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by

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**The Variety Theater in *The Master and Margarita*:
A Portrait of Soviet Life in 1930s Moscow**

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Report

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Dedication

To my husband, John, who has provided immeasurable encouragement and support throughout this graduate program and to Maya Nikolaevna Yegorushkina, who first believed in me.

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Abstract

The Variety Theater in *The Master and Margarita*: A Portrait of Soviet Life in 1930s Moscow

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Mikhail Bulgakov's satirical novel *The Master and Margarita* offers a humorous and caustic depiction of 1930s Moscow. Woven around the premise of a visit by the devil to the fervently atheistic Soviet Union, it is directed against the repressive bureaucratic social order of the time.

In chapter 12 of the book, the devil appears onstage at the Variety Theater and turns Moscow on its head. By appealing to their greed and desire for status, he turns the spectators into the spectacle. A close reading of the text confirms that the Theater is much more than a fictional setting for the chapter. Instead, it serves as a backdrop for a disturbing portrait of human frailty, a scathing criticism of Soviet bureaucracy and hypocrisy, and unmistakable references to real-life Moscow institutions and to the author's personal experiences during the tumultuous 1930s.

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Author's note: All English-language citations from Bulgakov's original text are from the 1995 edition of Burgin and O'Connor's translation of *The Master and Margarita*.

Introduction

The 1930s were a time of suffering and shortages in the Soviet Union. With the end of free trade in 1929, food, clothing, and dry goods had become scarce, and long lines frequently formed at poorly stocked state stores. Soviet authorities had begun to ration all basic foodstuffs and clothing, and by early 1930 rationing was in effect throughout the country. The first of Stalin's Five-Year Plans required enormous material sacrifices on the part of the population. In an effort to industrialize the country as rapidly as possible, Soviet leaders channeled all available resources into building new factories, primarily in heavy industry. This emphasis on manufacturing and industrial infrastructure led to woefully inadequate expenditures in the consumer sector, which in turn led to disastrous shortages in food, clothing, and housing. Industrial workers, who received priority for most goods, experienced a catastrophic fall in living standards, while other groups in the population, particularly peasants, actually starved (Davies 463).

Since the great majority of Russians struggled to obtain basic necessities during the 1930s, Western goods, including fine fashions and accessories, were practically unheard of. At the same time, official Soviet culture, which retained much of its revolutionary asceticism, condemned interest in material possessions and portrayed them as signs of bourgeois decadence. The newspaper *Komsomolskaia pravda* called jewelry and feminine clothes a symptom of bourgeois contamination (Naiman 183), and Solts, in a detailed discussion of ethical and unethical behavior, forbade personal enrichment and

declared that jewelry aroused “aesthetic indignation” (Guseinov 153-162). It was both during and about this period of austerity and struggle that Mikhail Bulgakov wrote his satirical novel *The Master and Margarita*.

The Master and Margarita offers a humorous and caustic criticism of Soviet society in the 1930s and is considered one of the foremost Soviet satires. Woven around the premise of a visit by the devil to the fervently atheistic Soviet Union, it is directed against the repressive bureaucratic social order of the time. While it satirizes many aspects of Soviet life, the novel also portrays human struggle, both inward and outward.

In chapter 12 of the book, Bulgakov uses the theater, a location where fantasy and reality frequently mingle, as the backdrop for some devilish mayhem. A closer look at the action, however, reveals both overt and covert allusions that when uncovered, demonstrate a depth and complexity of language that is difficult to appreciate at first glance. Like other master writers, Bulgakov offers in this chapter—and the entire book—much more than an entertaining fictional narrative. He presents a disturbing portrait of human frailty, a scathing criticism of Soviet bureaucracy and hypocrisy, and unmistakable references to real-life Moscow institutions and to his personal experiences during the tumultuous 1930s.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN CHAPTER 12: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

In chapter 12, the temptation of luxuries and riches is presented to the citizens of Moscow by the devil—in the guise of a character named Woland—and his retinue. At the beginning of the book Woland is referred to not as the devil but as a stranger, a

visiting professor from Germany, evoking mixed feelings in Ivan and Berlioz, his first contacts in Moscow. Professor Woland is hypocritical and sly, but also noble and generous. These contradictions in his personality are mirrored in his appearance: “Right eye black, left—for some reason, green. Black eyebrows, but one was higher than the other. In a word—a foreigner” (6). He claims that he was with Pontius Pilate when Pilate sentenced Jesus and that he is able to predict the future. The people in Moscow try to rationalize his supernatural gifts, because otherwise they end up in psychiatric hospitals.

Woland and his attendants wreak havoc on Moscow. They predict one man’s death and cause other people to disappear. They organize a show of black magic, during which money falls from the ceiling and gorgeous new clothing is offered to the ladies in attendance. But these lavish offerings are just an illusion; shortly thereafter the same women find that the clothing they had been wearing has vanished, and the money that had initially appeared authentic has been transformed into ordinary bits of paper. Only later in the novel, at Satan’s Ball, does Woland drop his disguise as a visiting professor and reveal his true identity.

Who exactly is this Woland character? Woland, leader of the world of supernatural forces, is the devil, Satan, “prince of darkness” and “spirit of evil and lord of shadows.” All of these definitions, according to Sokolov, appear in the text of the novel. Bulgakov bases the character of Woland, with his decidedly un-Russian name, in large part on the character of Mephistopheles that is found in both Goethe’s poetic and Gounod’s operatic versions of *Faust*. The name Woland is taken from Goethe’s poem, where it is mentioned just once, and is usually omitted in Russian translations. In the

scene that takes place on Walpurgis Night, Mephistopheles, demanding that the evil spirits give way to him, declares “Junker Voland kommt!” In Sokolovsky’s 1902 prose translation of *Faust*, the author explains the German phrase “Junker Voland kommt” as follows: *Junker* means grandee (nobleman), and Woland was one of the names of the devil. The base word *Faland*, meaning deceiver or evil, had already been used by writers in much earlier references to the devil (Sokolov 249). Bulgakov himself refers to the name Faland when, after the black magic show at the Variety Theater, the staff of the Theater try to remember the magician’s name: “Wo...Woland, I think.” And are you sure it was Woland? Well, maybe not. Maybe it was Faland. The Bureau of Foreigners had never heard of any magician named Woland or Faland” (156).

Fagot, the buffoon or jester, is another name for Koroviev, the eldest member of Woland’s retinue; the retired choirmaster, interpreter, and spokesman for the group. Koroviev usually wears a checkered suit, a jockey's cap and a pince-nez. Sometimes, as at Patriarch's Ponds, he introduces himself as a choirmaster, and at other times as the interpreter-translator of a foreign consultant (Woland) who “needs no interpreting.”

The character of Koroviev has a number of literary associations. The description of his outward appearance refers to the devil that torments Ivan in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, and he shares that character’s impudent, over-familiar manner, a characteristic that Bulgakov, according to his own words, could not bear (Burgin and O’Connor 345). Koroviev's profession as choirmaster connects him to the bandmaster Kreisler, a character in E. T. A. Hoffman’s book *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr*, or *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*. This bandmaster was also accompanied by a

cat that, like Behemoth, displayed human characteristics. (The cat in Hoffman's work, however, is a self-taught animal who has written his own autobiography.)

The name Koroviev is derived from the Russian word *корова*, or cow, which reminds one of the Golden Calf with which Mephistopheles celebrates the omnipotence of money in Gounod's *Faust*. His other name, Fagot, which Woland introduces in this chapter, connects him to the many musical themes in the novel. While Fagot, meaning bassoon, is a musical reference in Russian, it means a silly person or trickster in French and Italian, hence Bulgakov's description of him in this chapter as *заеп*, or jester.

Behemoth, the giant cat that appears on stage with Woland, is the Hebrew name given to a mythical beast mentioned in the Book of Job. *Беземом* is also the Russian word for hippopotamus. In sources on magic, he is listed as the grand cup-bearer to Satan (Burgin and O'Connor 346). In addition, in Goethe's *Faust*, a poodle (Mephistopheles in disguise) turns into a hippo at the very moment that Faust translates from the Gospels.

According to Sokolov, Bulgakov found inspiration for the character of Behemoth in M. A. Orlov's 1904 book, "The History of Human Relations with the Devil," extracts of which are preserved in Bulgakov's archives. Orlov's book describes Anne des Anges, the Mother Superior of a monastery in France, who lived during the seventeenth century. She was obsessed with the seven princes of hell, including the fifth one, Behemoth. This devil is depicted as a monster with an elephant's head, trunk and tusks, hands resembling those of humans, and an enormous belly, short tail, and thick hind legs like a hippo. The Behemoth in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* also displays these large proportions, and he has human-like hands that allow him, even though he is a cat, to do

such things as pour himself a drink or hand the conductress on the “A” tram a ten-kopeck coin. In an earlier edition of the novel, Behemoth also displayed characteristics of an elephant: “На зов из чёрной пасти камина вылез чёрный кот *на толстых, словно дутых лапах...*” (71).

During the retinue’s final flight, Behemoth loses his tail and fur and becomes “a lean youth, a demon-page, the best jester the world has ever known” (322). Near him flies Koroviev-Fagot, a “dark-violet knight with an extremely somber face that never smiled” (321). Here we see an apparent reference to the humorous “legend of the cruel knight” from the 1928 story *Life of Stepan Aleksandrovich Lososinov*, written by Sergey Zayaitzky, a friend of Bulgakov’s. In this legend, Zayaitzky’s knight had a passion for tearing off the heads of animals. Bulgakov passes on this passion to his character Behemoth, who tears off the head of George Bengalsky, the master of ceremonies at the Variety Theater.

In demonological tradition, Behemoth is the demon of the desires of the stomach, hence the extraordinary gluttony he displays in the *Torgsin* store, where he indiscriminately swallows everything edible. Muscovites, too, are seemingly overcome by the demon of gluttony as they rush into the *Torgsin* to buy delicacies, while outside of the capital, people live hand to mouth. According to Sokolov, Bulgakov and his wife, with the hard currency the writer received for performances of his plays abroad, occasionally shopped at *Torgsin*. Through the character of Behemoth, then, Bulgakov mocks not only the patrons of the hard-currency store, but also himself.

Black Magic and Its Exposé: A Linguistic and Historical Analysis

Chapter 12 of *The Master and Margarita* is entitled “Чёрная магия и её разоблачение,” or “Black Magic and Its Exposé.” This chapter is set in the fictitious Variety Theater in Moscow, where Woland and his retinue are scheduled to perform black magic. Following their performance, they are to reveal their techniques. Bulgakov’s choice of the word *разоблачение*, or *exposé*, in the title is particularly apt. The word comes from the verb *облачить* and the prefix *раз-*. *Облачить* means to put on clothing, in the sense of the ordination or investiture of a priest. *Разоблачение*, then, suggests the removal of clothing, foreshadowing the role that clothing will play in this chapter. Indeed the *exposé* during Woland’s black magic act is a literal one.

THE GUILLI FAMILY ACROBATS

The chapter opens with a colorful description of a bicycle act on stage at the Variety Theater. As the chapter opens, so too does the act. There is no initial background information about the Theater or about this particular performance, so Bulgakov allows the reader to feel the same anticipation and wonder as the spectators. While the title of the chapter suggests black magic, the opening lines of the chapter are anything but dark and evil. Instead, they are colorful and comical. If viewed as a commentary on Soviet bureaucracy, Bulgakov characterizes bureaucrats as clowns. The first to appear onstage is “a little man with a pear-shaped, raspberry-colored nose, wearing checked trousers, patent-leather shoes, and a yellow bowler hat full of holes” (98). He is the quintessential

clown: sunny and appealing, from his brightly colored clothes and shiny boots to his fruity (pear-shaped, raspberry colored) nose. He rides onto the stage on an ordinary bicycle, creating the illusion of normalcy. He circles the stage to the accompaniment of a foxtrot, a popular dance during the 20s and 30s, then lets out a triumphal cry as he lifts the front wheel off the ground, foreshadowing how things will soon turn upside down. Things are not always as they seem, as the reader will soon find out. The acrobat turns himself upside down and manages, at the same time, to unscrew the front wheel and send it offstage. Here, Bulgakov's particular choice of words for "he managed"—*он ухитрился*—conveys a nuance of the acrobat's being cunning or sly: *хитрый*. He then continues his ride upside-down, pedaling the remaining wheel—the back one—with his hands.

The next to sail onto the stage is a buxom blonde on a tall metal mast with a seat at the top and a wheel at the bottom. She wears a short skirt, replete with silver stars, and a leotard, or *трико*, the first of many French words that Bulgakov uses in this chapter. As they pass each other, the man shouts out greetings and with his foot, tips his hat to her.

The last to appear onstage is a child of about eight with an old man's face, who darts between the two adults on a tiny two-wheeler outfitted with a huge automobile horn. The fact that he is described as wizened may be a reference to his worldliness or to the exhaustion he feels as a result of frequent performances. Indeed, he has had to enter the work world at a very early age.

After making several loops, the three performers, to the ominous sound of drumroll, pedal up to the very edge of the stage, causing the spectators in the front rows

to gasp and draw back in their seats. The acrobats stop short of skidding off the stage and onto the musicians' heads, and with a loud cry of "Oop," they jump off their bikes and bow. The notion of the acrobats' tumbling into the abyss contains a figurative reference in addition to the literal one of their nearly falling into the orchestra pit. On a figurative level, they barely avoid falling into Hell, into Woland's world, which we enter in the next act of the performance. Ironically, while the acrobats' pedaling to the very edge of the stage appears ominous to the audience, there is no actual threat of harm. Unbeknownst to the audience, the real evil has yet to show its face.

RIMSKY'S NIGHTMARE

During the intermission, Bulgakov takes his readers backstage to find out what's happening behind the glitz and glitter of the stage. Here, the author contrasts the outward trappings of communism with the inner reality of the system. Soviet ideology, like a stage performance, is just a show. In sharp contrast to the colorful circus act just performed by the Giulli family, we find the grim financial director of the Variety Theater lost in thought as he ponders real black magic: the disappearance first of the director of the Theater, Likhodeyev, then of the manager, Varenuvka. Grigory Danilovich Rimsky sits alone in his office, biting his thin lips. Things have spun out of control for him since the disappearance of his colleagues. He is not even in control of his own face, which twitches convulsively. He is desperately in need of an exposé himself, as he appears not to understand the source of the chaos around him.

The name Rimsky, which means *Roman* in Russian, comes from that of the Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov, who wrote the symphonic suite *Scheherazade* and the well-known *Flight of the Bumblebee* from the opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. Ironically, the rational-minded Rimsky, in chapter 12 an opponent of the black magic séances being performed at the Theater, has the same name as the composer who set pagan legends and folklore to music.

And what of Rimsky's colleagues who have disappeared? First off, we know that Styopa Bogdanovich Likhodeyev, the director of the Variety Theater, lives in the notorious apartment #50 where Woland is staying. Woland has fabricated a contract containing Likhodeyev's signature, allowing him to perform seven black magic shows at the Theater. When Likhodeyev wakes up with a hangover, he finds Woland in his apartment, demanding that he make good on his contract. Woland and his retinue (and Bulgakov himself) have a low opinion of people like Likhodeyev, who hold high positions and avail themselves of such perks as government cars. Woland, then, just because he can, gets rid of him by sending him off to Yalta. The name Likhodeyev reflects Bulgakov's disdain for such bureaucrats, since *лиходе́й* means scoundrel, villain or evildoer.

It is worthy of note that in a 1929 version of *The Master and Margarita*, the name of the director of the Variety Theater was not Styopa Likhodeyev, but Garusha Pedulayev. This character was based on Tuadzhin Peizulayev, a real-life acquaintance of Bulgakov's from when he served as a doctor in Vladikavkaz, in the Caucasus, from 1919 to 1921. In this earlier version Woland sends Pedulayev not to Yalta, but to Vladikavkaz.

In later versions Pedulayev changes first into Styopa Bombeyev and then later into Likhodeyev, and in the 1937 version he gets sent to Yalta. In the final version of the novel, Likhodeyev retains a small detail from the earlier versions; he returns with a “Caucasian fur cap and a felt Cossack coat.” The real Peizulayev died in 1936, which is perhaps why Bulgakov, out of respect, replaced the Pedulayev character with Likhodeyev and sent him to Yalta instead of Vladikavkaz.

While Bulgakov may have had Likhodeyev sent to Yalta in deference to the individual upon whom he had based his character, this final destination does not appear to have been chosen at random. Indeed, the events in Yalta probably refer to Zoshchenko’s 1929 story *Earthquake*, in which the hero, Ivan Yakovlevich Snopkov, wanders through Yalta in his underwear following a drinking binge. In the story, before the earthquake mentioned in the title, Snopkov had drunk a bottle and a half of vodka, fallen asleep, and been robbed of his clothing by plunderers. (Such things were actually observed after the 1927 earthquake in Yalta.)

Ivan Savelyevich Vareukha, the second person to disappear, is the manager of the Variety Theater. After his rather rude meeting with Behemoth and Azazello, members of Woland’s retinue, Hella appears to Vareukha in the front hall of Sadovaya 302-bis, her eyes burning with a phosphorescent gleam. “Let me give you a kiss,” she says tenderly. Her kiss, however, is not an ordinary one, but the bite of a vampire. Vareukha faints and never feels the “kiss.” He in turn becomes a vampire and, together with Hella, also a member of Woland’s retinue, terrorizes Rimsky, who is saved only when a cock crows, announcing the impending dawn.

According to “A Definition of Vampire” in *Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, this crowing of a cock is a clear reference to vampires, who must spend the night searching for a victim and then return to the grave at cockcrow, when the sun rises, or when the bells ring in the morning (1154).¹ The name Vareukha comes from the word *варение* from *варить*, to brew. It's also the name of a Ukrainian cocktail made of honey, berries and spices boiled in vodka. For centuries *vareukha* was the favored drink of the fearsome Cossacks.

Back in the novel, Rimsky sits alone in his office, fearing the worst: he knows where Vareukha has gone, but he has gone there and... not come back! Rimsky hunches his shoulders and whispers to himself, “But why?” Of course, Rimsky knows very well where Vareukha has gone; he himself sent Vareukha there to “let them sort it out,” but he doesn't even dare to think the name of the secret police to himself. Vareukha has not come back from the unnamed place, which makes Rimsky suppose that he has been arrested. But he hesitates to call, since the unmentioned secret police is not an authority one spontaneously contacts. He decides, then, to take himself firmly in hand and make the call because, after all, it would be simple for a man “as businesslike as the financial director” to call the place where Vareukha has gone and find out what happened to him. Here, Bulgakov pokes fun at the notion that the mere title of “financial director” makes

¹ According to Thomas Garza (1-2), vampires have played an important role in Eastern European and Slavic cultures for centuries. From Pushkin to Gogol to Turgenev, classic Russian writers contributed major works to the vampire genre. Writers from the Soviet period, such as Bulgakov, and post-Soviet writers, including Pelevin and Lukyanenko, author of the popular *Watch* trilogy, have also featured vampires in their works. In addition to the vampires Verenukha and Hella in *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov wrote about revenants in a short story originally published in 1925, entitled “Когда мёртвые встают из гробов,” translated by Garza as “When the Dead Rise from the Grave.”

Rimsky businesslike and makes it easy for him to make such a phone call. Indeed, he is anything but businesslike. He was a coward when he sent Varenuvka away, and he is a coward now, as he tries to muster up the courage to make the unpleasant telephone call.

When Rimsky finally does work up the courage to call, he discovers that the phone is dead. Apparently, the other phones in the building are also out of order. Like rotting produce, they've gone bad: *испортились*. Writes Bulgakov, "This admittedly unpleasant but hardly supernatural occurrence completely unnerved the financial director and yet delighted him as well: he wouldn't have to make the call" (99). Here, Bulgakov's humor is twofold. First, he pokes fun at how unreliable telephones are in the day [and ultimately end up being throughout Soviet times]. Second, his admonition that the occurrence was hardly supernatural/paranormal is wonderfully ironic in light of the black magic that is to be performed later in the show. Note, too, the way Rimsky's happiness over not having to make the dreaded phone call paints him in a very childish light, not as a man in control of things. This glimpse into Rimsky's inner thoughts reflects a theme introduced earlier in the chapter, that of the outwardly powerful image versus the inwardly chaotic reality of the socialist system at the time.

Just as the intermission begins, the *курьер*, or messenger boy, comes to announce that the foreign *artiste* has arrived. [Here we see more examples of Bulgakov's use of French.] The announcement makes Rimsky wince with pain. Not only must he allow the performance of a black magic show that he didn't approve of in the first place, he also knows that he is the only one left to greet the foreign *artiste*. He turns "darker than a

storm cloud” (a foreshadowing of the upcoming scene in which money rains down from the ceiling) and heads backstage to welcome the foreigner.

WOLAND AND HIS RETINUE

While Woland waits for Rimsky, the guest artiste and his two assistants have already caused a stir backstage. Curious folks, from conjurers and roller skaters to storytellers and a make-up man, have been peering into the artiste’s dressing room, in defiance of the bells signaling the end of the intermission. It’s interesting to note here that Bulgakov refers to other conjurers/magicians, so we know that such acts already take place at the Theater, regardless of Rimsky’s opinion of such performers. All are intrigued by the artiste, to whom Bulgakov refers as a “visiting celebrity.” They are astounded by his unusually long and splendidly cut tailcoat, and by the fact that he is wearing a black eye mask. The tailcoat does more than lend an air of elegance, however. A well-tailored jacket made of fine fabric would be the envy of most Muscovites in the 1930s, a time of great shortages of consumer goods and high-quality clothing, so this particularly sumptuous tailcoat adds to the ambiance of novelty and affluence. Contrast the mystique and intrigue created by Woland with the Soviet buffoonery represented by the acrobats in the earlier act. To 1930s Muscovites, isolated from the luxuries of the West, Woland represents an exotic and sumptuous world far from the unpleasant realities of Soviet life. In contrast, bureaucrats—real-life clowns—perform what amounts to little more than a daily show for Soviet citizens. After all, the communist utopia promised by the Soviet government does not reflect everyday reality in the least.

Trying to put a smile on his face, which only makes it look sour and mean, Rimsky arrives and bows to the silent magician. No one shakes hands, but “the overly familiar fellow in checks” introduces himself as their assistant. This description of Koroviev as “overly familiar” is a criticism on the part of the author, who said, as mentioned earlier, that undue familiarity was a characteristic he could not bear. Koroviev’s appearance alongside Woland comes as an unpleasant surprise to Rimsky, since there had been absolutely no mention in the contract of a magician’s assistant. This is a wonderfully ironic passage, since Woland himself conjured up the contract in the first place, making it an altogether fraudulent document. This line also pokes fun at Soviet bureaucracy, where everything has to be spelled out to the letter.

Rimsky then inquires as to the whereabouts of the artiste’s equipment. He is described as saying this dryly and very tensely, which highlights his discomfort over the situation. Koroviev in turn tortures the financial director with overt familiarity, replying saccharinely and in a quavering voice, “Why, our most precious Director, our diamond from heaven.” Addressing him this way is not only overly familiar, it’s dreadfully paternalistic, since Koroviev uses language that one would use to address a child. He’s inferring that Rimsky is infantile and naïve. After counting to three in German, which adds an air of exoticism and plays up the notion that Woland is from Germany, he wiggles his gnarled fingers in front of Rimsky’s eyes and pulls out Rimsky’s gold watch and chain from behind the cat’s ear. Until then, it had lain securely in Rimsky’s vest pocket, beneath his buttoned jacket, with its chain looped through a buttonhole. Rimsky grabs his stomach involuntarily, a reaction that demonstrates how upset and vulnerable he

feels. Ironically, instead of sensing Rimsky's discomfort, the onlookers further humiliate him by ignoring this reaction. They are utterly transfixed by the impromptu magic trick they have just witnessed.

“Could this be your watch? Please take it,” says the fellow in checks, again smiling in an overly familiar way as he hands the flustered Rimsky his watch. Not only does Koroviev smile the paternal, knowing smile that Rimsky finds so upsetting, Bulgakov also describes his hand as dirty, which adds to his repulsiveness. (He has played a dirty trick indeed!) The onlookers, however, are impressed by the magic trick, and to add a touch of humor to the passage, Bulgakov conjures up the image of a streetcar, reminding readers of Berlioz's beheading in the opening scenes of the novel: “You wouldn't want to get on a streetcar with the likes of him,” whispers the storyteller gaily to the makeup man. In this case, the storyteller, who is probably accustomed to spinning fantastical tales, is telling the truth without even knowing it.

Next, the cat pulls a trick even more skillful than the one with Rimsky's watch. The irony in this line lies in the fact that by now, the cat's human-like qualities can easily be overlooked, as we readers have become accustomed to all sorts of pranks and magic from Woland and his retinue. Behemoth rises from the couch, walks on his hind legs to the table beneath the mirror, pulls the stopper out of the carafe, pours some water into a glass, drinks it, puts the stopper back in place, and then wipes his whiskers off with a makeup rag. This time, no one even gasps; mouths simply open wide (like children's), and the makeup man whispers enthusiastically, “Now, that's first class!” At this point, the third bell rings *тревожно*, forebodingly—perhaps heralding disturbing events to

come?—and everyone, keyed up and anticipating an exciting act, rushes out of the dressing room.

BENGALSKY OPENS THE SHOW

The lights dim in the auditorium and the footlights come on, casting a reddish glow on the bottom of the curtain. This reddish glow is reminiscent of heat rising from below, as if from hell, which is wonderfully appropriate given Woland's entrance onto the stage. The master of ceremonies then appears through the brightly lit opening in the curtain and stands before the audience. It is as though this master of ceremonies were the savior, appearing before the audience surrounded by light. He has come as a Soviet antidote to protect the audience from Woland, the evil foreigner.

Bengalsky, this master of ceremonies, is well known to all of Moscow. He is a stout fellow, clean-shaven and cheerful as a baby, and wears rumpled tails and soiled linen. What does this say about him? If he's stout, then he's well fed, unlike the average citizen during this time of food shortages. His allegiance to the party has likely provided him perks not enjoyed by most Muscovites. His merry features suggest that he is childlike and naïve. Indeed his rumpled, soiled clothing indicates that he is not entirely able to take care of himself, nor is he rich and refined enough to have someone else look after his wardrobe and appearance for him. His appearance clearly contrasts with Woland in his tailcoat and eye mask. Woland gives off an air of elegance and mystery, whereas Bengalsky is decidedly unsophisticated.

Bengalsky smiles a childish grin and begins to introduce Woland. Before he can finish, however, he interrupts himself. Perhaps he's nervous or embarrassed. Perhaps he'd planned to begin with a joke to lighten the mood before introducing the next act, but had become flustered by the hubbub behind the scenes and forgotten his plan. He does make an attempt at humor, but no one laughs; perhaps because they are so eager for the next act to begin. Bengalsky welcomes Woland, referring to him politely with a French title—*Monsieur* Woland, and explains that the famous foreign artiste will be performing black magic. Smiling a knowing smile, he adds that everyone knows there is no such thing in the world as black magic; it is nothing but superstition [which Russians actually take very seriously]. *Maestro* Woland—note the use here of yet another foreign title—is simply a master of the conjuring technique. This fact will become obvious in the most interesting part of his performance when he reveals the secrets behind his technical skill. “And so,” continues Bengalsky, “since we all applaud both expertise and its exposé, let us welcome Mr. Woland!” With a flourish of his hands, the curtain opens.

WOLAND'S GRAND ENTRANCE

The long-awaited entrance of the magician greatly impresses the audience. Here, Bulgakov refers to Woland as a *maɔ*, a magician, charmer, conjurer, or wizard. The word *maɔ* also refers to a member of a hereditary priestly class among the ancient Medes and Persians, which is very appropriate in light of the Persian rugs that he conjures up later in the chapter. Woland appears on stage with two others: his tall assistant in checks

(Bulgakov refers to him not as “tall” but as *длинный*, or long, like a bassoon,) and his cat, who walks out on stage on his hind legs.

After the curtain opens and Woland, Koroviev-Fagot and Behemoth appear, Woland quietly requests an armchair. The chair, to the surprise and delight of the audience, appears on stage out of nowhere, and the magician takes a seat. Woland's position on stage in a seat facing the audience is a reversal of what one would expect. Indeed, the Muscovites in the audience end up putting on more of a show than Woland himself that evening. Next, with no obvious intent to entertain, Woland addresses Fagot: “Have the Muscovites changed, in your opinion, in any significant way?” While at first glance this statement seems harmless enough, in the Soviet Union under Stalin it was a very subversive question to ask. After all, according to the Communist Party line, the people of the Soviet Union had achieved socialism in 1934 (Hoffman 119). They were new Soviet men and women. The *Homo soveticus* was quite a different species from any other human being on earth. They worked harder, knew more and were happier than anyone else. It would be risky for Bulgakov to claim otherwise.

So have the Muscovites changed in any significant way? “Indeed they have, Messire,” Fagot replies softly, addressing Woland with a French title of honor originally used to address persons of high rank. Bulgakov, as we have noted, deliberately employs French words within his Russian text. This is just one of many references to France and the French language in the show, lending an air of mystique to the performance. As we can see, however, Woland and Fagot are not performing at the moment, and their conversation is anything but entertaining.

“You are right,” replies Woland. “They have changed a great deal on the outside...” He goes on to mention that in addition to the way people dress, the city has changed: there are streetcars, automobiles and, adds Fagot, buses. While it appears that Woland is answering the question seriously and thoughtfully, Bulgakov does little to veil his sarcasm. In the author’s diary entry of 9 August 1924, he writes that they have introduced buses in Moscow, but that there are very few of them (Curtis 57). Later he writes on 20-21 December 1924, “They’re working out a new traffic scheme...But there is no traffic, because there are no trams; and it’s laughable, but there are only eight buses for the whole of Moscow” (58). Knowing how much Bulgakov cursed the public transportation system, one can only imagine the sarcasm he intended in these lines. Woland seems to be saying that while the city appears to have changed outwardly (and no doubt, the authorities praise these fine improvements in public transportation), there really are no significant changes for the better. Meanwhile, Grigory Danilovich Rimsky, the financial manager of the Variety Theater, grows pale and tense, fearing what Woland might say next.

At this point, our attention returns to George Bengalsky, the master of ceremonies, whose last name suggests a Bengal tiger. His first name is pronounced *Zhorzh* as the French would pronounce it, instead of the Russian *Georgy*, which makes him appear to be putting on airs. Bengalsky is also a character in Sologub’s *The Petty Demon*, where he plays an important role in the chaotic carnivalesque conclusion of the novel: a masked ball ending in fire.

In this scene, Bengalsky represents a character who played an active role in Soviet society and aroused Bulgakov's aversion as he visited popular entertainment venues: a master of ceremonies who was more a "political educator" than an entertainer, and who was there to guarantee the educational value of a given event (Proffer 346). His character is likely based on Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko, one of the directors of the *Moscow Art Theater* where Bulgakov worked. Bulgakov called him an "old cynic," and in his diary entry of 3 June 1938, he wrote that he was simply burning with impatience to show the novel [*The Master and Margarita*] to that "philistine" (Curtis 272). In his *Theatrical Novel* Bulgakov had already presented this Vladimir Ivanovich on the bank of the river Ganges, another possible explanation for the name Bengalsky.

Bewildered by Woland's conversation with Fagot, Bengalsky steps in to put a positive Soviet spin on their words. Taking advantage of a pause in the conversation, he declares, "The foreign artiste is expressing his delight with Moscow, which has advanced technologically, and with its inhabitants." Woland and his assistants turn their heads towards Bengalsky, the *конференсье*. Here Bulgakov, true to his preference for French and other foreign motifs in this chapter, chooses a French term for master of ceremonies instead of a more Slavic word such as *распорядитель* or *ведущий*.

After Fagot and Woland concur that they have expressed no delight whatsoever, Fagot pronounces that Bengalsky has lied and sarcastically praises him: "My compliments, citizen, on your lies." Bulgakov uses the term *соврамши* for *lies*, an antiquated and colloquial participial form, which elicits laughter from the audience. Woland goes on to explain that he's "not much interested in buses, telephones and

such... apparatus.” He’s more interested in whether Muscovites have changed on the inside; a veiled criticism not only of the earlier mentioned concept of the new Soviet man and woman, but also of the very real lack of buses, telephones, and the like, particularly in a society that emphasizes technological advances. His statement flies in the face of the trend in the 1930s to transform “backward” peasants by the acquisition of, among other things, modern appliances. Molotov argued in 1936 that demand for such goods demonstrated, for example, that farm workers had become cultured Soviet citizens (Hoffman 134). Trade commissar Veitser likewise proclaimed that peasants’ greater interest in household articles proved that cultural “backwardness had been eliminated” (Randall 434).

CARD TRICKS AND FAKE MONEY

Now that Woland has made his point, he cuts the tension in the room with a self-deprecating remark, expressing concern that he and Fagot have bored the audience. To the visible relief of the theatergoers, Woland cuts his commentary on their character short and suggests that Fagot perform a simple stunt to kick off the show. And what a performance he gives! After tossing a deck of cards out like a ribbon to the cat, who catches the ribbon of cards and throws it back, Fagot opens his mouth wide and swallows the cards one by one as they reach him. Then he jabs a finger toward the orchestra section and announces that the deck of cards is in the pocket of one of the audience members, a certain citizen Parchevsky. Bulgakov uses the term *тыкнул*, or poked, to describe Fagot’s indication of the location of the cards. This is a rather intense action; not merely pointing

but seeming to accuse Parchevsky of some unidentified wrongdoing. As for Parchevsky's name, it is reminiscent of the word *napua*, or brocade, a silk fabric woven with gold or silver threads that calls to mind the opulent dresses that appear later in the scene.

Parchevsky retrieves the deck of cards from his wallet. The cards lay, as Fagot had claimed, between a three-ruble note and a summons to appear in court for non-payment of alimony. While Bulgakov claims that the gentleman is red with astonishment over finding the cards in his pocket, I imagine he is embarrassed as well as astonished, since his non-payment of alimony has been announced to the entire audience, and ironically, his summons to appear in court lay next to cash in his wallet. Fagot suggests he keep the cards as a souvenir, adding insult to injury by announcing, having magically read his thoughts, what the citizen had said the night before: were it not for poker, his life in Moscow would be totally unbearable. This revelation would further embarrass Parchevsky, given the official Soviet condemnation of card playing as an uncultured and decadent pastime. Just after the Revolution, the Soviet government made some attempts to outlaw card playing completely, and while it relaxed these efforts by the 1920s, its campaign against it continued (Hoffman 32).

At this point, one of the spectators shouts from the balcony, "That's an old trick. The guy in the orchestra is part of the act." Obviously annoyed by the accusation, Fagot makes the heckler part of the act by announcing that the deck of cards is now in that gentleman's pocket. To the amazement of the audience, a joyous voice in the balcony cries out, "It's true! He does have it! Here, here... but wait! They're *chervontsy*!" The citizen has found a packet of bills in his pocket, wrapped the way they are at a bank, with

the words "One Thousand Rubles" written on the wrapper. His neighbors descend on him as he tries to ascertain whether the chervontsy (the bills) are real or make-believe. A few words about chervontsy will uncover the satire in this passage.

The Soviet Union did not have a stable currency when the civil war ended in 1923, and the government realized that it could not achieve its ambitious economic development plans of the New Economic Policy (NEP) without first solving this pressing monetary crisis. Bulgakov's diaries point to rampant inflation in the 1920s. For example, on April 18th, 1922, white bread cost 375 thousand rubles per pound. One year later, on July 11, 1923, white bread cost 14 million per pound. Three months later, on October 18, 1923, it was at 65 million (Curtis 45, 49, 53).

Accordingly, a 1922 decree authorized the Soviet state bank to issue the chervonets bank note as the equivalent of the pre-revolutionary ten-ruble gold coin (7.74232 grams of pure gold). The first step, the issuing of chervontsy (sometimes referred to as *sovznaki*), began at the end of November 1922. The ratio of the chervonets to the old ruble (also referred to as *kaznaki* and not backed by gold at all) was to be two to one. Further, no exchange rate was established between the two currencies, so the gold-backed currency would eventually prevail.

The chervontsy did drive the old paper money away. Whereas at the beginning of 1923, chervontsy represented only three percent of all money in circulation, the percentage increased to 83.6 per cent in February 1924, on the eve of the final act of currency reform. Through the 1920s, the chervonets was officially quoted on foreign exchanges. However, this attempt to maintain a "hard" Soviet currency was controversial

almost from its inception and quickly ended along with the NEP itself. On June 9, 1926, the government passed a resolution forbidding the export of Soviet currency abroad, and in February 1930 all transactions to sell gold and foreign currency to private individuals for chervontsy at a fixed rate were banned. The Soviet currency was withdrawn from foreign exchanges and a quoting commission was set up under the State Bank's Board to set the exchange rates of foreign currencies. In 1937 Lenin's portrait appeared on the chervonets bank notes, but the ruble soon became the main currency unit again. The chervonets persisted through 1947 when a confiscatory monetary reform was conducted and the old money was exchanged for new rubles.

In *The Master and Margarita* Bulgakov criticizes the use of the chervonets more than once. The money that changes into worthless paper consists of chervontsy, never rubles. And the taxi-drivers in front of the Variety Theater only agree to accept the bookkeeper Vasily Stepanovich Lastochkin as a passenger if he pays with three-ruble bills, since the chervontsy with which the spectators had paid the previous evening had all transformed into worthless items.

Next, another man in the audience asks that he be allowed to "play cards" (receive money) as well. "*Авек plezier!*" replies Fagot in French. With the spectators making such a fuss, Fagot agrees that everyone at the Variety Theater should join in the spectacle. After three pistol shots into the air, white pieces of paper begin to rain down onto the theatergoers from the domed ceiling. Within seconds, the downpour of bills reaches the seats and the audience strains to catch them. They hold the bills up to the light and find watermarks that are "perfectly genuine and authentic." They don't question where the

bills came from, and their appearance out of thin air does nothing to quench the audience's desire to believe the bills are real. Some of them revert to childlike behavior, crawling in the aisles and looking under the seats, while others stand on the seats, trying desperately to catch the bills. Those in the mezzanine even begin yelling and arguing like children over the falling money. Here is an example of Bulgakov's use of a French term to a very comic end. The word mezzanine, *бельэтаж*, comes from the French *bel étage*, or beautiful floor. Ironically, the audience members on this floor (level) of the theater are the ones who come to blows. Their behavior is anything but beautiful. Instead, it's clear that their desire for the money falling from the sky—indeed, their desire to *believe* that there is money falling from the sky—overrides their sense of Soviet logic and proper behavior as New Soviet People. So they continue to try to catch the *капризные* (again from the French) bits of paper falling from the sky.

Why do Woland and his retinue pepper their speech with foreign words, particularly from the French, during their black magic show at the Theater? And how is Woland, the “visiting professor from Germany,” able to address Muscovites in their native tongue with no perceivable accent (except when he chooses to speak with one)? The answer is clear. Woland, after all, is the devil, so he is able to speak in any language and appeal to any group of people in their native tongue. John 8:44 (New International Version) reads: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire... *When he lies, he speaks his native language*, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Woland uses French exclamations and forms of address with the spectators at the Variety Theater, because French is seductive and is the language of high

society. He employs this pretentious use of the language to appeal to the vanity of Muscovites and to their desire to be held in that light.

The money that Woland causes to fall upon the theatergoers at the Variety Theater is part of a rich literary tradition. In the second part of Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust*, Mephistopheles, finding himself with Faust in the emperor's court, creates paper money that turns out to be fake. Another possible inspiration for Bulgakov's fake money is Heinrich Heine's 1826 *Travel Pictures I*, in which the German poet gives a satiric allegoric description of the political battle between liberals and conservatives. The narrator of the work explains that evil in the world is a result of "God's having created too little money" (Sokolov 673). Woland and his assistants, by distributing paper money to the spectators, seem to relieve a perceived lack of cash. But the devil's money quickly turns into ordinary bits of paper, and the thousands of spectators at the Variety Theater become victims of deception. For Woland, the imaginary money is merely a means to reveal the inner essence of the spectators.

The episode of the falling money in the Variety Theater has an even more contemporary literary source: excerpts from the second half of Vladimir Zazubrin's (Zubtsov's) *Two Worlds*, published in the literary magazine *Сибирские огни* in 1922. In it, peasants—members of a commune—decide to abolish and destroy money, not waiting for a decree from the Soviet government. As it turns out, the government elects not to abolish money, and a crowd confronts those in charge of the commune, calling them deceivers and swindlers, threatening revenge and hoping for the impossible: to get their money back.

The general excitement in the theater intensifies until Fagot blows into the air to make the money stop falling. Effortlessly, with just a puff of air, the madness ends. Here, Bulgakov pokes fun at the master of ceremonies, who thinks it was he who took control of the situation: “Yes, yes, who knows how it all would have ended if Bengalsky had not summoned the strength to do something” (103). In reality, Bengalsky plays no role whatsoever in subduing the audience; on the contrary, he incites their ire through his efforts to convince them that what they have witnessed is nothing more than a so-called mass hypnosis. His explanation that it was a purely scientific experiment, designed to prove beyond a doubt that there are no miracles and that magic does not exist, falls on deaf ears. The audience reacts negatively to Bengalsky’s assertion that the paper bills will disappear as suddenly as they appeared. In doing so, they reject the Soviet notion that everything must have a scientific explanation, both because they truly want the money and the magic to be real, and because they have grown tired of the endless Soviet exultations of order and logic.

Next, Fagot thrills the audience by mocking Bengalsky and telling them what they want to hear: “Yet another example of what we call balderdash. The paper bills, citizens, are real money!” Here, Bulgakov uses the word *враньѐ*—fib or fabrication—to describe what Bengalsky has said, and in doing so, he is criticizing him on two levels. Not only does he accuse Bengalsky of lying again, but his word choice also offers an overarching criticism of political workers who masquerade as masters of ceremony and of the Soviet government’s continual efforts toward political indoctrination of the masses.

A bass bellows out from somewhere on high, “Bravo!” While one might surmise that there was a man with a deep voice calling out from the balcony, there is no actual reference to a person or to the balcony. Indeed, it could be the voice of God, expressing sarcastic approval from on high.

Fagot points at Bengalsky and speaks of him in the third person, as if he weren’t there, a real offense to a Russian. Fagot complains that “this fellow”—he doesn’t even call Bengalsky by name—has become a bore who keeps butting in when nobody asks him to and spoiling the performance with his bogus comments. The irony is that Bengalsky is, after all, the master of ceremonies. He is supposed to make comments, and he doesn’t need to ask permission before making them. Fagot asks the audience, now stirred up with greed, what to do with Bengalsky. “Tear off his head!” comes a stern voice from the balcony. Again, we hear a voice from on high, and again, there is no mention of a human supposedly attached to it. It’s as though it were a decree from God or a higher authority.

THE GREAT BEHEADING

Fagot pretends not to have heard the decree clearly, and reports what he thought he heard: “What did you say? What was that? Tear off his head? Now that’s an idea!” He acts as though the thought would never have occurred to him. Indeed, we must remember that the devil can perform no evil himself. The intention must come from others. So he orders the cat to do the dirty deed, again counting to three in German. The cat’s black fur stands on end, and he lets out a spine-tingling yowl. Then he shrinks into a ball and

lunges straight at Bengalsky's chest, like a panther attacking a Bengal tiger. From there he leaps onto his head, sticks his paws into the emcee's greasy hair, or *шевелюра*, from the French, and with a savage howl, tears his head off his thick neck in two twists.

The two and a half thousand people in the theater scream in unison as fountains of blood spurt from the severed arteries and pour down the emcee's shirt front and tailcoat, or *фрак*, from the French. The ugly bloodletting serves as a visual representation of the collective hate displayed by the audience. Bengalsky's legs buckle, and his body plops onto the floor, as though he were a marionette in a puppet theater. Women begin screaming hysterically. The cat hands the head to Fagot, who lifts it up by the hair and shows it to the audience as a booty, just as Salome received the head of John the Baptist on a dish in the Gospel of Matthew 14:6-11. The head cries out desperately to the whole theater, "Get a doctor!" Bengalsky's reaction is ironic for two reasons. First, Behemoth has reduced him, quite literally, to a talking head. Like the Lernaean Hydra in Greek mythology, beheading Bengalsky doesn't kill him. Soviet bureaucracy and propaganda, after all, cannot be killed. Furthermore, Bengalsky cries out for a doctor, as if he had the type of wound that a doctor could treat. He is naïve enough to fight black magic with everyday medicine. He doesn't understand that his lack of belief in the devil is what got him into this mess, and only the devil can get him out of it.

In threatening tones, Fagot asks the now weeping head, "Are you going to keep on talking rubbish?" "I won't anymore," rasps the head. Obviously, Fagot is willing to torture Bengalsky as long as there are no objections from the spectators. He wants to see just what today's Muscovites are capable of. A woman in the loge then implores, for

God's sake, that he stop being tortured. Interestingly, the woman, even in a supposedly atheistic country, invokes God's name here, unaware that the devil himself is standing before her.

Fagot addresses the entire audience, asking if they (collectively) should forgive him. One by one, several individuals—mostly ladies—suggest he be forgiven, and within a few moments, the audience forms a single chorus in agreement with them. When Fagot asks Woland how to proceed, the magician offers the following assessment of the audience: “They are like people anywhere. They love money, but that has always been true... They are thoughtless, but then again, sometimes mercy enters their hearts. They are ordinary people, very much like their predecessors, only the housing shortage has had a bad effect on them” (104). And he commands that Bengalsky's head be put back on.

The housing shortage to which Woland refers was a major issue in 1930s Moscow. The Soviet urban population was growing at record rates, causing extraordinary shortages in housing and other sectors. Fifteen million people had fled to urban centers between 1926 and 1933, an increase of almost 60 percent, and by 1939, another 16 million had been added. Moscow's population jumped from 2 million to 3.6 million. Since industrial construction, not housing, was the top priority in the Five-Year Plans of the 1930s, many Moscow residents found themselves living in dormitories or barracks, making even the infamous communal apartments seem luxurious by comparison (Fitzpatrick 41-42).

Taking care to make sure it is on right, the cat plops the head back in place, and it sits on Bengalsky's neck as if it had never left. The cat sweeps his paws over Bengalsky's

tailcoat and shirtfront, or *пластрон* (from the French), and the bloodstains vanish. Fagot lifts the seated Bengalsky to his feet, sticks a packet of ten-ruble bills into his coat pocket to add insult to injury, and directs him off stage with the words, “Get lost! It’s more fun without you.”

Swaying and looking around in a daze, the emcee makes it only as far as the fire extinguisher, and there he gets sick. Even if he were capable of using it, a fire extinguisher would be powerless to put out the flames of Hell from which the devil Woland has come. Bengalsky’s relentless search for a logical, earthly way to escape the dark powers of Woland and his retinue demonstrates how fully he has embraced the Soviet mentality that a rational explanation can be found for every phenomenon or event. Just as he foolishly called for help from doctors after his head was torn off, Bengalsky’s search for a fire extinguisher to put out the flames of Hell symbolizes the naïveté and narrow-mindedness of Soviet-era bureaucrats.

At this point Rimsky, among others, rushes over to Bengalsky’s aid. The emcee cries, grabbing at the air with his hands and mumbling, “Give me back my head! Give me back my head! Take my apartment, take my pictures, only give me back my head!” To my mind, this is a subtle criticism of the perks (an apartment and enough money for pictures on the wall) that Bengalsky has likely received over the years as a political educator for the Party. Indeed he had, in some respects, given up his mind—his own thoughts—when he joined the Party.

A messenger runs for a doctor. People urge Bengalsky to lie down on a couch in the dressing room, but he fights them off, becoming aggressive. He appears to be going

crazy. He cannot comprehend what has just happened. An ambulance has to be called. It appears that Bengalsky will share the same fate as Bezdomy, who, earlier in the novel, was hauled off in an ambulance to a mental hospital after witnessing Berlioz's beheading under the streetcar, an act that Woland had presaged.

After the unfortunate emcee has been carted off, Rimsky runs back to the stage, only to find new miracles in progress. However, the audience is so absorbed by the extraordinary things that Fagot is doing that they fail to notice the miraculous disappearance of the magician and his faded armchair from the stage. While the sudden appearance of the armchair out of nowhere at the beginning of the performance had greatly impressed the audience, by now they've seen so much magic that its equally abrupt disappearance goes unnoticed. Bulgakov's choice of the word *чyдeцa* here is doubly significant, as one would suppose that a belief in miracles, just like a belief in black magic, would be frowned upon by Soviet officials. Also, the word miracle most often refers to an act performed by God, not the devil.

Since Bengalsky had served, essentially, as the main symbol of Soviet ideology, his dismissal from the scene allows real magic to begin. Fagot has dispatched the ailing emcee, and now Woland and his retinue are finally able to give the audience what it clamors for: a real show. An escape from reality. And this time, when Fagot announces the opening of a so-called store for the ladies, it is the audience members who create the entertainment.

THE LURE OF PARISIAN FASHIONS

The scene that Woland sets—replete with magnificent clothing and sumptuous luxury items—plays upon the theatergoers' desire to escape into a world of grandeur. The abundance on stage so entices the audience that Woland and his armchair vanish unnoticed, in sharp contrast to the awe that their magical appearance had invoked just a few moments earlier. The scene before them is filled with striking elements: Persian rugs, gigantic mirrors, and glass display cases (*витрины*, from the French) filled with Parisian dresses of all colors and styles (*фасоны*, again from the French). While this accumulation of goods may seem unexceptional to 21st-century readers, such items would have appeared exceedingly foreign to the average Muscovite in the 1930s. The Persian rugs evoke an exotic, oriental atmosphere that contrasts with the dismal housing conditions endured by most Russians at the time. After all, the overcrowding suffered by a minority of Muscovites in the late nineteenth century had become the norm for all but the most privileged by the 1930s (Brooke 221). A floor covered in Persian rugs would be an unheard-of luxury for those attending the theater that day.

The countless Parisian dresses, hats, shoes and cosmetics on display would have particularly astonished the ladies in attendance. After all, despite Stalin's claim that the Five-Year Plans had modernized the nation, the standard of living actually declined in the 1930s. Stores offered little variety in styles, and most people had a limited number of outfits. Clothing was expensive and often scarce. Not only, then, would the women at the Variety Theater have been overwhelmed by the sheer abundance of clothing before them,

it would have been their first glimpse of apparel straight from the capital of fashion: Paris. To these women, Paris was a world away, and these were the kinds of clothing and accessories to which they would have had no access.

In addition to the dresses on stage, Bulgakov describes the accessories that accompany them, liberally sprinkling French terms throughout to underline their exotic and seductive qualities: hundreds of hats, with feathers and without, and hundreds of shoes of all colors and styles, plus countless bottles (*флаконы*) of perfume, and cases for lipstick (*номада*, from the French word *pommade*).

A red-headed beauty [Hella] appears, as Bulgakov puts it so amusingly, “the devil only knows from where,” in a black evening gown (*туалет*, from the French). “Her beauty,” writes Bulgakov, is “marred only by a strange scar on her neck” (105). The scar serves as a clear indication that she is a female vampire.

From Bulgakov’s annotations, we know that he discovered her name in the Russian *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary*, a work containing eighty-six volumes, roughly equivalent to the English-language *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Under the subject heading *чародейство*, or sorcery, he read that Hella was the name given to girls who died too early and became vampires. In *The Master and Margarita*, Hella is a member of Woland’s entourage and serves as their maidservant. She is efficient and quick, and “there is no service she cannot render.”

It should be noted that there is a connection between Hella and Margarita, the Master’s lover in the novel. Margarita is named in part after Gretchen from Goethe’s *Faust*, as Margarita is the usual Russian rendering of the name Gretchen (Curtis 170).

Bulgakov's Hella has exactly the same scar as Goethe's Gretchen, another clear reference to *Faust* (Sokolov 268).

Hella stands by the display cases with an air of ownership that would no doubt evoke envy among women in the theater. Then Fagot announces that the store will exchange, free of charge, old clothes, shoes, handbags and accessories for Parisian styles (*модели*, from the French) and Parisian shoes. The cat extends an invitation to the ladies by making welcoming gestures with his front paw, “*свойственные швейцарам, открывающим дверь*” — “the way doormen do upon opening the door.” In this phrase, Bulgakov takes advantage of the Russian word for doorman, *швейцар*, which sounds like the word for a Swiss, *швейцарец*. This choice of words, then, creates for the reader an image of being welcomed to the store by someone from an exotic, wealthy West European country.

Then the young girl begins calling out (or as Bulgakov puts it, sweetly singing) something obscure but, judging by the women's faces, very seductive: “*Guerlain, Chanel No. 5, Mitsouko, Narcisse Noir*, evening gowns, cocktail dresses...” This reminds one of stereotypical hypnosis sessions, where clients are mesmerized by the hypnotist's words and lulled into a trance. In this case, the mere sounds of the names of the perfumes pronounced in French and the notion of fancy dresses mesmerize the women in the audience, who in all likelihood are not actually familiar with the names of these glamorous perfumes. To add to the allure for the reader, Bulgakov writes these incomprehensible but seductive French words in Russian letters (for example, *Нарцисс Нуар*), instead of translating them into Russian.

Bulgakov chooses the perfumes very deliberately, not simply naming well-known fragrances but rather selecting ones that have a connection to Russia. The first one mentioned, *Guerlain*, is a famous French perfume house named after the preferred perfumer of all the courts in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. The founder of the company earned the prestigious title of His Majesty's Official Perfumer (France), which led him to create perfumes for, among others, Queen Victoria of England, Queen Isabella of Spain, and Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich of Russia, the youngest son of Alexander III.

Mitsouko, created in 1919 by Jacques Guerlain, the grandson of the founder of the perfume house Guerlain, is said to have been inspired by the name of the heroine of Claude Farrère's 1909 novel *La Bataille* (The Battle). It is the story of an impossible love between Mitsouko, the wife of Japanese Admiral Togo, and a British officer. The story takes place in 1905, during the war between Russia and Japan. Both men go to war, and Mitsouko, hiding her feelings with dignity, waits for the outcome of the battle to discover which of the two men will come back to her and be her companion for life.

According to colleagues of the perfumer who created *Chanel No. 5*, that fragrance was a remake of one of the perfumer's earlier creations, *Bouquet de Catherine* (*Букет де Екатерины*). It had been created as an homage to Catherine the Great and released in 1913 to celebrate the three-hundredth anniversary of the rise of the Romanov dynasty. It was produced by Rallet & Company, the largest Russian perfume house and purveyor to the courts of Imperial Russia (Kraft 42).

Finally, *Narcisse Noir* was created by the founder of the famous French perfume house Caron, Ernest Daltroff, in 1911. Daltroff was a chemist and perfumer from Russia who had been born into a wealthy bourgeois family of Russian Jews and later emigrated to France. Bulgakov's reference to this particular fragrance is wonderfully appropriate given its name, Black Narcissus. The color black has an aura of the occult and the forbidden, both of which are important elements in this scene. Narcissus was the youth from Greek mythology who fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool and wasted away from unsatisfied desire, whereupon he was transformed into the flower. In this scene, the ladies in the audience are transformed through Parisian attire from humble Soviet citizens into pretentious, vain narcissists, as the next scene demonstrates.

At first, transfixed by the sight of the French clothing and accessories, no one leaves her seat to take advantage of Fagot's offer. Finally, a brunette walks up and onto the stage, smiling as if to say that it was all the same to her and that really, she didn't give a damn. As if she had just finished a breathtaking performance, Fagot cries "Bravo!"—yet another foreign (in this case, Italian) exclamation, and lays out a pile of shoes in front of her. To add to the air of pampering and indulgence, he addresses her as *madam* and asks Behemoth to bring her a comfortable chair. This is possibly the kind of luxurious service the woman in the scene has never experienced. Hesitantly, the woman tries on just one shoe, in a color—lilac—she has probably never seen before in footwear, and carefully examines the heel. "They won't pinch?" she asks thoughtfully. She hasn't yet lost her Soviet sense of practicality. Both Fagot and Behemoth express indignation at the mere mention of such an idea, which prompts the woman to put on the other shoe and

respond boldly: “I’ll take this pair, Monsieur.” Her old shoes are thrown behind the curtain, and the brunette heads in that direction as well, accompanied by Hella, Fagot, and Behemoth, who hangs a tape measure around his neck to look more important. When the woman emerges in a dress that makes the entire orchestra section gasp, Bulgakov refers to her as *храбрая*, which Burgin and O’Connor translate as *brave*. And she certainly is brave to step out by herself in a fancy dress in front of 2,500 people. She also, however, has grown ever more daring and feisty, also acceptable translations of the word *храбрый*. After all, by the end of the scene, she even addresses Fagot in French as she accepts a bottle of perfume from him as a memento (as if she needed a memento of this event). The transformation from a meek Soviet woman to a haughty French *dame* has taken place, through a simple change in her clothing and appearance, in a matter of minutes. In contrast, as she walks up the aisle the yet untouched and unaffected Soviet audience jumps up and scrambles for an opportunity merely to touch the perfume box she is carrying.

At this point all hell breaks loose. Having lost all earlier reservation and restraint, women begin flooding onto the stage from all directions. One woman calls her husband a *деспот* and *мещанин* when he says that he won’t allow her to participate. While Burgin and O’Connor translate *деспот* as *tyrant*, there are other wonderful possibilities, depending on what one thinks the woman is trying to call her husband, including czar, despot and oppressor. While *tyrant* is a perfectly acceptable translation, I love the nuance of oppression in the other renditions. The word *мещанин* can also be translated several ways. Burgin and O’Connor chose the term *philistine*, a person who is lacking in, or

hostile or smugly indifferent to, cultural values, intellectual pursuits, aesthetic refinement, etc., or is contentedly commonplace in ideas and tastes. This translation does express the contempt the woman feels toward her husband, who appears to disapprove of her interest in aesthetic refinement. The word *мещанин*, however, can also be translated as wimp, commoner, and peasant, which may be more easily understood by the average reader.

Bulgakov goes on to describe women disappearing (which is very appropriate at a magic show) behind the curtain, leaving their old dresses there and emerging in new ones. An entire row of ladies—the *женщины*, one should note, have now been transformed into *дамы*—sit on gilt-legged stools, energetically tapping the carpet with their newly shod feet. One wonders, are they trying out their new shoes, or are they tapping impatiently, wanting to be waited upon further? Fagot kneels down before them, as if kneeling down in worship. The cat, like a beast of burden, grows exhausted, trudging back and forth between the display cases and the stools, weighted down by piles of handbags and shoes. And the redhead, in true magic show style, appears and disappears, and at some point begins to chatter exclusively in French. Amazingly, all of the women, even those who don't know a word of French, understand everything she says. The magic, the apparent transformation of plainly dressed Soviet women into elegantly dressed and perfumed French ladies, appears complete. In the meantime, latecomers rush onto the stage, while others—the lucky ones—pour off it dressed in ball gowns, pajamas with dragons, severely cut suits, and hats tilted rakishly over one eyebrow. Here, Bulgakov refers to the women leaving the stage as *счастливицы*, or

lucky women. This word also contains a hint of happiness (*счастье*), which is what most of the women probably feel at the moment.

Fagot then announces that due to the late hour, the store will close in just one minute. This news incites the masses even further. There is an incredible uproar on stage, and women snatch up shoes in haste, without even trying them on. One woman sweeps behind the curtain like a tempest, tears off her clothes, grabs the first thing in sight, and has just enough time to snatch two bottles of perfume. While earlier in the scene the ladies were more cautious, subdued, and orderly, by the end, they are in a frenzy. Then, a minute later, a shot rings out, and everything on stage vanishes into thin air. The so-called store disappears.

AN IMPROMPTU EXPOSÉ

At this point in the chapter, a new character gets involved in the act and jolts the reader back to Soviet reality. A resonant and very persistent baritone voice is heard coming from Box No. 2. “Just the same, citizen artiste, it would be much appreciated if you would reveal to the audience the techniques you use in your magic, especially the trick with the paper bills. The return of the emcee to the stage would also be appreciated. The audience is worried about his fate” (107). He acts as the voice of Soviet logic and reason and appears rather indifferent to the spectacle that has just taken place. He addresses the artiste as “citizen,” and insists on speaking for the audience when he suggests that they are worried about the fate of Bengalsky.

The baritone voice in question belongs to Arkady Apollonovich Sempleyarov, the self-satisfied chairman of the Acoustics Commission for Moscow Theaters and guest of honor at the evening's performance. According to the *Bulgakov Encyclopaedia*, the surname Sempleyarov was inspired by the name of a good friend of Bulgakov's, the composer and director Alexander Afanasievich Spendiarov (1871-1928). But Spendiarov was not as conceited and arrogant as Sempleyarov's character. For the more assertive, big-headed Sempleyarov in the theatre, Bulgakov was inspired instead by the character of Avel Sofronovich Enukidze (1877-1937), a Georgian who, from 1922 to 1935, was chairman of the boards of the Bolshoi Theater and the Moscow Art Theatre. Enukidze was also a member of the People's Commissariat for Education, or Narkompros, of which some departments had their offices at Chistye Prudy number 6, where Bulgakov situates the Acoustics Commission for Moscow Theaters. Enukidze was much attracted by female beauty and was particularly interested in the actresses who worked in the theaters under his Commission. In June 1935 he was removed from his party functions, and in December 1937 he was sentenced and executed for espionage and terrorist acts against the Soviet Union.

The so-called *Acoustics Commission for Moscow Theaters* that Sempleyarov chairs did not exist in reality. Bulgakov may have based this institution on the *Управления театральных зрелищных предприятий Наркомпроса*, or UTZP, the *Directorate for Theater Enterprises under the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment*. Bulgakov situates his fictitious *Acoustics Commission* at Chistye Prudy. In the Soviet era there were, indeed, three organizations responsible for guarding —and especially

censoring—a variety of arts, all of which came under the umbrella of Narkompros. The UTZP was under the command of M.P. Arkadiev, a probable source of inspiration for Arkady Sempleyarov's first name.

Sempleyarov lives, according to Bulgakov, at the Stone Bridge in the *Дом на набережной* or *House on the Embankment*, which suggests that he was a member of the Soviet elite. Here, Bulgakov draws a parallel between the character of Sempleyarov and the director of the real-life *State Union of Music-Hall, Concert, and Circus Enterprises* (GOMETs), Yakov Stanislavovich Ganetsky, who lived at the same address and was later executed during Stalin's purges. Located on the banks of the Moscow River, opposite what was to be the location for the massive Palace of Soviets, the building complex was constructed in the early 1930s as a residence for the upper crust of the Soviet elite: high-ranking party leaders, government ministers and other officials, military leaders, actors, writers, artists, and other heroes of the Soviet regime. It was more than just an apartment complex; it was practically a city within a city, containing postal and telegraph offices, a bank, a laundry, a beauty salon, and much more. It was, with just a touch of irony, the not-so-grand palace of the Stalinist nobility. The Great Terror of 1937-38 took an enormous toll on the upper echelons of the Soviet hierarchy, and nowhere was this toll more apparent than at the *House on the Embankment*, where Stalin had gathered the Soviet elite and those he considered to be enemies of the State in order to do away with them easily and efficiently. It is estimated that one-third of the building's residents (about 700 individuals) were victims of Stalin's repressions. In most cases, they were either executed immediately or sentenced to the GULAG.

During the show at the Variety Theater, Sempleyarov is seated in box number 2 with two ladies. The first one is his wife, expensively and stylishly dressed, and the second is his distant relation, a promising debutante, who has come from Saratov and is staying with Sempleyarov and his wife in their apartment. After the scene during which the ladies in the audience receive their new dresses, he interrupts the show and demands that Woland expose the technique of his tricks to the spectators without delay, “especially the trick with the paper money.”

“Pardon!” retorts Fagot in French. “I beg your pardon, but there is nothing to reveal here. Everything is clear.” Sempleyarov presses on, claiming to be speaking on behalf of the audience, who, as he puts it, demands an explanation. Fagot is quick to point out the obvious, however: that the audience has said nothing of the sort. The mass of spectators to which Sempleyarov refers is typical Soviet jargon. Sempleyarov asks his own question but presents it as though the audience were asking it. In the Soviet Union, the people—the masses—were ostensibly in control, although everyone knew that this was not the case. So Fagot pretends to kindly defer to Sempleyarov’s wishes and asks for permission to present one final number.

“Why not,” replies Sempleyarov in a condescending tone, “but make sure it comes with an exposé!” Now that Fagot has lured Sempleyarov into his trap, he asks him where he had been the previous evening. Sempleyarov’s face changes dramatically upon hearing the question. His wife answers for him, haughtily declaring that he was at a meeting of the Acoustics Commission and that she doesn’t understand what this has to do with magic. “*Oui, madame!*” confirms Fagot in French. “Naturally you don’t. As for the

meeting, you are completely ignorant.” This type of blunt statement is typical of Fagot, who then goes on to announce that Sempleyarov had in fact not been at a meeting of the Acoustics Commission at Chistye Prudy the night before. Sempleyarov had instead taken a bus to Yelokhovskiy Street to visit an actress from a touring regional theater company, Militsa Andreevna Pokobatkina, with whom he spent some four hours.

Both Sempleyarov's intervention in the performance at the Variety Theater and the situation with the visiting relative from Saratov bring to mind Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold, an enthusiastic activist of the Soviet theater, who worked in the Theater department of the Narkompros until 1922, when he started his own theater in Moscow. In March 1936 he is said to have declared that the masses of spectators demanded an explanation from the entertainers at a performance. The link with the niece relates back to Meyerhold's close relationship with the Saratov region and the fact that his second wife, Zynaida Nikolaevna Rajkh, was twenty years younger than he. In 1939, when she was found dead in their apartment, Meyerhold was heavily tortured to make him confess that he had murdered her. He was sentenced to death and executed.

“Oh!” comes an anguished cry in the hushed silence. After hearing that Sempleyarov had lied about his whereabouts, Sempleyarov's visiting relative lets out a low-pitched, terrifying laugh, as though she were possessed. “That explains everything!” she exclaims. “I've had my suspicions for a long time. Now I know why that third-rater got the part of Luisa!” Then she hits Sempleyarov over the head with her umbrella. Here Arkady's young relative is referring to the character of Luisa Miller from the play *Kabale und Liebe (Treachery and Love)*, written by the German dramatist and writer Friedrich

Schiller (1759-1805). The play, first performed in 1784 in Frankfurt, was a fixture in the repertoires of Soviet theatres at the time.

The description of this scene is replete with irony. First, we have the fact that Sempleyarov had claimed to be at a meeting of the Acoustics Commission at Chistye Prudy, where the commission meets. Instead of keeping his nose clean by having his *уофёр* (the French word for driver) take him to a meeting at Chistye Prudy (“Clean Ponds”), he was actually involved in a “dirty” or “sinful” act with another woman. No longer acting as a high-ranking official by using a personal driver to get around town, he had chosen to join the rabble on the bus and become like a commoner, hoping to disappear into a sea of bodies. He was clearly trying to hide his actions.

After exposing Sempleyarov’s escapades, the villainous Fagot cries out, “Here you have it, respected citizens, the kind of exposé that Arkady Apollonovich so persistently asked for.” Perhaps this line sums up the irony of the scene. The very person who requested an exposé had his own dirty laundry exposed.

At the same time, Sempleyarov’s spouse tries to defend him from the beating he’s receiving from his young relative. The wife is made to look like a monster, described as being of “gigantic height” and towering over the young girl. “How dare you lay a hand on Arkady Apollonovich!” she exclaims.

The young relative is seized by another short fit of “satanic laughter,” which is most appropriate given that she is in the presence of the devil himself. Sempleyarov’s spouse appears to be possessed as well, and as she shrieks out to the police to arrest the relative, her voice is so terrifying that it makes the audience’s blood run cold.

At that moment, the cat leaps up to the footlights and snaps, like a drill sergeant, “The show is over! Maestro! Hack out a march!” Here, Bulgakov uses the word *сеанс*, from the French, which can signify both show (session) and séance, to refer to the performance that has just ended. In the case of the Variety Theater that evening, they are one and the same.

FINAL MARCH

The half-crazed conductor, unaware of what he is doing, begins waving his baton, and the orchestra hacks out an improbable *марш* (from the French), “so sloppily played that it [does] not resemble a march at all” (109). The daring words to the march, with which Fagot forces the orchestra to finish the scandalous séance, are a parody on couplets from Dmitry Lensky’s popular 19th-century vaudeville show *Lev Gurych Sinichkin, or a Provincial Debutante*:

*His Excellency
Calls her his own
And even patronage
Renders to her.*

The show tells the story of an elderly actor who desperately wants to offer a major role in the theater to his talented daughter. The powerful prima donna of the theater company, however, stands in her way. After many heroic efforts and cheerful misunderstandings, the star actress and her patron cause a scandal, and the old man's dream eventually comes true.

This vaudeville act was performed from 1924 to 1931 in Moscow at the Vakhtangov Theater on the Arbat, alongside the apartment that Bulgakov described in his 1925 satirical play *Zoyka's Apartment*. Bulgakov's play, which premiered in 1926, had been commissioned by the Theater as a light vaudeville show about the then-contemporary New Economic Policy. Beneath its veneer of vaudeville humor, however, the play was replete with social satire, which contributed to its removal from the stage in 1927. In April of 1928, the play returned to the stage, only to be permanently banned from the repertoire a year later. Bulgakov may have chosen to parody Lensky's vaudeville march to protest the banning of his play.

Bulgakov's free adaptation of the vaudeville tune in *The Master and Margarita* is even funnier than the original. The text is straightforwardly aimed at the one who insisted on an exposé of that evening's black magic, but then was exposed himself: the chairman of the Acoustics Commission, Arkady Apollonovich Sempleyarov. Undoubtedly, the bird theme also pays tribute to the writer of the famous vaudeville show, who wrote under the pseudonym of Vorobiov, or sparrow.

*His Excellency
Had a taste for domestic fowl
And was always on the prowl
For good-looking chicks!*

To highlight the pandemonium that breaks out in the Variety Theater, Bulgakov writes that maybe those were not the words, and there were other ones to the same music that were also highly indecent. What matters, he claims, is that afterwards, something like the fall of the Tower of Babel breaks out in the Variety Theater, a description of the utter

chaos that ensues. The police rush to the Sempleyarovs' box, or *ложка* (from the French *loge*); curiosity-seekers climb onto the railing, or *барьер* (from the French *barrière*); and hellish bursts of laughter and mad shrieks, as if coming from souls burning in Hell, are heard and then drowned out by the golden crash of cymbals coming from the orchestra pit.

The stage is suddenly empty. Both the “puffed up” Fagot (very appropriate for a bassoon) and the huge brazen cat Behemoth melt into thin air and vanish, just as the magician and his faded armchair had vanished before them. Thus ends chapter 12.

The Variety Theater: An Analysis

FANTASTICAL ELEMENTS IN CHAPTER 12: A FUTURISTIC APPROACH

From Bengalsky's losing his head to chervontsy that float down from the ceiling of the Theater, chapter 12 is filled with grotesque, surprising, and fantastical elements. A careful textual analysis has uncovered numerous allusions to historical events, prominent works of literature, and early twentieth-century notables. While I have shared my own thoughts about the action in this chapter, each reader approaches the material from a unique angle. Sokolov's analyses of the Variety Theater from a Futurist point of view are of particular note, so let's examine his assessment of the fantastical elements that take center stage in this chapter.

In 1914, Filippo Marinetti's manifesto "Music Hall" appeared in translation in the Russian-language magazine *Theater and Art* with the title "Похвала театру Варьете" or "In Praise of the Variety Theater." In his manifesto, Marinetti, one of the founders of Futurism, declares the following:

The Variety Theater destroys all that is solemn, holy, and serious in art. It contributes to the forthcoming destruction of immortal works, modifying and parodying them, presenting them without any conditions, without embarrassment, as if they were the most mundane things... It is absolutely imperative to destroy all logic in variety shows, while noticeably increasing the extravagance, strengthening the contrasts and allowing extravagance to reign on stage. Interrupt the singer. Sing romances with abusive and insulting words... Make spectators from the mezzanine, loge and gallery take part in the action... Systematically profanitize classical art on stage, portraying, for example, all of the Greek, French, and Italian tragedies at the same time in one evening, condensed and comically mixed together... Embolden all genres of

American eccentrics: their grotesque effects, their startling movements, their awkward acrobatics, their immeasurable crudeness, their vests, filled with all sorts of surprises, and pants as deep as ship holds, from which together with a thousand objects comes grand Futurist laughter, forcing changes in the world's physiognomy.

Writers who embraced Italian literary Futurism sought to develop a language appropriate for what they perceived to be the speed and excitement of the early 20th century. Sokolov argues that Bulgakov, while unsympathetic toward Futurism and other leftist art theories, nevertheless follows the recommendations laid out by Marinetti when he writes about the Variety Theater (674). He makes wide use of the grotesque and fearlessly mixes genres and literary traditions of various styles. He destroys all that is sacred and serious in art. The programs at the Variety Theater in Bulgakov's novel are devoid of all logic, which is what Marinetti sought. The emcee Bengalsky distinguishes himself, like American eccentrics, through his awkwardness and clumsiness. Woland and his assistants force spectators from the mezzanine, loge and gallery to take part in the action and later encourage them to determine the fate of the hapless Bengalsky. Fagot invokes a march accompanied, as Marinetti urges, by extravagantly daring couplets, and pulls from his pockets, either literally or figuratively, a great many objects: from Rimsky's pocket watch and a magic deck of cards to fake chervontsy and a store filled with fashionable Parisian dresses.

While I agree that Bulgakov voluntarily or involuntarily includes in chapter 12 many of the elements laid out by Marinetti, I disagree with Sokolov's further assertion that Fagot's antics prompt grand Futurist laughter (674). We readers witness mayhem,

greed, and other disturbing scenes in this chapter, but there is very little laughter to speak of. Instead, we are embarrassed to see our own actions reflected in those of the spectators at the Variety Theater, and we recognize that Bulgakov's scathing commentary applies to us as well. There is no room for laughter; we are too horrified by the exposé of our own feelings of greed and self-importance.

Not only does the black magic show in *The Master and Margarita* fail to elicit laughter from the audience, I disagree with another of Sokolov's assertions. Later in his discussion of the Futurist nature of the performance at the Theater, Sokolov suggests that by dropping money from the ceiling and causing the ill-fated Bengalsky to lose his head, Woland demonstrates to the audience how much they have changed inside and tries in his own way to change the world's physiognomy (674). To my mind, Woland gives little indication that he believes the audience has changed inside. Consider his remarks to Fagot: "They are like people anywhere... They are thoughtless, but then again, sometimes mercy enters their hearts. They are ordinary people, very much like their predecessors, only the housing shortage has had a bad effect on them" (104). If anything, the theatergoers' reactions to Woland's performance demonstrate that Muscovites have changed very little. They value material goods and the finer things in life to the same extent they always have.

As for Sokolov's assertion that Woland is trying in his own way to change the world's physiognomy, I disagree with this point as well. From what I understood in the chapter, Woland creates a fantasy world not to change the nature of the spectators so much as to judge their reaction to what takes place before them. On a grander scale,

Bulgakov—not the character of Woland—may be trying to change the world’s physiognomy. After all, the point of satire is to poke fun at social and philosophical targets in order to inspire people to work toward self-improvement and create change where it is needed. As I see it, then, Woland is not trying to change Muscovites; he is trying to help them identify for themselves what needs to be changed. He wants them to recognize, for example, that despite their belief that they are new Soviet men and women, they are just as susceptible to the charms of money and goods as were their prerevolutionary counterparts (Proffer 99).

THE VARIETY THEATER : THE INSPIRATION BEHIND THE ACTION

According to Sokolov in his *Encyclopedia*, Bulgakov called the Variety Theater “театр Каба́ре” in early drafts of the novel (672). As a model for the Variety Theater, Bulgakov used the Moscow Music Hall, which existed from 1926 until 1936 and was located at number 18 Bolshaya Sadovaya Street, not far from Bulgakov’s own apartment at number 10. (Today The Moscow Theater of Satire stands on the site of the former Moscow Music Hall.) Until 1926 the site was occupied by the Nikitin Brothers Circus, housed in a building constructed in 1911 especially for the organization. It is perhaps for this reason that Bulgakov’s Variety Theater offers circus acts, the first of which stars the Giulli Family. This family act is based on the popular *Трунна Польди* or the *Poldi Company*, the stage name of the Podrezov family, which performed bicycle tricks at the Moscow Music Hall in the 1930s. The man in the yellow bowler hat and the blond woman on the unicycle can be recognized in posters from that time.

According to Sokolov, many of the elements of the black magic séance were not invented by Bulgakov, but were based on the author's life experiences (675). On April 4, 1924, for example, Genrikh Yagoda, one of the leaders of the OGPU, the National Security Agency at that time, who later appeared in *The Master and Margarita* as a guest at Satan's Ball, distributed a secret circular that read as follows:

As of July 15th, permission for shows involving so-called 'clairvoyants,' 'mind readers,' 'fakirs,' and the like will only be granted under the following obligatory conditions: 1) That there be an indication on every advertisement poster that the secrets of the performance will be revealed, and 2) That during each performance or at the end of it, there be a clear revelation of how the séance was performed, in order not to evoke among the audience faith in another world, supernatural powers or prophets. Local OGPU organizations must strongly attend to the fulfillment of these conditions and, in the event of aberrations or undesirable results, must forbid such performances through OBLIT and GUBLIT [agencies that censored published works, shows, performances, plays, etc. on the oblast' and guberniia levels].

While modern readers may think that the text of the poster "*Today and Every Day at the Variety Theater, An Added Attraction: Professor Woland Performs Black Magic with an Exposé in Full*" (87) was entirely a creation of Bulgakov's, the required exposé of all magic on theater or circus stages was, in reality, vigilantly monitored at the time.

Woland's store of French fashions at the Variety Theater is based in large part on Aleksandr Amfiteatrov's story "Petersburg Contrabandists," which was popular in the early 1900s. In the story, a famous *kontrabandistka* sells fashionable women's dresses out of her home, all of which have been brought into Russia illegally. But Bulgakov's scene, in which Moscow ladies are deceived by the latest Parisian fashions and then find

themselves on the street in their nightclothes, is based on another very concrete source. On September 17, 1937, E.C. Bulgakova wrote in her diary in connection with the recently completed trip of the MXAN troupe to Paris: “Out of complete naiveté, several of our actresses bought fancy long nightwear and wore them, thinking they were evening gowns. Well, they soon found out otherwise...” (Sokolov 675).

As for the episode of the chervontsy that fall from the ceiling and later turn into useless paper, Bulgakov had several sources of inspiration. One was the essay “The Legend of Agrippa” by the symbolist author Valery Briusov. It was a Russian translation of G. Orsay’s book from 1913, *Agrippa of Nettesheim: The Famous 16th Century Adventurer*. In it, Briusov mentioned that the medieval German scholar and theologian Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486-1535), a sorcerer according to his contemporaries, “often, during his journeys, paid his bill at hotels with money that appeared to be entirely genuine. Of course, upon the philosopher’s departure, the coins turned into manure. Agrippa gave one woman a basket of gold coins; the next day, the same thing happened: the basket was filled with horse manure” (675). Another possible source of inspiration for this particular scene is Mephistopheles’ and Faust’s performance at the emperor’s court, which includes the production of false money and the giving of gifts that later disappear (Barratt 22).²

² For an exegesis of the Faust theme in *The Master and Margarita*, see Andrew Barratt’s book *Between Two Worlds: A Critical Introduction to “The Master and Margarita.”* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

THE AUDIENCE'S REACTION: INFLUENCED BY HARDSHIP OR BY HUMAN NATURE?

The Variety Theater is more than just a setting for Woland's black magic show. It is a microcosm of Moscow and practically a character unto itself. Bulgakov uses the Theater to paint an ethnographic portrait of 1930s life in Soviet Moscow, with Woland and his retinue leading their own vaudeville show. The Theater, indeed the entire novel, had to be set in Moscow. Unlike *Notes of a Country Doctor* or *Days of the Turbins*, *The Master and Margarita* is all about Stalin's city, the capital of bureaucracy and corruption. The devil, after all, has to appear where the crimes are committed.

What can be said of the reaction of the spectators at the Variety Theater to the bounty offered during Woland's performance? How much of the greed they displayed can be attributed to human nature, and how much of it results from their dreadful living conditions? Is their frenzy over dresses and shoes fueled by the scarcity of affordable, attractive clothing in 1930s Russia, or is it indicative of a more universal desire for the finer things in life? Surely the women in 1930s Moscow would have been as amazed and transfixed by the wonders on stage as were the characters in Bulgakov's novel. The splendor laid out before them, after all, is enough to make the audience throw caution and practicality to the wind. Once they get started, they no longer wonder if there is a catch—these exotic items are offered free of charge; they have only to give up the worn and tattered clothing they are currently wearing. Perhaps if they were required to pay a steeper price for the items, the audience would spend more time considering their usefulness, rather than bounding off stage with lilac shoes, ball gowns, silk pajamas, and French perfume. Then again, is it not a sign of practicality that the spectators take

whatever they can get their hands on, since they're so rarely able to acquire what they want or need?

As with the dresses, what causes these so-called rational Soviet theatergoers to believe that the money raining down on them is real? Though they do check for watermarks indicating the authenticity of the bills, they certainly don't waste time wondering about their provenance. Is this scrabbling and fighting for the falling cash a sign of greed? Perhaps it is more a sign of the desperate times in which this audience lives. For the average Russian in the 1930s, money was in short supply, and life was uncertain and unpredictable. Given the opportunity to secure one's future, I think it only logical that the average citizen would do his or her best to take advantage of such an opportunity, regardless of where it came from. After all, Russians at that time would have been accustomed to fighting for their share of a very limited supply of goods. If the spectators wasted time wondering if the money was real instead of jumping in and picking it up, they would miss the opportunity to grab their share of the riches.

The desire for money and fine clothing crosses cultural boundaries; it does not reflect a greed or vanity that is unique to Russians in the 1930s. If anything, given the living standards of Muscovites at the time, their reaction is quite understandable. While their behavior may appear comical, their willingness, indeed their need, to believe in magic and suspend reality, if only for a short time, is perfectly human. Perhaps Hoffman explains it best:

After the grinding poverty and self-sacrificing asceticism of the First Five-Year plan [1928-1933], people longed for improved material conditions and some entertainment and frivolity in their

lives. But for the vast majority, the sumptuous foods, fashionable clothing, automobiles and imported goods ... remained far out of reach. Most of them struggled, instead, to obtain the bare necessities of food and clothing (130).

Given these unimaginable hardships, it is not for contemporary readers to judge the audience's reactions harshly. While the theatergoers in *The Master and Margarita* are certainly human—they are as greedy and desirous of status as anyone else—we must also acknowledge that much of their behavior stems from their unique circumstances. If we recognize that in today's society of abundance, people regularly purchase fancy, impractical clothing and seek to amass ever greater wealth, we must pardon the spectators for their greed. The theatergoers pounce on what is offered precisely because they have nothing. What is our excuse? We have so much, and yet we willingly accumulate more possessions at every opportunity. So perhaps the joke is not on the theatergoers, but on us. They, at least, have a valid reason to react the way they do. Bulgakov, therefore, offers more than a portrait of 1930s Moscow. He offers, whether or not we are willing to accept it, an exceedingly accurate portrait of us all.

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Vita

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This report was typed by the author.