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Vladimir Nabokov's *King, Queen, Knave* and the *Commedia Dell'Arte*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Nabokov Studies, 1 (1994), 83-102. STEPHANIE L MERKEL (Ithaca, NY, U.S.A.) VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S KING, QUEEN, KNAVE AND THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE In The Triumph of Pierrot, Martin Green and John Swan designate the period from 1890 to 1930 as a time "when the commedia [was] a conscious presence and pressure on everyone of imagination."¹ Up to 1890 Pierrot and Harlequin had been popular entertainment for most serious artists ... or else just episodes in the history of art. But in our period [1890-1930], Pierrot and Harlequin suddenly leaped to life in everyone's minds, colors glowing, limbs moving, not as history but as archetypes: forms both personal and impersonal that transcend psychology and history and all categories of realism—the archetypes of art.² Green's chapter, "Literature and the Commedia," identifies Vladimir

Nabokov as the "most important single case" of a great comedic novelist.³ Discussing Nabokov's last novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), Green notes the explicit references to commedia characters as well as "the fundamental theatricality of Nabokov's world view, which is his deepest debt to the commedia."⁴ Green specifically addresses Nabokov's fascination for "invented reality" and his novels' "conscious brittleness of mood" and self-conscious "artificiality" as rooted in the tradition of the commedia dell'arte.⁵ Green, moreover, views Nabokov himself as a comedic figure, noting that "[in] many commedia performances ... Pierrot is a butterfly hunter."⁶ As a pedagogue, too, Nabokov seems to have appreciated the commedia's enormous influence on Russian literature of the early twentieth century: Balaganchik, a commedia-style drama, is the only work by Aleksandr Blok on the reading list for a course Nabokov taught at Harvard.⁷

1. Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. xiii. 2. *Ibid.*, p. 7. 3. *Ibid.*, p. 233. 4. *Ibid.*, p.p. 234-35. 5. *Ibid.*, p. 18. 6. *Ibid.*, p. 237. 7. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew Bruccoli, *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1989), p. 127. ⁸⁴

Nabokov Studies Green's discussion of Nabokov's comedic sensibility focuses on works written after 1930, touching on *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938), *Bend Sinister* (1947), *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), *Lolita* (1955), and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974). However, he overlooks a work which fits within the 1890-1930 timespan of "Pierrot's triumph" and which is perhaps most heavily indebted to the commedia dell'arte—*King, Queen, Knave* (Russian version, *Korol', Dama, Valet*, 1928; English edition, 1968). Widely considered one of Nabokov's least successful novels, *King, Queen, Knave* (hereafter, *KQKn*) is almost certainly his least understood and probably one of the least treated works. Written three years after his first novel, *Mary* (*Mashenka*, 1925), this "bright brute" (as Nabokov dubbed it) seems, in Brian Boyd's opinion, "to invert the values embodied so directly in [its predecessor]," in which time and space-defying feats of consciousness and memory are showcased.⁸ Unlike the hero of *Mary*, the trio of *KQKn* exhibits none of these qualities, but lives with feet planted squarely in the present of its sordid (and trite) love triangle. In *KQKn*, the author stages a novel of adultery using commedia dell'arte plots, characters and moods, reflecting the overall comedic atmosphere of the period. The novel became even more overtly comedic when Nabokov "englished" it forty years later. The commedia was in fact a persistent symbol for Nabokov throughout his life and career, an emblem of the reality-bending antics the Nabokovian pen relished. It would have been nearly impossible for the young Nabokov not to imbibe the commedia imagery simply by reason of his proximity to the centers of Silver Age literature and theater. When Vladimir Nabokov was born on April 23, 1899, Aleksandr Blok had just finished the gymnasium and Andrei Belyi was still studying the natural sciences at Moscow University. Symbolism as a viable literary tradition took hold of the Russian literary world at about the time Nabokov emerged from "the prenatal abyss."⁹ But by the time Nabokov had published his first poem in 1914, Symbolism was already waning. Acmeism and Futurism vied for ascendancy, the former as the...

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