

The Mystery of Germann's Failure in «The Queen of Spades»: Cracking Pushkin's Personal Code

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“My ‘Queen of Spades’ is in great vogue,” wrote Pushkin in his diary in April 1834. For almost two centuries the story has been celebrated by readers, with this difference: in Pushkin’s time it stirred the blood of card players, whereas nowadays it heats the imagination of literary scholars. Regardless of the approach chosen for analysis, most critics attempt to crack the mystery of the three cards, returning again and again to the story’s finale. Why does Germann lose the game? Why does the queen appear in the ace’s place? What is the meaning of three, seven, and ace? Interpretations are legion; nevertheless, “something in the text is always missing [...] It is either the elusive ace, or the absence of resolution in the debate over realistic versus supernatural motivation, or the lack of a single literary prototype that the heroes [...] might be parodying.”[1] In this essay I will argue that *in Pushkin’s text*—constructed in accordance with his idea of a prose work as precise and brief—nothing is missing: Germann’s fatal confusion is predetermined by his movement into and around the countess’s house, and his final loss is a replica of the strategy he himself chooses in order to win. As I will suggest, the appearance of the queen does not represent Germann pulling the wrong card, as is commonly presumed, but means quite the opposite. Therefore, however audacious it may seem, I will propose another possible reading, which will look at Germann’s failure through the prism of Pushkin’s own attitude towards the value of money and marriage in relation to happiness at the time of his work on *The Queen of Spades*.

Let us first recall the rules of faro, the game of chance that Germann plays in the hope of quickly winning a large sum.[2] Each player has a deck of cards. One player, called the punter, chooses a card and announces his bet. The banker shuffles the cards, turns the deck face up, and moves the top card to his right so that the second card from the top can be seen as well. The side each card is on is crucial: if the card to the banker’s right matches in rank the punter’s card, the banker wins; if the card to the

banker's left matches the punter's card, the punter wins. If neither matches, the two cards are put aside, and the game continues in the same manner until a match occurs. If the banker's two cards are of the same rank and match the punter's card, the banker wins.[3] Deprived of any possibility to strategize, the punter therefore gambles not with an equal rival but with chance, or, in Iurii Lotman's words, with "Unknown Factors" in whose hands the banker becomes "a sort of dummy." [4] As Lotman further maintains, the faro model becomes relevant beyond the card table and, in particular, triggers the plot of *The Queen of Spades*: while Germann thinks he is playing a game of his own devising, he in fact is being played with.

In light of this double nature of gambling, the old countess—the keeper of the secret of the three winning cards—acquires both realistic and supernatural features. The first time the latter come to the fore is found in the scene after the ball when, hidden in the next room, Germann witnesses the countess's toilette:

Like most old people, the Countess suffered from insomnia. Having undressed, she sat in the Voltairean armchair by the window and dismissed her chambermaids [...] The Countess sat, all yellow, mumbling with her flabby lips and *swaying right and left* [...] looking at her, one might assume that the *swaying* of this horrifying old woman was caused, not by her own will, but by the action of a hidden galvanism.[5]

Как и все старые люди вообще, графиня страдала бессонницею. Раздевшись, она села у окна в вольтеровы кресла и отослала горничных [...] Графиня сидела вся желтая, шевеля отвислыми губами, *качаясь направо и налево* [...] смотря на нее, можно было бы подумать, что *качание* страшной старухи происходило не от ее воли, но по действию скрытого гальванизма.[6]

Pushkin introduces the countess's participation in the realm of irrational forces carefully and unobtrusively, starting from a general and quite realistic statement about the countess's insomnia, continuing by mentioning a number of ordinary actions on her and her servants' part, and then giving just a slight hint of the possibility of regarding the old woman's swaying as something strange. It is noteworthy that her motion from side to side is specified as "right and left." It seems that in light of the countess's relation to the power of Fate—and, notably, the game of chance—this mention of right and left may come directly from the rules of faro.

The opposition of right and left, however, occurs even earlier, in Liza's letter that

opens up a chance for Germann to get inside the countess's house. The correspondence between the young people begins seven days after Liza first sees Germann, and she receives his second letter three days after her response.[7] From that time on, as Pushkin makes clear, Germann writes to her daily, and Liza also participates in the exchange.[8] However, only two messages—Liza's first and last—are quoted in the story. The last letter is replete with detailed instructions of how to move around the house to finally get to Liza's room. This description is cited in full:

As soon as the Countess leaves, her servants will probably scatter in all directions; the doorman will remain by the entrance, but even he is likely to retreat, as is his habit, into his cubicle. Come at half past eleven. Walk straight up the staircase. If you find anybody in the anteroom, inquire whether the Countess is at home. You will be told she is not—and that will be the end of that. You will have to turn back. But it is likely that you will meet no one. The maids sit in their room, all of them together. From the anteroom turn *left* and walk straight through, all the way to the Countess's bedroom. In her bedroom, behind a screen, you will see two small doors: the one on the *right* leads to a study, which the Countess never enters; the one on the *left* opens into a corridor, where you will find a narrow winding staircase: this leads to my room. (221–22)

Как скоро графиня уедет, ее люди, вероятно, разойдутся, в сенях останется швейцар, но и он обыкновенно уходит в свою каморку. Приходите в половине двенадцатого. Ступайте прямо на лестницу. Коли вы найдете кого в передней, то вы спросите, дома ли графиня. Вам скажут нет, — и делать нечего. Вы должны будете воротиться. Но, вероятно, вы не встретите никого. Девушки сидят у себя, все в одной комнате. Из передней ступайте *налево*, идите все прямо до графининой спальни. В спальне за ширмами увидите две маленькие двери: *справа* в кабинет, куда графиня никогда не входит; *слева* в коридор, и тут же узенькая витая лестница: она ведет в мою комнату.[9]

Germann's path is associated with the left side, which in faro is advantageous for the punter. Let us also remark the consistent vertical movement emphasized by the presence of two staircases—from the entrance to the hall and from the countess's bedroom to Liza's room—and the implied occurrence of potential obstacles—a hall-porter at the entrance and “someone” in the hall—that can prevent this movement. There is another staircase whose presence is revealed when Germann carries out Liza's instructions:

At exactly half past eleven he stepped on the *porch* and *went up* to the brightly lit entrance hall. (222)

Ровно в половине двенадцатого Германн ступил на графинино крыльцо и вошел в ярко освещенные сени.[10]

The verb *vzoiti* (went up) indicates upward movement and in the present context represents a spatial change not only from bottom to top but also from outside to inside. Germann's actual travel indoors precisely follows Liza's letter:

The doorman was not there. Germann ran up the stairs, opened the door of the ante-room, and saw *a servant* asleep [...] under a lamp. [...] Germann walked past him with a light but firm step. The reception hall and the drawing room were dark [...] Germann entered the bedroom. (222)

Швейцара не было. Германн взбежал по лестнице, отворил двери в переднюю и увидел *служу*, спящего под лампою [...] Легким и твердым шагом Германн прошел мимо его. Зала и гостиная были темны [...] Германн вошел в спальню.[11]

The obstacles mentioned by Liza indeed seem plausible: the hall-porter, although present as a word, is absent as a person and the “someone” who materializes as a servant happens to be asleep. Be that as it may, Liza's instructions and Germann's actual movement around the house construct a distinctive scheme that comprises three sequential steps. The first step is related to two spatial shifts—going inside and up—and a potential obstacle (the hall-porter), which can prevent further movement; the second step is connected with a similar obstacle (the sleeping servant) and a similar vertical “hop” (from the entrance to the ante-room), but its horizontal axis is realized through a left turn, which presupposes the possibility of a right turn as well; the third step preserves the potential upward move (the winding stairs), whereas the opposition of right and left is explicitly present in the two doors, which simultaneously can be regarded as an obstacle Germann faces inside himself: now there is no “someone” to jeopardize his movement, but only his choice of one of the doors that may lead him astray.

This scheme, I believe, has a direct correspondence to Germann's game of faro in chapter 7. First of all, the three steps are the three days of gambling, with the three bets from the low three to the high ace parallel to the move from the ground floor to the very top of the countess's house. Secondly, Germann's position in the faro game—as a punter whose card is on the left—is reflected in his association with the left side inside the house. Thirdly, in both situations there is a chance of losing: one can

lose in faro as in any card game, and in the house Germann may run into “someone” and have to leave. Thus the house itself becomes one big faro game.

Now let us look closely at what happens when, already in the countess’s room, Germann has one step left:

Germann went behind the screen. A small iron bedstead stood behind it; *on the right* there was the door leading to the study; *on the left*, another one leading to the corridor. Germann opened the latter and saw the narrow winding staircase that led to the poor ward’s room... *But he drew back and went into the dark study.* (223)

Германн пошел за ширмы. За ними стояла маленькая железная кровать; *справа* находилась дверь, ведущая в кабинет; *слева*, другая — в коридор. Германн ее отворил, увидел узкую, витую лестницу, которая вела в комнату бедной воспитанницы... *Но он воротился и вошел в темный кабинет.*[12]

The sudden change in his final destination breaks the sequence of movements in Liza’s letter: instead of choosing the *left* door to *Liza’s room*, Germann enters the study door on the *right* and stays near the *countess’s room* to re-enter it afterwards. In terms of faro he chooses the card on the right (the one that makes a punter lose), and this card, here associated with the countess, will reappear as the queen of spades, the countess’s card double, during the final night of gambling.[13]

Not just the final step, but each of Germann’s three steps in moving from outside in and then within the house is linked to a door: first, he entered the house; after that, he “ran up the stairs, opened the doors to the ante-room, and saw a servant”; and finally, he found himself in the countess’s room facing the two doors. The closer Germann appears to be to the top of the house, the more conspicuous the parallel between doors and cards becomes. Besides, Germann’s fast and unimpeded progress through the first two “spatial” steps—from the entrance to the ante-room and from there to the countess’s boudoir—corresponds to his first two successful nights of gambling: Germann’s movement into and then around the house is confined to six rather short and precise sentences; his first two games at Chekalinskii’s are depicted with similar brevity and reserve, as if he walks past them with the same “light but firm step.” The third night of gambling starts with a noticeably verbose introduction, which, in addition to creating a retardation effect and keeping the reader tense and alert, echoes the detailed and long description of the countess’s room.

Now let us focus on the passage which Mikhail Gershenzon has called Pushkin's "serious artistic blunder"[14] and prove that in fact the minute depiction of the countess's room, which appears as an intermission between the second step and the third step, offers us a key to later events rather than exemplifying the author's artistic recklessness:

Germann entered the bedroom. A gold sanctuary lamp burned in front of an icon-case filled with ancient icons. Armchairs with faded damask upholstery and down-cushioned sofas, their gilt coating worn, stood in melancholy symmetry along the walls, which were covered with Chinese silk. Two portraits, painted in Paris by Mme. Lebrun, hang on the wall. One of them showed a man about forty years old, red-faced and portly, wearing a light green coat with a star; the other a beautiful young woman with an aquiline nose, with her hair combed back over her temples, and with a rose in her powdered locks. Every nook and corner was crowded with china shepherdesses, table clocks made by the famous Leroy, little boxes, bandalores, fans, and diverse other ladies' toys invented at the end of the last century, along with Montgolfier's balloon and Mesmer's magnetism. (222–23)

Германн вошел в спальню. Перед кивотом, наполненным старинными образами, теплилась золотая лампада. Полинялые штофные кресла и диваны с пуховыми подушками, с сошедшей позолотой, стояли в печальной симметрии около стен, обитых китайскими обоями. На стене висели два портрета, писанные в Париже m-me Lebrun. Один из них изображал мужчину лет сорока, румяного и полного, в светло-зеленом мундире и со звездой; другой — молодую красавицу с орлиным носом, с зачесанными висками и с розою в пудренных волосах. По всем углам торчали фарфоровые пастушки, столовые часы работы славного Лероу, коробочки, рулетки, веера и разные дамские игрушки, изобретенные в конце минувшего столетия вместе с Монгольфьевым шаром и Месмеровым магнетизмом. (6: 224)

Bristling with numerous particulars and details, this passage not only recreates the atmosphere of the countess's outmoded room (complete with a reference to Mesmer's magnetism, which again introduces the supernatural into the humdrum), but also invites the reader to seek a certain numerical clue to the tale.[15] However, as Sergei Davydov has noted, besides the winning three, seven, and one (ace), it comprises allusions to other numbers and therefore cannot be viewed as a reliable source for understanding the mystery of the three cards.[16] In his further discussion, Davydov suggests that "if the queen of spades has its human counterpart in the Count-

ess, then the ace could stand for her husband, the Count.”[17]

Indeed, the portraits visually resemble the cards, although it seems Pushkin may have intended a different card for the countess’s husband. As it follows from Tomskii’s remark in chapter 1, the count was a sort of butler to his wife. A statement of this kind demotes the count from ace to jack and thereby adds another card to those already discovered. The proposed correspondence may not appear obvious in Russian but is undeniable in French where “valet” refers both to a card and a servant. It would perhaps sound far-fetched, had Pushkin not used the same principle in the passage cited above by mentioning m-me Lebrun and (Mr) Leroy, whose French names conceal the queen and the king, respectively.[18] So, the passage contains the jack, the queen, and the king, the three higher-value cards with unequivocally anthropomorphic images. The highest card of all, the ace, can formally be included in this group of anthropomorphic cards as well, but in this case, it is a semantic criterion, not a visual one, that determines its humanlike quality. It is rooted in the second meaning the word “ace” has in Russian, namely, “a wealthy man of rank,” and possibly in its French equivalent “as,” which can mean “someone who excels at something” as well as an ace in a deck of cards. And yet the ace seems absent at this point of the story’s development.

The depictions of the old woman’s boudoir and of Germann’s third night mirror and illuminate one another. Turning into a refrain of the three nights of gambling, the haunting repetition of cards going right and left—“A nine fell to his right, and a trey to his left,” “A jack fell to his right and a seven to his left,” and “On his right fell a queen, on his left an ace”—emphasizes the importance of the right and left doors. At the same time, the cards in the countess’s boudoir, hidden behind portraits (queen and jack), doors (queen and ace), and names (queen and king), manifest themselves in real people:

The following evening Germann once more presented himself at the table. Everybody had been expecting him. The generals and privy councilors abandoned their whist in order to watch such an extraordinary game. The young officers jumped up from their sofas, and all the waiters gathered in the drawing room. (232)

В следующий вечер Германн явился опять у стола. Все его ожидали. Генералы и тайные советники оставили свой вист, чтобы видеть игру, столь необыкновенную. Молодые офицеры соскочили с диванов: все официанты

посылающую. Молодые офицеры вместе с дворянами, все офицеры
собрались в гостиной. (6: 236)

The generals and privy councilors—the people who occupy the highest position in the table of ranks—are, of course, aces. The correlation between the young officers and “kings” comes from fortune telling: the former are the best potential (or real) candidates for marriage—as is made clear in the epilogue with regard to Tomskii—while the latter always stand for potential (or real) suitors. The waiters and “jacks” are linked in their inferior position of servants. To complete the set, only a queen is missing. And it / she does not keep us waiting:

“The ace has won!” said Germann and turned his card face up.

“Your lady has been murdered,” said Chekalinskii affably. (232)

– Туз выиграл! – сказал Германн и открыл свою карту.

– Дама ваша убита, – сказал ласково Чекалинский. (6: 237)

This well-maintained correspondence between people and cards is reinforced by the associations between the winning cards and images in Germann’s disturbed imagination: a slender young girl is turned into a three of hearts, and a portly man becomes an ace. As others have observed, these images represent what Germann desires: the young girl can be related to Liza, whom Germann uses “for the sake of getting at the three magic cards, that is, money,” [19] while the portly—and well-to-do—man is Germann as he sees himself in the future. The intervening image, the seven, is connected to the concept of time: asked what time it is, Germann replies, “it’s five minutes to the seven” (*bez piati minut semerka*). This connection may reflect the fact that Germann’s desire to win matches up with two similar situations, the countess’s and Chaplitskii’s winnings, that chronologically preceded Germann’s. This “time-in-reverse” element is enhanced by Germann’s thoughts at the end of chapter 4 about “a lucky young man”—the countess’s lover—who stole to her room *at that same hour* but about sixty years before the night of the countess’s death.

These images that the waking Germann projects onto his surroundings are followed by a second set that appears in his dreams. The nocturnal images have a double meaning and are associated with Germann’s movement into and around the house as well as with the real, albeit veiled, state of things as opposed to what Germann desires. The great luxuriant flower into which the three is transformed is related to Liza, both because she is associated with this card in the set of daytime images and be-

... because she is associated with the card in the set of playing images and because she wears “fresh flowers” in chapter 3. She appears, her head adorned with flowers, when Germann was waiting for the moment to enter the countess’s house, i.e., to make his first move toward the wealth he imagined and, in terms of his spatial movement, his first step—inside and up. But in fact the countess, too, is connected to flowers: she wears a rose in the portrait and has her bonnet bedecked with roses. This detail underlines the old woman’s clinging to the years of her youth and thus makes her outfit seem inappropriate, but at the same time the roses make her resemble a queen from a deck of cards, always depicted with a flower in hand.

The seven, which is compared to a Gothic portal in Germann’s dreams, probably recalls, as Nathan Rosen shows, the Gothic arch in Tsarskoe Selo, a place where Pushkin spent almost six years as a student of the lyceum. This visual resemblance is strengthened by the Gothic atmosphere Pushkin sometimes lends to the story, an atmosphere that hovers over Germann’s plea to reveal the secret of the winning cards, which, as he implies, is bound up with “a terrible sin, a forfeiture of eternal bliss, a covenant with the devil,” and also over the mysterious gaze of the diabolical figure of Germann created in Liza’s imagination with Tomskii’s help. The image of the portal in the dream also echoes the door that overtly appears at the second stage of Germann’s spatial travel through the countess’s house. Consequently, the second card correlates with the second step. At the same time, the door, like the flower, can be correlated both with the countess and Liza.

The ace, which appears in Germann’s dream in the shape of an enormous spider, turns out to be the most troublesome image of all. Rosen illustrates this relationship by juxtaposing pictures of a spider (*pauk-krestovik*) and the ace of spades. At the same time, he appeals to the phonetic likeness of *pikovaia dama* (queen of spades) and *paukovaia dama* (spider-wife), fortifying this explanation of the shift from ace to queen by pointing out the feasible pun on “au jeu de la Reine” and “au jeu de l’araignée.”[20] This pun becomes more astounding and convincing when compared to another text by Pushkin, penned a few years earlier. The drafts to chapter 7 of *Evgenii Onegin* feature Onegin’s journal, or Album, which was not included in the published version of the novel in verse. Its second entry reads as follows:

“Are you afraid of *Countess -ova*?”

Eliza K. said to them.

“Yes,” objected the stern NN,

“We are afraid of *Countess –ova*,
As you might be afraid of a *spider*.”

Бойтесь вы *графини – овой?* –
Сказала им *Элиза К.*
– Да, возразил NN суровый, –
Боймся мы *графини – овой*,
Как вы бойтесь *паука*. [21]

In a jocular manner this passage combines a countess with a spider and even includes (E)liza. Pushkin, a man of superior memory who often borrowed from his unfinished works, could—consciously rather than unconsciously—have drawn on this short and playful dialogue while working on *The Queen of Spades*. [22] The five poetic lines above suggest a new reading of the countess’s answer to Germann’s demand to reveal the secret of the three cards: “That was a joke [...] I swear to you it was only a joke.” Perhaps, like “The Coffin-Maker,” which basically grew out of Pushkin’s crafty analysis of his evolution as a writer, *The Queen of Spades* sprang from an already existing text, which became a tongue-in-cheek reference. [23]

In terms of superstitions, a spider can be regarded both as bad luck and good luck. From a non-superstitious everyday perspective, on the other hand, a spider is quite a harmless creature that is often found in the upper portions of homes. If we remember Liza’s instructions, particularly the third step Germann has to take to reach her room, we can draw a parallel between a spider and the poor innocuous ward whose room is situated if not in the attic proper then, at least, higher than the other rooms of the house mentioned so far. All three elements of Germann’s nocturnal visions, then, can be associated to one extent or another with the countess and Liza. What is more, while Germann sees the ace as a spider, the text seems to provide a stronger link between spider and queen.

If the three nights of gambling are a replica of another faro game, the one that goes on inside the countess’s house and relies on Germann’s movement into and around the house, Germann’s success in this game depends on choosing the correct door (the door on the left), whereas the choice between the door that leads to Liza’s room and the door to the study becomes—especially in light of the ties between cards and people—the choice between two *damy* (two queens and two women). [24] This apposition is underscored by Germann’s readiness to become the old countess’s lover, a some

is underscored by Germann's readiness to become the old countess's lover, a somewhat weird and even perverse attitude for a young man involved in a relationship with a young girl. Germann's preference is understandable later, however: he seeks to find a better way to take possession of the secret. But his genuine purpose is at first disguised from the reader who may take the passion that inspired Germann to write to Liza for his true feelings for her. In this case, the countess may to some extent be regarded as Liza's rival.

This functional closeness of the two women as two queens, I believe, accounts for the ambiguity of the images in Germann's dreams, each of which can be associated with both. But, as in the actual game, only one is his lucky card. So, where is the ace? I would like to suggest that it could be found behind the door to Liza's room, which Germann opens but does not enter, and the outcome of his final game turns out to be doomed in advance by his choice of the "wrong" door. The fact that Germann is close to the ace but never gets it demonstrates the ace's "elusiveness." That is why to grasp it becomes difficult not just for the character but for the reader as well.

Germann's choice makes his last bet—"Germann [...] placed his (own) card [...] turned his (own) card face up"—sound ironically true. The queen of spades was *his dama*, and the ace was just a teasing inaccessibility, which may loom in the ghost's words, in Germann's "fiery imagination" or, literally between the lines.[25] Thus Germann loses his game not at the card table but three days before he learns the secret of the three cards and even before his "lady"—the countess—"has been murdered."

The *clue* to the mystery of Germann's failure and Liza's particular role in his fate can be found in the story's *conclusion*. Stepping over the bounds of the plot *per se*, the conclusion informs the reader about Germann's, Liza's, and Tomskii's fate. Germann goes mad, Liza is married and sponsors a poor relative, and Tomskii gets promoted and is getting married. On the one hand, Liza's life thus becomes a repetition of the countess's, and Tomskii's follows the ordinary path for a gallant. On the other hand, compared to Germann's, these two fates represent a well-ordered and quite happy outcome. As Lotman remarks, there are two mutually overlaid models: the first model presents the everyday world as well-disposed and opposed to the chaos of chance, while the second model contrasts the everyday world, whose order makes it over-ordered, inflexible, even dead, with chance, which penetrates it and enlivens its me-

chanical essence.[26] Lotman seems to regard both models as equal. Pushkin's artistic works and personal correspondence of the 1830s, however, show that he was more likely in favor of the former, more obvious model that has the order of marriage confronting the chaos of madness.[27] The presence of the other model in Pushkin's text seems to affirm the absence of an absolute definition of success in people's lives.

Pushkin wrote *The Queen of Spades* in Boldino in the fall of 1833. There he also wrote the long poem "The Bronze Horseman," whose main character's fate to some extent echoes Germann's: Evgenii loses his senses on having lost his beloved Parasha, a girl he intended to marry to live happily ever after. A short poem of that period, "Budrys and his Sons," tells the story of three brothers who return home from a military campaign, each with a young Polish girl to marry.[28] It is true that a literary plot can hardly do without love and marriage, but for Pushkin in the 1830s marriage was an actual issue. The reflections on marriage in his personal correspondence—especially at the time of his courting of Natal'ia Nikolaevna Goncharova beginning in 1829—go hand in hand with the issue of happiness. The dramatic confirmation of the connection between marriage and happiness can be found in numerous letters Pushkin wrote to his fiancée and friends.[29] For example, a few days after his marriage, he confesses in a letter to Pletnev:

I am married and happy. My only wish is that nothing change in my life: I cannot hope for more. This state is so new to me that, it seems, I have been reborn.[30]

Я женат – и счастлив. Одно желание мое, – чтоб ничего в жизни моей не изменилось: лучшего не дождусь. Это состояние для меня так ново, что, кажется, я переродился.[31]

In his youth a desperate gambler who called his passion for cards "the strongest of all passions" and once said he would prefer to die than to quit gambling, Pushkin seems to have changed his attitude toward gambling after his marriage.[32] This fact was acknowledged by the poet's contemporaries who testified that marriage had transformed him into a more serious and quite moderate man. Pushkin himself talks about this change in his letter of January 1832:

I have been married for about a year, and because of this my mode of life has completely changed [...] It has been over two years since I gave up dice and cards [...]

Я женат около года, и вследствие сего образ жизни мой совершенно переменился [...] От костей и карт отстал я более двух лет [...] [33]

In his letter to his wife of September 2, 1833, Pushkin notes:

I dined at Sudenko's. He's a friend of mine, a comrade from my bachelor days. Now he too is married and has fathered two children, and he has also stopped gambling.

Обедал у Суденки, моего приятеля, товарища холостой жизни моей. Теперь и он женат, и он сделал двух ребят, и он перестал играть.

Drawing a parallel between his friend and himself, Pushkin emphasizes their similarity through the antithesis of marriage and gambling.

It would be wrong to associate the idea of happiness that Pushkin had in his thirties with the juvenile spirit of nonchalance or passionate desires and dreams. The last two letters quoted appear to give away his somewhat nostalgic recollections of his youth in which gambling was one of the most notable features. It would also be wrong to believe that Pushkin's hand never placed a card on the table from his wedding day on. But here we are dealing not with a wish to create an ostentatious image of an exemplary husband, but rather with the incongruity of the desired and the real, or, in other words, with Pushkin the man, who, unlike Pushkin the genius, represents "the most wretched among the wretched children of the world." [34]

In *The Queen of Spades* happiness is connected to both marriage and passion for cards. When Germann beseeches the countess to reveal her secret, he presents himself as a man whose happiness—and whose descendants' happiness—lies in her hands. J. Thomas Shaw sees in Germann's supplication his desire to become wealthy and his hopes to establish a family. [35] It seems, however, that Germann's mention of his "children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren" does not reveal his true intentions, but is the same kind of elocutionary device as his appeal to the countess as "a wife, mistress, mother," and that in fact he is after money only for the sake of money.

Liza also thinks about happiness. and not iust her own but Germann's. too. Having

learnt about the countess's death, she understands that Germann's passionate letters had nothing to do with love. She realizes it is "not in her power to quench his passion and make him happy." Her wish to make Germann happy, I believe, is inevitably, albeit covertly, related to marriage. Pushkin does not talk about Liza's hopes as such but instead mentions her longing for a "deliverer" and "cites" her first letter, which opens with the sentence: "I am convinced [...] that you have *honorable intentions* and did not wish to offend me with a thoughtless act" (220, emphasis added). While in Pushkin's day the Russian phrase *chestnye namereniia* clearly stood for "a man's intentions to marry," nowadays this meaning is mostly lost and may easily be overlooked by the reader.

The question of happiness in *The Queen of Spades* can be summarized as the opposition of money/gambling and marriage. This does not mean, however, that money and marriage should be viewed as mutually exclusive categories. It is not that happiness can be found in wedlock and poverty, while unhappiness is the lot of the single and the rich. The question here is what comes first. Initially, Pushkin planned to present his protagonist with a dilemma and to make him choose between love and money. In one draft, Germann is in love with a German girl next door whom he presumably will abandon for the sake of enrichment. In its final version, the tale neither presents a clear-cut conflict in which love and money clash nor constructs a love triangle in the usual sense, but still Germann has to make his preference clear and choose between two women, one of whom embodies wealth and the other love.[36]

In the text, marriage is the condition under which Germann will be forgiven for the countess's death. The old woman's ghost reveals her secret and imposes this condition after Germann has made his choice inside the house by choosing the wrong door. If so, why is he still prompted with the right sequence of cards? Here, I assume, Germann gets a second chance, which life, unlike a card game, may offer. The countess remarks that she comes to him against her will. According to the tale's epigraph, the queen of spades signifies ill will. If the countess is the queen of spades who acts against her own ill will, she does it in accordance with someone else's good will. This "someone," I would suggest, is none other than Fate, and Germann still has another chance to win the game, but only if he meets the condition and marries Liza.

It is commonly presumed that there is no proof Germann did not intend to obey the countess's order. The text, however, testifies to the opposite. At the beginning of chapter 7 it is stated that Germann's mind was entirely occupied by the three cards, which had ousted the image of the dead old woman. This fact is then repeated almost precisely in the remark that "all his thoughts converged on the idea of using the secret." Finally, Pushkin directly reports Germann's plans: "He began to consider retirement and travel." Thus the image of the countess vanishes from his mind, and so does her command to marry Liza. Neither his short-term plans nor his far-reaching designs include marriage even as a general intention.

The Queen of Spades can thus be regarded as the place where Pushkin lays his most serious concerns of that time. It would be hard to disagree with Ilya Kutik's opinion about the existence of Pushkin's "purely personal code" that the story discloses.[37] Founding his explanation on Pushkin's superstitions, Kutik draws a parallel between the countess and the fortuneteller Kirchhof who predicted that Pushkin would die at the age of thirty-seven (three and seven), and correlates the ace with the person at whose hand Pushkin would, according to the prediction, be murdered. In Kutik's view, the story represents an act of exorcism where the queen (the fortuneteller) kills the ace (Pushkin's murderer), and in this way the fortuneteller's prophecy is annihilated. The connection between the three, the seven, and the queen with the divination is quite plausible and appears even more compelling if we recollect the countess's name—Anna Fedotovna—and correlate it with Kirchhof's real name—Alexandra Filippovna. However, nowhere in the text does the queen become a murderer. On the contrary, it is "murdered" (the Russian *ubita* can mean "beaten" in cards as well as "murdered") by the ace.

Proof that *The Queen of Spades* deals directly with superstitions can be found as early as its epigraph, which introduces the fortune-telling function of cards. In particular, a hint at fortune-telling comes (or rather crawls) into play in the image of a spider and its equivocal meaning of good luck and bad luck. Germann's superstitious nature becomes the reason he appears at the countess's funeral where the fanciful metamorphosis of the dead into the living first appears, to be repeated in the final scene of his failure. Germann's choice of the wrong door determines the outcome of the game (gambling) and of his fate (fortune-telling). This double nature of cards may also result in the ambiguity and bifurcation of the images in Germann's dreams, each of which conceals both Liza and the countess: they both look ahead to Germann's future (in Liza's letter that instructs him how to move around the house or in the countess's

(in Liza's letter that instructs him how to move around the house or in the countess's unexpected posthumous appearance) and in this way attempt to direct his "gambling" behavior, be it in the literal game of faro or the game Germann plays in life.

It seems that in terms of Pushkin's own superstitions, the story is not as much about card playing as it is about fortune-telling, or even fortune-shaping. Making Germann choose wealth, the counterpart to marriage symbolized by the queen of spades, Pushkin keeps the ace behind the door to Liza's room. In fact, he keeps the winning card for himself: by creating the situation which leads the character to collapse, the author, who chooses the opposite, may intend to become a *tuz*. A similar interaction between the text and its creator is evidenced in *Eugene Onegin*: there Pushkin falls in love with his Tatiana and keeps her to himself.[38] In *The Queen of Spades*, he keeps the ace. However, now it is not the creation of his imagination that matters, but his real-life hopes. In the letter to his wife of July 8, 1834, Pushkin confesses:

I had to marry you, for without you I would have been unhappy all my life.

Я должен был на тебе жениться, потому что всю жизнь был бы без тебя несчастлив.

This acknowledgment is quite in harmony with his ideas, even if their real embodiment may not have coincided with what he desired.

Assuming that Pushkin believed the prophecy about his death, which, in light of his highly superstitious nature, is not unlikely, the story in the first instance presents us with an authorial viewpoint on life values that is consistent with Pushkin's understanding of happiness. The ideological duel between the ace and the queen ends with the defeat of the latter, and Chekalinskii's final words about the queen's destruction become its dramatic confirmation. Thus *The Queen of Spades* is not an attempt to escape death, which is in any case inevitable, but an attempt to escape madness. Encapsulated in the artistic declaration, this attempt emanates from Pushkin's aspiration for orderliness in life, or, in other words—Pushkin's words, "the monotony of worldly habits"—perhaps, the only source in which happiness may be found.[39] The story thus becomes a sort of acknowledgment by Pushkin of Fate's benevolence toward him—in spite of the prophecy.

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[1] Caryl Emerson, "'The Queen of Spades' and the Open End," in *Puškin Today*, ed. David Bethea (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 35.

[2] The simplicity of such games opposes them to games of strategy. For a discussion of this difference, see Iurii Lotman, "'Pikovaia dama' i tema kart i kartochnoi igry v russkoi literature nachala XIX veka," in *Pushkin* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo SPb, 1995), 792–93.

[3] The game can also be played with several punters. In *The Queen of Spades*, for instance, Germann only punts alone on the last night.

[4] Lotman, "'Pikovaia dama,'" 798.

[5] Alexander Pushkin, *Complete Prose Fiction*, trans. Paul Debreczeny (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 223. All quotations in English are from this edition; the spelling "Hermann" used in Debreczeny's translation is here changed to "Germann."

[6] Emphasis added. The text is quoted from A. S. Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1978), 6: 224. All quotations are from this edition.

[7] "Odnazhdy, – eto sluchilos' [...] za nedeliu pered toi stsenoi, na kotoroi my ustanovilis'" (One time—this happened [...] a week before the scene that we have just

detailed), notes Pushkin. By “eto” (this) he refers to the scene where Liza sees Germann for the first time and by “toi stsenoi” (that scene) he means Liza’s reading to the countess, followed by their stroll, just before which Germann stealthily hands his first letter to Liza. The second letter from Germann comes three days after Liza’s response (“*tri dnia posle togo*”).

[8] The beginning of chapter 4 makes it possible to determine the approximate duration of the correspondence: “Ne proshlo trekh nedel’ s toi pory, kak ona [Liza] v pervyi raz uvidela v okoshko molodogo cheloveka” (Less than three weeks had passed since she had first caught sight of the young man through the window). Such a statement not only brings together three and seven but also suggests that the number of the days they have been in contact before the night Germann becomes the countess’s unintentional murderer is not less than fifteen and not more than twenty-one. Taking into account the fact that during the first eleven days Liza gets two letters from Germann and does not receive a response to her last letter, it may be supposed that Germann writes no fewer than four and no more than eleven letters which means the total number of their epistles is no fewer than seven and no more than twenty-one.

[9] 6: 223. Emphasis added.

[10] 6: 224. Emphasis added.

[11] Ibid. Emphasis added.

[12] Ibid. Emphasis added.

[13] The correspondence between Germann’s choice of the door on the right and the card on the right (the queen of spades) has also been pointed out by Gary Rosenshield. See his “Choosing the Right Card,” in *Pushkin and the Genres of Madness: The Masterpieces of 1833* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 33.

[14] Mikhail Gershenzon, “Pikovaia dama,” in *Mudrost’ Pushkina* (Moscow: T-vo “Knigoizdatel’stvo pisatelei v Moskve,” 1919), 112. Gershenzon questions the verisimilitude of this description as psychologically impossible for the character’s emotional state. However, Pushkin’s remark about Germann’s cold-bloodedness and possession in the passage that follows the lengthy description already weakens Gershenzon’s point. Moreover, why should the scene necessarily be given through Germann’s eyes? Why cannot it be the creation of the author who by default sees and knows much more than his character(s)?

[15] See, for instance, Lauren Leighton, “Gematria in ‘The Queen of Spades’: A De-

cembrist Puzzle," *SEEJ* 21: 4 (1977): 455–56.

[16] Sergei Davydov, "The Ace in the 'Queen of Spades'," *Slavic Review* 58: 2 (1999): 311–12.

[18] The queen and the king encoded in m-me Lebrun and (Mr) Leroy have been already discovered by scholars. Lauren Leighton, for one, remarks on this correspondence in the following way: "[T]he king is also present in the name prominently marked out in French: *Leroy = le roi* [...] The word *dama* is to be found in the adjective *damskie*, and the commonly used French slang term for the queen of spades—*la dame brune*—is present in a metathesis of the second name marked out prominently in French: *M^e Lebrun = la(le) dame brun(e)*." See Leighton, "Gematria," 456.

[19] Nathan Rosen, "The Magic Cards in *The Queen of Spades*," *SEEJ* 19: 3 (1975): 262.

[20] *Ibid.*, 267, 273n. The pun is also mentioned by Sergei Davydov in "The Ace in the 'Queen of Spades,'" 324n. Davydov proposes that the phonetic similitude of the French *la Reine* (the queen) and *l'araignée* (the spider) contributes to Germann's confusion of the queen and the ace and supposedly testifies to Germann's scanty French.

[21] 5: 454. Emphasis added; my translation (*D.S.*).

[22] *The Queen of Spades* indeed has numerous resonances with Pushkin's earlier texts. The epigraph to the first chapter is found in Pushkin's letter to Viazemskii (1 September 1828). The epigraph to the second chapter originally belongs to Denis Davydov's correspondence with M. A. Naryshkina. In his letter to Pushkin (4 April 1834), Davydov, who discovered his own words—once mentioned to Pushkin in passing—reproduced verbatim in the epigraph, is fascinated and surprised by his friend's "diabolical memory" (*d'ïavol'skaia pamiat' ^*). The epigraph to the third chapter is in fact the epigraph to chapter 2 of the small unfinished sketch "In the Corner of a Small Square" (1829–31). Another unfinished prose work, related in its plan to "In the Corner" and known as "The Guests Were Arriving at the Dacha" (1828, 1829–30), has evident thematic reminiscences of *The Queen of Spades* as, for instance, the motif of "strong passions." Interestingly, in the text of the latter there are quite precise lexico-grammatical repetitions of the former. For example: "and thus her fate was soon sealed" (*i takim obrazom uchast' eë byla reshena*), and "That moment sealed his fate" (*Eta minuta reshila ego uchast' ^*); or "An opportunity soon presented itself" (*Sluchai skoro predstavilsia*); and "But chance saved him from any such effort" (*Sluchai izbavil ego ot khlopot*). Moreover, Pushkin's hero in "The Guests" indicates that one common feature of the Russian character is malevolence (*nedobrozhelatel'stvo*), which is echoed in the epigraph to

The Queen of Spades: “The queen of spades signifies secret ill-will” (*Pikovaia dama oznacheta tainuiu nedobrozhelatel’nost’*). Since the queen of spades is the countess and the countess was once called a *Vénus moscovite*, the Russian beauty thus takes on the queen’s ill will, a feature of any Russian, according to the text of “The Guests.” The plot of *The Queen of Spades* can be also connected with the brief sketch “Naden’ka” (1819), which opens up with a scene of gambling at the house of the Polish Iasunskii and which incidentally mentions aces and threes. In *The Queen of Spades* Iasunskii may appear as Chekalinskii, whose nationality is not specified but whose name is recognizably Polish.

[23] For the metafictional meaning of “The Coffin-Maker,” see Sergei Davydov, “Pushkin’s Merry Undertaking and ‘The Coffinmaker,’” *Slavic Review* 44: 1 (1985): 30–48.

[24] In his discussion of the tale’s conclusion, J. Thomas Shaw regards the characters whose fate is mentioned from the point of their success to become an ace (*tuz*) or a queen (*dama*). He shows that Germann fails to become an ace, while Tomskii succeeds in becoming one. In turn, Liza turns into a *dama* by marrying a *tuz*, a young man who “holds a position somewhere in the civil service and has a handsome fortune of his own.” See J. Thomas Shaw, “The ‘Conclusion’ of Pushkin’s *Queen of Spades*,” in *Studies in Russian and Polish Literature: In Honor of Waclaw Lednicki*, ed. Zbigniew Folejewski (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), 114–26.

[25] For “reading between the lines,” or rather, between words, see Davydov, “The Ace,” 314.

[26] See Lotman, “‘Pikovaia dama,’” 810–11.

[27] On the theme of madness in Pushkin’s writing, see Rosenshield, *Pushkin and the Genres of Madness*.

[28] “Budrys and his Sons” is a free translation of Mickiewicz’s poem “Trzech Budrysów.” In the same free manner and at the same time Pushkin translated Mickiewicz’s “Czaty.” This work on Polish poems could be one of the reasons why in *The Queen of Spades* all but one of the Russian characters’ last names are of Polish origin. Curiously enough, as surmised by Veresaev, prior to publication *The Queen of Spades* had a preliminary title of “The Blank Shot.” In the story’s denouement, Chekalinskiĭ’s ace “kills” Germann’s queen. Chekalinskiĭ’s name has an evident Polish root, *czekać* (to wait). In Mickiewicz’s “Czaty” the verb *czekać* and the noun *wystrzał* (shot) come in the same line: “Wyżej... w prawo... pomału, czekaj mego wystrzału” (Higher... to

the right... slowly, wait for my shot). What is even more curious, Mickiewicz's verse combines *czekać* and *wystrzał* with vertical and horizontal movements, i.e., with the fundamental points of the present essay. For the reference, see V. V. Veresaev, *Pushkin v zhizni: Sistematicallyi svod podlinnykh svidel'stv sovremennikov* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1936), 2: 185.

[29] See, for instance, the letters to Natal'ia Goncharova of late August 1830, 9 September 1830, 30 September 1830, and 8 July 1834, the letter to Princess Vera Viazemskaiia of late August 1830, the letter to Petr Pletnev of 31 August 1830, and the letter to N. I. Krivtsov of 10 February 1831.

[30] All translations of Pushkin's letters are my own. (D.S.)

[31] See Pushkin's letter to Pletnev of 24 February 1831. The first time marriage and happiness are so clearly related in the same manner occurs in Pushkin's letter to Zubkov (of 1 December 1826), where Pushkin discusses his intended proposal to S. F. Pushkina.

[32] For the statement about "passions," see Veresaev, *Pushkin v zhizni*, 1: 347; for the statement about preferences, see *ibid.*, 2: 40.

[33] Pushkin's letter to M. O. Sudenko of 15 January 1832.

[34] A rough translation of Pushkin's lines from the poem "Poet" (1827).

[35] See Shaw, "The 'Conclusion' of Pushkin's *Queen of Spades*," 119–20.

[36] In this opposition of love and money, love should be understood not as passionate feelings, but as the orderliness of married life. It is true that even though Liza and the countess represent love and money, respectively, all three of the images from Germann's dreams (the flower, the portal, and the spider) are, as Germann perceives them, linked to both women. The fact that each image is associated with both Liza and the countess underscores that each woman represents one element of Pushkin's concept of happiness, either love/marriage or money/gambling, but that the choice between love and money is relevant only for the author, and not for Germann. Germann is adamant in his intentions, but the author, who forces him to make a choice, is at once an ardent gambler at heart and a man desperately seeking happiness, or, at least, "peace and liberty" (*pokoi i volia*).

[37] Ilya Kutik, *Writing as Exorcism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 31.

[38] This interpretation of *Eugene Onegin* was first suggested by Andrei Siniavskii in his "Progulki s Pushkinym" and developed by Caryl Emerson. See Caryl Emerson, "Tatiana," in *A Plot of Her Own: The Female Protagonist in Russian Literature*, ed. **Sona Stephan Hoisington** (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 6–20.

[39] "If only could I still believe in happiness, I would look for it in the monotony of worldly habits" (Si je pouvais croire encore au bonheur, je le chercherais dans le [sic] monotonie des habitudes de la vie). For this imprecise quotation by Pushkin from Chateaubriand, see A. O. Smirnova – Rosset, "Vospominaniia o Zhukovskom i Pushkine," in *Pushkin v vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1998), 152. Cf. the original: "Si j'avais encore la folie de croire au bonheur, je le chercherais dans l'habitude."