Reading *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov as Fantastic Literature

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Abstract

Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is a much-studied classic of Russian literature, often discussed in relation to its political, philosophical, and religious themes. However, very little critical attention has been paid to another major strand of the novel: its use of the fantastic and its place within the fantastic canon. This essay demonstrates how *The Master and Margarita* performs the functions of a fantasy novel as described by Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Jackson asserts that fantasy is a means of expressing "the unsaid and unseen of a culture." However, the assumed culture for much of her theory is a "secularised culture produced by capitalism," i.e. a western and Anglocentric conception of culture. I demonstrate how her theory both functions and requires adaptation within the Soviet-Communist context of Russia in the 1930s. In doing so, I situate Bulgakov within the genre of fantasy and suggest ways in which fantastic theory can shift its focus away from the Anglocentric.

Keywords

Russian Literature, Bulgakov, Rosemary Jackson, fantasy, subversion

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Article

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov has been much analysed since its publication in 1967. It is a complex novel, both in terms of structure and theme, and the interwoven historical, political, and religious subject matter has led to countless different, often contradictory, readings of the text. It has been read as political satire (Merrill), as an early post-modernist work (Tumanov), and as religious allegory (Weeks, "Hebraic"). However, one area of interest has been largely neglected within this complicated critical discourse. The fantastical elements of the novel such as the witches, the demons, and the 'black magic' have been largely elided, or else attributed to the religious strand of the text and set aside. When listing potential faults of Bulgakov's work, Vladmir Lakshin refers to "the one sidedness of his talent, the subjectivity of his social criteria and emotions [...] and his fondness for fantasy, mysticism and so on" (74). That a "fondness for fantasy" is listed amongst his faults leads one to question what exactly the novel would be about without it. It is also noteworthy that fantastic criticism does not often include *The Master and Margarita* within its canon. For instance, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, despite listing over 300 texts ranging from *Beowulf* to *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* in its chronology of fantasy, makes no mention of *The Master and Margarita*.

Similarly, Rosemary Jackson's analysis of the fantastic in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* makes no reference to the novel, despite having close analysis of other Russian fantasists such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Nikolai Gogol. Jackson's emphasis on the subversive nature of the fantastic is particularly apt for an analysis of *The Master and Margarita*, a novel that revels in subverting the norms of both Stalinist Russia and established Christian doctrine. I will also highlight some ways in which Bulgakov diverges from Jackson's definition of the fantastic, primarily in her assertion that "the modern fantastic, the form of literary fantasy within the secularized culture produced by capitalism, is a subversive literature" (180). This emphasis on capitalism, whilst true within a Euro-American context, does not account for Bulgakov's subversive marvellous fantasy produced within the Soviet-Communist context of Russia. Jackson excludes stories with a marvellous explanation from her definition of subversive fantasy, and yet it is precisely the marvellous nature of the text that makes *The Master and Margarita* subversive within its context; therefore, an analysis of the text that fails to acknowledge the magic fails to apprehend its full subversive potential.

In order to apply Jackson's theories to *The Master and Margarita*, one must first summarise her ideas about the fantastic. She identifies the fantastic as a literary mode, deriving her theory from an expansion of the ideas of Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Todorov identifies the fantastic as existing between the opposite poles of the uncanny (events with a natural explanation, possible within our conception of reality) and the marvellous (events with a supernatural explanation, impossible within mimetic realism). His fantastic mode

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exists between mimesis and the supernatural, sustained by the hesitation between the two explanations:

> If he [the reader] decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous. (41)

A resolution that rules out either mimetic explanation or the supernatural would therefore change the genre of the text, making it either uncanny or marvellous as opposed to purely fantastic. Jackson draws a historical timeline that progresses from earlier romantic marvellous literature, such as fairy tales, “towards an increasingly scientific and rationalist world view” in the modern fantastic (32). She makes some alterations to Todorov’s system:

> The uncanny [...] is not a literary category, whereas the marvellous is. It is perhaps more helpful to define the fantastic as a literary mode rather than a genre, and to place it between the opposite modes of the marvellous and the mimetic. The way in which it operates can then be understood by its combination of elements of these two different modes. (31-32)

This aligns well with an analysis of *The Master and Margarita* as it combines elements of the mimetic mode, such as the specificity of place descriptions within Moscow, with elements of the marvellous mode, such as flying on broomsticks and talking cats. It conforms closely to Jackson’s description of the fantastic as “between the marvellous and mimetic, borrowing the extravagance of one and the ordinariness of the other” (35). Woland and his retinue are nothing if not extravagant, and the people and petty infighting of Moscow nothing if not ordinary. It is the dramatisation of this contrast that gives the novel both its sense of humour and its source of tension. However, *The Master and Margarita* clearly lands in favour of a supernatural explanation of events, placing it firmly within the realm of the marvellous for both Jackson and Todorov.

Jackson mentions two related concepts as literary forerunners to the fantastic, namely the menippean genre and the carnival. She describes menippea:

> A genre which broke the demands of historical realism or probability. The menippea moved easily in space between this world, an underworld and an upper world. It conflated past, present and future, and allowed dialogues with the dead. States of hallucination, dream, insanity, eccentric behaviour and speech, personal transformation, extraordinary situations, were the norm. (14)

Quite literally every aspect of this description is featured in *The Master and Margarita*. The narrative moves between Moscow, the underworld of Satan's Grand Ball, and the upper world that Pilate and Yeshua travel along the moonbeam path. Time is suspended during the ball, Margarita communes with all of the long dead guests (273-287), Ivan spends much of the text in an psychiatric hospital dreaming of Pilate (79-86), and half of Moscow, including Margarita and her maid, are transformed at one point or another (242-259). Indeed, many critics, including the Russian Lakshin and the American critic Ellendea Proffer, have suggested reading the novel as menippean satire. Jackson refers to Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* as her primary source for the menippea and carnival. She summarises that Bakhtin "points towards fantasy's hostility to static, discrete units, to its juxtaposition of incompatible elements [...] through its 'misrule,' it permits 'ultimate questions' about social order, or metaphysical riddles as to life's purpose" (15). Moreover, Bakhtin links menippea to the notion of carnival: "carnival was a public activity, a ritualised, festive event [...] everyone is an active participant [...] the carnival life is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to a degree 'life turned inside out', 'life the wrong way round'" (Jackson 15-16). Laura D. Weeks also cites Bakhtin in her critical companion to *The Master and Margarita* in relation to the carnival aspects of the novel:

> The genesis for his definition was the medieval mystery plays given on church feast days and invariably accompanied by an atmosphere of horseplay, crude humour, farce and revelry. The collision of the eternal (the Passion story, often presented in starkly realistic detail) and the ephemeral allowed carnival goers to air their social and economic grievances and, most important, to set the prevailing social and moral order on its head. The analogy between this ritual and Bulgakov's novel, where the Passion story is set off by the antics of Korovyov and Behemoth, hardly needs to be spelled out. (18)

This scholarship establishes the clear link between *The Master and Margarita*, menippea, and carnival, the very genres that Jackson identifies as ancestors to the fantastic.

Within the area of the marvellous, we see the strongest discrepancies between Jackson's theories of subversion and Bulgakov's novel. Jackson views the marvellous (the supernatural) as conforming to and reconciling with dominant ideological traditions. Within the marvellous she includes "fairy story, romance, magic and supernaturalism" (33). She also makes broad statements about the form of the marvellous as differing from the fantastic, saying that the marvellous "is a form which discourages reader participation, representing events which are in the long distant past, contained and fixed by a long temporal perspective and carrying the implication that their effects have long since ceased to disturb" (33). Her distinct separation of the marvellous and the fantastic is out of step with modern scholarship and needlessly exclusionary towards the presence of magic in subversive literature. Farah Mendlesohn's theory of intrusion fantasy, for instance, would not fit within Jackson's characterisation of the marvellous, many examples of which are set within a

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contemporary timeline and involve the invasion of some marvellous force into an ordinary primary world. Mendlesohn describes intrusion fantasy as when "the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated [...] in a few cases the intrusion wins but there is always a return of some kind" (115). This is reminiscent of *The Master and Margarita*, as the world of Moscow is disrupted by the demonic invasion of Woland. The epilogue of the text, in which the city returns to relative normalcy, can be seen as the "return" as described by Mendlesohn. Jackson attempts to describe the marvellous as a sort of domesticated version of the fantastic, a means of silencing its potency:

> As an 'art' of unreason, and of desire, fantasy has persistently been silenced, or rewritten, in transcendental rather than transgressive terms. Its threatened undoing [...] of dominant structures has been remade, recovered into moral allegory and magical romance [...] Otherness is transmuted into idealism by romance writers and is muted [...] Fantasies moving towards the realm of the 'marvellous' are the ones who have been tolerated and widely disseminated socially. (173)

The difficulty with Jackson's conception of the marvellous as a regressive mode, a tamed version of the fantastic, is that it assumes a particular and narrow scope to the marvellous. Given that both are conceived in opposition to the real, both are capable of tracing "the unsaid and unseen of culture" (4). The introduction of 'real' magic does not seem to prevent that function in any meaningful way.

Mark Amusin suggests a manner in which both modes might be read within the novel in his essay "'Your Novel Has Some More Surprises in Store for You' (The Specificity of the Fantastic in The Master and Margarita)," though he approaches it using Todorov's theories of the fantastic and the marvellous. He suggests that when the Master meets Ivan in the psychiatric hospital, the novel shifts from the plausibly pure fantastic to the "fantastically miraculous" (64), i.e. the category bordering the fantastic and the marvellous. Amusin marks the moment when the Master tells Ivan that "yesterday at Patriarch's Pond you had a meeting with Satan" as the point for this shift (Bulgakov 112), as if speaking the idea aloud is more definitive evidence of the supernatural than, for instance, Woland predicting the death of Berlioz. This is arguably because the Master provides outside corroboration and confirmation for Ivan's beliefs, cutting off a natural explanation of events as occurring within Ivan's mind. However, Amusin does not believe that this marks a shift entirely away from Todorov's fantastic uncertainty. This revelation might be expected to remove all ambiguity about the nature of the events of the novel, offering a clear if marvellous explanation:

> But the matter is not that simple. We must first note that the series of amazing events in the novel does not end at this point, for all that the reader has by now accepted as axiomatic the magical omnipotence of Woland and his retinue. The unexpected plot twists and

> improbable situations continue to impress themselves on the reader's attention and imagination, particularly in the first few chapters of part 2, which lead up to Satan's ball and describe it. This effect is further reinforced by the replacement of one "naive character," who is located at the epicenter of the improbable events but is incapable of connecting them with life as he knows it (Ivan Bezdomny), by a new character—Margarita Nikolayevna. (Amusin 5)

Thus the fantastic ambiguity is not maintained for the reader so much by the content, which has become clearly marvellous, as by the shifts in perspective to different naive characters experiencing the strangeness for the first time. The exact specifics of the magic system are also oblique enough to leave some sense of wonder and confusion for the reader.

Whilst Amusin utilises Todorov's theories on fantastic uncertainty for his analysis, Jackson diverges from Todorov within the area of psychoanalysis. Todorov rejects psychoanalytical readings of fantasy, saying that "psychosis and neurosis are not the explication of the themes of fantastic literature" (154). Jackson critiques this:

> Yet his attention to themes of self and other, of 'I' and 'not-I' opens onto issues of interrelationship and of the determination of relations between human subjects by unconscious desire, issues which can only be understood by turning to psychoanalysis. (61)

In turning to psychoanalysis, she discusses Freud's references to *das Heimlich* and *das Unheimlich*, e.g. the familiar and homely versus the "unfamiliar, uncomfortable, strange and alien" (Jackson 65). However, both terms contain a double meaning. *Das Heimlich* also refers to "that which is concealed from others," whereas *das Unheimlich* "functions to discover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight" (65). The uncanny reflects both definitions simultaneously; "it uncovers what is hidden and, by doing so, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar" (65). The same function can be seen in fantastic literature, which "transforms the real through this kind of discovery" (65). A potential application of this within the novel might be the defamiliarisation of the Passion story in the Pilate chapters. The Passion story is a theological reality rather than a secular one, but it would be familiar and concrete for most readers, an established 'fact' within the Christian tradition, creating a sense of the uncanny and the strange in its alteration. Minor alterations such as Yeshua's insistence that he "has no donkey" and that he "did enter Yershalaim through the Shushan Gate, but on foot" (Bulgakov 19) serve to unsettle the reader's established perceptions of a well-known and comforting cultural norm. A more direct example of the uncanny in Bulgakov is the scene between Rimsky, the financial director of the theatre, and Varenukha, his employee turned vampire by Woland and his retinue. Rimsky notes that "he had been all alone on the second floor for some time, and the thought filled him with an uncontrollable child-like dread [...] and here it seemed to him that a smell of damp decay had suddenly seeped

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under the office door" (127). Here the familiarity, even the banality, of the office setting is made unfamiliar and unsettling by the invasion of the smell. The appearance of Varenukha serves to heighten the contrast between the normal and the strange. The familiar figure provides relief to Rimsky; "it came as a great joy" to see him until he notices that "Ivan Savelyevich Varenukha had become unrecognisable" (129). This twisting of the familiar serves as an embodiment of Freud's uncanny in fantasy literature.

Jackson also outlines Freud's phylogenetic (cultural) and ontogenetic (individual) evolutionary stages of development, which can be applied in interesting ways to the fantastic mode and Bulgakov in particular. In the phylogenetic Animistic first stage of childhood "men ascribe omnipotence to themselves" through ontogenetic narcissism and auto-eroticism (71). Likewise, in the phylogenetic second stage, Religious "power is transferred to gods, yet the individual believes he has some influence with them" (71); this stage corresponds with attachment to love objects. The third Scientific stage "leaves no room for human omnipotence. The subject becomes resigned to the laws of necessity and the inevitability of death" (71); this stage corresponds with abandonment to reality principle. Jackson draws a historical parallel with these stages, suggesting that "a child's growth from a narcissistic stage of self-love to a reality principle corresponds, on an individual level, to the movement of cultural history from a magical to a scientific world view" (71). She implies that a magical thought mode relates to childhood, whereas adulthood relates to the development of a scientific world view. This argument coheres with the commonly held belief that marvellous texts are for children and will be grown out of.

However, recent scholarship has begun to move away from this strictly progress-based narrative towards a more complex understanding of the relationship between magical thinking and science, and could provide another lens through which to view the seemingly chaotic events of the novel. In Karen Armstrong's *History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, she delineates mythos and logos as "art versus science," "spirituality versus worldliness" and "values versus fact" (Richards 9). Building on her work, Graham Richards suggests that "Mythos refers to those broad frameworks of value and meaning in terms of which we conduct and evaluate our lives and experience the universe as a whole," whereas "Logos on the other hand refers to our practical and problem-solving understanding of how the world works, our grasps both of physical cause–effect relationships and how to exercise social power over others" (Richards 9). Viewed through this lens, the conversation between Berlioz, Ivan and Woland at Patriarch's Pond takes on a different meaning. Berlioz and Ivan speak in support of their own mythos, the frameworks of value and meaning of that time created under the influence of the Stalinist regime. Berlioz says that "In our country atheism does not surprise anyone […] the majority of our population consciously and long ago ceased believing in the fairytales about God" (Bulgakov 23). This argument frames belief in God and the birth of Jesus as fantastical, akin to magical or mythos-based thinking, and their argument strongly resembles that of Jackson, equating disbelief with historical progress. However, their

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continued adherence to this position despite the literal appearance of the devil and the clear evidence of magic before their eyes shows the strength of their indoctrination within the "broad frameworks of value and meaning" rigidly enforced within Stalinist Russia. The marvellous is used as a device to draw out these contradictions and expose both the rigidity and the absurdity of blind devotion to an ideological system.

Jackson identifies the demonic as a core preoccupation of the fantastic, with particular emphasis upon those within the Faustian tradition (53-60). Briefly summarised, the Faust myth stems from a classic German legend in which Faust makes a deal with the devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. Later iterations of the story such as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Goethe's *Faust* would expand upon the myth and lead to its continued relevance within literature and popular culture. Faustian allusions can be found throughout *The Master and Margarita*, even in the clothing worn by Woland: "under his arm he carried a stick with a black knob shaped like a poodle's head" (21). This is an allusion to the appearance of Mephistopheles as a black poodle in Goethe's *Faust*. Jackson argues that "within a supernatural economy, or magical thought mode, otherness is designated as otherworldly, supernatural, as being above or outside the human" and "the other tends to be identified as an evil force: Satan, the devil, the demon" (53). She goes on to say:

> In religious fantasies and pagan ones, this context of supernaturalism/magic locates good and evil *outside* the merely human, in a different dimension. It is a displacement of human responsibility on to the level of destiny: human action is seen as operating under the controlling influence of Providence. (53)

In some ways this conforms quite well to the events of *The Master and Margarita*. It is unclear whether Woland causes or merely predicts the death of Berlioz under the tram car, but it can certainly be described as 'destined' or out of man's control. Even Margarita, arguably the character with the greatest amount of agency within the novel, acts at the behest of Woland and his retinue. Turning specifically to the Faust narrative, Jackson observes a progression from supernatural conceptions of the demonic to more internalised portrayals of the demonic as other, i.e. the demonic as a "projection of the unconscious part of the self" (55). She asserts that "Goethe's articulation of this demonism is apposite to an understanding of the modern fantastic, in its apprehension of otherness as a force which is neither good, nor evil" (55-56). Later transformations of the Faust myth such as Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* would continue this trend towards a morally ambiguous rather than evil demon. Bulgakov's Woland fits within this category, treading the line between good and evil or eschewing it altogether.

The Faustian elements of *The Master and Margarita* should be considered within the wider context of socialist satanism in literature, and more specifically within the Russian iteration of that

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tradition. Per Faxneld outlines a long tradition of the valorisation of Satan within the socialist democratic tradition, with Satan protrayed as an advocate for rebellion against authoritarian control, his rebellion against God likened to rebellion against the state. Russian revolutionaries like Mikhail Bakunin have viewed Satan as “symboliz[ing] revolt and reason” (Faxneld 538). An extract from the 1897 publication *Loki: Pamphlet for Youth* offers an explanation for the use of mythological figures in socialist publications: “Loki, Prometheus, Lucifer, these beautifully concocted figures of myth, are all symbolic expressions of one and the same thing: the spirit of liberation… the human lust for rebellion, the battle between oppressor and oppressed” (Faxneld 547). Echoes of this sentiment can be found within *The Master and Margarita*, in that Woland does indeed inspire rebellion and bring about liberation for those willing to embrace his spirit.

Valentin Boss makes a similar argument to Faxneld specifically in relation to the rise of Russian satanism, though he focuses on Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Boss contends that Goethe’s Faustian iteration of Satan was more widely tolerated and flourished in Russia because it was associated with Germanic legend, whereas Milton’s Satan was less widely allowed and therefore less popularised because of its closer association with the Bible (235). In this respect Bulgakov conforms to the more popular use of a Faustian Satan within the Russian tradition, likely influenced by its prevalence within the public consciousness and other literary works. However, Bulgakov is subversive within this tradition in that he satirises the idea that Satan would be on the side of the Bolshevik rebellion, turning it upon its head and exposing the Stalinist regime as the oppressor to be rebelled against.

Another intriguing interpretation of Bulgakov’s devil is offered by Vladimir Tumanov in his essay *Diabolus Ex Machina: Bulgakov’s Modernist Devil*. He describes Woland as “a definite redeemer, playing a messianic role in a wicked society where nothing short of a supernatural power can alter the course of events. Thus, Bulgakov's Devil appears as an allegory for spiritual, artistic and physical liberation” (51). This argument offers an inversion of the usual ‘evil’ role ascribed to the devil; here he is a force for freedom and deliverance from mundanity and petty societal laws. He also suggests a compelling function for the magic, or marvellous, within the novel:

> Woland's magic is, however, but a means to fulfilling his ultimate mission: the liberation of love, faith and art. All three are intertwined in *Master i Margarita*, and they represent exactly that which was lacking or suppressed in the Soviet Russia of the 1930s. (56)

This final point is most relevant to our categorisation of *The Master and Margarita* within Jackson’s mode of the fantastic as literary subversion. Jackson identifies that “fantasies produced within a capitalist economy express some of the debilitating psychological effects of inhabiting a materialistic culture,” but this does not encompass the variety of other contexts in which twentieth century fantasy developed (4). The novel itself is illustrative of the dangers of suppressing or

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denying the marvellous, as evidenced by the fate of Berlioz at Satan's Ball. As punishment for denying his existence, Woland tells Berlioz that "there is a theory that says to each man it will be given according to his own beliefs. May it be so! You are departing into non-being, and, from the goblet into which you are being transformed, I will have the pleasure of drinking a toast to being" (Bulgakov 233).

A reading of the novel that fails to acknowledge the marvellous, or views it as secondary or unrelated to the political, makes this same fatal error. So much of Jackson's analysis of the fantastic mode adheres to *The Master and Margarita*: the novel's relationship to carnival and mennipea, its use of Faustian motifs, its tendency towards the uncanny and *das Unheimlich*. Most importantly, it contains the subversive function "to trace the unsaid and unseen of culture" (4). However, the crux of the difficulty in reconciling this text to the theory is that the "unsaid and unseen" of Soviet Russia in 1930, a socialist and atheistic society, might well erupt in a profusion of the marvellous rather than the fantastic. Jackson's theories can help us to merge the political, historical, and marvellous elements, providing an integrated reading of the seemingly disparate elements, but only if they can be allowed to accommodate the magic as real.

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