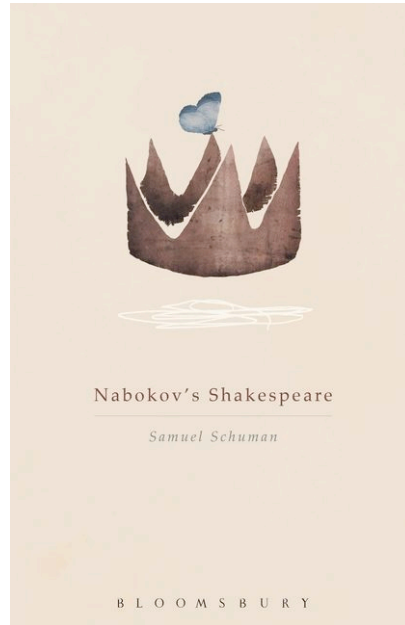


*Nabokov's Shakespeare*, by Samuel Schuman. London: Bloomsbury, 2014; ISBN 9781628922714. Works Consulted. Notes. Index. 208 pp.



The book under review was Samuel Schuman's last in a distinguished career as a Nabokov and Renaissance (Jacobean drama) academic. He was also a committed administrative leader whose career ranged from University teaching to the Director of University Honours Programs and to the Chancellor of two universities. His 1979 book, *Vladimir Nabokov: A Reference Guide*, was extremely valuable including a generally complete finding list with judicious assessments of the strengths of essays and books in the field to that date. He was elected President of the Vladimir Nabokov Society and his work for the Society and its journal was untiring.<sup>1</sup>

*Nabokov's Shakespeare* is a wide-ranging examination of Shakespeare's place in the broad range of Nabokov's poetry, novels and essays. The title is significant: this is not Nabokov and Shakespeare or Shakespeare's place in Nabokov's novels, but rather Nabokov's Shakespeare. The book is centred in "the precarious relationship between Nabokov's written texts in which the author is always insistently present and the playwright's written texts in which playwright is absent: both on stage but also as

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the man's achievements and publications, see Zoran Kuzmanovich, 'In Memoriam: Samuel Schuman (Sept. 26, 1942 – Nov. 11, 2014)', <http://sites.davidson.edu/ivns/featured-abstract/> (the International Vladimir Nabokov Society website; posted January 6, 2015).

a clear original source” (Frank, 162). For a short book it covers a great deal of material: biographical information; a useful account of Nabokov’s justifications for the uses of Shakespeare’s life and writings; and fulsome allusions to the plays and poetry in the titles, diction, register and characterization in each novel published in English, including direct echoing of language and thematic material.

I think especially important is Schuman’s careful detailing of how both writers begin with the motif of exile in so many of their works. Pointing to the biographical “root” of Nabokov’s interest, Schuman suggests that “a surprising number of Shakespeare’s plays also feature central characters who are, at least temporally, exiles” (8, 72): *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*. The comedies also use exile as a structural device shaping the action and theme of the comedies: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *The Tempest*. This is developed to argue that many Shakespearean and Nabokovian characters are outsiders who need to be “translated,” or translate their ideas and actions for others. But more generally in Nabokov’s English language texts the central characters are only able to speak to themselves and for themselves; they cannot “escape the prison of selfhood sufficiently to speak of important matter with others” (9). This leads to a central element of Schuman’s argument: “Through art, and through love, Shakespeare’s and Nabokov’s characters find an escape from the imprisonment of exile, self-reflexivity, and the trap of time” (10). They have to acknowledge the immortality of art and a love that could be preserved in their fiction, plays or poetry.

Two plays are central to Schuman’s book and to most discussions of Nabokov and Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. Shakespeare’s *Tempest* provides a pattern of allusions throughout *Lolita* and touches the “thematic core of Nabokov’s best-known novel” (61). A reference to “the enchanted isle of time” and bewitched visitors is mentioned twice in the novel; both the novel and the play also feature, in a central role, two characters who are monstrous, lustful and combine wickedness and naiveté in equal degrees: Caliban and Humbert Humbert. But Schuman is also interested in the relationship between Prospero/Shakespeare and Nabokov. Both authorize their own fictional universes by attempting to link the world created by the artist/maker and the world the artist himself inhabits. In *Lolita* this is waggishly done by self-referencing “the originator” or author of the text, contrary to the possibly distorted realization that textual properties and references, when enacted in fictional framework, almost always lead to a central literary problem: “The Death of the

Author”. Nabokov’s uses of Shakespeare allowed him to create his own pedigree in the English language and literature, enabling his texts such as *Bend Sinister* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to evaluate the ways in which an author’s text relies on and defies its own realisation and appropriation into other languages and medial representations. Each of these novels is an enactment of a debate about the power and authority of the artist and their creations within an imaginative spatial geography. As one critic has suggested, the extended conceit is the globe as the world and the globe as a theatre.

More central still is the theme of exile, as both Prospero in *The Tempest* and Nabokov in *Lolita* smart from their expulsion and separation, and must acknowledge their desire for what they have lost: their language, their authority, some of their books and even their freedom. Imprisonment as a metaphoric and metaphysical state overhangs both texts and is directly related to exile. Whether chosen or forced, they are captives of memory, imprisoned by the walls of time. While Prospero works his magic on an enchanted island, set in the physical ocean, Humbert seeks an “enchanted island of time... I substitute time terms for spatial ones” (*Lolita*, 16-17). Both Humbert and Prospero cultivate their “art” from within their own self-constructed captivity: Prospero finds a capacity to authorize a selfless act of mercy to forgive his enemies, while in *Lolita* the only release from artistic and ethical confinement for characters is death: Charlotte Haze, Quilty, Lolita and Humbert Humbert himself (Schuman, 73).

In the 1930s Nabokov sought to translate *Hamlet* into Russian and this is the play he makes direct or indirect reference to most often throughout his career. It is also a play that makes the problem of Nabokov’s authorship and his speaking/writing from memory (or a word-board), after his shift from writing in Russian to English, very clear. Shakespeare’s authorship is also intimately associated with problems of origin and identity, according to both Schuman in his chapter on *Bend Sinister* (45-57) and Siggy Frank in her chapter on Shakespeare’s ghost (*Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination*, 2012, 162-186). Frank argues persuasively that “Shakespeare’s ghost pervades all of Nabokov’s English works,” and that these issues are central to novels with characters who are actresses, actors and impersonators. But most importantly, “Nabokov’s linguistic transition coincides with a growing awareness of the limits of authorial control, once literary works enter into and are appropriated by the public sphere” (185). The literary theoretical problem of “authorship” and the performance

of identity in Nabokov's fiction were pointed to as early as 1997 by Michael Wood in his book *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*. Here the issue was interrogated more fully by a careful examination of the convoluted and ill-defined authorships that dominate so much of Nabokov's fiction while putting into play the seemingly controlling force of "the real author" outside the novels.

I would like to propose another approach to Nabokov's Shakespeare: the ghosts and shadows in his texts are not Shakespeare but the spectre of old Hamlet who haunts his son and who is hunting for his son. When Hamlet hears the voice of his father in the opening scene of Shakespeare's play, it is a disembodied voice. "Remember me," the ghost states, setting the plot of this revenge tragedy in motion. The ghost delivers a message in the absence of a living speaker. Memory has to live on, even when no person alive can carry it forward. Yet at the same time the voice when it is the King's can live on: "murder must speak with most miraculous organ." Hamlet the play explores the death of the old King, and the consequences of engaging with the kind of awkward memories that King Hamlet delivers to his son. Whether they come from a "spirit of health or a goblin damned" (I, v. 19), these words have the power in the play to divide Hamlet from his sense of self, and to send him whirling out into a world where bodies, voices, memory and political and artistic authority cannot be located in the right places.

A historical approach to Shakespeare suggests that the play puts into question the King's power and authority—the King's voice when it is the voice of the multitude. Is it possible that the mystical voice of the kingdom might be misplaced, and not reside in Claudius but somewhere else? Thus the play is both centred in questions of political authority, as recent historical critics have carefully explicated (Greenblatt, Witmore), but it also might be an exploration of the realities of community truthfulness and the performance of revenge for real or imagined wrongs, especially when "time is out of joint". It is apparent that these issues problematize the politics of Russia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and could be powerfully developed in interpretations of Nabokov's novels. This political problem, whether contextualized as symbolic of the relationship between the text and the author's authority, or the individual and a political party, is one of attending to the telling and the different ways of retelling the tale.

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the processes of reading and telling are carefully and humorously parsed: "remember that what you are told is really

threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale” (52). This dead man is both an instance of Roland Barthes’s author but also Hamlet’s father, displaced and resurrected by Nabokov’s phrasing. The ghost and the corpse are both absent and active, pictured as continuing to obscure what others have shaped and will reshape again.

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