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Margarita, the Multifaceted Heroine

Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* is a mystery at every turn, where everything is not as it seems. Everything we think we know is challenged: the Devil “forever works good” (1), the hero doesn’t appear until the thirteenth chapter, and even the story of Christ is rewritten. How do we interpret the main female of this story, Margarita? At first glance, it seems that her purpose in the story is to aid the main male characters: she is but a pawn in a man’s world. However, upon further analysis, Margarita’s personality reveals a complex integration of many elements. In her interactions with the main characters as well as her solo adventures, Margarita embodies an array of identities: motherhood, royalty, and divinity. Her connection to figures with connotations of power emphasizes Margarita’s personal strength and agency.

We first learn of Margarita when the Master retells his life story to Ivan at the insane asylum. In answer to Ivan’s question of “you’re a writer?”, his mysterious neighbor answers “I am the Master” and pulls the cap on with an embroidered “M” as proof. “She sewed this for me with her own hands”, he adds (114), and that is our first introduction to Margarita. We soon learn that in addition to sewing, the mysterious lover performed other household tasks for the Master: “She would arrive, and the first thing she would do was put on an apron and light the oil-stove”, “then she would prepare lunch and serve it on the oval table in the first room”, and “sometimes she would squat down next to the lower shelves or stand up on a chair next to the upper ones and dust the hundreds of books” (118). This causes some readers to raise eyebrows: the woman assuming a traditional housemaker role? Is this yet another typical patriarchal dynamic? However, at the start of Part Two we hear Margarita’s story in more detail, this time from the narrator’s voice. “Margarita Nikolayevna had plenty of money. Margarita Nikolayevna could buy anything that took her fancy. . . . Margarita Nikolayevna was ignorant of the horrors of life in a communal department” (185). So in fact, the housewife role Margarita assumes in her relationship with the Master is not at all her natural position! The fact that Margarita chooses to perform these household tasks, instead of hiring a maid like she does in her own household (Natasha), shows a desire. If we look more closely to the tasks, we see that they can be quite intimate: cooking and sewing directly creates something for her lover, while dusting the books shows a care for the area in which the Master is creating in: writing. We learn that the cap Margarita sewed is one of the few possessions the Master has kept, signifying deep appreciation. Assuming such a seemingly traditional housewife role does not necessarily make Margarita subordinate. On the contrary, Margarita’s attention seems very much mother-like: a desire to care and nurture. This dynamic is seen even more clearly when fortune turns its back on the Master and he falls into depression. Her care is intensified and she urges the Master to focus on his health: the Master recalls “she said that I should give everything up and spend what remained of the 100,000 on a trip south to the black sea” (121). After the Master throws his novel into the fire and tells Margarita “I’m afraid. I’m sick. I’m terrified”, she responds by “stroking [his] forehead” and “clutching [him] by the shoulders”, murmuring I’ll cure you, I’ll cure you”. These actions demonstrate a deep care for the Master that is very much mother-like. I argue that the housewife tasks seen earlier are just an extension of this motherlike role, and not a subordinate female position in their dynamic.

One major concern form readers arises from the Master’s name: why does Margarita name him “the Master”? Is she defining a dominant-submissive relationship? Actually, this is a rather unfortunate translation inaccuracy. “Master” in both Russian and English has the following two definitions as the most common: “a man who has authority over others” and “an artist or performer of great skill”. The problem is that in English, the former definition is the most common (Merriam Webster), while in Russian, the latter is. Although it is meaningful to acknowledge the existence of both definitions, ”skilled practioner” makes more sense in this context. Margarita begins calling him the Master in fascination of his work: “she predicted fame, urged him on, and started calling him Master” (118). Rather than a show of submission, Margarita’s name for the Master is actually an act of accreditation: she is judging his work and assessing the author’s skill level. If anything, this comes from a position of authority and not submission. In addition, the mother-son relation is especially evident here: Margarita gives the Master the name which he defines himself by. When Ivan asks for the stranger’s name, the reply he gets is “I no longer have a name . . . I gave it up, just as I’ve given up everything else in life” (114). The title of “Master” is one of the few identifiers he has left, overriding the name which his biological parents gave him. What can be a more powerful than giving someone their identity?

In fact, Bulgakov seems to directly challenge the traditional love story setup. This tail is strikingly similar to a reversed Disney Cinderella story: in our case, Cinderella is the Master. A historian by training, the Master “had lived a solitary life” with no family or friends in Moscow (114). One day, by a stroke of fairy’s luck, the Master won 100,000 rubles, giving him the chance to move into the wealthy neighborhood near the Arbat where he had the chance to meet Margarita. Our heroine, on the other hand, is married to a wealthy man and is as financially stale as one might dream of. As the narrator describes, “it can be said with assurance that many women would have given anything to trade places with Margarita Nikolayevna”. A “beautiful house in a garden”, buying “anything that took her fancy” “her husband’s circle of friends included some interesting people”, having a maid to do all her work - Margarita lived the royal life. How often does we see a relationship between a well-off woman and a working-class man (even if he did steal the jackpot)? Of course, when the clock “strikes twelve” and the Master’s novel is finished, fortune reverses direction. The “pumpkin carriage” of his writing career shattered as quickly as it sprung up. As a bonus, the Master’s “evil stepsisters”, Lavrovich, Latunsky and Ariman drive him into a prison of depression, likely out of jealousy, and the poor Margarita is left with nothing but burnt remnants of the Master’s novel as a “glass slipper”. So in fact, we see that our traditional princess fairytale is rather reversed: Margarita is coming from a position of wealth, class, and stability: she is the “prince” that everyone dreams of. The fact that she loves the Master despite his misfortune shows that her love is genuine and not motivated by desire for prosperity.

Some readers are criticize Margarita’s grief: it seems that she has no hope for happiness until she is reunited with him. As the narrator describes, “she often cried in secret, long and bitter tears. She didn’t know whether the man she loved was alive or dead. As the despairing days passed, the thought came to her more and more, especially at twilight, that she was tied to a dead man. She should either forget him or die herself. It was really impossible to go on with the life she was living” (186). Can a woman be strong when all of her happiness is dependent on this man? However, I argue that this should be viewed not as a weak dependency, but as the inevitable emotion: her love is simply too strong to allow any happiness. One of the main causes of her torment is simply the helplessness to do anything: she doesn’t even know if her lover is alive. However, when a spark of hope appears in her dream, Margarita is immediately ignited with faith: “I believe! I believe something’s going to happen!” (186). When this spark becomes a reality and Margarita meets Azazello, who knows something of the Master’s whereabouts, Margarita is snapped out of brooding and ready to go into battle. This demonstrates that her grief is the simply result of the current situation and not a permanent marker of her personality.

The adventure which follows is rather like a romantic *Chanson de Geste* - an epic tale of heroic deeds popular in medieval France. In such stories, it is typical to hear of a knight who embarks on a perilous journey where he must face trial after trial, fight enemies and wicked beasts. The reward? The princess! In *Master and Margarita*, the roles are reversed and Margarita is our valiant knight. She accepts the invitation to Azazello’s quest with utmost determination: “I know what I’m getting myself in for. . . . I agree to everything, I agree to play out this whole comedy with the cream, I agree to go to the devil and back!” (194-5). She warns Azazello that he will be sorry if he kills her “ ‘because I’ll be dying for love!’ - and, pounding her chest, Margarita gazed at the sun” (194). This type of sentiment, with such dramatic gestures, is typical for representatives of male chivalry, but is rarely demonstrated by females! That night, Margarita gains magical powers through Azazello’s cream and is equipped with a new mode of transportation: a flying broom - she is primed for the journey. Its grand beginning is described: “she galloped over to the bed and grabbed the first thing she saw, a light-blue chemise. Waving it like a banner, she flew out the window” (199). Descriptions of Margarita’s adventure are filled with language evoking images of valiant knights, spirited and unstoppable.

Some critics of Margarita say that she is simply a pawn in a man’s world, used by the main male characters to fulfill their own purposes. However, we saw above that Margarita passionately insists on visiting Woland herself - she is not forced into it by Azazello. Furthermore, we see Margarita using her new abilities to her own advantage. She delays the journey to Woland’s apartment in favor of avenging the Master’s literary death. If her willingness to meet the Devil face to face doesn’t convince one of Margarita’s dauntlessness, then surely the episode at Latunsky’s apartment must. From start to finish, this scene is packed with action. On her way there, “it was only by some miracle that she avoided a fatal collision with a rickety old lamppost down at the corner” (201) - danger pursues Margarita at every corner! Margarita tracks down Latunsky’s apartment, and upon finding it, shows no mercy. The language used here is rough and violent, without the daintiness and grace we might expect in describing a heroine. The following would read just as easily (perhaps more so), if the character had been replaced by a man: “breathing hard, Margarita tore at the strings and pounded them with her hammer. Finally, exhausted, she backed off and plopped into an armchair to catch her breath” (203). We see no hint of elegance or femininity in descriptions of Margarita tearing the apartment into shreds: “took a swipe at the chandelier”, “slashed the sheets with a knife”, “sweat poured off her in streams” (204), “finished off the last window with on the eight floor with particular relish” (205). The language here is action-packed, decisive, and masculinized, illustrating Margarita as a merciless warrior. The poor critic’s apartment is the location of a gory battle, which is so often found in tales of knights. In fact, some of the objects Margarita ruthlessly attacks are personified, as if they are creatures from the enemy’s army: “the totally innocent Becker baby grand cried out in frenzy... the instrument droned, howled, wheezed, and clinked” (203), the window “sobbed” (204) after receiving a blow with the hammer. The scene in Latunsky’s apartment is overflowing with battle scene imagery, equating her courage and determination with that of a heroic knight.

Following this, Margarita takes an even longer detour into a fairytale-like land, accompanied by the bewitched Natasha and the shifty pig-snouted Nikolai Ivanovich. Here, Margarita takes time to bask “in the pleasures of a solitary night swim” (209), showing once again that Margarita is not under control of the men who sent her on this mission, or even the man for whom she embarked on it, but rather that Margarita feels entitled to do what she likes when she likes. This enchanted setting, in which Margarita encounters “diaphanous mermaids”, “naked witches”, and goat-legged creatures (211), doesn’t seem to have much purpose other in the scheme of the plot. Rather, it adds to Margarita’s adventure contrast, time, and distance - making her knightly journey have an even larger scale. In addition, we see Margarita treated as royalty: she is recognized as “Queen Margot” (210) and receives “the most gala reception” (211) in her honor. We see Margarita’s royal heritage confirmed by Woland’s retinue: Korovyov hints that she is the “great-great-great-great-granddaughter” of a “certain sixteenth-century French queen” (216). This discovery of Margarita’s noble roots points to Margarita’s power being internal as much as external: in addition to having courage and agency in her actions, Margarita has an entitlement to power in her blood.

[Next: Is Margarita’s nudity an example of sexual objectification? On the contrary, it is a demonstration of her personal freedom and connects her to figures of female divinity]

[Conclusion: Margarita’s embodiment of attributes that are traditionally linked to power help reveal her strength as a heroine.]