Glamour and Drag: The Element of Performance in *Kiss of the Spider Woman and M. Butterfly*  

Adrienne Fair  
*Denison University*  

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate](http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate)  
*Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol1/iss1/3)*  

**Recommended Citation**  
Available at: [http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol1/iss1/3](http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol1/iss1/3)  

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.


In these two works, Manuel Puig and David Henry Hwang have written not only a text, but a work of performance, or a work to be performed. M. Butterfly is a play for the stage which contains in itself both a section of another stage production (Madame Butterfly) and the role-playing of the character Song Liling. Kiss of the Spider Woman is a novel written both in a movie/dialogue form and containing descriptions of movies as told through the mouth of Molina, who is in turn playing a role. Within these two theatrical and filmic texts, the two characters of Song and Molina are theatrically playing the roles of women. (Not to mention the characters of Gaillimard and Valentin who are playing the roles of men.) The idea of a “performance” is found throughout both of these works and is linked to several different ideas within the works. In focusing on the role-playing aspects of both of these stories, one can further examine how it is possible for a person to create him/herself-- much in the same way that authors Puig and Hwang have themselves created these stories.

The clearest example of playing a role is the character of Song Liling. He plays not only the role of a woman, but the role of someone who sacrifices herself to the desires and fantasies of the west. When Gaillimard first sees Song (during his performance as Madame Butterfly in drag) their verbal exchange reflects Song's feelings about the hollowness of the act he has just performed:

G: I've always seen it played by huge women in so much bad makeup.
S: Bad makeup is not unique to the West.
G: But, who can believe them?
S: And you believe me?
G: Absolutely. You were utterly convincing. It's the first time--
S: Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know. But I gather such an irony is lost on you (Hwang 16-17).

Song's creation of a feminine, Chinese, subservient character throughout M. Butterfly is partly made possible through the Chinese theatrical convention of having men play roles of women. Song and Gaillimard actually meet several times in a Chinese theater where Song performs (yet another play within the play). The subservience of Song as Butterfly reflects the western ideal of a willing eastern woman who, like Cio-Cio-San, wants and expects to be treated badly by her macho western husband--
even to the extreme that she would kill herself for him. Song adopts this character (in spite of his initial
distaste for the stereotyping involved in it) and enters the role so completely that he keeps his sex (more
specifically his penis) hidden and produces a child as if it were his own. He tries to convince his
communist comrades (and himself) that dressing as a woman is purely a facade, but he seems to waver in
this assertion:

Chin: ... every time I come here, you're wearing a dress. Is that because you're an actor? Or
what?
Song: It's a ... disguise, Miss Chin.
C: Actors, I think they're all weirdos. My mother tells me actors are like gamblers or prostitutes
or--
S: It helps me in my assignment.
C: ... You represent Chairman Mao in every position you take.
S: I'll try to imagine the Chairman taking my positions (Hwang 48).

Once again, we see Song's sense of irony towards the whole situation. He seems to be enjoying his role
and could even be seen as partly believing in the role. Towards the end of the play he admits some
degree of love for Gallimard, or at least a love for Gallimard's adoration of the Butterfly. The role that
Song plays has been created for him by the West and it is easily used to manipulate a Western man.
Through this role, a power play is created: Man over man, and East over West. Ultimately, a role reversal
is created, but we will address that later.

Since *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is written in dialogue form, we as readers do not have a set
visual image of how Molina dresses or gesticulates. Through his words, however, we are shown how
femininity is central to his character. In the movie version, William Hurt wears scarves, makeup, and so
on to suggest a form of drag, but the novel shows the more internal and verbal use of being in drag.
Molina even says that he actually wants to be a woman:

You're all alike, always coming to me with the same business always! ... 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 ... and my answer is this ... great! I agree! And since a woman's the best there
is ... I want to be one (Puig 19).

As the novel progresses, Valentin and Molina become closer friends and Valentin, at the end, allows
Molina to fill a woman's role for him in both an emotional and sexual way. The two prisoners come to
depend on and love each other and they have a sexual relationship. Interestingly, Valentin is unlike
Gallimard, who enjoys the submission of his Chinese lover. Valentin is uncomfortable with Molina's
wanting to be in a passive role and proposes a more equal relationship:

-- I mean that if you enjoy being a woman ... you shouldn't feel any the less because of it. . . . you don't have to make up for it with anything, with favors, or excuses. You don't have to . . . submit.
-- But if a man is . . . my husband, he 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.
-- No, the man of the house and the woman have to be equal with one another. If not, their relation becomes a form of exploitation.
-- But then there's no kick to it (Puig 243-44).

Molina enjoys not only playing a woman's role, but playing a submissive and stereotypical woman's
role—a role that most women would not want to be placed in. This stereotype, in Molina's case, seems to
come from a societal aesthetic source: most notably from movies. He recounts six films to Valentin
during the course of the novel, all of which contain somewhat one-dimensional, but beautiful, heroines.
Molina has created a vision of himself as the heroine of a movie—a mental drag performance. In
response to Valentin's question: "Who do you identify with? Irena or the other one?" he says, "With
Irena, who do you think? She's the heroine, dummy. Always with the heroine" (Puig 25). To return to
the term "performance," the retelling of the six films could be seen as Molina playing the roles of the six
leading ladies while also playing out the role of a consoling and mothering woman to Valentin (and of
course, later, the role of a lover to Valentin).

The women's roles that Song and Molina adopt can be traced to a filmic history. Song's
Butterfly is a mix between both the turn-of-the-century Puccini opera and a 1930's pre-revolution China:

S: How I wish there were even a tiny cafe to sit in. With cappuccinos,
and men in tuxedos and bad expatriate jazz.
G: If my history serves me correctly, you weren't even allowed into
the clubs in Shanghai before the Revolution.
S: Your history serves you poorly . . . a woman, especially a delicate Oriental woman-- we
always go where we please (Hwang 21-22).

This seems to suggest not only a theatrical history of the Butterfly role, but also a screen-oriented history
of an oriental heroine. *Shanghai Express* (Von Sternberg, 1932) is perhaps the ideal of a pre-revolution
China. Glamorous westerners use China as their playground where they have their own theaters, bars,
trains, and so forth. Song seems to take elements for his character from Anna May Wong, whose thin
and "exotic" look was popular in the 30's and 40's. There are also many other Hollywood films that use
an East-West love relationship more directly. Sidney Olcott, for example, directed a film version of
Madame Butterfly with Mary Pickford (as a Japanese woman) and Marshall Neilan. There was a rush of American male/Asian female movies in the 1950's (linked to America's involvement in Korea?). Two notable examples are Sayonara (Joshua Logan, 1957) with Marlon Brando and Mikko Taka and China Gate (Samuel Fuller, 1957) with Angie Dickinson (also a white woman in Asian drag) and Johnny Brock. Although Song doesn’t refer to being influenced by these movies, the Hollywood ideal of Asian women would definitely be linked to the audience’s perception of Song. Hwang, as well, seems to be suggesting a whole history of misconceptions about Asian women that all trace back to the Madame Butterfly stereotype. The audience's preconceived notions are particularly important to M. Butterfly because of the play's focus. As noted by Rosalind Morris, Gallimard speaks to the audience as if they were fellow males capable of sympathizing with his natural, "manly" desires:

Don't we who are not handsome, nor brave, nor powerful yet somehow believe, like Pinkerton, that we deserve a Butterfly. She arrives with all her possessions in the folds of her sleeves, lays them all out, for her man to do with as he pleases. Even her life itself—she bows her head (Hwang 10).

Butterfly's role is defined not only by Song, but also by Gallimard, Western history, and the audience of the play itself.

The influence of film on Molina is much more obvious. As he says, he identifies with "the heroine, dummy. Always with the heroine." Through the retelling of the six films, Molina puts himself in the role of the different women, and seems to be bending the characters around his own desires. He changes the women a little to suit his tastes, adds references to domineering mothers, and puts meticulous attention into the clothing and appearance of the women as if he were mentally dressing himself. He admits his manipulation of the stories in the first few pages of the book:

No, I'm not inventing, I swear, but some things, to round them out for you, so you can see them the way I'm seeing them... well, to some extent I have to embroider a little. Like with the house, for example (Puig 18).

One could even say he was creating a mental drag performance. He plays the fiancée of a Caribbean zombie-creating man, a woman who is obsessed with panthers and sexually complexed, the girlfriend of a romantic race car driver turned rebel, and so on. The role of Leni in the Nazi propaganda film is especially true to life. Leni Riefenstahl, screen actress turned director, actually directed films for Hitler. Further examples or inspirations for Molina's heroines could be found in just about any silver screen Hollywood film. Such famous women as Elizabeth Taylor, Lauren Bacall, Ginger Rogers, Veronica Lake, or Kim Novak could all be used in a comparison for both their manicured appearances, their melodramatic acting styles, and their pairing with macho leading men similar to the heroes of Molina's stories. To further tie in the idea of being in drag, one could cite the director Ed Wood who starred in his own movie Glen or Glenda (1950's) wearing both masculine and feminine attire. Lastly there is an interesting gender play around the showgirl character of Lola Lola in Von Sternberg's The Blue Angel (1929). In it, Marlene Dietrich, Lola, is a glitzy ideal of feminine sexuality. Visconti's film, The Damned (1960's), which treats the fall of a Nazi family, contains a reproduction of Lola's stage performance with a homosexual male character in drag as Marlene Dietrich. This example is somewhat extraneous, but does point towards a definite connection between a glamorous Hollywood aesthetic and the styles that a man adopts when in drag as a woman. The word "glamour" which is used frequently by today's drag queens is inherent both to the manicured Hollywood heroine and to the manicured transvestite performer.

The quality of glamour, or the art of being glamorous, could be linked to external and manipulatable qualities. Through makeup, clothing, mannerisms, posture, hairstyles, a person can come to seem somehow super-human and illuminated. Hollywood shows us images of perfectly adorned and poised women which become the physical ideals of the public as a whole. Fashion magazines give insights on how to become this ideal, on how to become glamorous. Joseph R. Urgo did a study on advertising in (ironically) Glamour magazine in which he stresses that the body becomes a work of art. Women are invited to become artists of their face, hair, clothing, what have you.

The woman is both the work of art and artist, both product and creator—subject and object. The viewer of the ad is shown what and shown how; she is shown what to look like and how to look well (Urgo 123).

Not to mention makeovers, plastic surgery and sex changes, modern culture presents the body as something that is not definite, not to be accepted. We are compelled to constantly change ourselves. Glamour is a quality that is not connected to an internal or naturally acquired beauty, but to the layers of paint that we put onto our canvasses, our bodies. Glamour is a realizable goal for Song and Molina because it requires not a pre-given beauty or femininity, but a rehearsed and manipulatable one. Song adopts feminine clothes, gestures, makeup; Molina plays the roles of heroines in movies, adopts the speaking style of a woman (especially in his use of "she" and "girl like me"), and in the movie version of Kiss of the Spider Woman wears feminine accessories and makeup. He shows an acute attention to the meanings associated with clothing and appearance—reflecting to some degree the idea that a person can
be readable (body as text):

... wearing the hair up is—pay attention—important, because women only wear it up, it so happens, or they used to back then, when they wanted to really give the impression it was an important occasion, an important date. Because the upsweep, which bared the nape of the neck because they pushed all the hair up on top of the head, it gave a woman's face a certain nobility (Puig 164).

In addition to makeup and visual clues, words are another way of stressing glamour, another form of paint on the body-canvas. One could be said to have glamorous speech patterns: Molina uses feminine pronouns when referring to himself and uses a stereotypically feminine (or frilly) style of description. Song as well must put his language in drag in playing the role of Butterfly, using "we" when referring to women, and speaking of his history as a history of traditional Chinese woman's innocence and shame.

In continuation of the idea of glamour being defined by external visual and linguistic clues, the whole of gender could be defined by these externals (an idea common to post-modernists, deconstructionalists, social determinists, and others). Judith Butler provides a clear explanation of this theory in her article on "Imitation and Gender Insubordination": "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself" (Butler 21). Under this theory, the more masculine characters of these two texts are also involved in a drag performance, and are concerned with socially determined ideals for what a "man" is. In the same way that Molina explained the meaning associated with a woman wearing her hair piled on top of her head, one could explain the meaning associated with a diplomat's suit, a military colonel's medals, a prison guard's gun, or a rebel's defiant stare. All the visual clues are readable.

In examining Gallimard's character, one finds many reflections of male hierarchy and governmental power. He is dressed in a European style, contrasting with his Chinese environment, he is shown stamping bureaucratic documents, and can be seen hobnobbing with diplomatic party guests, drinking and smoking. When he first goes to the theater where Song performs as a woman, Song immediately picks him out of the crowd because of his macho European drag:

S: Yes. You. White man. I'm looking straight at you.
G: Me?
S: You see any other white men? It was too easy to spot you. How often does a man in my audience come in a tie? (Hwang 20).

The tie and the white skin are immediate visual readable bits of information. This macho persons is at its strongest when Gallimard is with his friend, Marc. They talk in a good-old-boy fashion in short scenes throughout the play. In the beginning they are portrayed as Pinkerton (Gallimard) and Sharpless (Marc):

S: Who's the lucky girl?
P: Cio-Cio-San. Her friends call her Butterfly. Sharpless, she eats out of my hand!
S: She's probably very hungry.
P: Not like American girls. It's true what they say about Oriental girls. They want to be treated bad! (Hwang 6).

Here, Gallimard plays the role of Pinkerton which he plays to some extent in his relationship with Song. In addition, he could also be seen as playing himself at different stages of his life, since the play is set up with the prison cell as being the center for the dialogue. We see Gallimard in his cell and he flashes back to the scenes leading up to his incarceration—each scene that he reenacts involves playing the role of his former self. It is interesting to consider that while the roles Gallimard plays are very stereotypically masculine, he is not lucidly in drag. Song is constantly reminded by his male genitalia that the possibility of completely being the Butterfly is unattainable. Gallimard, however, is free to believe in his role, Pinkerton. This complete belief on Gallimard's part (both in the Butterfly and in his own male prowess) may be a fundamental reason behind his inability to cope with his situation at the end of the play.

While Gallimard is macho through his governmental position and his dominating Western ideas, Valentin is macho through his daring actions and his rebellious, communistic ideals. He acts the part of a freedom fighter with his fellow rebels in a similar way to how Gallimard acts the part of a diplomat and woman-chaser with his friend, Marc. At one point, however, Valentin questions the role that he is playing. Molina helps him to write a letter to his rich lover, Marta. In it, he confesses doubt about his ideals and about the sacrifices he has made to stay true to the image of himself as communistic and anti-bourgeois. He never intends this letter to be sent:

... you were raised in a clean and comfortable house like me and taught to enjoy life, and I'm the same way. I can't adjust to being a martyr, it infuriates me, I don't want to be a martyr, and right now I wonder if the whole thing hasn't been one terrible mistake on my part (Puig 177).

Valentin admits to having played a role, the role of a rebel which has somewhat romantic connotations in
South America. Specifically, one can trace the romance of rebellion to Che Guevera. He was from a reasonably well-off Argentinean family, and spent several years of his youth traveling around South America on a motorcycle. Through his political theories and his actions in Cuba and elsewhere, he became influential to communist thought and when he was killed by Bolivian soldiers, he became a martyr for the communist cause—and an icon for young idealistic communists. Valentin finds himself on the brink of a similar martyr situation, and feels unworthy of it. The glamour of being a heroic rebel begins to lose its appeal under the reality of rotting away in a prison cell.

At the end of both *M. Butterfly* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the roles played by the four main characters are interchanged—their performances are, in a way, deconstructed. *M. Butterfly* is visually blunt in portraying this reversal: Song appears in a “well cut suit” and Gallimard dresses himself in Butterfly’s kimono and kills himself. Gallimard, like Puccini’s Butterfly, cannot live with dishonor and cannot accept life without his lover. Song is revealed to have been more like Pinkerton in his manipulation of Gallimard:

I am an artist, Rene. You were my greatest... acting challenge. It doesn’t matter how rotten I answer, does it? You still adore me. That’s why I love you, Rene (Hwang 63).

Song’s disdain here relates directly to Pinkerton’s assertion that “It’s true what they say about Oriental girls. They want to be treated bad!” Song now has Gallimard “eating out of his hand” and, on a larger scale, has succeeded in aiding China to win a power-play with the West.

In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the roles are reversed in a less obvious way. Valentin takes painkillers from a nurse and enters into a dream world that is narrated by Molina. He has become like a character in a movie—a perfect beach scene with a beautiful native girl. Molina, like Song, takes on a masculine, active role. He leaves the prison, tries to divulge information to the rebels, and is killed by the rebels themselves in the process. Molina becomes the rebel and the martyr. He is, in fact, much more of a martyr than Valentin ever was, because he goes to speak to the rebels expecting to be killed. Molina also plays the role of Butterfly, Molina plays the roles of the heroines of his film (through imagination), and Molina also plays the role of a “woman” or the submissive half of his sexual relationship with Valentin.

In a more abstract sense, any of the roles that contain readable gender clues are also forms of drag: Gallimard’s suits and masculine body language, Valentin’s brusque dismissals of Molina’s more detailed descriptions and his initial bravado towards Molina’s attempts to help him. Performance could also mean emulating a particular hero or aesthetic: Gallimard tries to become the all-powerful, loved Pinkerton, and fails. Valentin thinks he is becoming a Gueveraesque rebel martyr, but fails. And then Song and Molina at the end of the two texts come to realize the goals that their lover had had. A final level of performance lies in the simple fact that both of the texts were written in performable forms: a stage play and dialogue suitable for the screen. Insofar as glamour is an element of most stage performances, the drag-glamour connection can also hold true to the play as a whole (*M. Butterfly* plays on Broadway, the height of glitz, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* was made into a musical, the pinnacle of glamour-centered entertainment). The plays not only contain the element of beauty through adornment/disguise (body as a work of art) but are presented in a glamorous form that suggests an emphasis on lighting, costuming, effects, settings—beauty through awe, a spectacle. All the aspects of glamour and self-creation and performance and playing roles are, in the end, put into a strange perspective since we are dealing with works of fiction. There is irony in that while Song and Molina are creating their own gender and painting themselves into feminine roles, they are fictional characters. The numerous “roles” that each character plays are trivialized by the fact that each character is no more real, at the core, than any of his roles. And so one could form this image of the authors as being surrounded by the characters they have created, and by the roles that the characters they have created are creating. In looking at Derrida’s analysis of Nietzsche’s style, one could formulate that all writing is a drag performance. He explains...
woman as being unpinnable by truth, and as being uncopiable. The feminine (in a literary sense) is therefore the unreachable side of art.

That which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth—feminine. This should not, however, be hastily mistaken for a woman’s femininity, for female sexuality, or for any other of those essentializing fetishes which might still tantalize the dogmatic philosopher. ... Nietzsche’s writing is an inscription of truth. And such an inscription, even if we do not venture so far as to call it the feminine itself, is indeed the feminine “operation.” Because woman is (her own) writing, style must return to her (Derrida 56-57).

If you take this idea literally, writing could be seen as a feminine operation. Even more literally, male authors could be seen as trying to simulate femininity (not in sexuality but in undefinability). Through Nietzsche and Derrida, therefore, male writers performing the inherently feminine act of writing, are, theoretically, in drag. Here, not only are the characters of these two texts in drag and playing several different roles, but the authors themselves, in writing, are fitting into a loose definition of what it means to be in drag.

To end on a lighter, more glamorous note, one could look at one last image. A film still from Shanghai Express shows Anna May Wong and Marlene Dietrich together closed in a train compartment. As the caption suggests, they are pinned into this little box and made easily examinable by the audience. Their clothing, makeup, and body postures are indicative of a heightened portrayal of glamour. They are so glamorized and covered in stylish paints and fabrics, in fact, that they just as easily could be two men dressed as women as they could be two women dressed as women. Either way, they are both in a very readable drag and they are both enclosed together in a train car, ostracized by the other passengers because of their label as “loose women.” It is easy to draw parallels between these two women and Song and Molina: appearance, glamour, a sense of disguised disdain for their position in life, and both judged as outsiders. So let’s close with this image, like the image out of one of Molina’s stories: two “divine-looking women, absolutely perfect... The most divine looking women you can imagine” (Puig 51, on Leni).

Works Cited


