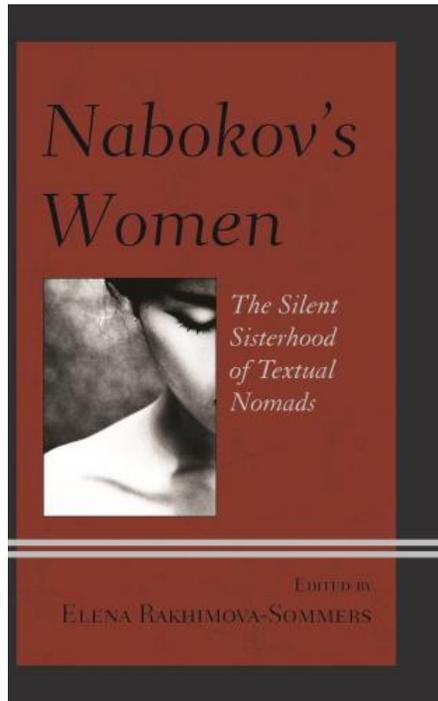


Nabokov's Women: The Silent Sisterhood of Textual Nomads, ed. by Elena Rakhimova-Sommers. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017: ISBN 978-1-4985-0330-3. Index. Xxxi+241 pp.



N*abokov's Women: The Silent Sisterhood of Textual Nomads* is the first book-length analysis of Nabokov's artistic relationship with the female characters in his oeuvre. Women in his narratives do not have lead roles. They do not have authorial voice. A female character might appear in the titles of his books, but with the exception of *Ada* (1969), as the editor of this volume observes, "the Nabokovian woman finds herself on a narratorial diet because entry into her emotional and physical 'I' is rarely granted and the nuances of her pain or pleasure are rarely discussed" (xv) in detail by the author. Indeed, several canonical twentieth and nineteenth century male Russian authors – for instance, Lev Tolstoy – have been called misogynist by contemporary scholars. Tolstoy's narration, however, does include description of women's points of views and internal and physical experiences that far exceeds the brevity of such details in Nabokov's writing. This anthology discusses how Nabokov's women are omnipresent, yet their role in narrative authority is always secondary at best. With the exception

of Sofia Ahlberg's contribution, the chapters in this volume discuss how these women are not only silent, they are *silenced by the author* whose self-proclaimed solipsism blocks the reader's view of the "real" female characters. These female characters do not have the opportunity to express themselves directly to the reader. Their words, thoughts, and emotions are filtered through the male protagonist's gaze, or through letters, or some cryptic means. Toward the end of the volume, chapters discuss how the women's inner feelings, self-hood, and physical wholeness are replaced with a textual description of various parts of their being – clothes, hair, voice. Their role is textual, erotic inspiration for the male artist/writer.

Matthew Roth's chapter "A Small Mad Hope" focuses on Dolores Haze (*Lolita*) and Hazel Shade (*Pale Fire*). The historical context about the changing dynamics of mentoring and bonding in father-daughter relationships in mid-century America that Roth provides brings clarity to many of Nabokov's decisions about how to depict young women in these two texts. At this time in American history, the bond between daughter and father was tighter, as were the expectations each had for the other. The focus on this chapter is about the muting of Hazel Shade's voice by her father, John Shade. According to Matthew Roth, this silencing that Shade forces on his daughter's behavior suppresses an uncomfortable truth about his daughter's attraction to him and his role in fostering that attraction. Mid-century America, an era before Second Wave feminism, has also been characterized by many historians of women's culture as an era when fashion and products were designed to "regulate" the female body. Some discussion of this problem that permeated women's culture in the America in which Nabokov lived would have been helpful, in particular since so many examples that the authors use in this volume stem from Nabokov's descriptions of the clothing of his characters.

Alisa Zhulina's chapter, "Queen Sacrifice" is the centerpiece of the book. Her intrepid analysis of the complex and important trope of chess playing and queen sacrifice in Nabokov's oeuvre provides clarity and fascinating research that students and world scholars of Nabokov's works would find extremely helpful and enjoyable to read. This dominating trope sheds light onto Nabokov's attitude toward his female characters as it offers some reasoning into why they are forced into the margins of the page. As Zhulina explains, "This rein on the Queen echoes the desire for authorial control at work in Nabokov's fiction and expresses the anxiety that women have a disruptive effect on artistic concentration in general and on the male act of artistic

creation in particular” (20). A muse cannot be pre-programmed by the one whom she inspires. Her power is the most useful to the author/artist in her absence. Some more attention to gender role reversal among Luzhin and his fiancé would have completed this chapter, at the expense of explicating games in Nabokov’s literary history. Here, some reference to Yuri Leving’s scholarship would have been appropriate.

Marie Bouchet’s entertaining chapter, “The Text(ure) of Desire: The Garments and Ornaments of Nabokov’s Maidens” brings in-depth analysis to an important topic of Nabokov’s style, the textual description of women that is erotic to the author/composer himself. Bouchet argues very convincingly by drawing from various books, essays, drafts, and letters written by Nabokov about how male characters’ strategies to capture the female body in rhetorical webs of desire are done to prove their power over “the not-so-easily capturable young girls” (101). Susan Elizabeth Sweeney’s “Nabokov in an Evening Gown” offers a provocative and very informed analysis on this crucial characteristic of Nabokov’s style, too, but unfortunately it was positioned as the penultimate chapter. Sweeney draws from Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s scholarship about conceptions of literary paternity and authority of the pen as a metaphorical penis. Sweeney compares Nabokov’s writing composition process to having sex with a female spirit (190). As Nabokov wrote in correspondence to one of his male colleagues, ‘I have lain with my Russian muse after a long period of adultery and am sending you the big poem she bore’ (190). Furthermore electrifying, Nabokov, according to Sweeney’s reading of *Selected Letters*, insisted that his translator must be male only.

Elena Rakhimova-Sommers provides a lovely description of mermaid themes in Russian folklore. Her chapter, “Nabokov’s Mermaid: ‘Spring in Fialta’” also offers very important connections to a precursor of Nabokov’s writings, Chekhov’s work, and in particular the story “Lady with a Lapdog.” Some more reference to the frequency of actions in Chekhov’s and Nabokov’s writing that occurs off-stage and behind the scenes, particularly actions and events that involve female characters, would have been appropriate to the discussion of silent and silenced female characters. Rakhimova-Sommers’s chapter focuses on the trope of mermaids in Russian folklore and literature, with references to Nabokov’s text. Mermaids’ peacefulness, surreptitiousness and proclivity to appear in a pack (of females) is a metaphor for the feminine behavior of female characters in Nabokov’s works. However, the loci of most of the works that

comprise Nabokov's oeuvre, areas where Nabokov himself lived and traveled, are land-locked, or deep in the heart of the country. Also, mermaids are nimble and fast. Scholars in this volume describe Nabokov's women as stoic and still figures (see, for instance, David Rampton's chapter, "Jealously Guarded Secrets: Nabokov's Women and the Vicissitudes of Desire"). There are few water scenes or metaphors in his oeuvre. "Nymphs," which Nabokov uses often, are creatures not only of the waters, as many myths place nymphs in the forest, for instance.

Contributors of the book are primarily from English, Comparative Literature and Russian departments and the approach the authors take to the study of gender and women is mainly literary-historical. There is a noticeable dearth of gender theory applied to the analyses of Nabokov's text. Drawing from folklore about mermaids to analyze this critical topic of silenced women is a step set in the right direction, but this approach leaves unanswered many questions that some intervention with Women's and Sexuality Studies scholarship (Julia Serano's and other scholarly definitions of femininity) could clarify. One important comment that attempts to theorize sexuality in Nabokov's oeuvre is relegated to a footnote – in David Rampton's chapter, where Rampton draws on Maxim Shrayer's scholarship to identify two main tensions in Nabokov's account of sexual desire. "The first is between the metaphysical and physical, between a not quite earthly ideal of feminism and an adolescent's exploding sexuality – both viewed by the fifty-year-old Nabokov. The second tension, the more subtle one, is between the dim sexual prospects of a bourgeois marriage and the luring sexual charms of free love and adultery."¹ Theories from Women's and Sexuality Studies scholarship help to concretize gender issues, which is greatly needed in this volume that often draws upon slippery metaphors to describe surreptitious, hidden, silent, directionless wanderers.

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¹ Maxim Shrayer, "Nabokov's Sexography." *Russian Literature*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2000: 495-516.