



**Key and Tripod in Mikhail Bulgakov's
Master and Margarita**
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In the essay which follows, Schrewe examines the significance of items which figure in both Goethe's Faust and Bulgakov's Master and Margarita. Pblished in Neophilologus 79, no. 2 (April 1995): 273-82.

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The connection between Goethe's *Faust* and Bulgakov's ***Master and Margarita*** suggests itself in the title of the novel: The Master referring to Faust and Margarita referring to Margarete or Gretchen from the first part of Goethe's tragedy. Another obvious reference to *Faust* is the novel's epigraph; it quotes the famous dialogue between Mephistopheles and Faust when they first meet. Faust asks "Who art thou--then?" and Mephistopheles introduces himself as the "Part of that power which eternally wills evil and yet creates the good". Granting the entire novel to be a comment on this quote, we are led to believe that Bulgakov adopted Goethe's concept of the devil as being part of a world in which the good will prevail and which ultimately is harmonious.¹

Numerous critical studies have dealt with the analogies between Goethe's *Faust* and Bulgakov's ***Master and Margarita***. Most often they agree that the Master is not a very convincing Faust character, but that Faustian characteristics are dispersed and could be found in the novel's various other characters. The same can be said for the devil's advocate Mephistopheles: he reappears in Bulgakov's novel under a different name and is accompanied by a variety of other devils.²

My contribution to the discussion is motivated by two items in Bulgakov's novel which so far have not been considered as a significant link to Goethe's *Faust*. They are a set of keys and a tripod--a three-legged stool. As we recall, in the scene "Dark Gallery" in the second part of Goethe's tragedy, Mephistopheles hands Faust a key and instructs him how to take possession of a tripod that belongs to the "realm of the mothers". In Goethe's *Faust* the key and the tripod are presented as ritual objects complementing each other and symbolizing the ultimate power of genius. In Bulgakov's novel the occurrence of the key and the tripod is very different; at points in the text far apart from each other, they seem to denote nothing other than household items. Their signifying function can only be identified through their relation to each other and to the text as a whole.

Pursuing the idea that Bulgakov's use of the key and the tripod is an obscured reference to *Faust* will cast a new light on the novel's narrative structure with its three interconnected story lines. Moreover, it will give new insight in regard to the representation of the Faust character in the figure of the Master.

The title of the novel misguides readers in their expectation that the Master is one of the two main characters in the novel. One would expect that being a "Master" has something to do with the Faustian characteristics of striving, self-reliance or even hubris. By the time readers have reached the 13th chapter titled "Enter the Hero", they understand the irony of this heading and realize that the Master is neither the main character in the traditional sense, nor does he conform to the idea of a Faust or a hero. The Master is confined in an asylum for the insane and only three days away from his death when the story begins.³ He is a man without a personal name and life has lost all meaning for him. Unlike Goethe's Faust, Bulgakov's hero has reached a final stage in his life where the struggle for self-realization and control over his life obviously has ended. How can this character be reconciled with the idea of a true Faust whose drive for knowledge, love, riches and power inclines him to enter into a pact with the devil? Can a Faustian existence possibly be evoked in the setting of an asylum by an author who writes under the stifling measures of censorship?⁴

Keeping these questions in mind, I will first turn to the Goethe text in order to establish the context in which Bulgakov's use of the "key" and "tripod" can be discussed. Goethe scholars agree that the scene of Faust's descending to "the realm of the mothers" stands out in that it presents an endeavor that Faust has to undertake on his own, without being accompanied by Mephistopheles. MEPHISTOPHELES: Descend then! I might also tell you: Soar! It's all the same. Escape from the Existent To phantoms' unbound realms far distant! Delight in what long since exists no more! Like filmy clouds the phantoms glide along. Brandish the key, hold off the shadowy throng. FAUST: Good! Gripping it I feel new strength arise, My breast expands. On, to the great emprise! MEPHISTOPHELES: When you at last a glowing tripod see, Then in the deepest of all realms you'll be. You'll see the Mothers in the tripod's glow, Some of them sitting, others stand and go, As it may chance. Formation, transformation, Eternal Mind's eternal re-creation. Images of all creatures hover free, They will not see you, only wraiths they see. So, then, take courage, for the danger's great. Go to that tripod, do not hesitate, And touch it with the key!

(6275ff; transl. by G. M. Priest)

Mephistopheles describes the realm of the mothers as the ultimate sphere of origin where figures or rather shadows hover in an eternal process of figuration and transfiguration. This realm seems to lie beyond the grasp of demonic powers and Mephistopheles wonders if he will see Faust return. Following Mephistopheles's instruction and equipped with the magic key Faust departs to the mysterious sphere and finds the glowing tripod, the guarded treasure of the mothers' realm. He

touches the tripod with the key, igniting the power that connects the two and makes the tripod follow Faust on his way back to earth. When he returns from his voyage to the imperial court with both trophies--the tripod and the key--Faust is celebrated as a man of the greatest achievements: he is greeted as a priest, as a poet, and as a magician: In priestly robe and wreathed, a wonder-man! Who'll now fulfill what he in faith began, A tripod with him from the depths below. Now from the bowl the incense-perfumes flow. He girds himself, the lofty work to bless; Henceforth there can be nothing but success.

(6421ff; transl. by G. M. Priest)

"In priestly robe and wreathed, a wonder-man" is a threefold identification of spiritual strength. The attire of a priest signifies the religious man, the wreath distinguishes the poet as a man of creativity, and a man of wonders is a magician who is acquainted with the supernatural. Like a priest Faust will indeed renounce all passion and experience the realization of his prophetic vision, he will dedicate himself to the world of his imagination like a poet does, and he will be endowed with the magical powers necessary to overcome the boundaries of physical existence. Entitled through the acquisition of the tripod, Faust even will surpass the boundaries of space and time: he leaps from the Northern Middle Ages to the Mediterranean world of antiquity and draws Helena into life.

Goethe's realm of the mothers combined with the symbolism of the key and the tripod is a new variant in the Faust story, but the symbols themselves, in particular the symbolic meaning of the key, have long been part of our cultural tradition. In medieval literature and the literature of the Romantics the key figures as an almost stereotypical device that symbolizes empowerment. Of various metals and shapes, the key authorizes intrusion into a realm of mystery aiming at its disclosure. In comparison with the key, the symbolism of the tripod as we know it from Greek mythology is more enigmatic. One source connects the three legs to the three "moments" of the sun in rising, zenith, and setting. Another source refers to the tripod as a ritual vessel, that was awarded to a winning athlete (de Vries 476). Most familiar is the tripod as it is described as the seat of the pythia, the receiver of the oracle in Delphi. In this connection the tripod became the symbol of prophecy and authority. Goethe's adoption of the tripod carries all of these elements of symbolic meaning.

The "Mother" scene in Goethe's *Faust* has been interpreted as a carthartic experience from which Faust emerges as a man of new dimensions. His human characteristics of striving and failing will be superseded by a superhuman spiritual strength that distinguishes the genius from ordinary human beings. The idea of prophecy, poetry, and magic Goethe invested in Faust will guide our reading of ***The Master and Margarita***.

Goethe's triadic concept of the spiritual "superman" appears to be at the source of the deeper structure of Bulgakov's novel. Its narration develops three parallel and at times intersecting plotlines: the story of the Master's fate as a *writer* is embedded in the narration of the *magical events* in contemporary Moscow, and both are interspersed with the retelling of the Master's *religious novel* about Pontius Pilate. Most astonishing though, is the fact that Bulgakov borrows from Goethe the device of the key and the tripod as symbols of magical empowerment and employs this device to establish the connection between the multiple levels of narration. The keys are an attribute of the Master in the asylum while the tripod is an attribute of Aphanis, the head of the secret police under Pontius Pilate. The following close reading of the relevant passages will reveal the significance of this connection.

First, I will take into consideration the "poet part" of the Goethean triadic concept of Faust's genius. We know from the Master's own fragmented account that his voice as a writer/poet was silenced by the authorities who rejected his novel for publication: "My life ended, when I came out into the world with my novel in my hands" (143).⁵ But he also silenced himself by resigning and burning the manuscript of his novel, thus destroying his life's work. "A burnt-out man", he will spend the rest of his life in an asylum for the insane, a place far removed from the events in the outside world. "We are all unstable people here &", says the Master, "I'm a burnt-out man and the embers have died away to ashes & I no longer have a name. I have renounced it, as I have renounced life itself" (136, 137, 138).⁶ In contrast to Faust who emerges as a hero from the realm of the mothers and receives highest honors at the imperial court, the master's writing is disregarded by the official government agencies, and he is confined in the asylum, a world of "phantoms". The friendly nurse Praskovya Fyodorovna is guardian over the shadows, the living dead. She is an absent-minded person, and even though the Master claims that he is not interested in life anymore, he is smart enough to take advantage of Fyodorovna's absent-mindedness when he steals a set of keys from

her. "Those keys are all I have. I am destitute" (137)--"These keys have enlarged my radius of action" (149).

The setting in the "underworld" of an insane asylum and the Master's theft of the keys remind the reader of the "deepest of all realms" from which Faust removes the tripod. Faust's descending to the world of "phantoms" is the prelude to his "soaring" into the "reality" of his imagined world triggered by the magic of the key and the tripod. The "burnt-out" existence of the Master, on the other hand, likens more a finale from which there is no "soaring", unless some magic would be at work and the keys would indeed "enlarge the Master's radius of action".

Even though the Master claims he no longer has a name and has renounced life, he is very outspoken, even threatening with his fist, when he is asked "Are you a writer?" "I am a Master" (137) is his response. By not giving an answer to the question asked, he indicates that it is not or not only his writing that accounts for his mastership. The evidence of his writing that could have proven his mastership, he himself had erased by burning his manuscript. His mastership seems to have outlasted his life as a writer and the fate of his work. Yet, he fails to reveal why he still claims to be a master. Being a master entails authority, superiority, and the power to control; such strength does not fit the mental state of a "burnt-out man". The insistence on his mastership suggests that the Master is referring to the keys: "Those keys are all I have".

Cut off from the outside world and without hope of return, the keys are the Master's only recourse to "enlarge his radius of action". In the context of the story's events, the function of the keys is plausible; the keys allow the Master to leave his room and visit a newly arrived patient, Ivan Nikolayich, the writer. Yet, understood as a magic wand in the Faustian sense, the keys are a signifier of the spiritual power that enables the Master to overcome the boundaries of his existence. His mastery is drawn from the keys which connect him to the spiritual power of the tripod hidden in his novel. The touching of key and tripod has an electrifying effect, as we know from Goethe's scene. It unleashes the power necessary to bring the world of the Master's imagination to life.

Complementing the creative imagination that characterizes the poet, the topic of the Master's novel designates his author also as a man of religious aspirations. With Goethe's triadic concept of Faust's genius in mind, one can see the Master's prophetic vision--his inspiration to write a novel about the last days of Jesus, about Pontius Pilate and the death of Judas. In fact, the Master is said to have re-written the gospel. He invalidated the biblical account in the Book of Matthew which says that Judas committed suicide. In his version the traitor Yehudah (Judas) is killed by a murderer, the death of Yeshua (Jesus) is avenged and the Hegemon (Pilate) is pardoned.⁷

An essential role that leads to these results is played by the mysterious figure of Aphranius, referred to as a man robed in a cloak, the head covered with a cowl or a hood and seated on a tripod. Only later in the story, after Jesus' execution, is he identified by the name of Aphranius and by his position of Head of the Secret Police in the province of Judea.

"The hooded man had placed himself a short way from the gibbets on a *three-legged* stool and sat in calm immobility, occasionally out of boredom poking the sand with the stick" (172).

A few lines further it says: "The Tribune turned towards the man on *the three-legged stool*. The seated man rose politely as the Tribune approached him" (177; emphasis added). Six chapters later in the book this scene is recalled:

Between the two marble lions there appeared first the cowed head, then the figure of a man closely wrapped in his soaking wet cloak. It was the same man with whom the Procurator [Pilate], before pronouncing sentence, had held a whispered conference in a darkened room of the palace and who had watched the execution as he played with a stick on a three-legged stool.

(294)

Three times the tripod is mentioned in connection with this man who is garbed like a monk.⁸ Bulgakov seems to postpone the naming of this character in order to be able to identify him repeatedly by his attributes, the cloak and the tripod. Assuming that Bulgakov adopted Goethe's symbolism of the key and the tripod, it becomes clear that the Master is magically connected with the authority his own imagination had given to Aphranius. As head of the secret police Aphranius holds the most powerful position one can think of in the Soviet Union at the time of Bulgakov's life.⁹

The seemingly subordinate role of Aphranius--he appears as a shadow of Pilate--contradicts the weight of his actions. Like a monk, Aphranius is a man without passion and unaffected by human guilt. Passionless he is watching the suffering of Jesus at the cross and after Jesus' body has been pierced with a lance, it is he who pronounces Jesus' death: "Stopping at the first gibbet, the hooded man carefully inspected Yeshua's bloodstained body, touched the post with his white hand and said to his companions, "Dead" (178). The "white hand" attests Aphranius' innocence even though he is in the service of death. Pilate's authority and claim to innocence as we know it from the New Testament--Pilate washes his hands in water and says that he is innocent of Jesus' death--is transferred to Aphranius. He represents the law and supervises its enforcement after Pilate's cruel decision to have Jesus killed. Pilate is not the one in control. He is stifled by headaches and falls victim to his own cowardice.

Aphranius steps out of his anonymity when it comes to the murder of Judas. He is shown wearing a chiton--on his way to the woman Niza (304)--and changing into a military uniform--after the murder (309). In arranging and supervising the murder, Aphranius obviously manipulates Pilate by withholding information or providing information that contradicts the given facts and by interpreting Pilate's orders according to his own understanding.¹⁰ With Judas killed, Aphranius provides Pontius Pilate with the claim that Jesus' death was avenged. Twice, Pilate was told that Jesus considered cowardice to be the greatest sin. Therefore, the killing of Judas could serve Pilate as a proof of his courage and free him from his guilt. Pilate is "obsessed with the problem of the murder of Judas" (316) and he "should have liked to have seen how they killed him" (316).¹¹ He even goes so far to claim that *he* had killed Judas (321) while in fact it is unclear if he had even given the order. Aphranius acts on his own when he takes charge of Judas' murder, executing the wrath of God as well as, in regard to Pontius Pilate, God's grace. Aphranius, the head of the secret police, is placed at the center in the Master's re-writing of the gospel. The "new" teaching is a justification of evil when it serves revenge and leads eventually to mercy. Only after vengeance has taken its toll can cowardice be forgiven.¹² Pontius Pilate's cowardice can be pardoned because the conflicting forces of good and evil had been brought back to life, disrupting the agony of victims and victimizer alike. The man to whom the opening of this path is entrusted is Aphranius, the mysterious man who holds the seat of absolute power as signified by the tripod.

Thus, the Master's claim to be a master needs to be reconsidered. Reaching out with his stolen keys to the tripod in his non-existent novel he controls the magic necessary to animate the world from which he is excluded. From Aphranius, the man in control in the Master's poetic and prophetic imagination, he draws the power to make its message work. The evil forces in the personification of Woland are mobilized and the master's vision of revenge and resurrection is enacted.

It has been pointed out that Woland does not have many similarities with Goethe's Mephistopheles, even though Mephistopheles once calls himself Woland (*Faust* 4023). Mephistopheles's characteristics seem to be represented in the variety of devils in Woland's following (Weeks; Wright 1973). Besides the differences in devilish traits, the similarity of Woland's and Mephistopheles's sudden and unexplained appearance also carries weight. Both are drawn into action when the hero's life has reached a "dead end"; Faust encounters the poodle after he came very close to committing suicide and the Master rejoices in Woland's arrival at Patriarch's Ponds when his life in the asylum is close to extinction. At this point, both Faust and the Master embrace the devil in their desire to enact that for which they long. The last three days of the Master's life in the asylum are countered with the "hell-raising" actions of Woland and his devils in the outside world. It is a celebration of revenge on literary and cultural institutions that had suffocated the voice of the Master.

The Master regrets emphatically that he can't meet with Woland: "I swear that I would have given up Praskovya Fyodorovna's bunch of keys in exchange for that meeting" (137). This ironic remark reveals and obscures at the same time the fact that there would not be a Woland without the keys. The oath ("I swear") confirms how much he depends on the spell of his magic wand that makes the devil appear. A few other factors allow the conclusion that Woland is the realization of the Master's imagined world: The Master doesn't show any surprise when Ivan tells him about his encounter with Woland; like an omniscient narrator he explains to Ivan that it was Satan who came to town, that this Woland will cause more trouble and that he indeed had been with Pontius Pilate. Surprising for the Master are the effects: that Ivan is in the asylum because of "Pontius Pilate" and that Berlioz died under the streetcar. This suggests that the Master knows that the magical power of the key/tripod connection is at work, even though he has no control over the activities in which Woland engages.

Woland's evil forces of revenge are infused by the newly rekindled vitality of the Master's novel

about Pontius Pilate. In fact, Woland starts retelling the Master's novel about Jesus and Pontius Pilate and insists that manuscripts don't burn (281); he says, "we have read your novel, and we can only say that unfortunately it is not finished" (369). Woland's interference allows the continuation of the retelling, first, in Ivan's dream, and later through Margarita's reading of the recovered manuscript. Thus the mythical past of the Master's novel comes alive in present day Moscow and Woland as the "chief of staff" enacts the Master's imagined reality. It entails Master's release from the asylum, his reunion with Margarita, and the reinstatement of the Master's authorship. It is the Master who speaks the last sentence of his novel releasing Pilate from his guilt of almost 2000 years after Jesus' death (370).

A shadow in the world of the insane, the Master is indifferent towards life and death, yet he is the *spiritus rector* who inaugurates the vision of the prophet and poet. By calling on magical powers the devil's forces are unleashed and a world is set in motion where evil indeed works for the good. While the Master and Margarita are both dying in the "real" world of contemporary Moscow, in the spiritual world of the Master's creation, Woland and his gang of devils bring about the unification of the Master and Margarita and the redemption of Pontius Pilate.

Goethe's *Faust* ends in an apotheosis; the immortal of Faust is drawn towards heaven by an angelic chorus ("Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan"). The redeeming act comes from above and is understood as the deserved reward for the striving. In Bulgakov's novel the redeeming power comes from within; the Master is not the striving character, but the one empowered to sanction his own pronouncement of redemption. It is through Bulgakov's writing that resurrection of a spiritual world materializes and that the Master's apocalyptic vision is permanently endorsed.

Notes

These same *Faust* lines had sparked Dostoevski's comment in his *Diary for the Year 1876/1877*. He refuses to accept Mephistopheles's claim to serve the good by doing evil. He finds the very opposite to be true, namely, that evil, even if it should aim at the good, inescapably creates evil: chaos, destruction, death. In his contradictory understanding of Mephistopheles, Dostoevski reveals his deeply rooted antagonism against Goethe's harmonious world-view and against the apotheosis which awaits Faust at the end of his life (Gronicka 110-141). We may assume that Bulgakov was familiar with Dostoevski's diary entry and it is possible that he chose these *Faust* lines as the epigraph for his novel in response to Dostoevski's negative understanding of Mephistopheles. Bulgakov's devilish characters are activists in breaking down the distinction between good and evil creating a new order that is unaffected by moral judgement.

Colin Wright (1973) discusses the Woland/Mephistopheles analogy and traces the mythical origins of the various other devils. A comprehensive and insightful interpretation of the novel as it relates to Goethe's *Faust* is the study by Edythe C. Haber. She succeeds in delineating the structure of the novel by pointing out the parallels and reversals of Faust features in Bulgakov's novel. Previously, Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor had identified a large number of details in the novel which originated in the legend around the Faust figure and its various subsequent manifestations ranging from the Aztec God Vitzliputzli to Hector Berlioz' opera *The Damnation of Faust*.

It is Wednesday night when Woland meets Berlioz and Ivan Bezdomny (Ivan Nikolayich Ponirov); three days later, on Saturday at sunset, Praskovya Fyodorovna tells Ivan of the deaths of the Master and Margarita (362). For a discussion of the parallel span of time in the Moscow- and Jerusalem-plot see Proffer (1973) 548-549, Beatie and Powell (227-228) and Fiene (1984).

Bulgakov wrote his novel during the time of the Stalin purges (1936-1938) and at the time of his death Stalin was still alive and Beriya in command of the secret service (until 1953). Bulgakov's attitude towards the communist party and its leaders was ambiguous; he rejoiced in the party's official acceptance of his play "Batum", performed in 1939 on the occasion of Stalin's sixtieth birthday, while at the same time he secretly worked on his masterpiece *The Master and Margarita* (Zinik 801). For more than a decade, Bulgakov had been writing and re-writing this novel knowing that it would not pass the scrutiny of Soviet censorship. In 1966/67, twenty-six years after Bulgakov's death in 1940, the novel was finally published in an abridged censored version; it created a public sensation and sold out immediately (Wachtel 270).

Page numbers in parentheses refer to *The Master and Margarita*. Translated by Michael Glenny. New York: New American Library, 1967.

Andrew Wachtel quotes the line "My life has ended, when I came out into the world with my novel in my hands", to illustrate one of the two types of "suicide" the Master attempts, the other one being the burning of the manuscript. Wachtel offers an illuminating discussion of *The Master and Margarita* in the context of the "living corpse" or "fake suicide" motif in the Russian literary tradition. One might add here, that the Master's existence in an insane asylum as a result of his "suicidal acts" is in itself a "living corpse" motif providing the frame for the Master's resurrection.

For a more detailed account of the diversions from the New Testament see Wright (1978) 262-263.

Aphranius wearing a cloak with a hood evokes the image of a monk. Another piece of monastic garment is the skull-cap which is usually worn on the monk's tonsure. Bulgakov's cap from which he is said to have been inseparable looks similar to a monk's cap; (I am referring to the photograph in Proffer 1984: 465). The Master's cap therefore could be the complementing part of Aphranius' hood signifying the Master's identification with the character he created.

By creating a Master whose Faustian drive reaches out to the position of Aphranius, Bulgakov chooses the extreme, since the head of the KGB, a position held by Beriia at the time, represented the ultimate power over life and death. Kevin Moss investigates how Bulgakov employs Aesopian language and succeeds in disorienting the reader through "vacillation or confusion of two realities" and through masking the actions of the secret police with apparently supernatural events (115). In the case of Aphranius, the tripod is used as an Aesopian device hiding the signification of power and its identity with the Master's control over the keys.

The ambiguity of Aphranius is extensively and intriguingly discussed by Richard Pope. Without anticipating a "solution", he considers four possibilities of interpretation based on the encounters between Pilate and Aphranius and Aphranius' subsequent actions. Pope points out that ambiguity allowed Bulgakov to transfer "to the Stalinist police the whole plethora of associations that he developed around the police in the Judean chapters and said things about the Stalinist police that he obviously could not say directly" (Pope 19).

This reminds us of the Master's wish to be a witness of the forces of evil when Woland arrived at Patriarch's Ponds and Berlioz was killed. For both, Pilate and the Master, the desire to be a witness when vengeance takes its course, stays unfulfilled.

Laura Weeks' illuminating study of the hebraic antecedents of the concept of good and evil in Bulgakov's novel helps understand the "new teaching". She concludes that "Bulgakov has succeeded in renewing the essential elements of the old theological confrontation between the Law and Grace" (241).

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