

ALLUSION, IRONY, AND THE NATURE OF TYRANNY IN PEDRO SALINAS' *JUDIT Y EL TIRANO*

Judit y el tirano: the title identifies the principal characters of this three-act play by Pedro Salinas. Moreover, the title combines an allusion to the heroine of the Apocryphal story with an ironic label for the individual portrayed as the Regente. Through artful melding of Biblical symbolism and unexpected characterization, Salinas forges a realistic picture of the nature of modern tyranny as a powerful political structure impeding any positive human communication. Salinas depicts a system so forceful in its destruction of human interaction that the tyrant loses his personality in his public role. Through allusion and irony, Salinas shows how the qualities of the tyrant as a man cannot penetrate his public image. The play entertains the surprising possibility that the tyrant could be very decent as a man without this having any impact whatsoever upon the functioning of the tyrannical regime.

The name Judit recalls Judith of the Biblical Apocrypha.¹ There are striking similarities between the two. A young, beautiful, and courageous woman takes it upon herself to deliver her people from the oppression of a tyrant. She gains entry into the enemy's personal domain, wins his trust, ignites in him a passion for her, and eventually causes his death. The actual details of the play demonstrate Salinas' remarkable ingenuity in adapting the ancient version to serve his own purposes. The thread of the original is always present, but Salinas weaves it into a unique fabric.

In the Book of Judith, Nebuchadnezzar's general Holofernes besieges the Israelites in Bethulia, and cuts off their water supply in an attempt to force them into submission. Before surrendering, the city elders decide to wait five more days for God to show mercy. Upon hearing this, the rich and pious widow Judith chastises her people for putting God to a test, and informs them that the Lord will deliver Israel by her hand. After a prayer, Judith removes her garments of mourning, adorns herself as splendidly as possible, and with her maid, sets out for the camp of Holofernes. She deceives him into believing that she has fled from her people. One night, hoping to enjoy Judith after a banquet, Holofernes becomes too drunk, and instead, she beheads him with his own sword, and carries his head back

¹ The story of Judith is found in the Book of Judith, one of the Apocrypha, those books or portions of books which appear in the Latin Vulgate, either as a part of the Old Testament or as an appendix, but which are not in the Hebrew Bible. References in the text to the Bible story are derived from the following edition: *The Apocrypha of the Old Testament revised Standard Version* (Trans. from the Greek and Latin tongues being in the version set forth A.D. 1611; Revised A.D. 1894; A.D. 1957), (Toronto, New York, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957), pp. 65-81.

to her people. The Book of Judith concludes with exalted praises of God, Judith, and the Israelite victory.

Unlike her Biblical namesake, Salinas' Judit is not driven by motives of extreme nationalism or religious fervor. She does conspire with a group of revolutionary artists against the tyrant, but her struggle is much more personal. Judit is tormented by the tyrant's lack of humanity. In the early part of the play, she explains her sufferings to Valentín, one of the co-conspirators:

Es que ha llegado a inventar una nueva figura del mal, otra encarnación física de lo diabólico, de lo antihumano. Y esa es la que me obsesiona.²

She convinces him why she must be the one to assassinate the tyrant:

...necesito verla de cerca, antes de que caiga, por mi mano, sentirla caer delante de mí, ver el embuste, el embeleco, materialmente derrumbado a mis pies. Sino, no podría creer que ha dejado de existir. (p. 309)

Unless she personally kills the tyrant, she cannot be certain that this "figura del mal" will have ceased to exist.

The flamboyant group of artists to which Judit belongs, "Los siete contra todos" (p. 320), deliberately draws attention to itself, publishing extravagant artistic manifestos and consistently declaring itself apolitical. Thus, as in the Book of Judith, the tyrant is not suspicious of those acting openly and apparently with nothing to conceal. Judit's entry into the Regente's sitting room, however, is the very opposite of Judith's showy arrival at the camp of Holofernes. Judit is led into the Regente's living quarters with the utmost secrecy, and hides behind a curtain to wait for her opportunity to strike. Furthermore, what she observes and overhears at this point causes her to save rather than to end the life of the Regente, and constitutes the beginning of Salinas' ironic portrayal of the tyrant. Thus far, the reader/spectator has had no direct look at the Regente. Judit's description of him as "antihumano," and the other artists' references to him as a faceless, evil being (pp. 310-311), provide the expected characterization of a tyrant, but Salinas' actual presentation of him in no way supports their judgments nor justifies Judit's private motive for tyrannicide.

All that is witnessed in the final two acts of the play points only to positive, engaging, and humane attributes of the Regente. Certain tangible objects associated with him, together with his actions and his words, indicate these qualities. A huge bouquet of white roses is the first thing that Judit notices upon surveying the Regente's room. Thus, the Regente, appreciative of beauty, is seen immediately to have at least this one redeeming feature. When the man himself enters, preceded

² Pedro Salinas, *Teatro completo*, Ed. Juan Marichal, (Madrid: Aguilar, 1957), p. 308. All further quotations from the play come from this volume, and will appear in the text.

by his personal servant Fidel, additional admirable qualities become evident. The ruler and his servant clearly share a genuinely affectionate relationship, from which stiffness and severity are absent. The content of their conversation reveals a most nonauthoritarian “tyrant.”

The Regente first laments to Fidel having to miss a harpsichord concert because of official duties. Then they discuss the mountain retreat that the Regente is having built. Its parlor is to be an echo of his parents’ home, the home of his youth. With minute detail, they discuss the pattern of a particular embroidered chair, all entwined with sentimental memories of the Regente’s mother. The Regente even attempts to draw the design for Fidel. Fidel surprises his master with a crowning accent for the room—a replica of the music box which played the waltzes of *Coppélia*. Their reminiscing is interrupted by the arrival of the Colonel, and the Regente shows reluctance to deal with this part of his existence. He instructs Fidel to indicate to the Colonel that their meeting be as brief as possible.

The rigid formality of the Colonel stands in stark contrast to the Regente, who maintains his already established air of refinement, concern for the arts, and genuine kindness. The Regente dismisses the suspicions of the Colonel that the music box might contain a bomb, and finds it hard to believe the Colonel’s information about the plot of the intellectuals to assassinate him, and especially Judit’s role. His response is tinged with empathy for the group:

Mire usted que los dichos y los hechos de estos artistas modernos muchas veces se prestan al equívoco... Y no se preocupe demasiado. Estos artistas son desconcertantes... para el que no los conoce. Parece que van a hacer una cosa y luego hacen otra... Sus intenciones son parabólicas... (pp. 320, 321, 322)

The Colonel has ordered the arrest of the seven intellectuals, and upon hearing this, the Regente, for the first time, assumes authority, which, paradoxically, reinforces his image as a “non-tyrant.” He demands that the prisoners be treated with absolutely no violence. When the Colonel leaves, the Regente immediately restarts the music box and returns to his drawing paper.

The picture of the Regente that Judit has received from her hiding place does not fail to make an impression upon her. Although she loads her gun, the ensuing crisis startles her into yielding to instinct, and proves the tyrant’s recent assessment of the behavior of artists to be ironically true. Two masked figures break through a window and attack the peaceful Regente with knives. Judit fires two shots, wounding one of the assailants and frightening them both away, after which she faints. More shocking to her than the event itself is her realization that she has saved the Regente’s life and that he has recognized his savior.

The following day, as Judit searches her conscience in order to understand her deed, the Regente also makes every effort to comprehend the situation. His astuteness is matched only by his sensitivity. He provides Judit with comfortable accommodations and has a servant bring her a change of clothing. The perfume

brought to her along with fresh clothing, all from the home of Judit Velasco, matches the faint scent he remembers from the previous night. His refined perception tells him this can be no coincidence, that she is the woman that the Colonel had named as probable assassin. The Regente knows he must clarify her intentions, but instinctively believes that she and her group bear him no ill will. Audaciously, he returns to her the fully loaded gun, and requests that she indulge him in one sentimental whim before regaining her freedom: to shoot a bullet into his garden alder tree while he sits beneath it. Taking great care with her aim, she hits her mark, and gives up a second opportunity to fulfill her mission.

Salinas' ironic portrayal of the tyrant comes to a climax at the end of the second act, in a moving scene in which Judit explains to the Regente the reason for her action. Judit, who for some time has been unable to articulate what has prevented her from killing the Regente, finally communicates the incongruity between her preconceived notion of the tyrant and her actual experience of the man:

Vine a matar al tirano, al monstruo, a esa figura de espantapajo, que no nos deja vivir, que no me dejaba vivir. ¡Y ya está muerto! ¿No ves que ha nacido un hombre? Delante de mí nació... ¿Cómo te iba a matar? Si lo que yo vine a matar no era a un hijo de mujer... era lo inhumano, el antihombre, tu embuste. Tú, tú te has salvado contra él, tú. Y quiero que me oigas este tú, así, con toda mi fuerza, porque este tú te distingue de todo, te señala, solo, único, tú. Es la marca de hombre, que te pongo en el alma... Ahora ya eres de verdad... Ten cuidado..., tu mentira, el embuste..., es lo que puede matarte... (...) Yo... ya no... (pp. 338-339)

The indirect presentation of the tyrant in Act One in the conspirators' verbal attacks upon him is completely unsubstantiated by Judit's first-hand encounter. He is a man, a vulnerable human being, not at all a cruel and brutal oppressor; and Judit's personal assessment of the Regente as a man accords well with his words and actions as he appears in the play.

In the third act, the emergence of the supposed tyrant as a genuine human being takes a totally positive direction as he unsaddles himself from the "false self" or "embuste" (p. 347) of his official position. Under Judit's guidance, after spending every evening with her for a month, the Regente learns to go out among people and to participate in the many things he could never experience. He makes the return trip to life, "el viaje de vuelta... de vuelta a la vida..." (p. 344). Judit comes to address him with a name—Andrés—his name as an individual human being.³ The man in him conquers the tyrant.

Like the Biblical Judith, Salinas' Judit arouses the love of her enemy, but the love of the Regente is a genuine, not purely passionate attraction. In fact, he is able to convert Judit from adversary to ally, and she is ready to return his affection and

³ The name "Andrés" comes from the Greek word for "man": *Anêr*. Not only does this name suggest that underneath the official tyrant is a genuine man, but also, as we shall find, that the role of tyrant in modern tyranny could be filled by any man.

marry him when she is convinced that the "tyrant" is dead. She will wait for him in a hotel near the country's borders and listen to his final broadcast as "tirano." He will join her if he has succeeded in disassociating the tyrant from the man. Of course, the harsh, metallic voice on the radio bears no resemblance to the kind, gentle individual she has come to know personally—the Regente Salinas has actually presented in the play. Judit is now certain of his true identity, and eagerly prepares for his arrival.

Meanwhile, however, the police suspect the identity of Judit, this woman who supposedly awaits her husband and possesses a gun and a false passport. They remember her photo from the recent search of conspirators ordered by the Colonel, and arrest the couple upon hearing the Regente's incriminating words:

...El otro está muerto. Lo mate... porque tú me diste fuerza para que yo viniera... Tengo pasaporte en el bolsillo. Nadie me reconocerá. (p. 357)

His words signal an irony of situation which proves them to be tragically true. The faceless Regente, whose people have never seen him face-to-face, is not recognized by his own police force.

To an extent, Judit is to blame for the resulting tragedy. One agent tells her, "...por usted hemos dado con... este hombre." (p. 357) As the Regente ventures toward him, the latter fatally wounds him with Judit's gun. In anguish, she cries out, "¡Yo lo maté, yo lo maté! Ya me lo dijeron: 'Te veo en los ojos. Tú le matarás'..." (p. 358) But the Regente refuses to accept her guilt, and explains that it is the non-visible image of tyrant which is really responsible:

No..., no..., Judit, fue el otro, el que no era yo... Él nos mató..., el tirano. (p. 358)

Salinas is at the same time both faithful and unfaithful to the original Book of Judith. Each woman seeks to destroy her enemy, but the manner, means, and results differ greatly. In the Apocryphal story, the brazen Judith, with her victim's sword, cuts off his head and returns with it to her people in glorious triumph. The beheading of Holofernes effectively topples the tyranny. The Israelites regain their water and are delivered from oppression. In Salinas' modern version, our final view of Judit is that of a grieving woman, whose weapon has been used by another to kill the man she loves along with that other part of him which she had wanted destroyed: the tyrant. Salinas, however, does not really show the two sides to Judit's tyrant, and the play ends with the death of the good man who happens to hold the ruling position. Indications are that the tyranny will endure.

We might ask, then, if Salinas is upholding the humanity of man, and Andrés is not really tyrannical, why does he die? Reflection upon Salinas' remolding of the biblical story together with the unexpected portrayal of the tyrant provides us an answer. The recast Judith story, which culminates in the dramatic irony of the tyrant's death, develops a powerful understanding of the nature of tyranny in the modern world. Modern tyranny employs the mass media to substitute constraining

messages for genuine communication. In the play, although behind the histrionics of the black cape, mask, and hollow voice of the Regente exists Andrés the man, the political structure obstructs any view of the ruler other than that publicly projected. The real tyranny is in the system itself, and in the forces it develops to keep it alive. Fundamental for this structure is the prevention of open interaction of people. The faceless way in which the Regente relates to his people expresses this theory of government: "el individuo no es nada, todo es la idea." (p. 311) The attitudes and behavior of the Colonel typify the efforts geared toward keeping the political apparatus intact. The assassination of Andrés by his own secret police is the final proof of man's lack of worth within the tyrannical structure. He is captured by his own underlings and the corrupt system, and his death makes no difference. The tyranny will continue, with another faceless creature functioning as the "official" tyrant. The words of the lieutenant, which end the play, indicate a perpetuation of the system:

Señora, la vida del Regente es lo primero... (p. 358)

The horror of modern tyranny in Salinas' presentation is that its functioning does not depend upon any man or group of men. The tyranny has a life of its own that substitutes for the life of the individuals within it. Anyone could fill the role of the Regente, if even someone as decent as Andrés did not influence the functioning of the regime.

In *Judit y el tirano*, Salinas conveys his abhorrence of real tyranny and professes the humanity of man as an ideal to be pursued, but his ironic portrayal of the tyrant, together with his allusion to the Book of Judith, point to a shocking realism, tied to the political events of the Twentieth Century which so greatly disturbed him. Salinas does not expect tyrants to be good men beneath their masks. Rather, he is telling us that the power of tyranny can be so strong, that even an "angel" of a man would make no difference and would lose his identity in the structure.⁴

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⁴ In *Historia del teatro español, 2. Siglo XX* (Madrid: Alianza, 1971), in his treatment of *Judit y el tirano*, Francisco Ruiz Ramón includes a discussion of Salinas' "tesis humana." (pp. 342-325) He criticizes Salinas' fundamentally one-sided presentation of the tyrant as an individual, non-tyrannical human being. Ruiz Ramón believes that the absence of real dramatic interaction or conflict between the "tyrant" and the "man" reduces the play to "una bella tesis, pero cuestionable en la realidad histórica, precisamente por su carácter demasiado particular y demasiado ideal." (p. 325) But Ruiz Ramón seeks a realism different from that which Salinas presents in the play. Ruiz Ramón asks, ¿Dónde están, en efecto, esos tiranos que, en sus trasfondos, no lo son, dónde esos dictadores cuya máscara es mentira y su oculto rostro interior verdad? ¿Están?... (p. 325) Certainly, Salinas would have hoped that the tyrants of the world be better men under their positions, but his real point is that the systems through which modern tyranny has flourished totally obscure the goodness and humanity of any individual. Salinas, like the other members of his poetic generation, and, like the modernists before them, was basically anti-realistic (á la "realismo") in orientation.