The Ace in "The Queen of Spades"

Sergei Davydov

И постоянно в умилении
И чувств и дум владеет он,
А перед ним воображенье
Своя пестрый мечт фарабон.

—A. S. Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, 8:37

(And slowly, as his mind and feeling / descend into a languid dream, / Imagination takes up dealing / her moody Faro game to him.)

At a card table at the beginning of "Pikovaya dama" (The queen of spades), Tomskii recounts a tale about his flamboyant grandmother, an avid Faro player. In her youth the Countess once lost a large sum to the Duke of Orleans au jeu de la Reine at Versailles. When her husband refused to pay off her debt, the Countess turned to the adventurer and wonderman Count Saint-Germain for help. Instead of lending her money, the old eccentric revealed to her three secret cards with which she won back everything she had lost. Tomskii's bizarre tale provokes three responses among the Petersburg gamblers:

"Mere chance!" said one of the guests.
"A fairy tale!" remarked Germain.
"Perhaps they were powdered (doctored) cards," joined in a third.
"I don't think so," Tomskii replied in a serious tone.1

Tomskii, the narrator of this remarkable episode, rejects all three rational explanations and insists on the validity of the supernatural event. Which response is correct? Those who explain the mystery in natural, realistic terms (chance, lie, trickery), or Tomskii, who insists on the intrusion of the supernatural? Fedor Dostoyskii addressed this question in a letter to his F. Abaza:

Pushkin, who has given us almost all artistic forms, wrote "The Queen of Spades"—the pinnacle of the art of the fantastic. One believes that Germain actually saw an apparition, and precisely in accordance with his worldview, and yet, having finished the tale, one does not know how to decide: did this vision emerge from Germain's own nature [realistic solution], or is he actually one of those who have come into contact with

The first portion of this article develops the argument I made in a note "Real'noe i fantasticheskoe v 'Pikovoi dama,'" in Revue des études Slaves 59 (1987): 265–67. I would like to thank my anonymous referees for several felicitous formulations and the guest editor of this issue, Stephanie Sandler, for her inspiring suggestions.

1. A. S. Pushkin, Pibew adroshnye voskrimeni, 17 vols. (Moscow, 1957–1959), 8:1: 228–29. All Russian quotations are from this volume (hereafter PSS, 17 vols.); all translations of "The Queen of Spades" are from Alexander Pushkin, Complete Prose Fiction, trans. and ed. Paul Debecquey (Stanford, 1985; hereafter CPF). All other translations are mine.

Slavic Review 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999)
straight wins in the game of Faro, if the stakes are doubled each time. If the initial stake (lev) is one, then the first win equals lev et lev; the second, trias et lev; the third, sept et lev; and so on. Pushkin himself mentions this lucky series—senio, paroli, paroli-paroli—in the beginning of his tale. The sequence 1-3-7 would have been known to German who never plays himself but "would sit by the card table whole nights and follow with feverish trembling the different turns of the game." Though Tomashovsky’s and Nabokov’s answer offers the most likely explanation so far for the identity of the three cards, it is marred by one flaw: it fails to indicate the correct sequence in which the cards had to be played in order to win. Because the ace is in the wrong position, this theory, too, is not entirely satisfactory.

It was essential for Pushkin that a pervasive sense of the occult be sustained throughout the tale. References to the elixir of life and lapita philosophum, the secret galvanism, Joseph-Michel Montgolfier’s balloon and Friedrich Anton Mesmer’s magnetism, the obscure epigraph from the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, and the ominous quote from a Fortune-Teller are all indispensable ingredients of Pushkin’s arcane brew. Stimulated by its mystery, but impervious to the irony of Pushkin’s tale, critics have availed themselves of a number of occult tools in order to extract the three cards from various numerological motifs. One shortcoming of this approach is that the tale contains a profusion of numbers and dates (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 17, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 125, 275, 47,000, 50,000, 94,000, 500,000) from which any card can be produced. When the focus is on a smaller textual segment, such as "Vot cheto urotio, usemert moj capital" (This is what will triple, seepalmy capital), one card, usually the ace, is missing from the triplet. Even when all three cards can be obtained from a given passage, the sequence is incorrect.

The same problem that mars the numerological approach also applies to gematria, that is, the anagrammatic method of extracting the cards from the sound texture of the tale. Lauren Leighton ingeniously discovered many card logorithms in the famous passage describing the Countess’s boudoir:


(A gold sanctuary lamp burned in front of an icon-case filled with ancient icons. Armchairs with furred damask upholstery and down-cushioned softs, their gift cooing warmth, stood in melancholy symmetry along the walls, which were covered with Chinese silk. Two portraits, painted in Paris by Mme. Lebrun, hung 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, tables clocks made by the famous Leroy, little boxes, handkerchiefs, fans, and diverse other ladies' toys invented as the end of the last century, along with Mongolfier's balloon and Mesmer's magnetism.)

Но doubt the description of the Countess's remarkable boudoir, which Gerschenzon inexplicably characterized as Pushkin's "artistic blunder" (кокушечевервый промах), is one of the most mesmerizing passages of the tale, rife with numerical allusions. The only problem is that in addi-
tion to the 3, 7, and 1, this passage generates a number of other cards, such as 2, 8, K, and Q, and it, too, fails to provide the proper order in which the cards should be played. When focusing on a smaller anagrammatic sample, as a rule, one card is missing:

... фонетически ТУСКО; ушли были РУСЫ. Изрекла тихо:
"Вы в той их глазам, взвыла ТРИЯ западного сезона. [1, 3,...] на его МЕСТе он поСТУПИл бы со СВЕТом ини [7, 1, 7]..." и приложило ее СМЕРТи [7, 3,...] — 8 не хотел СВЕТ, СМЕРТИ. [7, 3,...] — В эту минуту показались ему, что мертвая несмешино взглядела на него, прищуривая ОДИНИEM глазом. Герман, поспевши подняться назад, осступился и наверняка грузился об нем. [7, 1, 1]

"... the lights shone dimly; the streets were deserted. Only occasionally did a candleburner shamble by with his scraggly nose, on the lookout for a late passenger [...]." In his friend's place he would have acted entirely differently [...]."

12. PSS, 17, vol. 8, 1-239—46, CPE, 222—23, I have capitalized only the direct allusions to cards found by Lebovich and have added to one ace and one seven. See Lebovich, "Gemmatia in 'The Queen of Spades': A Decamerion Puzzle," Slavic and East European Journal 13 (1976): 455—56.
cards. They will treble my capital, increase it sevenfold, and bring me ease and independence!"

Aleksandr Slonimskii, who was the first to comment on this passage, speaks of a "double motivation" for the first two cards: the natural (through Germany) and the supernatural (through the Counts).20 Andrei Kozjak agrees that Germany "has subconsciously determined two of the methods that the Countess would reveal to him. Here, however, the psychological theory breaks down; the third winning card—the ace—remains inexplicable.21 Nathan Rosen, who also cites this passage, concludes: "The fact that the ace is not included in the passage [. . .] suggests a flaw in this approach."22

Having more trust in Pushkin than in the Pushkinists, I would like to insist on the flawlessness of the poet's cryptographic method, for Germany's words do contain all three cards, including the missing ace. Squeezed between the 5 and 7 hides the phonetically assimilated нз [rus]:

 vot chito ustril2, Usereri moi kapital.

Pushkin's sleight of hand may be counted on to uncover the right card at the exact time. The tale's maxims, according to which "two fixed ideas can no more coexist in the moral sphere than can two bodies occupy the same space in the physical world," does not apply to the poetic time and space of Pushkin's anagrams.23

Moreover, the principle of covering up the middle card seems to be derived directly from Faro. The game is played with two decks of cards. Each punter selects a card of his choice from one deck, places it face down

on the table and makes his stake on it. (Germany chooses the top in his first game and bets 47,000 on it.) The banker then deals from a different deck, placing two cards face up to the left and to the right of the punter's card. The punter then uncover his card. If it matches the card on his left, he wins, if it matches the card on his right, he loses. If no match occurs, no one wins and the game continues. The punters may select for the next round a different card or continue to bet on their old one. The actual suit is irrelevant in Faro.

Thus, if we apply the rules of the game to the phrase "ultrio, usemeri," the first reading of the phrase places the trey and the seven face up on the page, the second, cryptic reading uncovers the elusive ace: "ultrio-Fus-emerit." Theickle ace, a latecomer to this cryptographic charade, was hidden in the blind spot, both in the middle (graphically) and at the end (perceptually).24 Most important, of course, is that this cryptographic, just like the previous chronogram, precedes the ghost's visit, and if the engineer Germain had marked his own words more shrewdly, he might have deduced the triplet and the correct sequence without the help of the ghost. Nevertheless, the fact that the 5-7-1 would actually win still remains rationally inexplicable.

There is, I believe, only one other passage prior to the ghost's visit that can produce all three cards in the proper sequence. But, since this passage is a rather complex cryptogram, involving numerology, gematria, and visual transformations, we should first examine Pushkin's method more closely. Let us recall that after the ghost reveals the secret to Germany, he begins to perceive the surrounding reality as an encrypted text displaying the most bizarre manifestations of the three cards. The following passage, which Pushkin partially decoded for the benefit of the reader, is a good illustration of this method and can serve as a key to other cryptic passages of the tale:

Тройка, семерка, туз—не выходили из его головы и шевелились в его губах. Увидев мою добрую девушку, он говорит: "Как он смешён!
Настоящая тройка черномохая". У него спрашивал: "Какой час", он отвечал: "Все притягивает семерка". Веський нуменусный луночник напомнил ему музы. Тройка, семерка, туз—преследовав его во сне, принося все возможные виды: тройка цветы перед ним в образе пышного гранд-дьюнера, семерка представлялась готическими воротами, туз огромным плауном.

24. The fact that the ace is discovered as the last card of the series is conclusive proof of the infallibility of Pushkin's 5-7-1 sequence and, by the same token, of the short-sightedness of the interpreters of this phrase. See Slonimskii, "O kompozitsii 'Pikovoi damy';" 176; Kashin, "Po povodu 'Pikovoi damy';" 33–54; V.V. Vinogradov, "Pushkin, Moscow (1941), 356; L. V. Chizhakova, "O real'nom znachении motiva trevich kart v 'Pikovoi dame';" Pushkin: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo (Moscow—Leningrad, 1960): 458; Shamin, "The 'Conclusion' of Pushkin's 'Queen of Spades';" 119; L. S. Sidakov, "Klasicheskaya tema v A. S. Pushkina (Riga, 1975), 117; S. G. Bocharov, Pushkin: Moscow (Moscow, 1975), 187; Rosen, "The Magic Cards in 'The Queen of Spades';" 255; Kozjak, "The 'Queen of Spades' in the Context of the Faust Legend," 89; L. Leighton, "Numbers and Numerology in 'The Queen of Spades';" 627, and many others.
The Ace in the "Queen of Spades"

backward to the Middle Ages of the Gothic novel, hence the day and night associations of seven relate to time. 24 Kodjak offered an even more ab-
tract link between the day and night associations of the trey, seven, and ace: "youth, passing time, old age = fertility, historical time, destruction or death." 25 If Pushkin's code is consistent, both metamorphoses of the
seven should relate to time in a more direct, visual way. Perhaps the fire-
place clock from Pushkin's Petersburg apartment, whose case is a perfect
miniature replica of a gothic arch, is the missing iconic link. The fact that
Pushkin used the passage of time to encode the three cards twice before in
his chronograms would then attest to the consistency of his method.

Although German's spectacular associations occur only after the
ghost's visit, these visual and auditory metamorphoses of the three cards
provide the key to another encoded passage that precedes the visit.
The paragraph that immediately follows the phrase "uroto, usmenit" seems to
contain in an encrypted form all three cards in the correct order:

Rассуждая таким образом, он увидел он в одной из главных улиц Пет-
ербурга. Улица была заполнена живильниками,.imread image here
которые одни за другим
капались в освещенный подъезд. Из карет томительно вытягивалась
со стороны носил молодой красавец, то гремели бо-бормота, то
пользоватъ чулок в дипломатической башмак. Шубы и платья мелькали
мимо величавого шивозера. Герман выключился.

(Lost thus in thought, he found himself on one of the main streets of Pe-
tersburg, in front of an old-style house. The street was crowded with
equipages; one carriage after another rolled up to the lighted entrance.
Now a young beauty's shaply leg, now a ratting (journal) riding boot, now
a striped stocking and a diplomat's shoe emerged from the carriages. Fur
coats and cloaks flitted by the stately doorman. Hermann stopped.)

If we employ the already familiar cryptogrammatic clues, we may arrive
at the following reading: The phrase "karety odna za drugou kati"l" ana-
grammatically announces the arrival of the cards (karety-karety). (Compare
this with the analogous formulation in the next paragraph: "[German] stavil kartu za kartu."). Next, Pushkin pulls from his deck the three cards,
disguised as the three pairs of feet stepping one after another from the ar-
riving carriages. The first card he lays forth is the trey. "Is karet pomi-
nutno vytigalos' vosminoga molodoi krasavicy." The transforma-
tion of the trey into the "shapely foot of a young beauty" is a faithful
alliterative and a visual replica of the previous cryptogram: "Uvidel mol-
dulov debušku, on govori: 'Rak ona strowia . . . Nastolichnia trok chervonnia.'" Next Pushkin sets down the seven in the guise of
"gre-
 mucha boborta;" turned upside down, the "spurred boot" resembles a
seven. There can be little doubt that a "striped stocking and a diplomat's
shoe" adorn the foot of a big shot, a tre.

This last transformation antici-
pates both of German's later associations, which link the ace to a "pot-

27. C. A. Gelboeev, "Ccho za tury v Moskve zhivot i umriatstvo" (Gos't ve ena, act 2, scene 1). There is a secondary sound association between the psasieti musholka and tuz: a chubby little fellow is also called tuz in Russian.

30. C. A. Gelboev, "Cho za tury v Moskve zhivot i umriatstvo" (Gos't ve ena, act 2, scene 1). There is a secondary sound association between the psasieti musholka and tuz: a chubby little fellow is also called tuz in Russian.
33. PSS, 17 vols., 8:1:236, and CPE, 219 (emphasis mine).
Figure 1.
First column:
Russian playing cards, ca. 1830 (courtesy of the British Museum, no. V244).

Second column:
Pushkin's drawing on the manuscript of "Ozen" (1833); the fireplace clock from Pushkin's last apartment (Licheye vechchi Puschkina [Leningrad, 1968], 35); Pushkin's drawing of Prince N. B. Jasnov on the manuscript of "K vel'mozhe" (1830).

Third column:
Rosa grandiflora; Fel'ten's gothic arch in Ekaterininskii park (frontispiece from A. Del'vig, Serennye vstvy, 1830); garden spiders, Araneus diadematus.

Fourth column:
Pushkin's drawing from the manuscript of "Ozen"; Pushkin's illustrations to "Grohovshchik" (1830) and "Andzhel" (1833).
bellowed man" and a "gigantic spider." It is perhaps of interest to note that the legs of the garden spider are conspicuously striped, a detail that further tightens the web of correspondences between the various mutations of the ace. 84 Thus, with (or without) a grain of salt, the "shapely foot," the "spurred boot," and the "diplomatic shoe," stepping out from the carriages in the winning order before Germann's very eyes, are encoded images of the three magic cards. Had Germann been as keen an admirer of Voltaire as was his author, he might have solved the mystery without causing the death of the Countess and, perhaps, he might have found solace at the "shapely feet of a young beauty" such as Lina. Instead, he becomes privy to the "repulsive mysteries" of the old lady's toilette, as he watches how her yellow dress, embroidered with silver, fell to her swollen feet. 86

The Queen

This last pair of feet brings us to the last card of this magic tale, to the bel dame of the story, the queen of spades. The old Countess Anna Fedotova, a truly extravagant relic of the eighteenth century, belongs among the most remarkable of Pushkin's creations. Her real life model was Princess Natalia Petrovna Golitsyna, whom Pushkin knew personally (see figure 2). The princess served as a lady-in-waiting to five generations of Russian emperors and was ninety-two years old at the time Pushkin wrote his tale. She was an avid gambler, and because of her failing eyesight, a deck of large-format cards was kept for her at the court. 87 Once, her grandson, S. G. Golitsyn, had lost a large sum at cards and came to his grandmother to beg for money. Instead of money, the princess told him of the three winning cards that Saint Germain had once revealed to her in Paris. The grandson bet on them and regained his loss. 88

Nabokov discovered a German subtext for the Russian "Queen of Spades" in a novel Pique-Dame: Berichte aus dem Irrenhaus in Briefen (1826). The novel is a collection of letters from an insane asylum, addressed to a

34. Those who might take my delicate leg twisting for leg pulling should find reassurance in Pushkin's words to Prince Viazemsky: "Aristocratic prejudices are suitable for you but not for me—I look at a finished poem of mine as a cobbler looks at a pair of his boots I sell for profit. The shop foreman judges my jack-boots (legpans) as not up to the standard, he rips them up and ruins the piece of goods; I am the loser. I go and complain to the district policeman." From a letter to Viazemsky, March 1829, in J. Thomas Shaw, trans. and ed., The Letters of Alexander Pushkin (Madison, 1967), 111. My incredulous arbiter may turn for additional solace to Pushkin's parable "Sabotnik" (The cobbler, 1829): "A cobbler, staring at a painting, / Has found the footwear on it flawed. / The artist promptly fixed the failing, / But this is what the cobbler thought: / 'It seems the face is slightly crooked... / Isn't that bosom rather nude?' / Annoyed, Apelles interrupted: 'Judge not, my friend, above the boot!'" (trans. Rosanne Sheld, unpublished manuscript).

35. GFF 2:25.


dead friend by a young gambler who ruined his life in a game of Faro when he bet for the tenth time on the queen of spades.38 Neither the Russian princess nor the Swedish Pique-Dame can explain the dénouement of Pushkin’s "Pikovaya dama," however. The most puzzling aspect of Pushkin’s tale is not that the ghost reveals the three winning cards to Germain, but that he actually fails to win with them. There have been numerous attempts to explain the fatal displacement of the ace by the queen in realistic terms. Some of the solutions echo the responses of the gamblers at the beginning of the tale: "Mere chance!" "A fairy tale!" "Perhaps they were powdered cards." Gershenson maintained that Germain pulled out the card of spades by "pure coincidence," and that there was hardly any similarity between the card and the Countess.39 The Soviet scholar L. V. Chkhaidze offered a crudely materialistic explanation, claiming that in a new deck of cards "the printing tint was, of course, fresh, and the cards were slightly sticking to each other. [...] Hence, everything is explained realistically; there is no ‘mysticism’ in the tale whatsoever."40 Gary Rosenfeld argued that by choosing the "wrong card" (the queen instead of the ace), Germain has actually chosen the "right card," because to "win would, of course, have been to lose; it would have been never to gamble—to live—at all."41 Vinogradov offered a more plausible explanation of the uncanny dénouement; he cast the mysterious intrusion of the queen of spades at the end of the tale as the materialization of Germain’s repressed guilt for the death of the old lady.42

This psychological interpretation becomes even more valid if one takes into account the various visual assimilations of the Countess with the card. First Germain sees the Countess framed in a portrait by Mme Lebrun, depicting her as "a beautiful young woman, with an aquiline nose [and] a rose in her powdered hair." The portrait is reminiscent of the queen of spades, shown in profile with a rose in her hand (figure 2). Observing the Countess undressing, Germain sees her as an inverted double figure framed in the mirror. In the same scene he sees her sitting in a rectangular Voltaire chair and involuntarily "swaying from left to right" as if moved


40. Chkhaidze, "O real’nom mchesteni motiv trekh kart ‘Pikovoi damy,’" 459.

41. Gary Rosenfeld, "Choosing the Right Card: Madness, Gambling, and the Imagery in Pushkin’s ‘The Queen of Spades.’" PMLA 109 (1994): 1204. I have to admit that I fail to understand this argument. If gambling was what Germain really desired, as Rosenfeld claims, why should selecting the ace and winning 367,000 rubles have prevented him from gambling again at some future point? The true gambler Chkhaidze imagined to gamble after his fabulous bet on the three cards the Countess had revealed to him.


The Ace in the "Queen of Spades"

by "the action of a hidden galvanism."43 In addition to the framing of the Countess as a card, her swayin resembles the mechanics of the Faro game, in which cards fall to the left and right of the punter’s card.44 Twice Germain glimpses the Countess framed in his window, and twice she winks at him from other rectangular frames: from her open coffin and from the fatal card when Germain is finally struck by the "extraordinary likeness."45

Having established the visual link between the Countess and the card, we may now look into the mechanics of the actual displacement of the ace by the queen. To begin with, there is no visual resemblance between the two cards that would account for Germain’s error. The contrast between the ace, with its single suit in the center, and the queen, whose figure fills almost the entire card, defies confusion. More likely, Germain’s inexplicable blunder was prepared through a chain of assimilations based on contiguity rather than similarity, whereby the unstable position of the ace plays a significant role. Throughout the tale the ace is the most elusive member of the triplet and is often absent from the series altogether. When the ace does appear, it is usually the best-camouflaged card of the three. Semantically dissimilated as ‘rag, odin, oznadzh’ (one, once) or hidden at the word boundary between the two other cards, ‘uroto, usemurit,’ the ace is the least perspicuous component in the various cryptograms. Its weaker position within the triplet makes the ace an especially vulnerable target for displacement by the queen.

If the queen of spades has its human counterpart in the Countess, then the ace could stand for her husband, the Count. After hearing Tomskii’s story about his grandparents, Germain sees the two figures on the portraits hanging next to each other in the Countess’s boudoir: “One of them showed a man about forty years old, red-faced and portly, wearing a light green coat with a star [Count—portly man—star = ace]; 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 [Countess— profile—rose = queen].” The contingency of the two portraits might have contributed to Germain’s confusion of the two cards. Furthermore, Tomskii’s unflattering account of his grandfather underscores the Count’s inferior position vis-à-vis the Countess: “My late grandfather, as far as I remember, played the part of a butler to my grandmother. He feared her like fire.” After he refused to pay off her debt, “Grandmother slapped him on the face and went to bed by herself as an indication of her displeasure.”46 The next day she pays a visit to Count Saint-Germain, who helps her in his own mysterious way. Thus, throughout the story, the ‘queen’ clearly dominates over the vulnerable ‘ace.’

Another factor contributing to the assimilation and eventual displacement of the ace by the queen is the Countess’s androgynous appearance.

43. CFP, 223.

44. Noted by Vinogradov, "Stil ‘Pikovoi damy,’” 103.

45. A number of these frames were also pointed out by Rosen.

46. CFP, 212.
Once her feminine attributes such as the "cap, decorated with roses" and the "powdered wig" are removed, Germann faces a rather masculine "gray and closely cropped head." In turn, the appearance of the Countess's real-life prototype also intensifies the gender confusion: because of her facial hair, Princess Golitsyna was called in Pushkin's circle "Princess Moustache" ("Usatia prințesă") or by the androgynous name "Princess Woldemar." Yet even this gender osmosis cannot satisfactorily explain Germann's fatal error of pulling the wrong card. After all, the S-7-1 revealed to him by the ghost were the correct three cards, and nothing should have gone awry. Germann's repressed guilt or the assimilation of the two cards and of their gender offers only an auxiliary explanation of Germann's failure to distinguish between them. When he selected "his card" (Pushkin does not say ace, but "sovi kartu"), the alleged ace must have been before Germann's very eyes. Yet, when he turned the card over, the "queen of spades Screwed up her eyes and grinned." All rational explanations again break down at this point, and we are compelled to resort to the last and most authoritative word on the issue.

The Roman Fortune-Teller informs us in the tale's epigraph that "The queen of spades signifies secret ill will." Vinogradov explains: "Thus the queen of spades, that is, the dead Countess, penetrated the series of the three "reliable cards," replaced the ace, and, having destroyed Germann's plans, has fulfilled the will of destiny, "the secret ill will" of fate."

One can hardly blame the Countess for acting as she did. After all, one dislikes being called "old witch" ("staraia ved'ma") and being threatened with a pistol, just as much as one abhors dying, even at such an advanced age. One may conclude therefore, that the Countess assumed the form of the queen of spades and, acting as befits a lady of her suit, spied Germann, svarala Germannuna v pleku, as the Russian expression goes.

This simple, if fantastic, explanation has one fundamental flaw, however. At one point Pushkin confides to the reader that "the Countess had by no means a bad heart." Trusting Pushkin, I would like to suggest that Germann was ruined not because of the Countess's ill will but rather in spite of her goodwill. During her nocturnal visit, the Countess made it clear that she came to Germann against her will ("zi prishka k tebe protiv svoei voli"). She also reveals the three cards to him against her will: "mne veleno ispolnit' tovu pros'bu." In both cases the Countess seems to act on behalf of some other involved party. But then comes the unexpected move: "I will forgive you my death, under the condition that you marry my ward, Lizaveta Ivanovna."

Forgiveness and compassion are virtues not traditionally associated with the vengeful ghosts of gothic lore, yet the Countess forgives Germann of her own accord, because of her good heart. One can argue that her sudden, albeit posthumous concern for Liza's well-being is an attempt to atone for the ill-treatment of her poor ward, and in establishing this last condition, the Countess is arranging Liza's future. If Germann were to marry Liza, his fabulous win would come into play of her dowry and would also handsomely compensate for Liza's salary which, as Pushkin tells us, "was never paid in full." Thus, if Pushkin's statement about the Countess's heart can be trusted, and if her concern for Liza's well-being is genuine, it is highly unlikely that the Countess would double-cross Germann, for the ruin of Liza's benefactor could not be in her interest.

Yet the Countess may have concluded from his behavior that he had no intention of marrying her ward. Germann's predicament would have been further exacerbated if Liza's chastity had been compromised during that night she spent, "bare-armed and open-chested," alone with her "midnight bridegroom." Because Germann has disregarded an important part of the contract with the dead Countess—for both love and magic are contracts—the "Venus moscovite" intercedes and in the guise of the queen of spades ruins the knife.

But what if Germann had intended to marry Liza? In that case, his ruin must have been orchestrated by forces beyond the Countess's control. There remains only one character capable of this meddling. Germann was ruined through the diabolical intervention of the Wandering Jew, the discoverer of the elixir of life and of the philosopher's stone, the alchemist, spy, and founder of Freemasonry, Count Saint-Germain himself. The notorious master of the three cards, he prevents Germann from winning the "superfluous" and robs him even of the "necessary." Germann's 47,000 rubles, the patrimony left to him by his thrifty German father, comes to the banker Chekalinski, while Germann ends up in the insane asylum.

Diana Burgan offered the most intriguing argument for the necessity of this seemingly excessive punishment. Causing the old lady's death is only the most overt of Germann's transgressions. During his visit to the Countess, Germann inadvertently stumbles upon an arcane mystery that involves a "cabalistic, erotic, familial, and possibly incestuous" relationship among three generations of gamblers and lovers: Saint-Germain, the Countess, and Chaplikis. It was Gerbzenho who in 1919 deviously suggested that Saint-Germain may have helped the destitute "Venus moscovite" in exchange for a small "romantic favor." We know from Tomski's tale that "to this day grandmother loves him with a passion and gets cross when she sees him with other women."

47. See Nikolai Osipovich Lerner, Pensa Pushkina, 2 ed. (Moscow, 1925), 47; and Shakh, trans. and ed., The Letters, 502, 394. The confusion of the ace with the queen of the house could also have been facilitated by Germann's possible misunderstanding of the French phrase from Tomski's tale: "au jeu de la Reine" (the queen's game—fem.,), which Germann might have associated with an ace—"jamais.

48. This pun was mentioned by Rosen, "The Magic Cards in "The Queen of Spades," 275s. The German engineer's French was probably not as good as that of his aristocratic friends.

49. Vinogradov, "Stit' "Pokorai damy.""

50. Ibid., 217.

51. "Between 3:00 A.M. when Germann enters Lina's room and the moment he kisses her good-bye in the morning, another winter night, long and dark enough to accommodate a Dantesque pause, pauses imperceptibly. We learn from the tale's epilogue that Liza has been married and is bringing up a poor relative, perhaps her own illegitimate daughter by Germann. "Suggested by Neil Cornwall, Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades," Critical Studies in Russian Literature (London, 1991), 62–65.


53. Gerbzenho, Mnebrat' Pushkina, 98.
if she hears disrespectful talk about him."54 Burgin suggested that Chaplitski, to whom the Countess once revealed the three cards, might be their natural son. (It is rumored that Saint-Germain himself was the natural son of the Queen of Spain.) But, in order to qualify for Saint-Germain's inheritance, Chaplitski had to become the Countess's lover. Gershenzon was the first to intimate that the Countess passed down the secret to the distressed young gambler for his "leniency toward her fading charms."55 To complete this arcane genealogy, J. Thomas Shaw added to it the banker Chekalinski who acts as "the card-playing agent of fate." A man of about sixty, Chekalinski is of "the right age to be the 'son' of the Countess and Chaplitski.56 It seems that Saint-Germain's incestuous clan, spanning four generations of gamblers and lovers, is governed by strict laws of pronom geniture (and paranomastia) according to which Chaplitski and Chekalinski, rather than German, are the legitimate heirs. Unlike the true members of Saint-Germain's cabal, German was averse to risk and to love, which further disqualifies him from the patrimony. Thus, it is only befitting that the banker Chekalinski should dispose the pretender.

German, of course, is unaware of this cabal, yet on several occasions he comes dangerously close to its taboo-ridden scenario. At one point he considers becoming a lover of the old Countess, mentions to her some "covenant with the devil," and is willing to take her "terrible sin" upon his soul. Prying from the Countess her secret, German inadvertently evokes the "cry of a new-born son" and beseeches her by appealing to the "feelings of a wife, mistress, mother." At first the Countess dismisses the whole affair as a joke: "Eto byla shukta." But when German mentions Chaplitski's name, she becomes "visibly uneasy" and, for the first time, shows a "profound stirring of her heart" (chertva de zhurnali sfera dochennih dushes).57 The amorous innuendoingers even after her death. As German leaves the house by the secret staircase, he imagines some eighteenth-century scene, "with hair combed à laissé royal, pressing his three-cornered hat to his heart."58 He is at the Countess's boudoir. Was it the apparition of Chaplitski, or of Saint-Germain himself, returning to claim the Countess's soul? Such musting would not be far off the historical mark: In 1762, when the Countess was in her thirties, Saint-Germain actually visited Peters burg and was involved in the conspiracy that ousted Peter III and brought Catherine II to the throne. While in Russia, Saint-Germain stayed at the house of Princess Maria Golitsyna, a relative of Pushkin's prototype for the Countess.59 The amorous innuendo transpires also through the liturgical words of the bishop's funeral sermon: "The angel of death found her [ . . . ] waiting for the midnight bridegroom."60 And toward the end of the service German himself becomes implicated in the most risqué aspect of the cabal. A close relative of the deceased misidentifies him as the Countess's "illegitimate son." Thus, because German inadvertently disturbed the privacy of Saint-Germain's clan and came within a hairsbreadth of its secret, the patriarch sends the ghost of his mistress to punish the intruder.

For those who dislike this magic scenario and would prefer to remain on this side of the supernatural, there is a simpler explanation for German's ruin. Pushkin punishes German out of Masonic loyalty to Count Saint-Germain—both men were members of the Ovid Lodge in Odessa. Simultaneously, in a gesture of chivalry, Pushkin intercedes on behalf of the two slighted ladies. By chastising German for his callousness, Pushkin fulfills the old lady's last wish better than she had ever envisioned: he marries off her heartbroken and dowryless ward to the wealthy son of the Countess's former steward. With this offstage marriage, the matchmaker Pushkin transfers a substantial part of the Countess's fortune to poor Liza, for it was known that the "numerous domestics [ . . . ] did what they pleased, robbing the moribund old woman left, right, and center."61

Having meted out justice, Pushkin also settles his own poetic scores with German, who scoffed at Tomski's story, calling it a "fairy tale." What the German engineer berated as Dichtung, Pushkin stages as pure Wahrheit. The author surrounds his hero (and the reader) with uncanny events, teases him with tantalizing anagrams, chronograms, and cryptograms that the calculating engineer repeatedly fails to crack, and when he also fails to respond to the call of Liza's heart, Pushkin spits German with the fatal card, thus completing his path from the baldman to bedlam.

Dostoerovski called "The Queen of Spades" "the pinnacle of the art of the fantastic."62 Its concealed galvanism and the seamless weaving of the fantastic with the realistic invites yet frustrates logical decoding, leaving reader and critic alike to perpetually sway between natural and supernatural explanations for the inexplicable. Pushkin's fantastic tale is a positive proof of Lord Byron's claim that "the Artist who has rendered the 'game of cards poetical' is by far greater" than one who describes a "Walk in a forest" badly.63 By the same token, Pushkin also fulfills Baron Brambeus's prophecy that "The Queen of Spades" will be read with the "same pleasure by a Countess and merchant alike."64 We can only guess what Anna Fedorovna thought of it.

"Pam!" called the Countess from behind the screen. "Send me a new novel, will you, but please not the kind they write nowadays."

"What do you mean, grand'mamaw?"

"I mean a novel in which the hero does not strangle either his mother or his father [. . .]"

"There are no such novels these days. Would you perhaps like some Russian ones?"

"You don't mean to say there are Russian novels? . . . Send some to me, my dear, send some by all means!"

65. CPF, 215.