

In discussing question b) in Pushkin's "Пиковая дама", one is likely to consider the text's usage of parody as subversive performance. While Pushkin parodies a multitude of different styles (gothic literature, detective novels, etc.), the most poignant example of inter-art discourse is in his imitation of a love story. The bizarre yet central relationship between Hermann and the Countess takes on the near effect of a romantic affair in which she serves as an ironic muse and he as a mock lover. Early on in the story the reader is informed that in the days of her Parisian youth the Countess was known as "la Vénus moscovite", from which point onwards Hermann becomes possessed by the desire to know her winning secret. Ultimately it is money Hermann is after, yet there appears to be a transference of desire for wealth onto the Countess herself, rendering her the perfect object of obsession. Evidently this desire is not erotic; it only exhibits all the expected hallmarks of a romantic fixation which Pushkin is indeed parodying. The age gap (the Countess is said to be eighty) in addition to her frequently being assigned the descriptor "безжизненная" while not yet dead further contributes to the ironic distance between the two, the impossibility of which is threatened by their dual nocturnal visits to each other's bedrooms.

Hermann is the first to pervert his desire for the Countess's secret towards the Countess herself, suggesting that he would go so far as to become her lover in order to obtain knowledge of the three cards: "Что, если, — думал он на другой день вечером, бродя по Петербургу, — что, если старая графиня откроет мне свою тайну! — или назначит мне эти три верные карты! Почему ж не попробовать своего счастья?..

Представиться ей, подбиться в ее милость, — пожалуй, сделаться ее любовником.¹”

Perhaps it is only the appearance of Lizaveta at the window which prevents Hermann from pursuing the Countess in this regard; he is then able to confront Lizaveta as the easily manipulatable physical means to his end. In fact, Hermann’s relentless false pursuit of Lizaveta could be seen as a shadow of his true desire to possess the Countess and by extension her secret, as Lizaveta is the Countess’s ward, the two live in the same home, and they are often depicted as similarly posed in front of window and mirror (respectively).

Having successfully gained access to the interior of the Countess’s house under the pretense of a rendezvous with Lizaveta, Hermann hides in the former’s bedroom and watches her undress: “Графиня стала раздеваться перед зеркалом. Германн был свидетелем отвратительных тайнств ее туалета”. Eventually revealing himself to the Countess, and further his purpose for being in her bedroom, he pleads for her to divulge the card secret. When she claims it was but a joke, he becomes increasingly hostile: “Старая ведьма! — сказал он, стиснув зубы, — так я ж заставлю тебя отвечать...С этим словом он вынул из кармана пистолет. При виде пистолета графиня во второй раз оказала сильное чувство,”. Here Hermann’s declaration that he will force the Countess to confess, combined with the potential phallic symbolism of the brandished pistol, transforms this scene to become a parody of rape. The “rape”, so to speak, of the Countess fails for she dies before Hermann is able to extract her secret. This failure to successfully effectuate their relationship is further satirized and undermined by

¹ Pushkin, Aleksandr S, Gillon R. Aitken, and Aleksandr S. Pushkin. *The Queen of Spades*. London: Folio Society, 1970. Print.

Hermann's subsequent confession to Lizaveta that indeed "Я не хотел ее смерти — пистолет мой не заряжен," thus perhaps insinuating his inability to perform sexually in the role of the mock lover to both Countess and Ward.

The mimicry of sex, or rather blundered sex, echoing throughout their encounter is again reiterated by Hermann as he flees the scene: "Германн стал сходить по темной лестнице, волнуемый странными чувствованиями. По этой самой лестнице, думал он, может быть, лет шестьдесят назад, в эту самую спальню, в такой же час, в шитом кафтане, причесанный à l'oiseau royal, прижимая к сердцу треугольную свою шляпу, прокрадывался молодой счастливец, давно уже истлевший в могиле, а сердце престарелой его любовницы сегодня перестало биться..." The notion that Hermann is "волнуемый странными чувствованиями" in thinking that he is treading the same path as some former lover of the Countess points to his excitement at the idea of the Countess, and thus all her secrets, as readily accessible. Hermann's apparent desire to possess the Countess is clearly rooted in his overwhelming desire to possess the knowledge of the three winning cards; it is only in the grips of his obsession that Hermann begins to conflate the two separate objects of desire (the Countess and her secret) as an enmeshed, intractable one. This is highly ridiculous, for as previously mentioned the Countess is introduced as eighty years old and is, by this point in the story, very much dead- none of which dissuades Hermann from remarking what a "молодой счастливчик" her lover must have been. The comicality in Hermann's remark is inherent given that he is the very antithesis to such a young man: he is more parts murderer than lover, more fool than hero.

Hermann persists in playing the role of passion-wrecked suitor even after all logical hopes of attaining the secret die along with the Countess, going so far as to attend her funeral and kneel before her body. Here Pushkin entangles an already complex irony by having a guest suggest at Hermann's relationship with the Countess: "худощавый камергер, близкий родственник покойницы, шепнул на ухо стоящему подле него англичанину, что молодой офицер ее побочный сын, на что англичанин отвечал холодно: Oh?", thus calling into question their closeness and further mocking the notion that Hermann ever pondered seducing her. The appearance of the Countess, or rather, the ghost of the Countess, in Hermann's bedroom that very evening serves to imitate that of a love scene. Only now the young beauty is transformed to a post-mortem Countess, who ultimately relents and imparts the secret upon Hermann, though not without informing him that, "Я пришла к тебе против своей воли, ". If she did come on her own volition, then what was it but Hermann's imagination that conjured her to visit his bedroom (and in her slippers)? If this is to be held true, then the Countess's admission that "Прощаю тебе мою смерть, с тем, чтоб ты женился на моей воспитаннице Лизавете Ивановне..." succeeds in suggesting Hermann still harbors subconscious desires to infiltrate the Countess's circle, so much so that they find expression in the voice of the ghost demanding he marry Lizaveta (arguably her closest counterpart and double).

Pushkin's parody of a romantic infatuation illustrates both how foolish and how fundamental Hermann's obsession is to his very livelihood. Even after the secret has been possessed, Hermann cannot help but continue to perform according to the functions of his

obsession: he sees the Countess winking at him from within the cards and is haunted forevermore by her words, “Тройка, семерка, туз! Тройка, семерка, дама!”.

Bibliography:

- 1). Pushkin, Aleksandr S, Gillon R. Aitken, and Aleksandr S. Pushkin. The Queen of Spades. London: Folio Society, 1970. Print.