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## Object or Abject? The Feminine Principle in Bulgakov, Briusov, and Blok

### Introduction

Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* shares much with the ethos of the Symbolist movement, but its title characters manage to achieve the transcendence and the "happy ending" that characters in Symbolist works strive for but rarely obtain. This article will compare the success of the characters in *The Master and Margarita*, and the failure of some of their closest Symbolist predecessors in works by Valerii Briusov and Aleksandr Blok, to reach the desired release from rationality and mundane reality and achieve self-acceptance or peace of mind. This success or failure will be connected to their relationship to "the Feminine Principle" or "the Eternal Feminine," as manifested in the depictions of female characters. I will examine how "the feminine" functions as the Other, and at times the Abject, in these male-centered texts and fictional universes, and how the male protagonists' ability or lack thereof to transcend reality and their current (unhappy) situation is related to a similar ability or inability to accept this Other and its fundamental Otherness. Following Julia Kristeva's distinction between the Object and the Abject, I will show how it is "abjectionification," rather than "objectification," of female characters that leads the male characters in Briusov and Blok's works into a no-win situation in which they cannot escape from the system they have created, while Bulgakov's depiction of Margarita, even though in many ways just as limiting and androcentric as Briusov or Blok's treatment of their female characters, does not "abjectify" her and therefore allows both his male and female characters to have the possibility of transcending their current unpleasant physical circumstances. Although Briusov and Blok's heroines could serve as a point of escape from the realm of earthbound rationality and the tedium of ordinary life, being abject, they are too horrifying to be a conduit for the

Subject. It requires a less “abjectionable” female character, such as Bulgakov’s Margarita, for the male Subject to be saved.

### Theory: The Object, the Abject, and the Femme Fatale

Before jumping into an analysis of the female characters of these three authors, I will briefly define the difference between what is Other or Object and what is Abject, as defined by Kristeva. I have chosen to base my approach on Kristeva’s theories not only because of their scope and impact on contemporary literary criticism,<sup>1</sup> but because, as a Bulgarian who rose to academic prominence after coming to Paris in the 1960s, she forms a bridging figure between East European and Western literary theory: as Toril Moi points out in her introduction to *The Kristeva Reader*, Kristeva’s

fluent Russian [and] her Eastern European training enabled her to gain first-hand knowledge of the Russian Formalists, and—more importantly—of the great Soviet theorist Mikhail Bakhtin [...]. This double heritage, at once Marxist and Formalist, enabled her to make the most of the structuralist impulses she met with in Paris, giving her the confidence and context necessary not only to learn from them but to appropriate and transform them for her own particular project. (Moi 1986, 2)

Kristeva was also, as Kirsti Ekonen discusses, heavily influenced by Roman Jakobson (2014, 152) and wrote on Russian Futurism (ibid., 153). Kristeva’s theories, although not widely used in the analysis of Russian literary texts, combine aspects of both East European and Western critical approaches, and this synthesis means that they share enough cultural context with Russian literature to be appropriate for its analysis, while also being distant enough from it to provide a fresh perspective on classic works.

So, what is the Other/Object and what is the Abject, according to Kristeva? The Other is what is opposed to the Subject, but is also necessary for the Subject’s self-definition, as a mirror is necessary for the Subject to see its own face. Like a mirror, the Object/Other is perceived by the Subject as a tool with which to achieve a satisfactory self-image. When the Subject is male, the female must be Other. Kristeva takes this one step further by saying that woman is not only “Other” culturally and psychologically, but is “Other” to language or the symbolic order itself (Kristeva 1977, 35).

This problem, of women existing outside of the symbolic order, is of interest to us here, not only because we are examining images of women expressed in the symbolic order, but because we are examining images of women expressed in the symbolic order by authors who were participating in or heavily influenced by the Symbolist movement, which was preoccupied with, among other things, escaping from the straitjacket of rationality and the symbolic order. As Ekonen says, “The notion of otherworldly reality is central to symbolist thinking, and, according to the symbolist ideal, the artist’s task is to find the gate to this realm and combine it with everyday reality [...]. For the symbolists to find the way—the connection—to the otherworldly is to find the way to creativity” (2014, 154). Femininity seems an obvious avenue for this escape, but, as something outside the dominant masculine code these authors were using, that is to say, “Other,” or as we will soon see, even “Abject,” harnessing it for their own ends proved in many cases to be beyond these authors’ powers, perhaps because “In Russian symbolism, the feminine is of great importance in the creative process, but the prerequisite of creativity, that is, subjectivity, is understood as a masculine one” (ibid., 156). This inability to utilize “the feminine” to break free, despite its apparently subversive nature, may in fact be in accord with Kristeva’s own ambivalent depiction of the possibilities of women and femininity within the patriarchal symbolic order; as Ekonen says in her discussion of the feminist critical response to Kristeva’s theories, “According to some critics, Kristeva’s theory provides a positive model for constructing female subjectivity, and woman stays nearer to creative (and revolutionary) forces. At the same time, some critics see that woman is not an independent subject because she does not have access to the symbolic and therefore is not a creative subject” (ibid., 152). The tantalizing possibility of woman as the source of creativity and change, and her actual inability to transcend mundanity, or cause the male subject to transcend mundanity, is precisely what we see in the works of the Symbolist authors under discussion here, and is related to their depictions of “woman” or “the feminine” as ultimately Abject.

The “Abject” as Kristeva defines it is different from the “Other,” in that it destroys rather than builds meaning. As Kristeva explains:

The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. (Kristeva 1982, 1-2)

Instead of the binary system of subject and object, or I and Other, the concept of the abject allows us to posit a trinity of subject, object, and the anarchic forces of abject. The abject is thus what disturbs the sense of self by being both too foreign and too similar to the subject's self-image, provoking a knee-jerk reaction of "no, that can't be me!" Furthermore, although the abject can be anything that threatens the sense of self, women are frequently, according to Kristeva, the abject in their own society, where they are associated with that which is both dangerous and disgusting.<sup>ii</sup> In her discussion of the relationship between the abject and defilement, Kristeva says: "[T]he attempt to establish a male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by the no less virulent power of the other sex, which is oppressed [...]. That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (1982, 70). According to the theory of the Abject, therefore, women can and are seen by their society as something horrifying that must be rejected, suppressed, and denied.

Given everything that has just been said about the Other and the Abject, we must bear in mind that the female characters that will be analyzed below are not "real" women. Briusov's sadomasochistic heroines, Blok's Beautiful Lady, and Bulgakov's Margarita are not faithful depictions of women or the female character "as it is," but imaginary creations designed—even if this was not done with any conscious intent—to support their creators' male-centered philosophies and worldviews. Although these female characters did have real-life inspirations,<sup>iii</sup> my approach to the texts here is psychological, not

biographical, and I will concentrate not in the similarities between these female characters and their real-life counterparts, but rather on the function of these female characters within the system of the fictional narrative for which they were constructed. This frees us to examine these “women” in a manner that would be inappropriate with real women, as Briusov, Blok, and Bulgakov’s “women” are fictional creatures responding to the pressures of their authors’ imaginations, not flesh-and-blood people reacting to the pressures of hostile social expectations.

While the fictionalization of women is nothing new, two new kinds of fictional woman appeared during the rise of the Decadent or Symbolist artistic movement, that of Divine Sophia and the *femme fatale*. The Symbolist interest in and worship of the concept of Sophia, Divine Wisdom and the feminine aspect of divinity, can be traced back to the philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev, who created a “chivalrous cult” (Pyman 1994, 228) dedicated to her. Inspired by Solov’ev, second-generation Symbolists such as Blok “made the myth [of Sophia] or revived it for their own time, and, within the myth, they understood one another and were free from the conventions of a rationalist age” (ibid., 229). Sophia/The Feminine was thus seen as a conduit for these Symbolists to achieve the transcendence of rational conventions for which they longed, but as we shall see in the following section, they depicted their attempts as largely unsuccessful. Even for Blok, perhaps chief worshipper of Sophia after Solov’ev, achieving union with and transcendence through Sophia proved to be beyond his poetic persona’s powers, and his depictions of his Sophia-figure becomes more and more degraded as his poetry develops. And throughout his poetry, Blok’s feminine has traces of that female figure that so conspicuously marks his predecessor Briusov’s work: the *femme fatale*.

As discussed by Virginia Allen in *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, in the late nineteenth century emerged:

an idea of woman that was more erotic and more evil than in earlier art. Out of the ancient and traditional contrast of Demeter/Aphrodite, Mary/Eve, emerged a new image: one in which the evil pole was enormously intensified, and the poles themselves were pushed apart

to their furthest limits. Her image acquired a series of personality traits that altered and exaggerated her character from mere sin to positive and devouring evil. (1983, 12-13)

Allen describes such a female character as “immortal, queen, goddess, and therefore separated from ordinary men—and women—by a vast gulf” (1983, 4). The vast gulf separating the *femme fatale* from other people suggests that she is, for all her beauty, abject, that is, outside of the system and therefore a figure of horror, as can be seen by the association of *femmes fatales* with vampires and other fatal figures, something Allen discusses at length. Like a corpse, which Kristeva calls “the utmost of abjection” (1982, 4), a *femme fatale* may present a semblance of life, but in fact she is completely remote from the system generally designated as life. This remoteness marks, although in different ways, the women of both Briusov and Blok, to whom we shall now turn.

### Briusov’s Sadomasochistic *Femmes Fatales*

Briusov, while in some ways admiring Solov’ev, remained “untouched by the myth of the Eternal Feminine” (Pyman 1994, 231). Instead, the female characters who populate his poetry fit most obviously into the definition of the *femme fatale*. An excellent example of the *femme fatale* tormenting her lover/devoted slave is the 1901 poem «Раб» (“The Slave”) from Briusov’s collection *Urbi et Orbi*, released in 1903. It begins with the declaration:

I am a slave, and I was a submissive slave  
To the most beautiful of empresses.  
Before her gaze, flaming and black,  
I silently fell facedown.<sup>iv</sup>

At first the slave is unable to look at the empress, but is rather the object of her gaze. However, starting in the third stanza, the roles are reversed, for the slave glances up at the empress, so that “she trembled with rage, / Death to the defilers of sacred objects!”<sup>v</sup> The slave’s punishment is not, though, to lose his sight, but to be forced to continue to watch the empress under even more intimate circumstances:

And that very night I was chained  
To the imperial bed, like a dog  
[...]  
And her clothes fell away  
To the fabric on her breast...  
And in horror I shut my eyes...  
But a voice whispered to me: look!<sup>vi</sup>

The empress is then joined by an unnamed youth, for whom “She, submissive, was waiting,”<sup>vii</sup> and the slave passes the night watching their lovemaking and then their sleep. His position as both the nonhuman possession of the empress and the possessor of the gaze that takes ownership of her is emphasized in the penultimate stanza as he watches them as they sleep till sunrise, still “chained to the bed like a dog,” and then goes over the memory of what he has seen repeatedly as he breaks rocks in a quarry in the final stanza. He thus “owns” the memories of his sight of the empress, just as she owns him.

The empress herself in this poem is *femme fatale*, object, and abject. She fits Allen’s definition of being a queen and a goddess, who is separated from her subjects/lovers by a “vast gulf,” and who takes said subjects/lovers according to her own desires, with no concern for convention or procreation. She is Other and therefore object for the slave because her definition as empress is necessary for his definition as slave. She is also the object of his gaze. And finally, she is abject, inasmuch as she is defiled by the slave’s gaze (he is called a “defiler of sacred objects”) and by, it is implied, the youth who shares her bed. This defilement and abjection can be seen in the description of her as “submissive” or “obedient” (*pokornaia*) as she awaits the arrival of her lover. The slave uses the word “submissive” for both her and himself, suggesting the close connection between subject and abject. Defiled by the slave’s gaze, she has now gained some of his slavish nature, which would destroy the empress/slave system. Furthermore, her “submissiveness” suggests that she, too, is “chained to the bed like a dog,” and therefore nonhuman; that is, outside the system of humanity, and so abject in yet another way.

The empress's "submissive" behavior suggests a tendency not just towards the sadism commonly associated with the *femme fatale*, but also towards masochism, an equally important aspect of the *fin de siècle* fictional woman's personality. This masochism of Russian female characters from the literature of that period, and of Briusov's creation Renata in the novel *The Fiery Angel* in particular, is discussed in detail by Catherine Le Gouis in her article "The Woman on the Cross," in which she describes how women in Decadent and Symbolist novels "seek power by exceeding the suffering of men as they conflate religious and sadomasochistic rituals" (2008, 477); here we shall only touch upon it in order to contrast Renata's behavior with Margarita's.

*The Fiery Angel*, Briusov's fantastical novel from 1908, tells the story of the affair between Ruprecht, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century landsknecht, and Renata, the demon-haunted woman he encounters on the road. Despite her peculiar and often unreasonable behavior, Ruprecht becomes so enamored of Renata that he agrees to perform black magic and trade his immortal soul for knowledge of the whereabouts of Renata's former lover, whom she believes to be the flesh-and-blood form of the angel Madiel, who visited her throughout her childhood and told her she would become a saint. Renata must therefore preserve the purity of her soul, which is why she has Ruprecht engage in the black magic rituals she uses to try to track her previous lover.

The novel is narrated through the first-person account of Ruprecht, and so we only see Renata through his eyes, which are largely preoccupied with her irrational and sadomasochistic behavior. The narrator dwells at length on Renata's predilection for torment, which begins with her childhood visions of Madiel: as part of her preparation for sainthood the angel forces her to undergo numerous trials, such as "to go out into the frost naked, [...] to flagellate her thighs with knotted ropes or torture her breasts with sharp points" (Briusov 2005, 37).<sup>viii</sup> Such highly sexualized descriptions of Renata's masochistic tendencies are sprinkled throughout the novel, as are descriptions of the pleasure Ruprecht takes in suffering for her sake or because of her.<sup>ix</sup> This sadomasochistic master/slave relationship between Ruprecht and Renata carries on throughout the novel, ending only in Renata's death in prison after being



tortured by the Inquisition. Ruprecht arrives just in time to witness her death, and the novel ends with his statement that:

I hereby swear an oath before my conscience that never again shall I yield up so blasphemously my immortal soul, given unto me by my Creator—in the power of one of His creatures, in whatever seductive form she may be clothed, and that never, however weary may be the circumstances of my life, shall I turn to the aid of divinations condemned by Holy Church, or to the forbidden sciences, nor shall I attempt to cross that sacred edge that divides our world from the dark sphere in which float spirits and demons.<sup>x</sup> (Ibid., 392)

The novel thus ends with the male character having barely survived his brush with a sadomasochistic *femme fatale*, who lures him into contact with the forces of darkness and the Other World, but whom he fails to save from her own demons, literal and figurative. Chastened by his experience with the Other Sex and the Other World, Ruprecht swears off further contact with them, rejecting both women and the unknown that they represent. By declaring Renata and all that she stands for as abject, that is, “beyond the sacred edge that divides our world from the dark sphere in which float spirits and demons,” he is able to exclude her from the system of masculinity, rationality, and piety he has created, but he, and by extension the novel, thereby fails to transcend that very system.

Briusov’s fictional women such as Renata or the unnamed empress represent one attitude towards women: that of the fatal temptress, who seduces men into leaving the rational, conscious world within the “dominant masculine code” and plunging into the dangers of the unconscious, black magic, and by extension the abject. Kristeva, in describing the effect of the feminine in its interactions with the masculine symbolic order, says: “It is thus that feminine specificity defines itself in patrilineal society: woman is a specialist in the unconscious, a witch, a bacchanalian, taking her *jouissance*<sup>xi</sup> in an anti-Apollonian, Dionysian orgy. A *jouissance* which breaks the symbolic chain, the dominance, the taboo” (1977, 35).

Renata and her sisters in Briusov’s work act in exactly this way: while, on the one hand, they are outside the male subject’s frame of reference, eliciting little compassion, empathy, or understanding from

him, on the other hand, they disturb or destroy his worldview. In both the works discussed here this disturbance is only temporary—the slave is sent from the empress’s bed to the quarry and therefore back to the comfortingly familiar system of his slavery, and Renata dies, freeing Ruprecht to return to his pious rationalism—but it leaves scars nonetheless: the slave cannot forget what he witnessed when he was chained to the empress’s bed, and Ruprecht cannot stop longing for Renata even after he has lost both her and his eternal soul to the Devil. The encounter with the feminine in Briusov’s literary world is emphatically an encounter with the dark side of human and supernatural nature, one that leaves the hero shaken by the horror that contact with the abject provokes.

#### The Degradation and Destruction of Blok’s “Beautiful Lady”

Just as Briusov’s characters find little salvation in their interactions with sadomasochistic “fatal women,” so does Blok’s poetic persona fail to achieve transcendence through its encounter with the other pole of the Eternal Feminine, that of the Beautiful Lady/Sophia. The poems discussed below demonstrate both the initial fear, and the later disillusionment, present in Blok’s poetry about this figure.

In the early poem «Предчувствую Тебя» (“I Apprehend You”),<sup>xii</sup> which was composed June 4, 1901 and was published in *Verses About a Beautiful Lady*, we meet, not the Beautiful Lady herself, but the lyrical hero’s simultaneous longing for and fear of her arrival. The poem begins “I sense your coming. Year follows fleeting year— / With your mien still unchanged, I sense your coming”<sup>xiii</sup> (Blok 1981, 39-4. All subsequent translations of this poem are quoted from the same source). However, as the lyrical hero, surrounded by a flaming horizon, awaits the arrival of his Beautiful Lady, he is overcome with apprehension that she will in fact change, and the poem concludes “How clear the horizon! Nearer comes that glow. / But I am terrified you'll change your mien.”<sup>xiv</sup> The Beautiful Lady here seems less like the object of chivalrous affection, and, with her terrifying yet unseen approach, more like a monster from a horror movie as it comes creeping up on the hero.<sup>xv</sup> This is a particularly apt simile if we accept Barbara Creed’s description of the horror movie, which:

brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between the human and non-human. As a

form of modern defilement rite, the horror film works to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. In Kristeva's terms, this means separating out the maternal authority from the paternal law. (1989, 72)

We can see how this separation takes place in Blok's poems dealing with the Beautiful Lady/Unknown Woman/Columbine, the three faces of the Divine Sophia that appear in his poetry.<sup>xvi</sup> In the beginning of the cycle, Blok's Beautiful Lady, like the most frightening monsters, remains hidden in this poem, present only through hints and hearsay. She is the Unknown, and therefore outside the hero's system and potentially abject. The hero awaits her in fear and trembling, longing for her arrival but terrified she will be different from what he expects—that she will let him down by “changing her mien,” that is, failing to fit into his personal system, the symbolic order, and paternal law, causing him to be overcome with abjection.

The next step in the process can be seen in this next poem, which is part of the «Незнакомка» (“The Stranger,” or “The Unknown Woman”) cycle. In this 1906 poem, She makes her appearance, but with her “mien changed” from how the hero had initially imagined her. Now she is surrounded by vulgarity and banality, where “ladies flaunt their fashions / [And] any schoolboy can act like a wit”<sup>xvii</sup> (Blok 2003, 127. All subsequent translations quoted from this poem are from the same source). When she comes to the hero in his tedium, she is not the transcendental heroine expected in the earlier poem, but an apparently human woman who is “Brazenly ravishing, / And condescendingly proud.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Here the Beautiful Lady/Sophia has reached the hero, but banal reality remains stubbornly banal. The sunset, which featured so prominently in the earlier poem, and in the Beautiful Lady collection in general, is powerless here,<sup>xix</sup> and She is out of place in this scene of tedium and vulgarity. In fact, there is a suggestion in the penultimate stanza that She, too, has over-indulged in wine (“Tumultuous in your black silks, / Have you been deafened by the wine, / Under your helmet with its funereal plumes?”),<sup>xx</sup> and in general she has lost a great deal of her luster through her manifestation in a material dimension, even if she still maintains some contact with the spiritual realm. She is, however, disappointing in comparison

with the terrifying She of the previous poem, and the poet concludes by questioning whether he even needs her at all:

Amidst this enigmatic vulgarity,  
Tell me—what am I to do with you—  
As unattainable and singular  
As this evening, full of smoke and blue.<sup>xxi</sup>

While he still recognizes her potential as a Sophia-figure, his desire for a union with her no longer drives him, and his descent into vulgarity (*poshlost'*) has dragged her down with him. Although she joins him in his system, by not being the Beautiful Lady he had hoped for, but still retaining some of Her features, she could be seen as the internal abject, that which the subject excludes from the system, but which nonetheless is within the system, poisoning and destroying it. This makes her, while less frightening, perhaps even more horrifying than the expected Beautiful Lady of the earlier poem.

In the lyric drama “The Puppet Show” («Балаганчик»), also from 1906, the destruction of the heroine, and the disillusionment of the hero, is complete. The play begins with a group of mystics awaiting the arrival of a terrifying feminine figure, whom they believe to be Death. At the same time, a Pierrot waits for his bride. Both groups are let down. The terrifying feminine figure turns out to be Columbine, disappointing the mystics expecting Death, and she abandons Pierrot for Harlequin, leaving Pierrot disillusioned and broken-hearted:

Oh, how radiant she was, who went away.  
(My jingling comrade led her off).  
She fell (from cardboard she was made).  
I came—at her to laugh.

She lay prone and white.  
Oh, our dance was fun.  
There was no way she could arise.

She was a cardboard bride.

(Blok 2003, 32-3)<sup>xxii</sup>

Pierrot's Columbine, far from being the awe-inspiring figure of Death the mystics expect at the beginning of the play, is nothing but a "cardboard bride," who falls down and betrays him, both literally and figuratively. Her real and metaphorical collapse in front of the hero allows him to laugh at her and, while mourning the loss of his vision, not to mourn whatever fate is in store for her. To continue with the comparison of Blok's Lady to a monster from a horror movie, she has followed the trajectory from unknown terror, to frightening but flesh-and-blood creature, to the final revelation as nothing but a prop or special effect. This downward transformation of his Lady allows the hero to avoid the transcendence that might accompany a real encounter with a supra-rational and supernatural being, while also blaming his Lady for his failure to achieve this transcendence. The fault, it is implied in "The Puppet Show," is not in Pierrot for being sad and scared, but in Columbine for being a "cardboard bride" instead of the figure of Death the mystics had expected at the beginning of the play. Pierrot resolutely excludes Columbine from his system, abjectifying her into a nonhuman figure and allowing her to be taken from him. It could even be argued that her betrayal is essential for the preservation of his system of self-pity: if she were to be faithful and make him happy, it would collapse. Or to return to Creed and Kristeva's contrast of the maternal authority versus the paternal law, if the feminine (the maternal authority) were to be integrated into the symbolic order of this poem and this cycle, it would cause the paternal law to fall apart. While this is what the narrator/hero supposedly desires, he is unable to allow the feminine to be integrated and perform this essential function.

Both Briusov and Blok suggest some kind of link for their heroines with the supernatural and irrational realm, a link that is not passed on to the heroes at least in part because of the heroine's flaws as a conduit for the Divine or its inverse. In Briusov the heroine's link to the Other World is through the powers of darkness and a connection with the Devil, while in Blok the heroine is ostensibly an aspect of Divine Wisdom, but in either case the heroine lets the hero down. Renata does so by sinking ever deeper into insanity, black magic, and masochism, and Blok's Beautiful Lady does so by revealing herself to be

nothing more than Columbine, the cardboard bride, but these two different manifestations of the “feminine” in these authors’ works are united by their untrustworthiness. Not that they deliberately set out to deceive their heroes; they are simply incapable, it is suggested, of telling the truth or being what their heroes desire them to be. As Steven C. Hutchings remarks in his article “Time-Shifts and Mirrors in Brjusov’s Ognennyj Angel”: “Renata’s personality remains in a permanent state of flux, impossible to fix or label, even as ‘contrary’ or ‘contradictory.’ Whenever Ruprext appears to have captured and fixed Renata’s essence, she seems able to split away from her former personality, so that she is always different, never identical to herself” (1990, 477). Aside from her sadomasochistic tendencies, we never get to know Renata at all. Our last impression of her, as she raves wildly at the moment of death, is of a creature whose behavior is beyond the powers of human reason to predict.

This is what the poetic persona in Blok’s poems to the Beautiful Lady fears: that she will “change her mien.” A fear that is not unfounded, as she does indeed change, becoming a mysterious visitor to restaurants and bars (possibly a prostitute?), and then a cardboard bride who collapses into nothing but a figure of mockery for the hero. Through all of her manifestations, she never manages to achieve the status of object to the hero’s subject: she cannot even serve as a reliable mirror to reflect his face back to him. She is so outside of the world he has created that the only thing she can do is destroy both it and herself.

### Bulgakov’s Post-Symbolist Heroine

So what does this have to do with *The Master and Margarita*? Bulgakov wrote the novel twenty years after the flowering of the Symbolist movement, but it is rich in Symbolist imagery and interests such as religion, black magic, the Devil, supra-rational sources of knowledge, and the transcendent power of art, and the debt he owed to his Symbolist predecessors has been well documented by scholars.

Andrew Barratt devotes a significant section of the conclusion of his book *Between Two Worlds* to it, while George Krugovoy declares that the novel “occupies an honorable place among the best esoteric and occult novels of the Russian Symbolist prose written before the Revolution of 1917” (1991, 3). Laura D.

Weeks also touches upon the connections between Bulgakov and Symbolism in her introduction to *The Master & Margarita: A Critical Companion* (1996, 5), and Caryl Emerson mentions it in her discussion of the novel in *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature* (2008, 177). Most recently, Andrei Cretu's 2010 article "'Memento Mori': A Hypothesis on the Genesis of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," is an in-depth discussion of the shared motifs in Bulgakov's novel and works by Briusov. It is this connection to Briusov that provides the most concrete link between Bulgakov and Symbolism.

Cretu suggests an interesting series of parallels between *The Master and Margarita* and a 1918 sonnet by Briusov titled "Memento Mori," in which Satan visits Moscow, just as he does in Bulgakov's novel. *The Fiery Angel* is also brought up as a source text for *The Master and Margarita*, not only by Cretu in his article but by Barratt and Krugovoy in their respective books as well. The similarities between the two novels are noteworthy enough to bear further elaboration.

Both novels involve a pair of lovers, one of whom is striving to save the other. The active member of each pair makes a deal with the Devil in order to save the other, passive member of the pair. There are almost-identical scenes in which the lover who has made the deal (Ruprecht in *The Fiery Angel* and Margarita in *The Master and Margarita*) applies a magical cream or ointment, is transformed, and flies off to a fateful meeting with the Forces of Darkness. However, there are some significant differences between these scenes as well. Ruprecht denies God at the Black Sabbath, while Margarita, when serving as the queen of Satan's Ball, does not. Ruprecht ultimately fails in his quest to save his beloved, while Margarita does not. Perhaps most importantly for our discussion here, *The Fiery Angel* is narrated in the first person, while *The Master and Margarita* is narrated in the third person. Ruprecht is thus the subject of his own story, while Margarita is the object of a story told from an outside perspective. This enables her character to act as the selfless feminine object that is necessary for the system of the novel to function and for the Master to be saved, but, while Margarita, like Renata or the Beautiful Lady, is seen from the outside, the third-person narration places her on more equal footing with the male characters and allows her to be integrated into the overall world-view of the novel. While I argue that this

equality is not fully realized, there is on the other hand no attempt to degrade Margarita and “the feminine” or expel them from the work, as there is in the Symbolist works analyzed above.

That *The Master and Margarita* is not a Symbolist but a post-Symbolist novel is something Barratt in particular stresses, saying that:

[T]he novel is perhaps best described as a *post*-Symbolist work. Bulgakov was, after all, writing long after the demise of Symbolism as an active movement on the Russian literary scene, and it would be foolish to suggest that he was working consciously within the framework of Symbolist philosophy or aesthetics. Moreover, he harnesses these recognizably ‘Symbolist’ elements in his last novel to a vision which is unmistakably his own, and which actually counters the intense pessimism which characterizes so much Symbolist fiction. (1987, 319)

This “intense pessimism” of Symbolist fiction includes the fictional women who inhabit it. These women, whether purportedly good or evil, tend to possess terrifying aspects of the *femme fatale*. Of course, so does Bulgakov’s Margarita, but she nonetheless manages to be a force for good rather than evil.

So how does Margarita differ from her Symbolist foremothers? Is she any less changeable, impure, or “feminine” than Briusov and Blok’s heroines? An examination of her words and deeds suggests not. She takes up with the Master because she is bored and unfulfilled in her marriage to another man. She engages in a deal with the Devil in order to find the Master once he has disappeared, a deal which involves her presiding over Satan’s Ball. While fulfilling her duties, however, she fails to obey the strict instructions she has been given to be impartial,<sup>xxiii</sup> and speaks to Frieda, a young woman who has been condemned to eternal punishment after suffocating the illegitimate child she is unable to feed. After the ball, when Margarita is given the chance to ask for the one favor she has earned, she suddenly changes course and asks, not for the Master’s return, but for Frieda’s release from her punishment. When Woland (Satan) asks Margarita if she is a person of unusual goodness and moral fiber, she replies that, on the contrary, “I’m a thoughtless person”<sup>xxiv</sup> (Bulgakov 1995, 242). All of this could be interpreted as a sign



that she is, just as she says, a “thoughtless person,” or that she is, like Briusov’s Renata, in a “constant state of flux,” constantly in danger of “changing her mien” like Blok’s Beautiful Lady.

Margarita does have much in common with those characters, on both the good side and the bad side. Like her Symbolist predecessors, she is, according to Krugovoy, an aspect of Sophia, as can be seen by her name, for “[m]ystical signification constitutes the core of Margarita’s name, which stands for ‘pearl’ in Greek. In gnostic literature, the pearl denotes a valuable human soul or, on its deeper metaphysical level, the ‘World Soul,’ Sophia” (1991, 139). However, Margarita is, as can be seen by the examples given above, not a fixed and remote persona, but in many ways a capricious and quicksilver personality, like Briusov and Blok’s heroines. She is also, again like Briusov and Blok’s heroines, immoral according to generally accepted standards, in that she commits adultery and makes a deal with the Devil. Her willingness to leave her husband in order to engage in liaisons with both the Master and Satan give her traits of the *femme fatale*. In both her “good” and her “bad” aspects she is, then, as Cretu points out, the heiress to “an illustrious line of Symbolist images of the Eternal Feminine, from Baudelaire’s ‘passerby’ (*A une passante*) to Blok’s *Neznakomka*” (2010, 438).<sup>xxv</sup> However, unlike these Symbolist examples of the Eternal Feminine, who cannot possibly hope to succeed in the task set out for them—saving the hero from himself while maintaining their status as everything and nothing—Margarita succeeds.

Margarita’s infidelity, her willingness to make a pact with Satan, her failure to honor the terms of that pact, and her “thoughtlessness” have already been mentioned. So what is it that sets her apart from Renata and her sisters, and makes her the “hero,” in the sense of someone whose brave actions save the day, of this novel? Her heroism lies in her non-masochistic self-sacrificing nature, and in the other (male) characters’ willingness to accept that sacrifice. She is a “thoughtless person.” But in this thoughtlessness her courage and selflessness are expressed.

This selflessness sets Margarita apart from the other characters in the book except Yeshua Ha-Notsri, whom the reader recognizes to be Jesus of Nazareth. She, like Yeshua (and unlike the male characters others than Yeshua), is capable of sacrificing herself for the sake of others. This can be seen in

every instance of her “failure,” but especially in her treatment of Frieda, which is “the supreme mark of her victory, the apotheosis of the spirit of compassion” (Barratt 1987, 245). The emphasis on compassion, as well as selflessness, differentiates her behavior from Renata’s masochism. Margarita’s suffering and abandonment of self are motivated by her empathy for others rather than a love of pain and self-abasement for its own sake. Although she becomes a witch during the novel, and thus seems to represent the dark side of the “Eternal Feminine,” her innate merciful tendencies associate her not only with Yeshua, but also with the bright side of the “Eternal Feminine”: Mary, the Mother of God.

Laura Weeks lists a number of parallels between Margarita and Mary, the most significant of which for our discussion here is the parallel between Margarita's service as hostess at Satan's ball and the apocryphal story of Mary's descent into hell, in which she begs for, and is granted, a brief period of mercy for its inhabitants (1996, 35), just as Margarita brings a moment of compassion to the sufferers at Satan's Ball, and intercedes on Frieda's behalf. This association of Margarita with Mary as well as Yeshua gives her a feminine cast, as opposed to making her simply a masculine character with a feminine name. Furthermore, it could even be argued that, on the contrary, it is Yeshua who embodies a number of stereotypical feminine traits: he is peaceful, largely passive, self-sacrificing, and possesses the ability to read the feelings of others. The reunion between Yeshua and Pontius Pilate even seems reminiscent of a lovers' reunion, especially given that it parallels the final reunion and retreat of the Master and Margarita. Yeshua thus seems to represent the union of masculine and feminine within one (masculine) body. The novel—in contrast to the works by Briusov and Blok discussed above—demonstrates the acceptance of both the feminine side of the masculine and the acceptance and integration of the actual feminine, as represented by Margarita and the other female characters, into the (still androcentric) world of the novel.

The link between femininity and mercy can be seen in the scene when George Bengalsky, master of ceremonies at the Variety Theater, has his head torn off in front of the audience. When the audience is asked if Bengalsky should be forgiven, it is women who lead the cry to have his head restored (Bulgakov 1995, 104). This suggests it is not just Margarita’s individual nature, but also her status as female, that allows her to show such mercy to Frieda and others, and that, within the system of the novel, femininity,

instead of being a loathsome and terrifying monster to be rejected and expelled, as Briusov and Blok's fictional women are, is both essential and positive, as Margarita and the other women take on a salvific role.

Margarita is not only a Jesus-figure and a Mary-figure, she is also a Sophia-figure. The connection between her name and Sophia has already been discussed. Although Margarita, with her infidelities and her "thoughtlessness," might seem like exactly the sort of failed Sophia to be revealed as a "cardboard bride," in Bulgakov's literary universe, the fact that Margarita is not sinless or unerring does not diminish her Sophia properties, nor does it weaken her spiritual significance. As Krugovoy argues:

Far from being a mythological realization of perfection, Margarita, the precious pearl, is rather a symbol of the sinning, erring, and striving humanity which establishes her relationship to the Sophia figure [...]. [P]laced in the perspective of the Gnostic Sophia figure, Margarita acquires in the Epilogue the mystical traits of the terrestrial Church on the way towards her mystical union with Yeshua in Heavenly Jerusalem. On the level of literary archetypes, the figure of Margarita integrates both the self-abandoning nature of Goethe's Margarete and the sovereign wisdom of Beatrice. (1991, 289)

Instead of being a "cardboard bride," Margarita, for all her faults, functions as a true "Beautiful Lady" in the novel. Through her intercession, she effects the rescue of the hero from his physical imprisonment in the insane asylum, and she also rescues him and other desperate characters such as Frieda from the imprisonment of their mental suffering. This puts her in direct contrast with Briusov and Blok's heroines, who as *femmes fatales* are the cause of suffering for those around them. Even though Margarita shares the traits of a *femme fatale* such as infidelity and a connection with the powers of darkness, she is also a force for life. Importantly, unlike Briusov's heroines, she is not sadomasochistic: her occasional outbursts (for example, at Begemot or the critic Latunskii) are caused by righteous outrage at harm done to others, not the desire to inflict pain for the sake of enjoying pain, and while she does not shy away from it, she evinces no desire to seek out pain and humiliation for herself—her pleasure in her naked broom ride, for example, is innocently childlike, and she agrees to preside naked over Satan's Ball

out of selflessness, rather than submissiveness. The end result is that, although her intercession leads to a kind of death for both herself and the Master,<sup>xxvi</sup> this in turn is followed by rebirth and escape to a better plane of existence. By containing both poles of femininity, that of Eve and that of Mary, within her, Margarita is able to move between worlds and interact with both the Satanic (i.e., Woland and his retinue) and the Divine (the Master's inspiration and the other world where they eventually receive refuge), thus effecting the salvation of the main male protagonist in a way that a one-sided character such as Briusov's Renata could not.

While the female characters of these Symbolist writers function as the object of these authors' literary systems, Margarita functions as the object in Bulgakov's male-centered world. Rather than being "radically excluded" as loathsome and inimical to meaning, she is included as an essential part of the system. Without her courage, compassion, and "thoughtlessness," the system behind the novel would fail to function. As the chief representative of the forces of mercy, Margarita, and the other characters' acceptance of her, is necessary for the happy resolution of the story. By allowing her to perform this function, even though she is a flawed character, the Master and the others allow her to save them. The male subjects in Briusov and Blok's literary worlds, on the other hand, insist on seeing the female characters as either a perfect vision, or as a sadomasochistic *femme fatale*. The perfect vision is inevitably disappointing and is consequently subject to savage mockery as a "cardboard bride," while the designation as a *femme fatale* is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In either case, the female character is destroyed, but her destruction entails the destruction or misery of the male character attempting to deny her as well.

However, this should not be taken to mean that Margarita is a fully-fledged and independent subject within the novel. Her value to the system is in her compassion, which is predicated upon her selflessness. Throughout the novel she bounces from one male character to the next (her husband, the Master, Woland), seeking salvation either through him or for him. Although the reader is occasionally given glimpses of Margarita's inner life, there is never a hint that she could or should have a meaningful existence beyond her service to others, or that she might, for example, try her hand at writing her own

novel. She is essential to the system, and therefore not abject, because she is the object: that which allows the subject to set itself up as “I.” Necessary as she is to achieving the (comparatively) happy end of *The Master and Margarita*, it is significant that her name comes second in the title. She is the Master’s “other half,” in that she completes him, but she completes him by doing, while he completes her by being. While this may seem like an inversion of the stereotype of masculine activity and feminine passivity, it still puts the male character at the center of the story, while placing Margarita in a peripheral, subservient position. Her role is still that of a helper and enabler of masculine achievement, the strong woman behind her man: he is allowed to achieve completion by creating a work of art, while she is allowed to achieve completion by sacrificing herself for him. Nevertheless, the fact that she is playing that role at all is one of the main distinctions between *The Master and Margarita* and its Symbolist predecessors discussed above. While Renata and her ilk are depicted as nothing more than broken mirrors, incapable of either seeing or being seen in their true form, Margarita could be thought of as shown through the wrong end of a telescope: small but still there. Although this still puts Margarita in the position of object/complement, she is not, like Renata and her sisters, “abjectified” and ultimately excluded, but allowed to serve her function within the male-centered narrative, thus enabling the integration of the feminine by the male protagonists and the novel’s world-system. By embracing this feminine side, the novel may not be presenting a true or balanced picture of emancipated femininity, but, by admitting the presence of the maternal authority and allowing it to make some cracks in the symbolic order and paternal law, it does enable its characters to achieve the transcendence of mundane reality that its predecessors sought in vain.

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<sup>i</sup> For a detailed discussion of the breadth of Kristeva's theories, and of the impact of her work, see for example Noelle McAfee's book *Julia Kristeva*.

<sup>ii</sup> Ethnic minorities, often feminized even if male, can also serve the same role. Kristeva writes of anti-Semitism: "The Jew becomes the feminine exalted to the point of mastery, the impaired master, the ambivalent, the border where exact limits between same and other, subject and object, and even beyond these, between inside and outside [are] disappearing—hence an Object of fear and fascination. *Abjection itself*" (1982, 185).

<sup>iii</sup> Blok's Beautiful Lady cycle was in part inspired by his courtship of his future wife, Liubov Dmitrievna Mendeleeva; *The Fiery Angel* was a literary response to Briusov's affair with Nina Ivanovna Petrovskaja; and Bulgakov's character Margarita was based on his third wife, Elena Sergeevna. For a more detailed discussion of the biographical facts behind the creation of the works under consideration in this article, see for example Irene Masing-Delic and I.G. Vishnevetsky's "Aleksandr (Aleksandrovich) Blok," Judith Kalb and I.G. Vishnevetsky's "Valerii Iakovlevich Briusov," Lesley Milne's *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography*, and Nadine Natov's *Mikhail Bulgakov*.

<sup>iv</sup> Я—рабъ, и былъ рабомъ покорнымъ

Прекраснѣшей изъ всѣхъ царицъ.

Предъ взоромъ, пламеннымъ и чернымъ,

Я молча повергался ницъ.

(Briusov 1913, vol. III, 41-2. All further quotations from the poem are from the same source. Translation my own).

<sup>v</sup> «вздогнула она отъ гнѣва, / Казнь—оскорбителямъ святынь!» *ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> И въ ту же ночь я былъ прикованъ

У ложа царскаго, какъ песъ.

[...]

И падали ея одежды

До ткани, бывшей на груди...

И въ ужасъ сомкнулъ я вѣжды...

Но голосъ мнѣ шепнулъ: гляди!

*Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> «Она, покорная, ждала...» (*ibid.*).

<sup>viii</sup> «выходить обнаженной на холодъ, [...] бичевать себя узловатыми веревками по бедрамъ или терзать себѣ груди остріями»

(Briusov 1971, 22).

<sup>ix</sup> For example, when Renata is being pursued by unseen demons in chapter 4, Ruprecht recounts that “then she did not send me away to my room, but allowed me to spend the night with her—sometimes at the foot of her bed, sometimes again under one coverlet, though as man and woman we remained strangers to each other. And I even found in this torturing nearness a special charm and sweetness, as if one were to enjoy the deep cuts of a sharp blade insensibly dividing the flesh” (Briusov 2005, 88). («тогда она не отсылала меня в мою комнату, но позволяла провести ночь вмѣстѣ съ ней,—иногда у подножья ея кровати, иногда опять подѣ однимъ одѣяломъ, хотя все же, какъ мужчина и женщина, мы оставались чуждыми другъ другу. И я даже находилъ въ этой мучительной близости особую сладость и прелесть, какъ если бы кто наслаждался глубокими порѣзами остраго лезвія, нечувствительно раздѣляющаго тѣло») (Briusov 1971, 65-6).

<sup>x</sup> «Но со строгой увѣренностью могу я здѣсь дать клятву, передъ своей совѣстью, что въ будущемъ не отдамъ я никогда, такъ богохульственно, безсмертной души своей, вложенной въ меня Создателемъ,—во власть одного изъ его созданій, какой бы соблазнительной формой оно ни было облечено, и что никогда, какъ бы ни были тягостны обстоятельства моей жизни, не обращусь я къ содѣйствію осужденныхъ Церковью гаданій и запретныхъ знаній, и не попытаюсь переступить священную грань, отдѣляющую нашъ міръ отъ темной области, гдѣ витають духи и демоны» (Briusov 1971, 328).

<sup>xi</sup> *Jouissance* “is used in psychoanalytic contexts to mean the simultaneously organic and symbolic sexual pleasure of the speaking (human) subject” (Kristeva 1977, 15).

<sup>xii</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this poem’s prefiguring of the fear of women that marks Blok’s later work, see Jenifer Presto, *Beyond the Flesh* p. 55.

<sup>xiii</sup> Предчувствую Тебя. Года проходят мимо—

Всѣ в облике одном предчувствую Тебя.

(Blok 1971, vol. 1, 93. All quotations of this poem are from the same source.)

<sup>xiv</sup> Как ясен горизонт! И лучезарность близко.

Но страшно мне: изменишь облик Ты.

<sup>xv</sup> This poem also seems to have (presumably coincidental) echoes in William Butler Yeats’s 1919 poem “The Second Coming,” in which the Apocalypse is at hand and a terrifying monster “slouches towards Bethlehem to be born” (Yeats 2000, 76).

<sup>xvi</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between these three recurring characters, see for example the introduction by Timothy C. Westphalen to *Aleksandr Blok’s Trilogy of Lyric Dramas*.

<sup>xvii</sup> Там дамы щеголяют модами,

Там всякий лицеист остер—

(Blok 1971, vol. 2, 160-1. All subsequent quotations of this poem are from the same source).

<sup>xviii</sup> бесстыдно упоительна

И унизительно горда.

<sup>xix</sup> Туда манит перстами алыми

И дачников волнует зря

Над запыленными вокзалами

Недостижимая заря.

<sup>xx</sup> Шелками черными шумна,

Под шлемом с траурными перьями

И ты вином оглушена?

<sup>xxi</sup> Среди этой пошлости таинственной,

Скажи, что делать мне с тобой—

Недостижимой и единственной,

Как вечер дымно-голубой

<sup>xxii</sup> Ах, как светла—та, что ушла

(Звенящий товарищ ее увел).

Упала она (из картона была).

А я над ней смеяться пришел.

Она лежала ничком и бела.

Ах, наша пляска была весела!

А встать она уж никак не могла.

Она картонной невестой была.

(Blok 1971, vol. 4, 18)

<sup>xxiii</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Margarita's "failure" in this matter, see Barratt's *Between Two Worlds*, pp. 242-245.

<sup>xxiv</sup> «Я легкомысленный человек» (Bulgakov 2003, 294) in the original.

<sup>xxv</sup> Krugovoy also compares her explicitly to Blok's *Neznakomka* (1991, 139-40).

<sup>xxvi</sup> When Azazello gives them poisoned wine, they collapse, apparently dead, and then revive; both are at first convinced that Azazello has killed them, but he tells the Master, "after all, you're thinking, how could you possibly be dead?" («ведь вы мыслите, как же вы можете быть мертвы?») (Bulgakov 2003, 386).