“The Queen of Spades” may well be the most widely read work by Pushkin in the English-speaking world. It has spurred an exceptionally wide range of criticism: as Neil Cornwell (himself the editor of a recent critical study of the work) has said, critics have “subjected [it] ... to seemingly endless analysis.”¹ Caryl Emerson classifies these endless analyses into four main groups: a) “socio-literary studies that focus on the mechanics and ideology behind gambling”; b) “psychological-generational treatments”; c) “linguistic and syntactic studies”; d) “numerological approaches.”² And to these one must also add a number of studies devoted to comparisons of the story with any one of a variety of contemporary western European literary texts.³ In the essay that follows, I will not propose a radical change in approach to “The Queen of Spades.” Rather, I would like to revisit some points that have been made by scholars who have focused on analysis types (a) and (b), while paying close attention to one line in Pushkin’s text whose importance has not, in my view, been sufficiently recognized.

To begin, let us ask one more time: what is this story really about? As a way into the question, I propose starting almost from the end, paying close heed to a line that at first glance seems to be something of a throwaway. On his third trip to the gaming table, on the fateful night on which he loses his fortune and his mind, Hermann stakes his entire fortune on the final magic card he received from the old countess’s spirit: the ace.

¹ Pushkin’s The Queen of Spades, (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), v.
won again, reveals his own card. To his horror he sees that he has in fact turned up not the ace but the queen of spades.

Suddenly it seemed to him that the queen of spades had screwed up her eyes and grinned. An extraordinary likeness struck him... “The old woman!” he cried out in terror. Chekalinskii gathered in the bank notes lost by Hermann. The young man stood by the table motionless. When at last he left the table, the whole room burst into loud talk. “Splendid punting!” the players kept saying.5

В эту минуту ему показалось, что пиковая дама прищурилась и усмехнулась. Необыкновенное сходство поразило его... Старуха!—закричал он в ужасе. Чекалинский потянул к себе проигранные билеты. Германн стоял неподвижно. Когда отошел он от стола, поднялся шумный говор.—Славно спонтировал!—говорили игроки. (237)

It is that last line, “splendid punting,” that I want to keep at the center of attention.6 Why should the other players say this? And what implications does it have for our understanding of the story?

Now let us turn back to the beginning of “The Queen of Spades.” We recall that Hermann is introduced at a card party taking place in the house of Narumov, an officer in the Horse Guards. Hermann, a German and a military engineer by profession, sits and watches his acquaintances play. There is little reason to speculate as to why he himself does not join the young officers in their game. When the others kid him about his unwillingness to take part, he replies that he “is not in a position to sacrifice the necessary in the hope of gaining the superfluous” (211) [Я не в состоянии жертвовать необходимым в надежде приобрести излишнее, 210]. At the same time Tomskii simply ascribes the refusal to Hermann’s “thriftiness” (“Germann raschetliv”).

Let us unpack these purported motivations. The first thing to be noted is that although most readers probably think of Hermann as poor,

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4 For a succinct description of the rules of the game Hermann is playing (faro), see note 3 to Paul Debreczeny’s translation of this work in Alexander Pushkin, Complete Prose Fiction (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 516–17.

5 “The Queen of Spades,” trans. Debreczeny, 232; Russian original from A.S. Pushkin, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v desiaty tomakh (Leningrad: Nauka, 1968), 6, 237. Further quotations from the story will be noted in the main text with reference to page numbers in these editions.

6 When this paper was given as an oral presentation, there was some confusion among the audience as to whom this line could in principle refer. According to the terminology of the card game, Chekalinskii is the “bankomet” or dealer and Hermann is the “ponter” or punter. Therefore, the line can refer only to him.
this is not really the case. He actually has inherited a fair amount of money—at least 47,000 rubles—for that is what he bets on the first night, and Pushkin gives the reader no reason to suspect that the money he stakes was not all his own.\footnote{This fact is pointed out in Andrei Anikin, “Money in Alexander Pushkin’s ‘The Queen of Spades,’” in \textit{Money. Lure, Lore, and Literature}, ed. John Louis DeGaetani (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 107.}

How much money was 47,000 rubles at this time? By way of comparison from the Russian tradition, the “enormous” sum of money that Nikolai Rostov loses to Dolokhov in \textit{War and Peace} is 43,000 rubles.\footnote{To be sure, the game with Dolokhov takes place some twenty years earlier, but inflation in the nineteenth century was negligible, so the comparison is reasonable.} That is to say, Hermann almost certainly has a larger sum at his disposal than does any of the apparently richer young officers who are actually gambling at Narumov’s.\footnote{Of course, many of them could have expected eventual inheritances larger than this amount. But, as we know well from Russian literature, such inheritances often came with serious encumbrances.} Translated into contemporary English equivalents, Hermann’s capital was equivalent to some 2150 British pounds.\footnote{“Mezhdunarodnoe polozhenie rublia bylo otnositel’no stabil’nym. Veksel’ny kurs v 1825–28 gg. sostavlia 10 pensov na London i 9 shillerov na Gamburg. V 1829 g. on povysil’sia i po 1838 vkluchitel’no ... v srednem derzhalsia na urovne 53–54 censa (na Amsterdam), 11 pensov (na London)...” (emphasis mine). \textit{Russkii rubl’: Dva veka istorii: XIX–XX vv.}, ed. N. P. Zimarina (Moscow: Progress, 1994), 39.} At the standard 5% per annum this sum would thus have provided a steady income of some 107 pounds per year. In England at about this time “the first income to merit having a servant attached is 100 pounds per annum.”\footnote{The Jane Austen Companion, ed. J. David Grey (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 81.} In Russia, however, prices were undoubtedly significantly lower, so there is little doubt that Hermann could have afforded to retire from the military and live respectably, although by no means grandly, on his capital. But, as readers of the story know, according to Hermann’s own view as he states it to himself later in the story, the sum of 47,000 is not sufficient: he feels the need to triple or septuple his capital in order to achieve “ease and independence” (\textit{pokoi i nezavisimost’}). This desire for money and what money can bring aligns him with other Pushkinian heroes, particularly the son in “The Miserly Knight.”

But something more significant than money is at stake here. To see what it is we need to ask not what Hermann thinks he wants, but what he actually desires. For Hermann’s deeper desires cannot be fulfilled by money, no matter what the quantity. Specifically, Hermann does not so much want money as he wants to be part of the society represented first and foremost by Tomskii’s grandmother, a society whose values are still
paramount for the Hussars with whom he spends his time. This is the ancien régime French-inflected aristocratic high society of the Catherinean age.

One of the distinguishing features of this society in Russia was, as is well known, the accidental nature of fortunes. Catherine was able and willing simply to hand out enormous properties to her favorites, who became fabulously wealthy overnight. As Iurii Lotman points out in his famous article “‘The Queen of Spades’ and the Themes of Cards and Card Playing in Russian Literature at the Beginning of the 19th Century”: “gigantic fortunes were created in an instant, depending on leaps of fortune in spheres far distant from economics. According to Kaster, the Orlovs received 17 million rubles from the Empress, Vasil’chikov 1.1 million, Potemkin 50 million ... in all, according to his statistics, during the reign of Catherine II various favorites received 92 million 500 thousand rubles.” At the same time, many traditional aristocratic families (such as Pushkin’s own) found their economic position increasingly unviable by the end of her reign. The results were predictable—money became ever less closely connected to status (at least from the point of view of the old bluebloods). Rather, the ability to ignore the subject entirely or a cavalier willingness to treat money as worthless, to throw it away, becomes a sign of true aristocratic behavior.

Although by the early 1830s, when Pushkin’s story is set, this society no longer really existed, its memory lived on, both in the physical presence of its relics (the old countess is one of them), and to a certain extent among those groups who actively or passively refused to accept the rising commercialization of Russian society—hussars like Tomskii, for example. Hermann, of course, can never be fully accepted into their society, not because he doesn’t have enough money, but rather because he is unable to understand, much less fulfill, their codes of behavior. Everything in his nature and his background, from his engineering profession to his German blood, and including his desire to grow his already large capital

12 This unconscious desire was already noted by Gary Rosenshield in his article “Freud, Lacan, and Romantic Psychoanalysis: Three Psychoanalytic Approaches to Madness in Pushkin’s ‘The Queen of Spades,’” Slavic and East European Journal 40: 1, 1996, 1–26. As it happens, I am not particularly interested in the central issue that concerns Rosenshield—to wit, how can we understand why Hermann goes mad?—but at one point, in an aside, Rosenshield makes an insightful comment regarding Hermann’s unconscious motivations for gambling. “The secret of this other desire resides not in the cards themselves—they are, despite Germann’s wishes, signifiers not signifieds—but in the relationships they call into play in Tomskii’s tale. Germann secretly yearns not for a specific person, but for an entire age called up by the tale,” 13.

by “calculation, moderation, and industry,” are strikes against him in a world that still lives and dies by ancien regime codes relating to money.

One can see the yawning gulf in the attitude toward money separating Hermann from the other characters precisely in the contrast between him and Chekalinskii. Pushkin introduces the latter as follows:

Wealthy gamblers formed a group in Moscow under the deanship of the famous Chekalinskii, who had spent all his life at the card table and had at one time made millions, even though he had been winning promissory notes while losing ready cash. His many years of experience had earned him the trust of his fellow gamblers; his open door, excellent cook, cordiality and cheerfulness had won him universal admiration. (230–31)

By no means does the fact that Chekalinskii is rich (he may well no longer be, even if he can afford to keep an excellent cook supplied with victuals) cause him to be admired. Rather, what is crucial is that he runs a fair game, and that he possesses the proper personal qualities, including, it should be pointed out, a willingness to lose money as well as to win it.

By now, then, it should be clear where the present analysis is heading. On the first two, winning, nights of play, Hermann succeeds in quadrupling his capital, but he fails miserably if his real (unconscious but real nevertheless) goal is to gain respect. As long as he watched the games of chance but did not play, Hermann was at least tolerated by the others. When he begins to play, however, he commits one gaffe after another. The other gamblers play for long periods and for low stakes, a practice that makes it clear that for them being in the game, rather than winning or losing money, is the object. Now that he thinks he possesses infallible knowledge, Hermann is willing to play, but he refuses to follow the house norms. Pushkin makes this transparent in the story through Chekalinskii’s response to Hermann’s 47,000-ruble stake on the first night:

“Allow me to remark,” said Chekalinskii, with his immutable smile, “that your game is bold. So far no one here has placed more than two hundred and seventy five on a simple.” (231)
Chekalinskii is too well bred to refuse Hermann’s bet, of course, but he hints pretty clearly that such a bet is socially unacceptable. The obtuse Hermann ignores him. The bet itself is bad enough, but Hermann extends his social faux pas further after he wins. For instead of continuing to play—again, that would be the norm—he immediately pockets his winnings and departs. This, notes Pushkin, causes “murmurs” (shepot) among the other players, and they are certainly not murmurs of approval. Hermann has now won an enormous sum of money, but he is no closer to gaining what he wants. On the second night, of course, Hermann commits the exact same set of etiquette mistakes.

It is only when he loses everything on the final night that he achieves what was his unconscious aim. The “splendid punting” remark from the observers, therefore, is the linguistic sign that they have been able to recognize Hermann as one of their own. In risking and losing everything he has overcome all his handicaps, his past, and his own innate tendencies, and has become part of the world he had always wanted to join. The delicious irony of the story, however (and this sort of irony is typically Pushkinian), is that he is incapable of recognizing this fact. His unconscious desire clashes too forcefully with what he thinks he wants, and the result is insanity. For as Pushkin puts it earlier: “Two fixed ideas can no more coexist in the moral sphere than can two bodies occupy the same space in the physical world” (230) [Две неподвижные идеи не могут вместе существовать в нравственной природе, так же, как два тела не могут в физическом мире занимать одно и то же место] (234).

Why should Pushkin have chosen to punish his protagonist so cruelly? On the one hand, a somewhat mocking authorial attitude toward his main characters is fairly common in Pushkin’s work. Indeed, Pushkin very commonly builds the ironic twist at the end of his works on a character’s realization of his desires coupled either with his or her failure to rec-

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14 Ian Helfant argues that a high stakes bet such as this was not a faux pas but rather the quintessence of exceptional aristocratic gambling performance (see “Pushkin’s Ironic Performances as a Gambler,” Slavic Review 58: 2 (Summer, 1999), 371–92. This may well be true, but Chekalinskii’s response to Hermann’s bet is an indication that in this particular circle a bet of this size was interpreted as problematic.

15 It is interesting to note that earlier in the story, before receiving the secret of the cards, Hermann dreams about playing successfully, but essentially in the same manner as the other gamblers: “he dreamed of cards, a green table, heaps of bank notes, and piles of gold coins. He played one card after another, bent the corners resolutely, and kept winning, raking in the gold and stuffing the bank notes into his pockets” (219).
Rereading the “Queen of Spades”

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ognize that this is the case or his or her inability to reap the rewards that the fulfillment of desire should provide.\(^{16}\) Take, for example, Tat’iana’s tragically ironic situation at the end of Onegin. She has finally achieved what she wanted all along—Onegin is at her feet. And yet, despite her obvious dislike of her present situation and her preference for what he could even now potentially provide, she cannot take advantage of the fulfillment of her desires (“Ia drugomu otdana”).

The ironic twist at the end of “The Queen of Spades” is even more similar to that of “The Shot.” Here, Silvio, like Hermann, is the one person who does not belong fully to the society of officers in which he finds himself. From his own narrative, we learn that in his earlier life Silvio had been accepted by his Hussar comrades, but had been supplanted by the appearance in their midst of a true aristocrat, the Count B. Silvio is apparently convinced that his only satisfaction in life would come were he able to take his revenge on the Count (he risks losing his reputation by refusing a duel with another man solely in order to preserve himself for this future revenge). But, when he has the opportunity to take his shot, he twice cannot bring himself to do so, for although shooting the Count might give him revenge, it could never give him what he really wants—the Count’s carefree aristocratic insouciance. Thus, in its employment of a reasonably straightforward authorial irony towards the central character, “The Queen of Spades” is quite a typical Pushkin story.\(^{17}\)

\(^{16}\) A number of recent studies of Pushkin have emphasized the importance of Romantic irony; see, for example, Monika Greenleaf, Pushkin and Romantic Fashion (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 205–86, and Maxim Shrayer, “Rethinking Romantic Irony: Puškin, Byron, Schlegel and ‘The Queen of Spades’,” Slavic and East European Journal, 36: 4 (1992), 397–414. While there is nothing at all wrong with such an emphasis per se, it does tend to shift attention away from Pushkin’s employment of more straightforward types of irony.

\(^{17}\) The story also represents a reprise of a formula that Roman Jakobson claimed to be typical for a number of Pushkin’s later poetic works (“The Golden Cockerel,” “The Stone Guest” and “The Bronze Horseman”) in his famous article “Pushkin and his Sculptural Myth,” trans. John Burbank (The Hague: Mouton, 1975). Jakobson notes that in these works “the title indicates not a living person but a statue, a plastic representation, and in each case an epithet defines the material of which the statue is made.” In this story the “Queen” referred to in the title is not a three-dimensional statue. At the same time she is not a living person, but rather a two-dimensional artistic representation. And as is the case with the works that Jakobson considers, the epithet that describes her (“of spades”) describes the material of which she is made as strongly as do the adjectives golden, stone, or bronze. Furthermore, insofar as the Queen of Spades playing card and the Old Countess are closely identified in the story, it is worth noting that the Countess in certain respects resembles a statue more than she does a living person. The grotesque scene in which Hermann watches her undress is sufficient to emphasize that in her living incarnation she is not entirely real. And after her death, when Hermann passes back through her boudoir after his tryst with Liza, Pushkin specifically describes the Old Countess as a statue—“The dead old woman sat petrified, profound tran-
At the same time, there is a very specific set of reasons for Pushkin’s rather nasty treatment of his main character in the story. Hermann, in his predilections and concerns, is a representative of the rising class in Russian society, a class regarding which Pushkin had an obsessive and ambivalent attitude. As William Mills Todd, III has shown so convincingly, the late 1820s and early 1830s were precisely a time during which various views of authorship and the writer were coming into conflict and synthesis. In particular, the question of what an individual’s (and a writer’s—the two were never really separate for Pushkin) attitude toward money should be was of central importance. As a poem like “Conversation between a Bookseller and a Poet” (“Razgovor knigoprodavca i poeta,” 1824) reveals, Pushkin was already thinking about this issue in the early 1820s. At that time, insofar as his poetic persona agrees with the bookseller’s maxim that “you can’t sell inspiration, but you can sell a manuscript,” Pushkin seems to be able to recognize and live with the new realities. But, as a marked member of the generation of “literary aristocrats” who were fighting a losing rear-guard action against the commercialization and bourgeoisification (or Germannification) of Russian literature and society in general, Pushkin never fully accepted the new realities. The pride Pushkin had in his aristocratic background, and his equal distaste of parvenue aristocrats and those who had risen through mere talent is manifest in the bitterly ironic stanzas of “My Genealogy” (Moia rodoslovnaia): “My granddad never dealt in crepes, / Nor polished up the emperor’s shoes. / He didn’t leap to nobility from the provinces / Nor was he an escaped soldier...” [Не торговал мой дед блинами, / Не ваксил царских сапогов, / Не пел с придворным дьячком, / В князья не прыгал из хохлов, / И не был беглым он солдатом...]]. In the realm of literature we see similar sentiments towards the need to make money and the possibility of rising through so doing expressed in the obvious dismay with which Pushkin’s alter ego Charskii regards the Italian improviser’s attitude to money in Egyptian Nights (Egipetskie nochi, 1835).

That is to say, what on the surface might seem to be monetary distinctions between characters in Pushkin’s work generally turn out on closer examination to be class distinctions. That Pushkin’s story is based on a conflict between generations who represent different classes in Russian society was already recognized more than 40 years ago by

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Grigorii Gukovskii. However, driven presumably by the imperative to show that Pushkin and therefore the story’s hero were “progressive” figures, as well as his desire that each figure neatly “typify” a certain aspect of the society of Pushkin’s day, Gukovskii completely misinterprets Hermann’s attitude to the ancien régime society. In Gukovskii’s reading, Hermann is a rebel against that society who “raises a revolt against the aristocratic world, and that revolt is an individualistic one, as befits a rebellious bourgeois” (p. 345). In fact, Pushkin’s protagonist is much more psychologically complex than Gukovskii thought. As we have seen, the irony of the story lies precisely in the fact that Hermann is not rebelling against the society of the Tomskiis but is trying to join it. Rather than wishing to supplant, rebel against or otherwise smash the aristocrats, Hermann’s real desire is to be fully accepted by them.

In this reading, then, Hermann’s paradox (and the ironic paradox of the story as a whole) is that although he thinks he wants money, what he really desires is to be accepted by a society in which what counts is not so much having money as having the proper attitude toward it. Hermann, in short, becomes a victim of false consciousness. In a sense, then, we can see this conclusion precisely as Pushkin’s rather nasty revenge against the class embodied by Hermann. Without in any way saying so overtly, Pushkin shows that whatever such people may think they want, and whatever they have achieved, their true desire is to have what he has. And that desire cannot be fulfilled, at least not by the methods they use.

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19 See his Pushkin i problemy realisticheskogo stilia (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo. khud. liter., 1957), 340–74.
HERE was a card party at the rooms of Narumov of the Horse Guards. The long winter night passed away imperceptibly, and it was five o'clock in the morning before the company sat down to supper. Those who had won, ate with a good appetite; the others sat staring absently at their empty plates. When the champagne appeared, however, the conversation became more animated, and all took a part in it. "And how did you fare, Surin?" asked the host.

Queen of Spades. After experiencing tragedies that lead her to a checkered life, Natasha has decided to go on the path to redemption. There is promise with her membership at Reverend Jamison's church. When discoveries are accidentally made, does Natasha stay mum about what she's learned or does she place a taint on religion? (short story)

Disclaimer: Deals with adult situations.

Short Story (approx. Queen of Spades. The bond between Mr. Bradley and granddaughter is put to the test when it coincides with his dedication to share the bounty of his garden with others in the neighborhood. When the deliveries start to dwindle down, how does the neighborhood react?

"Your queen is killed," remarked Tchekalinsky quietly. Herman trembled; looking down, he saw, not the ace he had selected, but the queen of spades. He could scarcely believe his eyes. It seemed impossible that he could have made such a mistake. As he stared at the card it seemed to him that the queen winked one eye at him mockingly. "The old woman!" he exclaimed involuntarily. The croupier raked in the money while he looked on in stupid terror.