Shakespeare and Nabokov: Transformations and Explications

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William Shakespeare and Vladimir Nabokov have some surprising similarities in their creation and re-creation of characters. They also demand more direct interaction from their audiences (or readers) than most writers have done. A comparison between the two will, of course, illuminate Nabokov, who was influenced throughout his career by Shakespeare, but it will also illuminate Shakespeare, showing a great modern writer using techniques similar to and influenced by Shakespeare's and also commenting on them.

Nabokov and Shakespeare break the same "rules" of character development and break them in similar ways. Mark Twain's essay on "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" is not only one of the funniest pieces of literary criticism and rule-making ever put on paper, it is also one of the most accurate. Indeed, it is hard ever again to take Fenimore Cooper seriously after reading this devastating hatchet job. However, while Twain's nineteen rules governing literary art may make good guidelines for the mediocre and even the moderately talented, others, such as Nabokov and Shakespeare, break them with impunity and felicity. Rule number 11 says, "The characters in a tale shall be so clearly defined that the reader can tell what each will do in a given emergency."[1] Shakespeare, of course, never had a chance to read that rule, and Vladimir Nabokov, if he read it, rejected it, for neither of them followed it. In fact, some of their most exquisite and revealing effects come from following their own higher rules and art. As Hegel says, Shakespeare gives his characters "intelligence and imagination; and, by means of the image in which they, by virtue of that intelligence, contemplate themselves objectively as a work of art, he makes them free artists of themselves."[2] In the words of Brian Boyd, Nabokov's best-known and most authoritative biographer, he "objected to the treatment of character as a cluster of fixed possibilities, and dared to present a character making a

complete about-face and then follow it up with a second or a third. And yet, he thought, there should be a harmony in each individual's fate discernible through the freaks of time and the free impulses of personality."[3]

Clearly, one of Nabokov's inspirations for this position was William Shakespeare. He admired Shakespeare intensely. According to a profile the *Wellesley College News* ran on him, Vladimir Nabokov's three favorite writers were "Pushkin, Shakespeare, and himself."[4] Being a Russian, he, of course, could not omit Pushkin; being Nabokov, he could not omit himself; so the only writer freely chosen and included in the list was Shakespeare.[5] In a public lecture called "The Tragedy of Tragedy," he refers to *Hamlet* and *King Lear* as "dream tragedies resplendent with genius."[6]

Vladimir Nabokov's connection with Shakespeare's tragedies was more than general admiration. Nabokov's play *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* was first published in Russian in 1997 in the journal "Звезда" [*The Star*]. It has been published in book form (Набоков, 1999) but has not yet been translated into English. In the Library of Congress's "Draft A" of the manuscript version of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, Ganus has escaped from prison and is a hunted fugitive, but he still wishes to see his wife. His friend Tremens claims she has been unfaithful, and Ella, a theatre school student ("в школе театральной учусь"), disguises Ganus as Othello. When Ella has completed her work, she finds the reality more Shakespearean and more real than she had expected, and she expresses her fear in a Russian version of Shakespeare's own words,

> Но все же я тебя боюсь. Как смерть,
> Бываешь страшен ты, когда глазами
> Вращаешь так. Зачем бы мне бояться,-
> Не знаю я: вины своей не знаю,-
> И все же чувствую, что я боюсь...[7]
> [And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then
> When your eyes roll so. Why I should fear I know not,
> Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel I fear].[8]

In standard fiction, characters come in easily recognizable patterns. Static characters remain the same from the start of the story to its finish, and are almost always minor, background people. They provide easy and comfortable points of reference for the audience, somewhat like familiar wallpaper. They make the plot almost as easy to understand as a summer movie sequel. Developing characters change in predictable ways and take the whole of the story to do so; in fact, the change is the story, and these characters are usually the most important people. They guide

the audience through the labyrinth (or more often, the clearly marked highway) of the plot and make it easy to follow. Unfolding characters are so complex that it sometimes takes whole plays or novels to reveal their complexities. As a result, audiences are often puzzled by them and commonplace writers avoid them.

Developing/unfolding characters take the complexities of unfolding characters and add the additional complication of change. Audiences struggle with them, writers suffer for them, and there is always the problem of finding space to contain them. For instance, Hamlet, one of the most illustrious of their company, has 1507 lines—almost as many as in the whole of *The Comedy of Errors*. Falstaff is another large example. As the distinguished actor Ted van Griethuysen said at the inaugural weekend of the National Council for the Shakespeare Theatre, "I could pour my whole life into this character, and there's still room left over."[9] However, Nabokov and Shakespeare are both known for violating conventions and breaking patterns. Even the smallest, seemingly static characters can swiftly change. In *As You Like It*, when Orlando saves his brother Oliver's life, Oliver is suddenly transformed from a villain to a fit partner for Rosalind's cousin and dear friend Celia. Even more sudden is Duke Frederick's change from menace to hermit, which occurs off stage and is reported in one speech:

> Duke Frederick, hearing how that every day
> Men of great worth resorted to this forest,
> Addrest a mighty power; which were on foot
> In his own conduct, purposely to take
> His brother here and put him to the sword;
> And to the skirts of this wild wood he came,
> Where, meeting with an old religious man,
> After some question with him, was converted
> Both from his enterprise and from the world,
> His crown bequeathing to his banished brother.[10]

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, before the story begins, Demetrius has changed from a love of Helena to a love of Hermia. During the play, he changes back to a love for Hermia, while Lysander, who begins by loving Hermia, changes to a love for Helena and then back again. In *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, Nabokov "makes us perceive with absolute clarity why and how her [Ella's] inclinations subtly shift, now from Klian to Ganus, now back again."[11] In the same play, the faithful Edmin first becomes the lover of his master's mistress and then becomes the faithful Edmin once again.[12]

While such changes may look sudden and seem unprepared for, suggesting that the characters themselves are shallow and

unsupported by any deep structure in the play or novel, an examination of the vocabulary and epithets in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows that this is not so. The young lovers, fairies, and mechanicals in *Midsummer* are not usually held up as examples of Shakespeare's most profound character creation. However, the very vocabulary changes to reflect the origins of the characters. For example, describing fairies Shakespeare uses epithets of English and Celtic origin since the images depicted in the play are taken from these cultures. The change of the image origin usually is indicated by the change of epithets. When young lovers describe the moon, the vocabulary shows that the image comes from classical mythology. The epithets depicting it are English words of Latin origin.[13]

Both Nabokov and Shakespeare created unfolding/developing characters of such complexity that the critical arguments will never stop, and audience engagement with these fictional but seemingly real people and their patterns is sometimes more intense than with so-called real life. Brian Boyd says about Nabokov, "No other writer has gone so far as to declare that the true drama of a story takes place not among the characters, but between author and readers, just as the true drama of a chess problem takes place not among the pieces but between problemist and solver."[14] Harold Bloom sees the relationship between Shakespeare and his readers in a similar fashion: "As we read Shakespeare, we are always engaged in catching up, and our joy is that the process is never-ending: he is still out ahead of us."[15] Nabokov's concern with the complexity of his characters was so great that he arranged his manuscript character list for *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* in order of complexity. Simple characters, even if they are more important in terms of the plot, are listed last. There is a special note which says, "Линии остальных четырех типов куда проще..." ("The other four characters are much simpler...").[16]

In Nabokov's short story *Ultima Thule*, readers have to decide if the character Falter is simply crazy or is the one who found out all the truth about the universe. Depending on this decision, the audience will perceive the story differently. Nabokov offers this challenge in the very beginning of the narration: "Когда мне надоедает уверять себя, что он полоумный...я вижу в нем человека, который...потому что его не убила бомба истины...вышел в боги..." ("When I get tired of convincing myself that he is insane ... I see in him a person who has survived the explosion of the Truth and thus become a god").[17] Different points of view allow different readings of the story. But the author

does not clearly indicate which one is right. In fact, there is textual support for both sides. Some characters within the story would provide evidence for the insanity of Falter; others, doubting it, suggest that maybe there are signs of the opposite—great universal wisdom: "Это был человек, как бы потерявший все: уважение к жизни... общепринятые...традиции чувства...". ("He seemed to have become a man who had lost absolutely everything: respect for life...common traditions of feeling").[18] Such a description makes the audience believe in Falter's insanity, but in just a few pages they will read quite the opposite: "А вместе с тем он не производил впечатления умалишенного...совсем напротив...",—в нем,— "чуялась...сосредоточенная сила..." ("At the same time he didn't look crazy... quite the opposite..."; there was " some kind of concentrated power in this man....").[19]

While Nabokov creates characters who change and then change again and talks about it, Shakespeare just does it. Hamlet, too, is a character whose sanity comes into question and who changes repeatedly. In fact, he is not so much a character as a walking transformation. He is an innocent and a cynic, a lover and a soldier, a prince and a revolutionary, a judge and a murderer. He begins by condemning Claudius's deceit and hypocrisy and then spends most of the play disguising his own true motives under a cloak of madness. He finds Claudius' murder of his (Hamlet's) father damnable, but he callously sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and many others to their deaths. He admires young Fortinbras for his strength and willingness to shed blood in Poland, but grieves over the fate of ancient Troy. As Barbara Everett says in her excellent book *Young Hamlet*, "When the first scene of Shakespeare's first great tragedy ends by introducing the name of 'Young Hamlet,' it tells us at once that the character is young, that he embodies all the newness and immediacy of experience itself, but that he is also the past recalled—old Hamlet's royal son and heir."[20] He is thus the past, the present, and, in a world more amenable to the survival of protagonists than that of Shakespeare's tragedies, the possible future of the monarchy.

The Prince walked out of the play long ago and has been making himself felt in the world ever since. As Harold Bloom says, "No other single character in the plays, not even Falstaff or Cleopatra, matches Hamlet's infinite reverberations. The phenomenon of Hamlet, the prince without the play, is unsurpassed in the West's imaginative literature." [21] Hamlet has had enormous influence on the literatures, philosophies, and even the moods of

most European countries. In Russia, for instance, the play has been extraordinarily popular from the nineteenth century on:

> The principal reason for the sustained interest of the aristocracy lay in the romantic fascination with the character of Hamlet himself. Russian aristocrats felt a strange kinship with this privileged court figure torn between the mission he was called on to perform and his own private world... By the early nineteenth century there seemed nothing surprising in a Russian aristocrat's leaving his boat to make a special pilgrimage to 'the Hamlet castle' at Elsinore.[22]

Over and over, Hamlet, a character who is only an imaginary person, has personified people's most perplexing problems and dearest hopes. In Russia, the "Hamlet question" led to aristocratic and artistic suicides, but it also became a "search for the meaning of life" and "inspired the turn to 'the people' by Belinsky (and the radical populists after him)."[23] Perhaps the most surprising re-imagining of the Prince (and one of the closest to Shakespeare's original character) was Boris Pasternak's in the poems he appended to *Doctor Zhivago.* In Pasternak's words, "Hamlet is not the drama of a weak-willed character, but of duty and self abnegation.... Hamlet is chosen as the judge of his own time and the servant of a more distant time."[24] In the hands of Pasternak, who was also a translator of Shakespeare's plays, Hamlet had been transformed and, of course, personalized yet again; the Prince once more became the perfect symbol, part of the interplay between audience and author.

For Nabokov, who had read all of Shakespeare by the time he was fifteen,[25] Hamlet and the rest of Shakespeare are tremendously important. He asserts, "Shakespeare must be produced in toto, without a single syllable missing, or not at all."[26] His contempt for the Olivier film of the play (which cuts lines, rearranges scenes, and changes words) was total. "During a party he held for his students, he railed against Laurence Olivier's film adaptation of *Hamlet.* One student asked, 'But how can you say such things? Have you actually seen the film?' 'Of course I haven't seen the film,' Nabokov replied. 'Do you think I would waste my time seeing a film as bad as I have described?' "[27]

Humbert Humbert, the main character and narrator of Nabokov's best known novel, *Lolita,* also changes, becoming an absolutely different person. The audience does not expect this transformation, and careless readers may miss it altogether. Humbert Humbert, through the course of his life, tries to find his childhood image of love, abstracted from his real experience with

Annabel Leigh, a girl who is a little younger than he is. He first meets her a few months before his thirteenth birthday,[28] and she dies when he is sixteen. He is fixated on girls the age of Annabel at the time of her death. That is what he sees in Lolita—an approachable shadow of Annabel. He starts out with an affection for a phantom but gradually develops a true feeling for Lolita. Neither the novel's audience nor Humbert himself realizes that change before the very end of the novel. Then it becomes clear that he is a totally different person now, with real feeling for a real, not imaginary, partner. The audience marks this transition through the following lines: " 'One last word,' I said in my horrible, careful English, 'Are you quite, quite sure that—well, not tomorrow, of course, and not after tomorrow, but—well—someday, any day, you will not come to live with me? I will create a brand new God and thank him with piercing cries, if you give me that microscopic hope.' "[29] The Lolita that Humbert now loves is an adult woman who is about to have a child. She is less like the nymphet she was and more like her mother, the mature woman that Humbert had found to be somewhere between unattractive and disgusting. He has come to love Lolita, not for her youth or age but for herself. He has at last grown beyond his own adolescence and is emotionally ready to enter a new and adult world. Unfortunately, the world he inhabits, like Hamlet's, is not kind to main characters and does not provide happy endings.

Brian Boyd sums up the purpose of Nabokov's fiction in the following words, but he is also enumerating the advantages of the changing character types that both Shakespeare and Nabokov create. He says that Nabokov's "whole artistic credo" was his desire to prepare for his readers the sublime surprise of discovery, the surprise that he knows he would ruin were he to point it out himself. Throughout his work he wants to make us gasp with wonder when we see how real things can be behind all that we take for granted; to impart a sense of the artful, deceptive munificence of life, concealing miracles of generosity behind the everyday; to suggest that the world before our eyes is a puzzle, but that its solution lies before us, and that we may somehow be headed toward the "blissful shock" of discovering life's great surprise.[30]

Perhaps it may seem too much to discover the nature of the world in the changing faces of imagined characters, but Shakespeare asked for us to see through a world of dreams and illusion where all of us are dreams and beyond that world to a reality beyond such impermanent stuff. Nabokov asked for a dialogue between author and audience that would make of characters the talking

points that would lead on to understanding the nature of all those patterns of light and dark, of that chessboard which is the world. After all, it is not the characters themselves who reach out to us, but the subtle and brilliant minds behind them, speaking the language of fiction with the accents of truth.

Notes

1. Mark Twain, *On Writing and Publishing* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1994), 67.

2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "From *The Philosophy of Fine Art*," in *Shakespeare in Europe*, ed. Oswald LeWinter (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1963), 86.

3. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 225.

4. Quoted in Boyd, Brian, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 122.

5. Pushkin, too, had a high opinion of Shakespeare, calling his characters "living beings imbued with many passions, many vices; their variegated and multiple characters evolve before the spectator by the force of circumstance." See Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin, "From Shylock, Angelo, and Falstaff," in *Shakespeare in Europe*, ed. Oswald LeWinter (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1963), 161.

6. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Man from the U.S.S.R. and Other Plays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 326.

7. Vladimir Nabokov, "Tragediia Gospodina Morna" ("The Tragedy of Mr. Morn"), in *Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, Writings, Plays*, (Washington, D.C.: Manuscript Division, The Library of Congress). We wish to express our deep thanks to Dmitri Nabokov and his literary agent Nikki Smith for special permission to examine the Nabokov papers in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. Our thanks also to Fred Bauman of the Library of Congress for his expert and expeditious help.

8. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Alvin Kernan (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 5.2 .37-39.

9. " 'Call Back Yesterday': How Shakespeare's Histories Mirror Politics Today," National Council for the Shakespeare Theatre, 18 October 2003, Washington D.C.

10. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, eds. Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. Lamar (New York: Pocket Books, 1960), 5.4.159-68.

11. Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 222.

12. Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 223

13. Olga A. Ivanchenko Pilkington, "Epithets in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," a paper delivered at the Cultural Dialogue Conference at Krasnoyarsk State University, 2003, publication forthcoming, Russian title "Эпитет в произведении Шекспира "Сон в летнюю ночь".

14. Boyd, *The American Years*, 178.

15. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 271.

16. Nabokov. "Tragediia Gospodina Morna" ("The Tragedy of Mr. Morn"), "Synopsis."

17. Владимир Набоков,. *Весна в Фиальте. Рассказы* (Москва: Прометей., 1989), 117.

18. Набоков, 123.

19. Набоков, 126.
20. Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 1.
21. Bloom, 384.
22. James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 354.
23. Billington, 355.
24. Cited in Billington, 562.
25. Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 91.
26. Nabokov, *The Man from the U.S.S.R*, 327.
27. Boyd, *The American Years*, 139.
28. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita.* New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 11.
29. Nabokov, *Lolita*, 280
30. Boyd, *The American Years*, 7.