

Social Criticism and the Fantastic in Roberto Arlt's *La fiesta del hierro*

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Social criticism emerges as a strong sub-theme in most of Arlt's earlier plays: *Trescientos millones* (1932), *Prueba de amor* (1932), *Saverio el cruel* (1936), and *La isla desierta* (1937). In *Trescientos millones* a poor servant girl creates a chimerical world in order to flee from the drudgery of the real world of poverty, a domineering "patrona," and her abusive son. *Prueba de amor* condemns society's hypocrisy and man's obsession with money. Arlt sympathizes with a humble dairyman in *Saverio el cruel*, and criticizes the leisure, and consequent boredom, of the upper classes in Argentina, while he attacks war and violence. In *La isla desierta* the boredom and unfulfilled dreams of a group of office workers are closely tied to economic problems and the restrictions imposed by society on the individual. Perhaps the play which most emphatically unites these themes is *La fiesta del hierro* (1940). As always, the author presents fantastic elements in this work; but they are used here in large part to accentuate Arlt's social criticism, which is the dominant concern of the play. In this work Arlt condemns the church and armament industry specifically and man in general. For the first time the church becomes the focus of the dramatist's criticism.

La fiesta del hierro is a three-act play dealing with an anniversary celebration of the Armstrong armament factory. Carlitos, Armstrong's trusted adviser, as well as the lover of Armstrong's wife, plans the celebration around the statue of a mythological god of war named Baal Moloc. The ancient god will be used to symbolize the bellicose activities of the company. A planned farcical recreation of a ritual of sacrifice is transformed into reality, as the frenzied guests shout for human blood and Armstrong's child, hidden inside the statue, is actually sacrificed.

An analysis of the vicious nature of the major characters reflects the dramatist's strong attack on a hypocritical society. Raúl Castagnino comments that in *La fiesta del hierro* "no se descubre un acto bondadoso, noble; no hay caridad

ni desinterés."¹ There is a contradiction between what certain characters appear to be and what they really are. The formula of the mask and the face is at work in the play, as Arlt's characters don masks of virtue only to reveal themselves later as hypocrites, cheats, and liars. In his treatment of Carlitos, Mariana—Armstrong's wife—, and the priest, for example, Arlt presents a grotesque contrast. Carlitos is supposedly his employer's most trusted counselor. At the anniversary celebration for the armament factory, the people unanimously request that he follow his boss, Armstrong, as speaker. Carlitos' mask makes him appear dependable and truthful. On the other hand, his face or inner nature reveals the exact opposite, for Carlitos is Mariana's lover. In addition, he demonstrates his distorted values when he rebukes the angel who attempts to convert him: "¡Al cuerno con la honestidad! Vendo mi puerco alma por un plato de lentejas de oro."² Significantly, the playwright makes Carlitos the high priest for Baal Moloc, the idol that becomes Arlt's symbol of man's inhumanity to man. In the last scenes Carlitos' barbarity is literally unmasked, when he is transformed into a monstrous character who, despite his innocent demeanor, is capable of devouring anyone or anything.

There is a parallel development of duplicity in Armstrong's wife, Mariana, who is as deceptive as her lover Carlitos. She is attractive and apparently intelligent, able to play her role very well as the wife of an important industrialist. Nevertheless, she astounds Carlitos when she discloses her inability to read or write. Through her illiteracy Arlt criticizes the lack of culture in the so-called elite of society, showing once again his scorn for the upper class element, as he had done previously in *Trescientos millones*, *Prueba de amor*, and *Saverio el cruel*. He attacks the idea of the superiority of power, showing that the upper classes are driven by duplicity and falsity. The astonished Carlitos reflects on Mariana's beguiling mask, which succeeded in hoodwinking one as deceitful and astute as himself:

¡Qué mujer! ¿A quién puede ocurrírsele, contemplándola ya en el fondo tapizado de un Rolls-Royce, ya en la luneta dorada de un palco del Gran Teatro, que esa señora es una ratera analfabeta? ¿Y que esta ratera analfabeta habla más o menos correctamente dos idiomas? Como rarísimas flores de invernáculo, ella ha necesitado nutrirse de estiércol para alcanzar su total lozanía. Dama por la apariencia, cortesana por su condición, dechado de simulaciones. (I, i)

Even more startling than this elegant disguise of culture is the treachery that Mariana conceals behind her serene mask of politeness. For example, when Mariana first hears that the priest wants to see her, she refers to him derogatorily as a "pajarraco" (II, i) and attempts to dismiss him with a small offering. She does, however, display all her guiles when the cleric reveals compromising photos taken of her and Carlitos: "Padre, me está humillando con su generosidad" (III, vii). She even goes so far as to call him a saint. The real Mariana, nevertheless, emerges upon the priest's departure, when she blackmails her servant, Ambrosio, and eagerly lights the match which will burn her stepson, who is hidden in the idol Baal Moloc. Armstrong's wife exemplifies Arlt's vision of the worst elements of the upper classes. Mariana is masked as beautiful, charming, and intelligent, while in reality she is cruel, ignorant, hypocritical, and bloodthirsty.

Arlt does not allow the church to escape his satire either, as reflected in the disparity between the priest's holy pretenses and his corrupt nature. When we first meet him in the second act, his initial reaction to the news that a woman wants to speak to him is one of scornful dismissal, but he agrees to see her when he is told that she is well dressed. His polite behavior contrasts with his "¡Qué gente más bestia!" which he utters after she leaves. The priest not only demonstrates a basic hypocrisy but also a lack of real Christian spirit. This becomes clear when he makes derogatory remarks about the Jews, proceeds to criticize their unscrupulous ties with industry, and then goes on to calculate how Armstrong could help him further his ambitions: "Fabricante de cañones, influencias enormes!" (II, ix). Arlt perceives the church as being in league with the military-industrial complex; from his vantage point, the church and military represent power which corrupts and oppresses.

In such a system there is a constant masquerade, and it here that Arlt shows the theatricality of role playing. The priest's habit disguises his "unchristian" nature as much as Mariana's loveliness and charm cloak her ruthlessness and cruelty. When the two meet, only the spectator can appreciate the grotesque contrast between how these characters act and what they really are. The priest's concern for Mariana's servant Ambrosio, and his insistence on expecting nothing in return for delivering compromising photos of Mariana and Carlitos, appear as ludicrous as Mariana's feigned respect for the priest and her promise to him that she will not reprimand Ambrosio severely for his apparent desire to blackmail her.

In this play there appears once again the poor and frustrated dreamer of liberation who is so common in Arlt's works. Ambrosio, Mariana's servant, believes that money will be the panacea which will liberate him from his repressed state. Like the servant girl in *Trescientos millones*, he believes that all restraints and boredom will abruptly terminate if he acquires wealth. Ambrosio envisions power in his dreams of being a "rey mago" as owner of a chain of restaurants: "¡El amo! ¡Seré el amo, el patrón, el propietario!" (III, v). The fact that Mariana, who achieves precisely what Ambrosio longs for, is bored and disenchanted with her wealth and power, proves the self-deception in Ambrosio's aspirations. Similarly, the affluent Susana and her friends in *Saverio el cruel* find their riches incapable of satisfying them, and for that reason they make the unfortunate dairyman the butt of their entertainment. Jaime Giordano has commented the following on the plight of Arlt's characters and their concern for wealth:

Son seres que generalmente pertenecen a una pobre clase media, cuyas voluntades e inteligencias han sido relegadas a la servidumbre y la obediencia. En esta humanidad desplazada, la angustia, la desesperación y rebeldía adoptan un carácter doblemente dramático, la metafísica se muestra directamente ligada a la angustia económica.³

What Arlt presents in his works is an infelicitous society where the affluent find their dreams unfulfilling, while the downtrodden ironically dream of becoming prosperous.

La fiesta del hierro is a vehemently harsh condemnation of the armament industry. The idea of making profit by the creation of destructive weapons is

strongly criticized by the author. The entire scene of the anniversary celebration demonstrates the playwright's attitude toward this business, as Arlt presents men who pray for war in order to acquire more wealth, without any concern for the consequences. Their cruel indifference is underscored at the end of the play when the guests, oblivious to the fact that the child has been burned inside the idol, shout with frenetic joy upon hearing that war has been declared.

In *La fiesta del hierro* fantasy and reality merge as the author includes mythological figures and numerous grotesque elements. These fantastic elements are also used to reinforce Arlt's social message. Inspired by certain traditions in Greek, Roman, and Semitic mythology, Arlt also integrates aspects of the medieval morality play and the *auto sacramental* in his structuring of *La fiesta del hierro*. The devil in Arlt's work physically resembles the Faun of Greek and Roman mythology, Baal Moloc once being a Palestinian cult which practiced human sacrifice.⁴ Even more compelling is Frazer's description of Moloc, which includes a reference to the sacrifice of children that parallels the immolation of Julio in *La fiesta del hierro*:

Carthaginians sacrificed their offspring to Mōloc. The children were laid on the hands of a calf-headed image of bronze from which they slid into a fiery oven, while the people danced to the music of flutes and timbrels to drown the shrieks of the burning victims. The resemblance which the Cretan traditions bear to the Carthaginian practice suggests that the worship associated with the names of Minos and Minotaur may have been powerfully influenced by that of a Semitic Baal.⁵

Arlt also includes festive dances and choruses which offer a striking discord to the horrifying sacrifice of the child. The dramatist combines these bizarre myths to create a clear parallel with the barbarous tendency of modern man to destroy himself in war.

One critic considers *La fiesta del hierro* a reworking of a modern play in the tradition of the *auto sacramental*:

El tercer es el gran acto, por la progresión, por su aliento clásico . . . La simple farsa ha depurado aquí sus elementos para constituir un verdadero auto sacramental moderno, en el cual los personajes comunes toman contornos de generalización. La mujer adúltera, el criado infiel, el ambicioso sacerdote y hasta las figuras del ángel bueno y el malo, el bien y el mal disputando las criaturas. Todos se deshumanizan. Y para que la identificación con el auto sea más perfecta, allí está el ídolo del hierro, el "Deus ex machina" de la tradición clásica y la infalibilidad del castigo.⁶

The work also bears similarity to the medieval morality play, as Arlt once again returns to literary traditions in his portrayal of reality:

Señalamos de paso que los personajes imaginarios de *La fiesta del hierro* no están personificando mundos de traslado, de soñar despierto, sino que entroncan con los personajes de las moralidades medievales: el ángel y el demonio, cuya función es destacar mediante acotaciones sarcásticas la débil fuerza de la luz ante la poderosa fuerza de la oscuridad en el interior de la conciencia humana.⁷

Unlike *Saverio el cruel* and *El fabricante de fantasmas*, in this work the ethical

takes precedence over the psychological. The fawn and the angel approach three characters in *La fiesta del hierro*, as the devil tempts Carlitos, the priest, and Ambrosio to commit evil deeds. In this very bitter and depressing play no one is spared in Arlt's vicious condemnation of the contemporary world and its values, as evil is led to its inevitable triumph.

The idol Baal Moloc is an appropriate symbol of human depravation in this ignoble world. His role can be compared to that of Pedro's work, *Los jueces ciegos*, in *El fabricante de fantasmas* (1936) as an expression of subconscious guilt.⁸ No one has any difficulty understanding Baal Moloc's relationship to the factory. Carlitos describes the idol as "algo brutal, digno de la fiesta del mercader de la muerte. . ." (III, iii). Even the boy Julio readily comprehends the significance of Baal Moloc as he explains to Ambrosio: "Representa las actividades de nuestra fábrica, la guerra, la riqueza, la muerte" (III, i). When Armstrong explains to the guests that "ése es Baal Moloc, el devorador de hombres," one of the guests is described as "comprendiendo" as he responds: "Que sea por muchos años, protector de esta fábrica" (III, xiv). Even though everyone understands the company's relationship to the idol, no one initially views Baal Moloc as anything more than an appropriate symbol of the armament industry.

The guests initially seem to admire Carlito's astuteness as a publicity agent, for they have not yet been transformed into the bloodthirsty worshippers of Baal Moloc. Their first comments indicate that they are maintaining psychological distance from Carlitos' idol, because they comment on it in much the same way Saverio did when he first viewed Susana's farce as a madwoman in *Saverio el cruel*, and as did the office workers who enjoyed the mulatto's tales in *La isla desierta*. Voices exclaim:

- voz 1a-¡Qué bonita!
- voz 2a-En efecto, está elegantemente impresa.
- voz 3a-Don Carlitos es un gran jefe de publicidad.
- voz 1a-No, se refería a la impresión.
- voz 2a-El sentido es extraordinario.
- voz 4a-Es como guardarla de recuerdo. (III, xiv)

Arlt, however, creates a step-by-step departure for the characters who gradually withdraw from the realm of reality into the world of fantasy. The entrance into the fantasy world commences when one suggests that they should rise and pay homage to Baal Moloc, while another compares Carlitos to the idol's priest: "Tú, que actúas como sacerdote del ídolo, debes indicarnos el ritual" (III, xiv). One visitor realizes that this is becoming much more than a mere farce and, as he departs, comments: "Con perdón de ustedes, esta farsa es una herejía condenada por la iglesia. Buenas noches, señores" (III, xiv). In the same way that Julia represents the rejection of the heartless farce in *Saverio el cruel*, this guest also symbolizes the voice of reason in a society gone completely mad. Another guest at the celebration exclaims: "Parecería que volviéramos a los tiempos antiguos" (III, xiv). This is precisely what happens in the work, as what initially seems to be a farce becomes the recreation of a traditional blood ritual. Some guests are at first hesitant when Carlitos begins to light the fire, but soon everyone is carried away by the sacrifice as fantasy dominates reality and mob psychology rules.

Guests are soon asking for human blood and offering precious belongings to the idol. The fantastic has transfigured the real, this fact becoming even more obvious when it is realized that Julio was actually immolated inside the idol and that Baal Moloc has given the guests their wish: war has been declared. Arlt's ever-present and primary concern for the intermingling of fantasy and reality (*Saverio el cruel*, *Trescientos millones*, *El fabricante de fantasmas*, etc.) is apparent in this play, but is merely used as another means of presenting his bleak vision of the world and his desire to criticize society. Although social elements are evident in the other works as sub-themes, the horror of this transformation of a group of average people into a mob thirsting for blood is clearly more important to Arlt than his concern for communicating artistically the interchangeability of fantasy and reality.

La fiesta del hierro includes innumerable grotesque contrasts and contradictions between the real and the fantastic; besides the supernatural power of Baal Moloc, marble statues come to life as demonic or angelic figures. These bizarre aspects of the play are intermingled with very real and normal circumstances. In addition, there are violent juxtapositions between the apparent and actual natures of the characters. The entire final act is eerie and bizarre as the spectator views Carlitos wearing a scarlet tunic and sandals which make him appear as if he were an ancient priest. Strange choruses echo throughout the scene, in which guests praise Baal Moloc and plead for gold, bloodshed, and war. The action takes place around the extraordinary idol itself, whose unusual appearance underscores not only the horror of the occasion but also Arlt's social criticism:

A pesar de su prodigiosa estatura, el cuerpo del dios causa una impresión de pesadez primitiva, con sus extendidas alas de murciélago y la enorme cabeza de elefante, que es la de soldado actual con máscara de gases. (III, i)

Baal Moloc appears to be simultaneously ancient and modern, symbolizing a throwback to ancient times which occurs in the contemporary period. The entire Baal Moloc episode illustrates Arlt's vision of a grotesque world where the familiar suddenly becomes strange and ominous. A seemingly festive occasion is transformed without warning into a Kafkaesque nightmare.⁹ Baal Moloc is a symbol of the evil which Arlt envisions possessing contemporary man and bringing forth war, greed, and corruption. Again, the fantastic elements here function as a sub-theme to these socially oriented implications.

In conclusion, the essential difference between *La fiesta del hierro* and his other plays is that in this particular work Arlt's criticism of the imperfections of society becomes the dominant theme. Although his earlier plays contained underlying social elements, the playwright appeared to be more interested in character development and in the relationship between reality and fantasy. There are fewer characters in the preceding plays; *Trescientos millones* and *El fabricante de fantasmas* have only one main character, while *Prueba de amor* contains two. Although *Saverio el cruel* concentrates mainly on the character of Saverio, the entrance of Susana and her friends might be looked upon as a precursor to the dramatist's concern for classes or groups in his later plays. *La isla desierta* is Arlt's first play to deal principally with a group; an entire office abandons

the frustration and tedium of its prosaic world and for a few precious moments enters a fantasy world. This newly formed interest in the group rather than in the individual leads to Arlt's first truly social play, *La fiesta del hierro*. As in *La isla desierta*, a group rather than an individual departs from the real world into the realm of fantasy. The workers from Armstrong's armament factory are all united by greed and indifference. There is no psychological distinction among the characters in the work, as they all prove to be malicious and evil. Arlt subordinates all themes and treatment of characters in *La fiesta del hierro* to a vicious attack on the world that surrounds him.

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Notes

1. Raúl Castagnino, *El teatro de Roberto Arlt* (La Plata: La Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 1964), p. 75.
2. Mirta Arlt, *Roberto Arlt: teatro completo* (2 vols., Buenos Aires: Editorial Schapire, 1968), I, iii. All quotations are from this edition of his theatre.
3. Jaime Giordano, "Roberto Arlt o la metafísica del siervo," *Atenea*, XLV, CLXVI, No. 419 (1968), p. 74.
4. *Standard Dictionary of Folklore* (N.Y.: Funk and Wagnall Co., 1950), p. 100: "Baal—the Cult of Malkhart, the baal of Tyre, reached prominence in Palestine under Ahab and Jezebel and brought forth denunciation from the prophets because of its license, human sacrifice. . . ."
5. Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: MacMillan Company, abridged ed., 1951), p. 327.
6. Jaime Plaza, in Nira Etchenique, *Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: La Mandrágora, 1962), pp. 109-110.
7. Mirta Arlt, II, p. 94.
8. See my article on "Pirandellism in the Theatre of Roberto Arlt," *LATR*, 7/1 (Fall, 1974), 40-41.
9. For a discussion of Roberto Arlt and the grotesque tradition, see my article, "The Grotesque Tradition and the Interplay of Fantasy and Reality in the Plays of Roberto Arlt," *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 4 (Spring-Summer, 1976), 7-14.