

**Subversive Revisions: Metafiction and Sexuality in Francisco Chaves
Guzmán's Retrato del héroe sumiso**

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Published at the beginning of a boom in Spanish gay male fiction, Francisco Chaves Guzmán's 1992 novel Retrato del héroe sumiso occupies a unique position within gay narrative in Spain during the 1990s. Certainly, the presence of homosexuality in Spanish literature of the entire twentieth century was not uncommon; the works of prominent writers like Federico García Lorca, Luis Cernuda, Juan Goytisolo, and Esther Tusquets frequently include same-sex themes. At the same time, Spain has been marked by the thirty-six year (1939-1975) Franco dictatorship which repressed positive representations of homosexuals in the arts or by the media. As a result, the staging of numerous plays by García Lorca was prohibited, while his poetic collection *Sonetos del amor oscuro* disappeared completely until the 1980s. Many gay poets, such as Cernuda, Jaime Gil-de-Biedma, and Juan Gil-Albert, were only able to publish their works through foreign presses. A large group took residence in exile; novelist Juan Goytisolo moved to Paris, while Terenci Moix lived in Italy. Others writing during the era practiced self-censorship; Luis Antonio de Villena, currently one of Spain's most prolific writers of gay poetry and fiction, did not openly embrace the subject in his writing until after the death of Franco.

Franco's death in 1975 eventually led to a democratic government and a cultural revolution in Spain. Subsequently, from the late 1970s to the present Spain has experienced an explosion of literature in which homosexuality is a major theme. This explosion corresponds to great changes in attitudes toward lesbian and gays in Spain by both legal and social structures. They now live openly and enjoy legal protections that rival the most liberal countries in Europe and exceed those of the United States. As a result, writers now produce texts in which same-sex relationships are both open and explicit, often portrayed positively, explored deeply, and at times directed toward a specifically lesbian or gay audience. Similarly, the growing interest in lesbian and gay literature and culture in Spain has led to regular symposiums by major authors and scholars, the opening of specialty lesbian and gay bookstores in numerous cities, as well as the birth of two specifically lesbian and gay presses. Many authors of gay fiction have become quite popular with the general reading public. Antonio Gala, as well as the aforementioned Villena and the recently deceased Moix have enjoyed best-seller status with the publication of many of their works.

However, Francisco Chaves Guzmán admittedly is not a well-known name within contemporary Spanish literature. Nonetheless, his novels, short stories, and collections of poetry consistently demonstrate a creative talent unafraid to confront explicitly such a controversial topic as same-sex desire. A native of Ciudad Real, Chaves Guzmán currently works as a writer, art critic, and poet, and holds close friendships with some of the city's most well-known artists, including the painters Manuel Plaza Trenado and Jesus Puente Carretero, and the photographer José María Maldonado. These diverse artistic interests frequently emerge in his writing, particularly in the current text at hand, Retrato del héroe sumiso. Although primarily narrative in form, this work also

incorporates the styles of drama, poetry, fairy tale, and literary criticism. The mixture of genres in this experimental work leads the author to label the book a “no novela/no poema” (93). The surreal text contains no easily identifiable plot; instead, Chaves Guzmán breaks sequential logic to create multiple perspectives through which the reader views the events of the work. The author frequently uses a particular genre and set of parameters to present one series of events, only to immediately re-present the same scene through a different literary genre and with vastly different character traits. In effect, the novel constantly rewrites itself.

While Retrato del héroe sumiso is a humorous parody of the act of writing and the self-important attitudes of many writers, the text also reflects seriously upon the position of lesbians and gays in late-twentieth century Spanish culture. In the remainder of this study, I argue that the subversive nature of the text lies in the self-reflective structure of the work itself. Despite these dominant literary innovations, I posit that Retrato del héroe sumiso first and foremost falls under the category of social protest literature. As an in-depth analysis of the text will reveal, through these literary structures—including numerous metafictional techniques—Chaves Guzmán both parodies contemporary Spanish society and attacks nearly every attitude toward homosexuality.

Before laying the parameters for this discussion, I should illustrate briefly the story line for those unfamiliar with the text. The novel centers upon a young gay protagonist who, surrounded by character stereotypes such as the Bishop, the Mayor, the Prefect, and the Capitalist, must reconcile his sexual identity with the norms of Spanish society. This central character, a dance club disc jockey named Tolín, wishes to be crowned the Prince of Virility, a title he desires in order to attest to his own masculinity. He must earn this designation from the Three Harpies, themselves mythological figures who transmute between Opus Dei-like voices of society—clearly representative of more traditional and conservative social values—and campy drag queens. Tolín’s parents, former Spanish left-wing radicals, Tolín’s much older lover Miguel, and the fictionalized author himself complete the makeup of Chaves Guzmán’s literary game. While the protagonist eventually receives the coveted title, the resolution of the plot becomes much less important to the reader than the construction of the text itself and the implications of such a clearly artificial production.

The appearance of a pseudo-author, like that of Retrato del héroe sumiso, occurs frequently in metafictional narratives. Although examples of self-conscious texts exist throughout the history of literature, a fury of criticism in the later decades of the twentieth century accentuated the technique’s popularity with numerous postmodern writers. In particular, critics such as Robert Spire and Phylis Zatlin have noted the boom of metafictional narratives in Spanish literature since the 1970s. In her study Metafiction: The theory and practice of the self-conscious novel, Patricia Waugh illustrates a major component of this style of text—that being the questioning of conventional modes of fiction—when she states, “[m]etafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion” (6). [1] As such, metafiction disrupts the reader’s understanding of the boundaries within the fictional world the text

occupies. Waugh further defines a relationship between the world of the text and that of the reader when she states “[m]etafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary world as a construction, an artifice” (9). In her discussion of how particular metafictional texts contrast with traditional realist novels, she further notes that some “novels suggest that history itself is a multiplicity of ‘alternative worlds’, as fictional as, but other than, the worlds of novels” (104-105). In other words, much self-conscious literature not only challenges its readers to examine the verity of the space within the texts, but also to question the history and held values of the readers’ own societies. Through this exposure to multiple levels of artificial constructs, numerous writers of metafictional novels transfer their critical deconstruction of one’s perception of reality within the narrative to the readers’ perception of their own cultures.

Upon closer examination of the text at hand, we see that Chaves Guzmán continually debunks this literary world within Retrato del héroe sumiso. For example, as the text opens the Three Harpies climb the disc jockey’s tower in order to speak with Tolín. As the Harpies ascend, the fictionalized author comments, “parece fuera de duda que la torre es un símbolo fálico” (10). As a result, early in the novel the author—or rather, his literary counterpart—purposely exposes his readers to the artifice of the text through the depiction of such manipulations. Chaves Guzmán represents the ensuing interaction between the mythological creatures and the protagonist in the form of a dramatic piece. The scene portrays the Harpies like catty transvestites; at the same time, the naïve Tolín appears obsessed with his own physical beauty. The fictionalized author suddenly interjects to edit the encounter, and then claims that the preceding events never occurred: “Nadie con los dedos de frente puede dudar que el teatral intercambio de frases es mera invención de quien esto escribe, que, en su patética intención de atraer la improbable atención del lector, ha fabulado con todo descaro” (12). He thus toys with his readers though an attack on his own motivations and talent and novelist. In the newly rewritten scene that follows, the three now-wise—and apparently female—Harpies act like mystical sages who have arrived to predict the future of the young and noble protagonist. In this second dramatic sequence, Chaves Guzmán borrows the baroque language and structure of Spanish Golden Age drama to portray the characters in a completely different manner. This new language completely reverses the tone of the novel. Consequently, this re-representation of the same event forces the reader to question the truthfulness of the entire novel.

Chaves Guzmán’s characterizations and re-characterizations of both Tolín and the three Harpies become particularly interesting within current theoretical approaches to gender identity. The Harpies’ fluctuations between traditionally-male and female gender traits underscore the conception of gender as performativity posited by queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Sue-Ellen Case. For example, Butler argues that “[g]ender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (282). Through the continual reframing of the Harpies’ gender, the author

exposes the often artificial delineations between characteristics associated with the male and the female. His representation of them as aggressive transvestites becomes particularly interesting, as they combine hyper-femininity with the ideal of masculine domination. The more they change, the more they expose gender identity as the continuous act that Butler identifies. Indeed, numerous theorists argue that drag performers offer the ultimate parody of rigid gender definitions. [2] As Helen Bode illustrates, “drag, therefore may offer a way to challenge and subvert the traditional dichotomy and reduce the privileging of individuals who do conform to the heteronormative ideal” (23). Chaves Guzmán pushes such subversion to an extreme through his characterization of the three Harpies at times as the most authoritative voice of social norms and then, alternatively, as individuals marginalized because of their conscious parody of ideal gender roles. This conflict between fluid gender performativity and social pressure to conform to traditional gender norms figures prominently in later chapters as well. The more Tolín awakens to his true sexual desires, the more the symbols of Spanish society—the Bishop, the Mayor, the Prefect, and the Capitalist—insist that the protagonist embrace only stereotypically male behavior.

Chaves Guzmán’s constant restructuring of both characterization and action continues throughout the novel. In another notable re-writing of a particular sequence of events within the text, the three Harpies require that Tolín murder his boyfriend in order to affirm to them the protagonist’s virility and achieve the title he desires. The narrator vividly describes the process in which the young man repeatedly stabs his lover atop a sacrificial-like marble platform. Despite the intensity of the scene, the fictitious author soon jolts his reader back into another realm of reality and negates the entire scene. Chaves Guzmán completely reverses the narrative tone built up through the climatic death scene when he subsequently discloses: “Ni que decir tiene que esta historia del asesinato es una exageración. En el fondo, Tolín es un pusilánime, incapaz de una acción de este tipo” (79). As the text returns to a much less-dramatic level of reality, the protagonist again finds himself unable to fulfill the Harpies’ requirement, and by extension those held by more mainstream Spanish culture, that exemplify a masculine identity. Furthermore, Chaves Guzmán balances this serious critique of the pressures of society upon the individual with a humorous exploration of the role of the reader and that of the writer. He defends the need to include the violent act within the text, and subsequently its negation, by declaring, “he creído que convenía contarle de esta manera para dramatizar los hechos, golpear al lector, e imprimir el ritmo necesario que advierta de la cercanía del epílogo” (79). Once again, Chaves Guzmán both robs from his readers the dependability of his authorial voice, and exposed the manipulative powers that writers possess.

Through such various stylistic experiments, Retrato del héroe sumiso certainly qualifies itself as a metafictional text. Chaves Guzmán frequently exposes the artificiality of the novel’s space and his own consciousness as a writer. Furthermore, the characters are fully aware of their own fictional being in the novel. Often they comment on the progress of the work, dispute the interpretations of the events, and even analyze the author’s motivations in producing the text. Through a series of interior monologues in a chapter titled “Reflexiones diáfanos” each of the characters comments upon the merits

and perversions of homosexuality, while at the same time debating the accuracy of the author's interpretations of the transpired events. All find some fault with the text they inhabit; one harpy notes that the author "es un cerdo, un cabrón con alas...un retorcido con mala leche que se ha empeñado en aguarnos la fiesta. Si es tan listo y sabe tanto, como trata de dar a entender al escribir esta marranda" (34). Chaves Guzmán's ultimate act of literary parody is the inclusion of a fictional review of the novel. Like the characters, the critic attacks the work and questions the sanity of the author. Eventually he concludes, against all principles, that the only value the book holds is to ignite an old-fashioned book-burning bonfire. [3] Again, the author surprises his reader through exaggeration and humor at the writer's own expense. As such, Chaves Guzmán usurps the authoritative voice of everyone within the novel. He forces his readers to mistrust the perspectives of every character, not the least being his own as writer.

As previously argued, metafictional novels frequently challenge readers to not only question the fictitious world within the text, but also their understanding of the societies in which they live. An important question one may ask, then, is what does Chaves Guzmán ask his readers to impugn of contemporary Spanish culture? While the author's humorous literary games dominate the text, Chaves Guzmán also critiques both Spanish mainstream Spanish society and the marginalized position of lesbian and gay culture. Clearly the humor and parody illustrate a level of social tolerance quite different than that reflected in the Goytisolo or Moix novels of the 1960s and 1970s, or even the Eduardo Mendicutti and Alvaro Pombo narratives of the early 1980s. [4] In many ways the absurdities reflect the more tolerant social attitudes toward homosexuality a decade after the transition to democracy. As Paul Julian Smith and Emilie Bergmann point out in their introduction to Entiendes: Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings, the lesbian and gay communities in Spain were rather apolitical during this era, noting that "they had nothing to be political about and did not suffer under the burden of governmental hostility" (11). Other critics, however, note a resurgence in lesbian and gay activism during the mid 1990's, largely in response to the rise of the more conservative Partido Popular as the dominant political party. No longer satisfied with the anti-discrimination laws established during the early years of the democracy, lesbian and gay associations pursued the enactment of domestic partnership laws throughout Spain during the 1990s. To date the majority of Spain's regions and provinces, including Madrid in 1994, have passed some sort of same-sex partnership laws.[5] Although nationally activists continually met resistance from José María Azar's government. [6]

In essence, after the liberal era during the 1980s, lesbians and gays again found themselves threatened as Spain moved slightly to the right. In their study of the contemporary gay community in Spain, Juan Vicente Aliaga and José Miguel Cortés note that homophobia has run rampant through many Spanish social structures throughout the post-Franco era. Furthermore, they argue that heterosexism still represses large segments of the lesbian and gay population through more traditional social structures such as the Church: "[t]odavía existen miles de hombres que son incapaces de asumir sus prácticas homoeróticas y se casan, se ocultan y frecuentan (vergonzosamente) saunas y parques" (118). Aliaga and Cortés find this conventionalism particularly oppressive upon Spanish youth: "[l]a sociedad heterosexista se ha encargado de difundir—con una mayor

incidencia en las pequeñas ciudades y en los sectores sociales más desfavorecidos—unas ideas que hacen que el adolescente se considere el único ser homosexual que hay en la faz de la tierra” (118).

Published in 1992, however, Retrato del héroe sumiso appears more like a transitional social text between the more passive lesbian and gay communities of the 1980s and the emergence of varied activist movements in the 1990s. Chaves Guzmán’s composition of his novel at the beginning of this era lends validity to the socially committed nature of the text. The novel reflects hostile attitudes despite certain legal protections afforded to the community. In the chapter entitled “La conjuración,” or “the four symbols of society,” the Bishop, the Mayor, the Capitalist, and the Prefect, meet to debate the spreading cancer of homosexuality. Set against the backdrop of a closed-doors, corporate boardroom meeting, each functionary takes a unique position to illustrate the ills of same-sex desire upon the Spanish State. In order to assert the official position of the armed forces, the prefect argues that homosexuality goes against all sense of honor and discipline, as well as the sacrifice and camaraderie often associated with military service. Whereas the mayor offers a more social critique of homosexuals within greater Spanish culture when he proclaims the most repugnant of all crimes and the greatest threat to social order and control (29). Each of the four individuals professes commonly-held arguments against lesbians and gays that for years have been used to justify positions against anti-discrimination laws, homosexuals in the military, and other gay rights issues. Despite the austere tone of each of the speakers, Chaves Guzmán consistently pokes fun of the four and their self-appointed positions as voices of the people. Through the self-aggrandizement and inconsistencies of their characters, the author exposes the hypocrisy of these representatives. Chaves Guzmán’s approach toward these authoritative figures, however, is not one of complete mockery; he warns his readers: “[n]o eche el lector en saco roto que cuando los poderes eternos llegan a un acuerdo lo mejor es ponerse a temblar” (29). In effect, the author illustrates the true damaging effect those with such power may cause.

The author also attacks those on the left of Spanish society. Although participants in the radical movements surrounding the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain, Tolín’s parents still must rectify their own cultural inhibitions in order to accept their son’s sexual orientation. The protagonist’s mother, for example, distinguishes between the activism of her youth and the reforms suggested by the Chaves Guzmán. In reference to this fictionalized author, she declares, “este tipo parece no querer admitir que los años setenta, felizmente, pasaron ya, que la libertad por la que luchamos ha arraigado entre nosotros, que el nuevo orden social requiere unas pautas morales diferentes” (32). Nevertheless, Chaves Guzmán exposes the mother’s arguments as flawed; throughout her monologue she selectively defends the radical reforms still in her interest, mainly the feminist movement of the seventies, while she chastises those that upset her sense of social order. Tolín’s father, in contrast, provides the most lucid description of the ideological changes within his generation. He laments that: “[d]e marxistas libertarios que fuimos nos hemos convertido en reaccionarios defensores de todos los prejuicios burgueses. Somos peores que los facistas (36). Possessing such insight, the father offers

the most tolerant attitude toward his son's sexual orientation. Eventually he becomes the one individual most sympathetic of Tolín's marginalized position.

Chaves Guzmán's most forceful attack against puritanical values occurs in the chapter entitled "El Aquelarre," or the "The Witches Sabbath." Hauntingly reminiscent of Francisco de Goya's painting of the same title, in this scene hundreds of Harpies gather with the Mayor, the Bishop, and their colleagues to condemn any type of same-sex activity or expression. Dressed in tunics during the early morning hours, the group at first appears to be from another era. But the author juxtaposes the gathering next to television camera crews assigned to cover the events. The incongruent imagery culminates when a classically dressed Harpy steps up to a microphone and calls the meeting to order. The moderator then leads the chorus in a series of denunciations against homosexuals. At first, the group unfavorably compares them to other marginalized groups within Spanish culture. "Antes drogadicto—que maricón, ...antes borracho—que maricón...antes sifilitico, que maricón" goes the exchange between the Lead Harpy and the masses that surround him. Soon, however, the condemnation of homosexuality before over other types of behavior leads to the absurd: "antes traidor—que maricón, antes terrorista—que maricón...antes fascista" (72-74). Clearly Chaves Guzmán mocks those who single out same-sex desire as one of the greatest threats to social order. As the accusations progress, interestingly the author highlights Spain's most notorious groups, those being Basque terrorists and the Fascist victors of the Spanish Civil War. Furthermore, the author reverses the traditional positions of accusers and accused. Witchcraft frequently has been a practice severely condemned throughout history. Ironically, Chaves Guzmán utilizes a witches' gathering to represent the attack upon what becomes a witch-hunt against behavior that conflicts with more traditional social values.

Although Chaves Guzmán directs the majority of his criticism toward those who would repress lesbians and gays, the author also holds homosexuality itself up to lampoon. Through a satire of the novel of desire, Tolín symbolizes the obsession with youth and the physical—the cult of beauty—within gay society. The protagonist's eventual crowning as Prince of Virility by the Harpies underscores the exaggerated importance of these qualities. Tolín earns the crown not based upon his demonstration of masculine ideals—he fails miserably each time the Harpies test him. Rather, he earns the title for his potent sexual abilities. Chaves Guzmán's portrayal of the protagonist's older lover Miguel, further emphasizes what he deems as the misguided priorities of gay culture. Through Miguel's poetry in praise of the young man, he tries to teach him the true meaning of virility. He idealistically tells him that virtue comes from one's spirit and not material goods or beauty. Although Miguel provides the older voice of reason, even he is a victim of the author's criticism. Guzmán illustrates the inconsistencies in Miguel's words. On one hand, Miguel attacks the pursuit of youth and physical beauty; at the same time, his object of desire, Tolín, possesses exactly those qualities. Having aged and lost his desirability, Miguel wishes to be valued for other qualities, but he neglects to value those qualities in the individuals of his desire. Chaves Guzmán's text thus becomes an advocate for fundamental changes even within the marginalized community it seeks to protect.

Retrato del héroe sumiso is a novel full of parody. As this study has illustrated, however, such parody provides the author a means to raise both serious social and artistic questions. Chaves Guzmán mocks the act of writing and the self-important attitudes of many writers. He questions the ability of someone to represent the truth successfully. The variety of literary experimentation in his text also serves as a game to expose the artificiality and inconsistencies of cultural norms. As such, he attacks nearly every attitude toward homosexuality; Chaves Guzmán disparages those who would proscribe sexual freedom, while at the same time he criticizes those within the gay community who advocate physical idolization and self-important superficiality. However, the author does not expect his reader to take him too seriously. He saves some of the most humorous parody for himself and his fictionalized “author.” For Chaves Guzmán, Retrato del héroe sumiso is an experimental game that allows him to suggest a more tolerant society in terms of both homosexuality and gender identity, while at the same time poke fun at multiple aspects of Spanish society.

NOTES

[1] For discussions of metafictional techniques in a purely Spanish context, see: Robert Spires, Beyond the Metafictional Mode: Directions in the Modern Spanish Novel (Lexington, Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1984).

[2] For a detailed discussion of drag performance in relation to gender performativity theory, see: Judith Halberstam, Female Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), and Richard Ekins and Dave King, ‘Blending Gender, An Introduction’ in Blending Gender, eds. Ekins and King (London: Routledge, 1996).

[3] Chaves Guzmán utilizes repeatedly the motifs of fires and mob-like gatherings as an expression of conservative social values.

[4] Novels such as Juan Goytisolo’s Juegos de Manos (Barcelona: Destino, 1954), Eduardo Mendicutti’s Tiempos mejores (Barcelona, Tusquets, 1989) and Alvaro Pombo’s El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1984) provide a more pessimistic and serious perspective of homosexuality during the Franco era.

[5] These regions include: Andalucía, Aragón, Asturias, Baleares, the Basque Region, Cataluña, Extremadura, Madrid, Navarra, and Valencia.

[6] The PSOE’s national victories in the March, 2004 elections seem to have energized Spanish lesbian, gay and transgendered communities. Queer activists groups such as Madrid’s COGAM and Seville’s COLEGA also played essential roles in the campaigns leading up to the elections. The national Spanish magazine Zero—roughly equivalent to The Advocate in the United States reports of the Zapatero presidency: “Matrimonio civil, adopción, políticas anti-homofobia, derchos para los transexuales... [u]n giro político crucial en nuestra lucha en el que todos los LGTB tienen mucho que decir y mucho que esperar” (54).

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