Homing in on Shakespeare and Nabokov

By Samuel Schuman

Authors William Shakespeare and Vladimir Nabokov share more than a probable birthday: April 23. (The date for Shakespeare is commonly accepted but not definitively proven.) The parallels extend beyond the enduring critical reverence and popular appeal of their works as well. Interestingly, the concept of “home” is central to these towering figures, Shakespeare (1564-1616), the greatest writer of English, and Nabokov (1899-1977), the premier English prose stylist of the 20th century.

In their recurrent explorations of this theme, however, the two represent polar opposites: one deeply anchored to a home culture, the other without such moorings. Shakespeare grounds plays in his native land and references it reflexively even when they’re set elsewhere. An oppressive regime uprooted Nabokov’s family in his youth and he moved often throughout adulthood, and his works are often set in a type of Never Never Land. Yet through the alchemy of talent and imagination, both reach the same place: a particular habitat, whether based in actuality or built from imagination, that becomes universal, the home place for readers everywhere and forever.
“This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.”

The royal and military record of England, Shakespeare’s homeland, is the subject of 10 of the Bard’s 38 plays, those called the Histories, and covers some 350 years of political developments. (This list excludes ruminations on mythical history like King Lear and Cymbeline and non-British history like Julius Caesar and Pericles.) To many literary scholars, such as Christopher Fitter at Rutgers University-Camden, Shakespeare’s studies of English history focus on the monarchy and in some ways the monarch of his own time: Queen Elizabeth I, daughter of Henry VIII. The plays depict the rise and legitimacy of the Tudor line of rulers, of whom Elizabeth was both the greatest and the last. Studying themes in the reigns of earlier kings (such as divine ordination of monarchs) offered Elizabethan dramatists a relatively safe way to comment on how those issues appear in contemporary politics.

These 10 plays begin chronologically with King John, written most likely in 1594-96. The historical John assumed the throne in 1199 and his reign (until 1216) was troublesome: suffering military losses to the French; falling out with the Pope; being derided by his subjects; affixing his seal to the Magna Carta to avert civil war by the nobility, which was intent on protecting its rights and properties. As a result, Shakespeare explores the perils of internal dissent within Britain. The last monarch Shakespeare headlines is Henry VIII, in the play of the same name (from 1612-13), ruler from 1509 to 1547. The historical Henry is perhaps most notable for breaking with the Roman Catholic Church and for his succession of wives. Shakespeare treads the line between historical accuracy and cautious respect for Henry’s daughter by Anne Boleyn, Queen Elizabeth I, who presided from 1558 to 1603.

Eight plays address a sequence of monarchs from 1398 to 1485: Richard II (source of the quotation in the above subhead); Henry IV parts I and II; Henry V; Henry VI parts I, II and III; and Richard III. And, as in King John and Henry VIII, Shakespeare takes episodes from those eras to comment on the state of the nation, particularly its leaders. For instance, in Richard II (1595) and Henry IV (1596-98), he poses the delicate question of regal succession — an important topic as the Queen, who never married and had no children, grew older and older without a clear heir for the throne.

But Shakespeare’s preoccupation with England did not end with his Histories. Even when his topic is far removed from the factual account of his native land, his plays are deeply bound in his own time and place. Thus, the romantic comedy A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1595-96) is set in a mythical and classical Athens ruled by the betrothed Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolita, Queen of the Amazons. But in classical Athens there is a group of bumbling Elizabethan workingmen: Snug the joiner, Bottom the weaver, Peter Quince the carpenter, Francis Flute the bellows mender, and Tom Snout the tinker. These characters, Shakespeare’s British contemporaries, enact a play within the play and add an everyday London ambience to help audiences relate to the proceedings. Similarly, the tragedy Coriolanus (1607-08) is set in Rome in the fifth century B.C. and based on the leader of the same name, but it also is full of characters and conversations that are contemporaneous with Shakespeare. For example, a serving man exclaims in Act IV, “This peace is nothing, but to rust iron, increase tailors, and breed ballad-makers.” Those tailors and ballad-makers come straight from the streets of London. Likewise, the ancient Rome of Julius Caesar (1599-1600) features mobs of common people and aristocratic intrigues akin to those of London at the turn of the 17th century. Consider this bit of dialogue early in Act I:


The carpenter, with his leather apron and his ruler, and the cobbler who mends bad soles are the voices of Shakespeare’s neighbors in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon or in the back streets around Shakespeare’s Globe theater, not Roman pleblasts. Antiquity, for Shakespeare, was of interest not because it was different and exotic, but because it was an echo of his home time and place.

Yet because of, not in spite of, his localism, Shakespeare is the most universal of writers. Precisely because the lovable braggart Bottom the weaver is persuasively true to Elizabethan Warwickshire does he represent a truth of everywhere and all times. The villain Richard III is an emblem of misrule not just for his own era, but eternally, in his ruthless and unremitting ambition. “He was not of an age, but for all time,” Ben Jonson, the actor, playwright and poet, observed about Shakespeare. A later poet, William Blake, urged seeing the world in a grain of sand, and Shakespeare saw the grain of sand that was his homeland so clearly and wrote of it so compellingly that it became everyone’s home, forever. His England, past and present, becomes both symbol and quintessence of all the world.

“… I swore to myself I would not dream of staying in Ramsdale under any circumstance but would fly that very day to the Bermudas or the Bahamas or the Blazes.”

Unlike Shakespeare, Nabokov spent his adult life without a true home. His parents were wealthy aristocrats, owning a grand city mansion in St. Petersburg, Russia, and an estate in the country nearby. But their fortunes took a turn for the worse with the Russian Revolution in 1917, which overturned the imperial government and more than 300 years of the Romanov dynasty and replaced it with communism. Vladimir’s father was a prominent liberal, hence an enemy of the new Russian state. In 1919, the Nabokovs, including 20-year-old Vladimir, were forced to flee their homeland and abandon most possessions. They settled in Berlin, living comfortably but modestly until the senior Nabokov was accidentally murdered in 1922 in a botched political assassination. Vladimir enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge, and returned to Germany temporarily after finishing a degree in literature.

From 1919 until his death in 1977, Nabokov lived only in rental properties. First in Berlin, where, in 1925 he married Vera Slonim and in 1934 their only child Dmitri was born. (He died in February.) Nabokov supported his family primarily as a tutor of Russian and literature. With the rise of Nazism, the family was compelled to move again, partly because Vera was Jewish, first to France in 1937 and then to America in 1940, where Nabokov supported himself in the academic world as a research scientist at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, as curator of lepidoptery, and as a teacher of comparative literature at Wellesley College and later as a professor at Cornell University. With the astonishing success of his well-known and controversial 1955 novel Lolita by the end of that decade, Nabokov
was free to become a full-time author and returned to Europe, residing in the Montreux Palace Hotel near Geneva, Switzerland, for 16 years until his death, as the preeminent Nabokov critic Brian Boyd details in his two-volume biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (1990) and *The American Years* (1991). The physical homes of Nabokov’s youth receded into the safe and unchanging realm of mythic memory; he never again saw the Russia he left as a college-age student.

Lifelong exile resulted in Nabokov’s creation of a fictional world that some scholars term transnational. (See, for instance, Rachel Trousdale’s 2010 study, *Nabokov, Rushdie, and the Transnational Imagination: Novels of Exile and Alternate Worlds.*) Much of Nabokov’s writing — novels, first in Russian and then in English; short stories; criticism; plays; poems — reflects this global perspective.

*Nad or Ar dor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), his longest novel, best illustrates this sui generis environment. The sweeping story depicts a forbidden love between protagonists Ada, a gifted naturalist, and her brother Van, a brilliant psychologist/philosopher; neither knew they were siblings upon beginning the liaison in 1884 when 14-year-old Van seduces 11-year-old Ada. But the unabashed sensualists continue the incestuous relationship, ecstatic, tempestuous, passionate and tragic, not only after discovering they’re kin late in adolescence but also through Ada’s marriage and, indeed, until the end of the novel in 1967 when Ada is 94 and Van 97. This complex plot unfolds in an invented cosmos that Nabokov calls Demonia or Antiterra but which might be called nowhere and no-when. Van and Ada’s unique and forbidden passion demands an equally exotic setting.

In *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Boyd describes this locale as “his strangest and most contradictory world, his most colorful and comic, his most lyrical and discordant, his most unsettling and profound.” Antiterra makes use of bits and pieces of prerevolutionary Russia, Western Europe, and the United States at various points in their histories. For instance, the U.S. encompasses all of North and South America, which were discovered by African navigators. Western Canada is a Russian-speaking province and Eastern Canada is French-speaking; Russia belongs to the empire of Tartary, where the communist revolution never took place. And the British Empire incorporates most of Europe and Africa and is ruled by a king. Antiterra includes elements totally outside history; for example, there is no electricity but there are flying carpets!

The explosive and baffling first paragraph of the novel prepares the reader for this disorienting geographic (and linguistic) chaos: General Ivan Durmanov, Commander of Yukon Fortress and peaceful country gentleman, with lands in the Severn Tories (Severniya Territorii), that tessellated protectorate still lovingly called ‘Russian’ Estovy, which conglomerates, granoblastically and organically, with “Russian” Canady, otherwise “French” Estovy, where not only French, but Macedonian and Bavarian settlers enjoy a halcyon climate under our Stars and Stripes.

This is one of the many houses Nabokov lived in while teaching at Cornell.

Nabokov fashions a time and place that never was or will be. Yet like Shakespeare, he engenders men and women who convince the reader of their veracity by behaving as real people might in a fantasy universe. And, of course, Nabokov borrows from his own lifelong itinerancy. Ada grows up in a stately Russian-style country manor and Van at one point lives in an urban skyscraper. They have a house in “Ex, in the Swiss Alps,” and endow a museum in New York. One character has “lingered in the [North American] West where the many-colored mountains acted … as they had on all young Russians of genius.” The point: Nabokov’s homeland and all his many resettlements are transmuted into a self-contained fictive universe, which obeys its own laws, but not those of “real” geography, politics or history.

Numerous other Nabokov novels take place in fictional transnational realms, among them *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading*. And other Nabokov novels toy with notions of home in recognizable places, *Lolita* first and foremost, whose backdrop is mid-20th-century America (and which is quoted in the above subhead). Like *Ada*, it deals with a taboo sexual relationship, between Humbert Humbert, a 37-year-old man of letters and pedophile, and the 12-year-old Dolores Haze, whom he calls Lolita. Nabokov reinforces the perverse nature of their affair with the odd houses in which much of the story takes place. They meet in a quintessentially tasteless American suburban home in Ramsdale, N.H.; their last encounter is in a bleak road and a waste of weeds all around.” At that end of the novel, Humbert Humbert murders his rival, Clare Quilty, at the pseudo gothic Pavor Manor, on Grimm Road, straight out of a “B” horror movie. These houses become emblems of Nabokov’s themes: tasteless suburbia, hopeless adulthood, perverse evil.

“I will pay thy graces / Home both in word and deed.”

Thus, Shakespeare, quintessentially Elizabethan and English, achieves artistic universality in the context of his actual time and place, while Nabokov achieves that same literary universality through homelessness and the resulting creation of a fictional world.

There is at least one point, though, where the Nabokovian and Shakespearean visions of home converge: *The Tempest* (1610-11), a favorite play of Nabokov’s, in which Shakespeare creates a fantastical world, like that of *Ada*, for a group of Renaissance Europeans. In this late comedy (quoted in the above subhead), the hero Prospero, Duke of Milan and a Nabokovian exile, has been marooned on a magical island that he oversees and that is populated by sprites and the offspring of a witch. But wandering around on it, too, are a pair of drunken English sailors, a betraying brother, and a wise but ineffective old counselor. After enchanted misadventures give way to happy endings, Prospero realizes, “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on; and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.” And then, his exile ended, he goes home. —

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