

Title: Execution and Assassination in *Master and Margarita*

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Foucault described executions as political ceremonies to assert state power through public spectacle (48-9). Although earlier states required public performances, by the Soviet period, news reports of show trials and executions achieved the same effect. As Soviet control over mass communication grew in scope and efficiency, its totalizing discourse conveyed the primary message of state power over individuals. However, some individuals and groups resisted state discourse by refusing to believe or trust official information, turning instead to unofficial modes of communication, like rumor. In this circumstance, assassination, frequently a weapon against state power, can become a state tool to infiltrate unofficial modes of communication. The unusual death makes a compelling rumor to reach precisely that segment of the public most resistant to official discourse, and to deliver the underlying message of the state's infinite reach. Thus, both execution and assassination become performances of state power.

Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* features execution and assassination in both of its major narratives. While the Jerusalem opposition between Yeshua's execution and the assassination of Judas conforms to traditional definitions of execution and assassination, the Moscow chapters abound with unusual and ambiguous deaths. Although Woland's band actually causes these deaths, connections drawn elsewhere in the novel between witchcraft and the police allow these forces to be analyzed as part of a larger paradigm of state power. The unusual deaths, such as the beheadings of Berlioz and Bengalskii, share suggestions of pre-scripting and subsequent spread as rumors through Moscow. Their staging and reporting illustrate how assassination creates easily spreading narratives that reinforce execution's more open display of state power.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.