

Vladimir Nabokov

SHAKESPEARE ¹

Amid grandees of times Elizabethan
you shimmered too, you followed sumptuous customs;
the circle of ruff, the silv'ry satin that
encased your thigh, the wedgelike beard – in all of this
you were like other men... Thus was enfolded
your godlike thunder in a succinct cape.

Haughty, aloof from theatre's alarums,
you easily, regretlessly relinquished
the laurels twining into a dry wreath,
concealing for all time your monstrous genius
beneath a mask; and yet, your phantasms' echoes
still vibrate for us: your Venetian Moor,
his anguish; Falstaff's visage, like an udder
with pasted-on mustache; the raging Lear...
You are among us, you're alive; your name, though,
your image, too – deceiving, thus, the world –
you have submerged in your beloved Lethe.
It's true, of course, a usurer had grown
accustomed, for a sum, to sign your work
(that Shakespeare – Will – who played the Ghost in *Hamlet*,
who lived in pubs, and died before he could
digest in full his portion of a boar's head)...

The frigate breathed, your country you were leaving.
To Italy you went. A female voice
called singsong through the iron's pattern,
called to her balcony the tall *inglese*,
grown languid from the lemon-tinted moon
amid Verona's streets. My inclination
is to imagine, possibly, the droll

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and kind creator of *Don Quixote*
exchanging with you a few casual words
while waiting for fresh horses – and the evening
was surely blue. The well behind the tavern
contained a pail's pure tinkling sound... Reply –
whom did you love? Reveal yourself – whose memoirs
refer to you in passing? Look what numbers
of lowly, worthless souls have left their trace,
what countless names Brantôme has for the asking!
Reveal yourself, god of iambic thunder,
you hundred-mouthed, unthinkably great bard!

No! At the destined hour, when you felt banished
by God from your existence, you recalled
those secret manuscripts, fully aware
that your supremacy would rest unblemished
by public rumor's unashamed brand,
that ever, midst the shifting dust of ages,
faceless you'd stay, like immortality
itself – then vanished in the distance, smiling.

1924

Translated from Russian by Dmitri Nabokov

