, all new trends. They've accepted the models of behavior from the '40s—you know: the subdued woman and the dashing male—and they have, of course, identified with the subdued though heroic woman, and they don't want to change that fantasy—or they can't. (572)

Valentín, more than Molina, struggles with his culture's stereotypical gender roles. He warns Molina that "al hombre ese exceso [de ser sensible] le puede estorbar" (35), indicating his acceptance at some level of the ideas of machismo. Yet he insists in the Marxist belief of equality and tries to convince Molina not to let himself be dominated or taken advantage of, as the marianista female is wont to do. Ultimately, Valentín's dreams betray his rhetoric; he, too, is the victim of social conditioning. He desires

una mujer europea, una mujer inteligente, una mujer hermosa,

una mujer educada, una mujer con conocimientos de política internacional . . . una mujer de gusto impecable, una mujer de vestir discreto y elegante, . . . una mujer que sabe ordenar el vino adecuado, . . . una mujer que sabe dar órdenes al personal de servicio . . . (128)

While the woman of whom Valentín dreams is not limited to traditional "feminine" characteristics, neither is she completely free of them.⁴ Molina as well as Valentín demonstrate the profound effect that the patriarchal power structure has over the individual. Regardless of sexual orientation, both men have accepted societal gender constructs.

The patriarchal power structure that Valentín and Molina, as examples of masculinity and femininity, represent mirrors the political situation. Male domination and authority—Valentín—is the military; it is machismo taken to the extreme: strength through force and repression. Molina never comments on the capricious and cruel political system that oppresses them. He never questions why Valentín continues to be "detained" after two years without due process or a trial. He has assumed the characteristics of the marianista female, similar to many in Argentina who ignored, denied, and avoided what was happening, who out of fear and passivity submitted to the domination. Who is to blame—he who has the power or she who submits to it? The novel's answer is both; either extreme produces the same results.

The techniques or styles that the two employ to gain the power obtained through discourse can also be studied along gender lines. Valentín, with his attacks on the verisimilitude of the films narrated demonstrates the logic and reason typically associated with masculinity. In addition, it is the macho Valentín who resorts to violence and to anger in order to reinforce his position. In contrast, Molina uses techniques that are more stereotypically feminine. He cries, pouts, and manipulates Valentín by making him feel guilty about his behavior. Foucault affirms the manipulative nature of sexual struggles:

Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies. (*History* 103)

The use of sexuality, or rather strategies normally associated with a particular sexual orientation or gender, to manipulate a cellmate and gain power is clearly something with which both men are familiar.

The movies, as voices of popular culture, further reinforce the themes of power, gender, and sexuality. Physically, all the heroines personify traditional ideas of femininity and beauty. These ideas are also reflected in their behavior. Leni submits to Werner's wishes and allows herself to be molded into the ideal woman of the Third Reich, whose mission "es ser hermosa y traer hijos al mundo" (89). The heroine of the Mexican movie prostitutes her body, sacrificing her career and her self-respect to support her lover, even going so far as to lie to him in an effort to protect his masculine pride. The movie *Cat People*, introduces the idea that Western culture perceives homosexuals as a danger, a threat. Irene, the panther woman with whom Molina identifies, represents a danger for the "normal" man; if she kisses him, she kills him. Accepting the parallel between this protagonist and Molina, one sees that normal men perceive themselves as endangered by the existence of homosexuals; it is because of this fear that patriarchal society represses them. Surely this is the attitude of Valentín in respect to Molina at the beginning of the novel; he is afraid that if he were to have some sort of relationship with a homosexual, he would destroy his own self-image as a macho guerrilla.

Even more important than a person's self-image, however, is the perception of the society that surrounds him or her. Molina's interior monologue recounting the film about the blind man further illustrates how society judges people and marginalizes them for being different. To the film's lovers, their disagreeable physical appearances are not important; neither the woman's lack of beauty nor the man's scars matter. They marry and are happy with each other until the man's parents, representative of outside society, arrive and remind the newlyweds of their faults, thereby causing them to feel uncomfortable with each other. The couple's happy relationship depends on their isolation from society in the same way that Molina and Valentín need to arrive at the point of feeling isolated from the structures and stereotypes of society in order to see and treat each other as human beings. Foucault writes, ". . . power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule" (*History* 83). Only by removing the discourse, be it that regarding physical beauty or accepted sexuality, can the characters break the law.⁵

Valentín expresses this idea, saying ". . . estamos los dos acá encerrados, y no hay ninguna lucha, ninguna batalla que ganarle a nadie. . . . En cierto modo estamos perfectamente libres de actuar como queremos el uno respecto al otro . . ." (205-06). What he says seems like a paradox when compared to his manipulative behavior regarding power: a paradox to Valentín, who acknowledges and takes part in the power games with Molina. However, his words fit perfectly with Foucault's theory in the

sense that ". . . there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free." In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty" (Bernauer 12). That is to say that, within their cell, the two men are free in regard to their relationship although repressed by other outside forces.

Puig himself has commented extensively on the idea of freedom from societal impositions. He believes in a sort of inherent bisexuality, suggesting that "[i]f people were really free, I think they wouldn't choose with the limits of one sex" (Christ 574). From this perspective then, the characters do not so much as invert personalities through the course of the book as they expand their own selves to encompass more than a narrow societal definition of self. Molina and Valentín become free to recognize both the "masculine" and "feminine" within their own personalities by learning from each other.

By the end of the novel, it is clear that in order to express himself the way he does, Valentín must have significantly changed his macho attitude from the beginning of the novel. Indeed, there are various indications of this change in the second part of the text. It is Valentín who asks Molina to tell him the film about the zombies; a film "del tipo de la mujer pantera" (163) that he had mocked in the first part. He also dictates a letter to Marta, the bourgeois woman whom he loves, opening himself up through this action to Molina and admitting to both of them his desire to love and be loved. The culmination of his transformation is the act of making love with Molina.

As mentioned, outside the novel, Puig repeatedly questions the value of being limited to one sex, one type of sexuality. He emphasizes in the Christ interview that "I wouldn't call it a 'homosexual affair.' In that cell there are only two men, but that's just on the surface. There are really two men, and two women" (571). The novel is not limited to exploring the characteristics of gender roles, but also to questioning the power structure that allows, even encourages, their imposition. The same is true of the political ideologies presented in the novel. Puig's purpose is not to present any one system as better than the other, but rather to show the danger of blind faith, the power of the organization over the individual. Molina and Valentín's relationship reflects Foucault's analytics of power; it is constantly changing and modifying itself as the two characters exchange power and resistance through the production of discourse and knowledge. However, the novel demonstrates the extent to which larger societal relations of power affect interpersonal relationships.

From this perspective, Molina can be seen as a victim of gender roles, accepting without question the role of the male and female as decided by Hollywood and the patriarchal system. The authoritarian government in-

Marxist political rhetoric. He has given up the freedom to think and feel for himself. Once confined to the cell, the two men liberate each other by sharing their opinions and experiences, thus presenting a more balanced picture of the other's situation. They search for knowledge and understanding of both self and others as human beings, devoid of the limiting social restrictions of gender or ideology. Both want to have a relationship and make a connection with the other person, even if briefly. Puig expresses this desire through Valentín in the last line of the novel ". . . este sueño es corto pero feliz" (287). Both are willing to sacrifice something that mattered greatly to them before they met in order to realize this dream; Molina sacrifices his life and Valentín his unimpeachable dedication to the Marxist cause. However, in order to accomplish it, they need to recognize that their own power strategies are patterned on the social power structure that surrounds them. Foucault writes, "[c]onfession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom" (*History* 60). Only when Valentín and Molina are finally free to break the stereotypes and see each other as equal human beings—despite the roles assigned to them by society—are they capable of realizing their true goal. Kerr describes the discourse of the prisoners as ". . . an effort to fill with fictional stories a space whose potentially fatal, and certainly repressive, reality they seek to either forget or control" (191). What Puig demonstrates is that the repressive space is much greater than the walls of a prison; its metaphorical bars of stereotypes and cultural prejudices permeate all of society.

● NOTES

1. There have been numerous books and articles written about the "dirty war" and its sociological effects. See *¿Y a mí, que me importa?* by Guillermo O'Donnell, for a study of the individual's actions and reactions during El Proceso. See *Represión y reconstrucción de una cultura: el caso argentino*, Ed. Saúl Sosnowski, for an essay compilation based on a conference of Argentine intellectuals from different fields which took place at the University of Maryland in 1984. The volume represents "una vasta gama de opiniones y experiencias en torno a la represión de la cultura argentina y las vías que se abrían para su reconstrucción" (7).

2. The Nazi film reinforces this theme, giving the reader an example of yet another political system and ideology that abused its power.

3. It is interesting to reconsider the lack of a third-person narrator in this novel from this perspective. The power of a narrator who is both omniscient and controls the discourse is an uncannily accurate reflection of the authoritarian government. As Puig confirmed in the Christ interview, "to be omniscient is to reproduce the repression" which is the very paradigm the novel is trying to subvert (576).

4. These dreams also undermine Valentin's political rhetoric. His fantasy woman is one who is used to and can manage the trappings of a bourgeois lifestyle such as a domestic staff.

5. The way in which Valentin discourages Molina from speaking while they have intercourse could be seen as an extension of this idea. By preventing the production of discourse, which represents the "law", he is also preventing the imposition of the societal rule prohibiting homosexual love.

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