

BRIDGE LITERATURE

Nick Smith



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The Card of Avon

They say that diamonds are a girl's best friend,
But they've been kind to me as well, while clubs
And hearts are just as faithful to the end,
From those three suits you will receive no snubs;
But spades have rarely yielded to my charms
And one card will send me to an early grave—
The queen, you see, has caused me such alarms,
She's always sitting over my poor knave.
But more than that, this lady dark is fair
To all but me; if it's a two-way guess,
I'm sure to get it wrong; she'll never bare
Her secret soul to my naive finesse.
And if I squeeze her, she'll ignore my menaces,
She'll ne'er succumb to young Will's tenaces.

It is acknowledged in learned circles that the finest bridge journalist of all time was one William Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire. But who was this country yokel who was destined to revolutionise the world of bridge literature? The life story of this secretive figure has long remained shrouded in mystery, but recent research has established a few important biographical facts.

Shortly after marrying, Shakespeare's parents founded the Stratford Bridge Club and conceived the ambition to produce the finest club side in the country. Unfortunately, the only members they could attract were either Catholic heretics, who had a lot on their minds at the time, or village idiots, who had nothing on their minds but nothing in them either.

The club side finished bottom of the local league year after year until Mr and Mrs Shakespeare decided that if they could not attract the right quality of player to the club by conventional means, they would breed a

team of their own. Before long, Mrs Shakespeare was eight times “in the club”, and so, in another way, were the eight children she produced.

As soon as this unsuspecting octet were out of nappies, they were schooled in the arts of the young Queen Elizabeth’s favourite game (bridge, that is, not hangman).

By the time the youngest Shakespeare was seven, they won the local league by a record margin and went on to compete in national events. Of the eight children, the infant Will was undoubtedly the one with the most natural ability, solving the double dummy problem in bridge magazines before his ninth birthday. But like all infants, he sometimes rebelled against his parents’ spartan regime.

“Please, Mum,” the child would beg, “can I go out bear-baiting, like all my friends at school?”

“Certainly not, William, you must stay in and practise your relay sequences, along with your brothers and sisters!”

And so the growing boy had no choice but to persevere with the game. When sibling rivalry became too intense at the family club, he went further afield and formed a promising partnership with the young, rich, if somewhat laid-back, Earl of Southampton. These two became junior

internationals in 1581 and reached the final of the National Pairs in the same year. Comfortably ahead of the field after the first session, they were still hanging on to first place when Shakespeare was faced with this historic hand:

♠AJ10
♥AQ1094
♦QJ
♣Q54

N
W E
S

♠K976543
♥J5
♦K62
♣A

Shakespeare, sitting South, was declarer in 4♠ after a routine sequence. On seeing dummy, however, he realised that if trumps broke and the ♥K was onside, some pairs would be in a making slam. Hopefully, that wasn’t the case.

But surely he could wangle a twelfth trick anyway on the lead of the ♣J?

After a moment's reflection, he covered the ♣J with the queen. East, a rather foppish gentleman (who was later to serve as the model for Sir Andrew Aguecheek), duly played the king and Shakespeare won perforce with the ace. Now it was much safer to take a heart finesse because, even if it lost, East would be sure to continue clubs, expecting at least one trick in the suit. Now Shakespeare's diamond loser would disappear on the established hearts.

He decided that it was vital to take the heart finesse before trumps had been drawn, to prevent the defenders exchanging signals. So, at trick two, he ran the ♥J, rather hoping it would lose. Sure enough, West played the two and East won with the king. A little puzzled, East led back the ♥8 which his partner ruffed low. Far from trying to cash a club, West switched to a small diamond. Adjusting his ruff, East won this with the ace and pushed another heart back.

Having lost three tricks already, Shakespeare was now actually in danger of going off. Since he was short in hearts, the odds seemed to favour West holding the ♠Q, so Shakespeare ruffed the third heart with the ♠K and led a small trump from hand. West followed innocently with the eight and Shakespeare still had to decide whether to finesse or play for the drop. Reasoning that if trumps were splitting, ten tricks would be worth very few match-points, he decided to play East for a void in trumps. But the finesse of the ten lost to the queen, as this was the full hand:

♠AJ10			
♥AQ1094			
♦QJ			
♣Q54			
♠82			♠Q
♥2		N	♥K8763
♦109543	W	E	♦A87
♣J10962	S		♣K873
			♠K976543
			♥J5
			♦K62
			♣A

In due course, the Earl of Southampton found himself writing 4♠-1 on the scoresheet underneath a long line of 4♠+1 scores.

“Hard luck!” was all he said.

“It was sheer greed,” admitted Shakespeare. “Luck didn’t have much to do with it.”

“On the contrary,” smiled the Earl, “it was bad luck that the defence held the ♠Q. Whenever they do, you seem to find a way of losing an unnecessary trick to it ...”

Southampton was right, and Shakespeare knew it. Will’s judgment and theoretical abilities were second to none, but there was a fatal flaw in his game at the moment. Now that the flaw had been pointed out, it was no longer a problem. It became an obsession.

Whenever he was missing the ♠Q as declarer, he would go to any lengths to avoid losing a trick to it. Often he would avoid attacking the suit altogether and opt instead for an inferior line. The pair’s results were soon in marked decline. Even when he held the ♠Q himself, it was never worth a trick. In defence, he could not get rid of the card fast enough and he was reasonably happy if he could at least avoid being thrown in with it. Worst of all, he discovered that there was at least one ♠Q lurking in every pack of 52 cards and that was one too many.

His earnings at the big London clubs were drying up fast. During the 1580s, he had been making up a regular four with the Earls of Southampton and Essex, and the Virgin Queen herself, by no means a bad player. It is a little-known fact that Queen Elizabeth never married for the simple reason that she was too busy playing bridge to waste time on romance. Essex was her favourite partner at this time, although later he

was to pay the ultimate penalty for passing the Queen's SOS redouble, a theme Shakespeare adopted many times in his writings.

As you might suspect, QE1 was rather fond of the ♠Q, indeed of the queens in all four suits, and it was surprising how often she held them. Sometimes this made it easier for an opponent to plan the play, but tact, and the inclination to protect one's neck, demanded that you did not take too many successful finesses against her.

In one high-stake game at Hampton Court, Southampton raised Shakespeare's opening 1NT to 7NT. The partnership had a combined 38-count and the only honour card missing was the ♠Q. Yet, because of the flatness of the hands (both were 3-3-4-3), there were only twelve tricks on top. Shakespeare, who was of course declarer, tried everything to avoid the two-way spade finesse. As far as was possible, he eliminated every other suit, but there was no squeeze and no indication which opponent held extra length in spades. It really was a 50-50 guess and, in that case, it was more than his life was worth to take a successful finesse against the Queen's queen. In effect, it was a one-way two-way finesse and that one way was sure to be wrong. With a profound sense of destiny, Shakespeare took the unavoidable finesse into the Queen's hand. One down.

His partner, whose need of cash was not so urgent, was philosophical in the face of adversity, promising to content himself with a raise to 6NT next time he held a 26-count, but the Queen was not quite so gracious.

"I don't know why you play this game, Shaky," she said haughtily, confusing him for a moment with her favourite pop star, Shakin' Stevens. "You should take up something which is less intellectually demanding, like journalism."

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Shakespeare humbly.

From that fateful day, Shakespeare began to scribble away in his garret, submitting wordy articles to the prestige bridge press of his day. His disasters at the royal table provided ample subject matter for his lurid outpourings. The following hand was the last of his playing career, and one which was to leave its imprint on all his later writing.

♠AK63	<i>North</i>	<i>South</i>
♥86	Southampton	Shakespeare
♦A92		1NT
♣A1092	2♣	2♦
	3NT	Pass
N		
W E		
S		
♠854		
♥AJ3		
♦K75		
♣KJ84		

The Queen's lead of the ♥5 ran to the king and ace. For once, the problem seemed to be to find the other black queen, for, if he guessed right, there would be nine easy tricks. It was important to avoid giving East the lead, so Shakespeare crossed to the ♣A and ran the ten. With HRH sitting West, he was not unduly surprised when this lost and a low diamond was returned.

With just three club tricks, there was still a chance of a ninth trick if the spades split 3-3, as the thirteenth card in the suit might be established. But a trick would have to be lost in the suit, and it would be very difficult to keep East out in the process.

Shakespeare won the diamond switch in hand and led a small spade. The Queen's card was the two, so he was forced to go up with the ace. It would be fatal now to lead the king from dummy, so Shakespeare crossed to the ♣K in order to lead another spade. Alas, before he could do so, the Virgin Queen discarded the ♠Q with an imperious (indeed, an imperial) flourish. Now there was no way of preventing East from winning the third round of the suit, for this was the complete deal:

	♠AK63	
	♥86	
	♦A92	
	♣A1092	
♠Q102		♠J97
♥Q9752	N	♥K104
♦Q104	W E	♦J863
♣Q3	S	♣765
	♠854	
	♥AJ3	
	♦K75	
	♣KJ84	

“You never learn, do you?” gloated the Queen. “If there are four queens out, it’s 90% likely that I will hold all of them.”

“Yes, Your Highness, but ...”

“And you made it much too easy for me. If you had led a spade at trick two, I’m bound to play small, and even if I do go in with the queen, you can let it hold and I’ve got no useful return. If I push back a heart you have nine tricks on top and if I don’t you can finesse clubs into my hand as before.”

Shakespeare shrugged his shoulders alliteratively. Personally, he had little doubt that, if necessary, the ♠Q would have levitated itself out of the Queen’s hand at the right moment. The card had a mind of its own.

Shakespeare came to think of the ♠Q as the one card in the pack which had never submitted to his powers, a dark lady whom he had wooed in vain. As his interests switched from playing the game to writing about it, he devoted all his energies to analysing his paradoxical relationship with this fatal card. Much of his well-known sonnet sequence is dedicated to the “Dark Lady” and scholars have spent many fruitless years trying to identify this mysterious lady once and for all. But my own painstaking research allows me to discount the extraordinary idea that it might refer to the ♣Q.

Many of Shakespeare’s bridge masterpieces are now lost, as are some of the early drafts of the plays. The only remaining manuscripts of the first drafts which remain were recently discovered in a dusty chest in the attic of the Acol Club in London. It will be observed that these works are exclusively in narrative rather than dramatic form. All the stories revolve around games of bridge and many of the highlighted hands turn on the part played by the Dark Lady herself. It is clear now that the

bridgeless dramas of his later years are a pale shadow of the originals here reproduced for the first time.

But what made Shakespeare change his mind? Why did he omit bridge altogether from the First Folio? Were the folios bowdlerised at some later date? The first act of *King Lear*, for instance, makes little sense without the bridge game, while the conspirators in *Julius Caesar* lose all motivation without the bridge element. Yet such was his genius that the mature Shakespeare managed to find a number of appropriate metaphors to convey his deep understanding of the game. Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, in particular, are the ♠Q made flesh. His basic philosophy that “all the world’s a card table, and we are merely players” is implicit in all his expurgated dramas. Yet in later years he denied all knowledge of the game. He no longer signed himself “The Card of Avon” and insisted that he had always meant to write “Bard” but his execrable spelling had let him down.

Shakespeare may not have been the greatest bridge player the world has ever known, but he was certainly the finest bridge writer and it is not difficult to detect the lines of influence running down to Hardy, Orwell, and other modern masters, many of whom had their own traumatic bridge experiences to exorcise in their writings. Indeed, this can be seen as the main function of literature through the ages—a sorting house for the strange and wonderful experiences afforded by that great gift of the gods to man—the game of bridge. It is with great pleasure that I present Shakespeare’s early essays on a game which has become the perennial subject of English literature.

PARODY IS THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY

Bridge Literature was first published by Cadogan Books in 1993 and has since been acclaimed as one of the quirky classics of the game. Most of the stories in *Bridge Literature* originally appeared in *English Bridge*, *International Popular Bridge Monthly* and other periodicals.

Readers may be inspired to turn to the original works upon which these stories are based. Most of the original stories are well-known, at least as far as the plot and major characters are concerned, but more pleasure may be derived from the stories if read in conjunction with the original.

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