2021

Review: A Reader’s Companion to Mikhail Bulgakov’s “The Master and Margarita

Daniel Brooks
Franklin & Marshall College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj

Part of the Slavic Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70163/0036-0252.1323
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol71/iss1/13

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Language Journal by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
instructors themselves to brush up on the material before introducing it to students. There are also opportunities for teachers to observe classes lead by DiMattia and consult with her individually.

Unlocking Russian Pronunciation provides a structured, yet lively, way of introducing phonetics into the Russian-language classroom. The textbook and website materials are targeted to students with different learning styles and help to make the instructor’s job easier. This supplementary course would be of interest to all teachers of Russian, but it might be especially helpful for graduate students starting their Russian-language teaching career and those in the field whose training is primarily in literature and not linguistics.

Irina Kogel
Davidson College


Although Mikhail Bulgakov’s classic The Master and Margarita has become an inevitable fixture of Russian literature survey courses, it can nevertheless present a challenge even for seasoned instructors. As the text repeatedly slips between locales, historical periods, and narrative voices, Bulgakov’s novel seems more and more like a world unto itself. In my experience, there always proves to be something in this world—rewritten Gospels, a moving romance, the gun-toting cat—that will draw undergraduates in. And yet, when a tight syllabus gives me but four classes to tackle the novel’s elaborate system of leitmotifs, allusions, and historical realia, I feel like I fail to do the work justice.

J.A.E. Curtis’s A Reader’s Companion to Mikhail Bulgakov’s “The Master and Margarita” represents a valuable tool not just for such harried instructors, but also for the undergraduate reader interested in further exploring the novel. Curtis, who has authored or edited several essential volumes on Bulgakov, is eminently qualified to compose a work of this type. This book presents a welcome update to the similar companion (to which Curtis contributed) published by Northwestern University Press in 1996. Curtis’s text references the subsequent twenty-plus years of Bulgakoviana and tackles the novel’s intricacies in a more linear fashion, deftly cataloging “some of the principal lines of debate and disagreement about the text” (xii) for the benefit of professor and pupil alike.
After a brief foreword, Curtis chronicles Bulgakov’s life and the winding history of his novel’s composition and publication. The chapters concerning this content are deftly composed; Bulgakov’s experiences are rendered briskly and vividly. Richer than an encyclopedia entry but lighter than a monograph, this miniaturized “life and works” provides instructors with an economized refresher; it would be quite useful for a morning-of prep for the first class session discussing the novel. Lay readers might be more inclined to skim Curtis’s in-depth chronicle of the novel’s six drafts, although they would miss telling details about the Stalinist atmosphere in which Bulgakov worked. The repeated appearances of Grisha Konsky—an admirer from MKhAT whose cheerily brazen interest in Bulgakov’s manuscript outs him as an NKVD informer—underscore how guarded the author had to be (33).

Grappling with the novel’s complexities can prove difficult for the uninitiated, as Curtis sympathetically suggests with an aside to her heterogeneous audience: “It is a real challenge for those of us who have read The Master and Margarita more than once to reconstruct now our original impressions of the novel. . . . No subsequent reading can quite recapture that ‘innocence’” (49). The middle chapters of the volume are devoted to the vital structural and thematic concerns that make The Master and Margarita so complex: its Moscow and Jerusalem/Ershalaim division, Woland’s complex morality, Bulgakov’s estranged biblical allusions, life in 1930s Moscow, and the writer’s elevated role in Russian culture. Curtis’s survey of scholarship on these matters takes a more student-friendly tack than the denser, more argument-driven articles that comprise the 1996 NUP companion. She frequently cites and contextualizes (mid-paragraph, not in distant footnotes) not only Anglo-American scholars but also Russian ones—a welcome gesture of recognition in a volume whose readership will skew English-speaking undergraduate. Given that possible audience, however, I sometimes wished that Curtis—in the interest of nourishing a beneficial “innocence”—would be more generous to the more allegorical or cryptographic readings of the novel. She labels them “far-fetched” and “bizarre” (54) or “difficult to agree with” (89), and I worry that an undergraduate reader would take this standard scholarly jockeying as a proscription against inventive, involved reading. Even if interpretations of The Master and Margarita as fantastical roman à clef strain credulity, they remain a productive, accessible means of thinking through “the sense of an echoing pattern” (59) that the novel fosters. Curtis does speak approvingly and in detail about looser, more cautious theses regarding possible Woland-Stalin and Yeshua-Master correspondences. Still, the volume sometimes
overcompensates for Curtis’s skepticism of overdetermined allegorical readings. The Woland’s ball/William Bullitt connection dominates chapter 8; tellingly, the ball is designated “the section with the greatest number of unambiguous links to a real event—and to real people” (90). This connection, however compellingly explored, strays from the ostensible focus of the chapter (political satire) and seems more of a piece with the volume’s earlier biographical content. Even if, say, the novel’s satirical treatment of the 1930s “apartment question” is a mere “backdrop to the main action” (90), it is an omnipresent backdrop that today’s novice readers, far removed from the Soviet experience, need help navigating.

Such readers will greatly benefit from Curtis’s later chapters, which directly engage the texture of Bulgakov’s style. Her step-by-step dissection of the novel’s complex narrative voice (via specific excerpts from the novel) may tread familiar ground for instructors, but those new to literary analysis will benefit from Curtis’s instructive close reading and her superlatively lucid definition of skaz narration (112). Largely free of reference to thorny interpretive debates, this section makes clear why scholars read structural significance into Bulgakov’s tiniest linguistic turns. Curtis’s comparison of the English translations of The Master and Margarita serves as another valuable, if narrower, close-reading exercise. I suspect that few lay readers who have just finished the book will immediately seek an alternative version of it, but Curtis’s observations remain useful in the classroom, where, in my experience, one student will have inevitably ignored instructions and purchased an unsanctioned translation on Amazon. Instructors’ preferences for particular translations will probably not be shaken by this section, but the saltiness of Curtis’s pronouncements make it a worthwhile read. Curtis’s personal reflection on the novel—an intriguing and impassioned account of its political afterlife—rounds out the volume.

All told, Curtis’s companion to Bulgakov’s allusive and elusive novel hits its multipurpose mark, serving well both novice and experienced readers of The Master and Margarita. It represents a valuable addition to university libraries and instructors’ individual collections.

Daniel Brooks
Franklin & Marshall College