

Blood,
Love,
and
Rhetoric

A Poetic Game of Stories and Roles

Game Chef 2011: Avon Calling

Ingredients:

Nature, Forsworn, Exile

By Jeff R.

Introduction

She is the Queen. Her power is absolute in her own domain, and she is as beautiful as she is capricious. You are her courtiers, and, at least in your dearest hopes, her suitors. You are not without rivals: false men, all. Her court is an arena in which you clash daily, wielding words and facts like swords and axes. With each roll of the dice you risk ruin, exile, or even a traitor's death

Blood, Love, and Rhetoric is a game of poetry and intrigue for 3 or more players. Over the course of the game each player will complete a sonnet, which functions during the game as a character sheet.

Preparing for Play

The following materials are required for this game: the Bidding Chart and counters, a stack of index cards (at least seven per player), a blank character sheet and writing implements for each player, a few dozen each of two different types of token, and two standard dice.

Pick one of the two types of token to represent the High currency, with the other representing the Low, and place all of these tokens on the area of the Bidding chart marked "The Bank".

Before play begins, each player should select a set of counters and take seven index cards. On each index card they should write a pair of rhyming words, one on each side. All chosen words should be more or less consistent with the genre of the game, and none should be excessively long or obscure. If you choose a word that has a homonym, such as 'wound', indicate which pronunciation you intend with a brief clarifying note in parentheses below it. (either 'harm' or 'like a spring', in our example.) After all of the cards have been finished, they should be combined into a deck and shuffled well, after which twice as many cards as there are players should be dealt onto the play table. Finally, each player, starting with the youngest, selects one card from those eight without looking at the opposite side. Players should avoid picking cards they wrote themselves when possible.

Scenes and Verses

Blood, Love, and Rhetoric is a game of three scenes and an endgame. During each scene, each player will write one verse of their character's sonnet. A scene begins with each player taking one low currency for each point of Nature on their character sheet (which will be none in the first scene). Then each player writes the first line of their Sonnet, ending with the word on their card, and claiming up to two points of Nature or Artifice to the side, according to the line's Rhetoric (see chart below). They then immediately one each of the low and high currency, as well as a Low currency for each point of Nature and a High for each point of Artifice claimed. Finally, each player in turn (again, and as always, starting with the youngest player and proceeding clockwise) flips their first word card over, takes one of the four unclaimed cards on the table, and replaces it with the top card in the deck. They should place this new card on top of their first one.

After that, play commences. The first scene is set by the oldest player, who describes a general issue confronting Her Majesty's nation. In the second and third scenes, the scene should be set by the first Exile, describing a negative consequence of the Queen's final decision in the previous scene that has become an important issue itself. Players are encouraged to use their imagination in establishing these issues, but each issue should include a villain or enemy powerful enough to threaten the interests of the Queen. Once a scene has begun, players should endeavor to speak only in character, debating the issue at hand, and perform all game-related activities with their hands, without explanation. (This can be relaxed in the first verse of a player's first game, until everyone is used to the flow of play.) Players may adopt the identity on their counter set or devise some other role and personality for their courtier.



On Sonnets

A Sonnet is a form of poem that consists of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, organized into three four-line verses with alternating end rhyme and a 'heroic couplet' of two rhyming lines at the conclusion of the poem. Sonnets of the type used in this game should be mainly persuasive in nature, rather than merely descriptive. They need not be directly aimed at convincing the Queen to marry, though.

The rules of the game will take care of the rhyme scheme, leaving the meter as a task for the players. "Pentameter" means that each line should contain exactly ten syllables, and "iambic" means that they should alternate unstressed and stressed. This is actually less difficult than it sounds, and will come natural with a small amount of practice. At any rate, players should not sweat the details here: there is no penalty for coming in a syllable long or short, or having a misplaced stress or two.

A line in a sonnet is an arbitrary division: while a line will never conclude in the middle of a word, it is perfectly acceptable for one to end in the middle of a sentence. It is advised that players strongly attempt to ensure that each verse, on the other hand, does end naturally at a sentence's end.

During a player's turn, they may do one of four things: they may place a bid, write a line of their sonnet, ask the Queen's opinion on the debate thus far, ask the Queen for to make a final decision, or, when all hope is lost, voluntarily choose Exile.

Placing a Bid

To place a bid, a player puts one of their counters onto one of the blue squares of the bidding board along with some of their currency. If there are no previous bids on a square, they may place a single currency, either high or low. If there is a previous bid, they must bid a higher amount. If the numbers are equal, high currency wins out over low. Players may not mix currency types or 'skip' bids: if the current bid on a square is 2 low currency, the only acceptable bids for that square are 2 high currency or 3 low. If the bid on a square is 1 high currency, the acceptable bids would be 2 low or 2 high. When you place a higher bid, return the current bid's currency to the bank and only the counter to the previous bidder.

Each square contains the name of a concept, and players placing a bid should advance an argument relating to that concept as they place their bid. Bids using the low currency should accompany arguments appealing to baser instincts or based on avoiding bad outcomes, while bids using the high currency should accompany arguments founded in lofty ideals or on achieving glorious outcomes. For example, a high currency bid on 'Nature' might suggest favorable winds forecast for the Queen's navy, while a low currency bid on that same box might warn of a possible famine.

Writing A Line

A player may choose to write a line of their sonnet on their turn. The line should end with the word on their top card. As with the first line, they will collect one currency of each type per line, and additional currency based on the line's Rhetoric. If the card they use has only been used once in this verse, they should flip it over and place it beneath their other card. If not, they should discard it. Players should concentrate mainly on writing their lines quickly enough to not disrupt play (and once players are experienced enough with the rest of the game, they may spend the entire time during other players' turns until their next one begins in this task without harming the game's flow), and should not expect to necessarily score Rhetoric points on every line that they write.

Beseeking the Queen

When a player asks the Queen's opinion on what has been recently said, they should take the dice and roll them on the table. The result will point to one of the squares on the bidding chart. If that is a blue square, if there is any bid currently on that square, the holder of that bid receives one currency of the same type as the bid. If, on the other hand, the number corresponds to one of the red squares marked "Caprice", the Queen has become angered.

When this happens, any player has the option to forswear one of their positions. They should verbally back out of their argument while reclaiming both the counter and currency on that bid. Players may not forswear more than one position. After all players have chosen whether or not to forswear, roll the dice again. If the result is again "Caprice", continue to re-roll until a blue square comes up. When a blue square is rolled, return all currency on that square to the bank, and the player who owned that bid must, if possible, write a line on their next turn. (If a blue square with no bids on it is rolled, all players escape the Queen's wrath for now.)

The player who Beseeked the Queen should take on the role of the Queen in conversation while doing these things, expressing her positive and negative opinions. When Caprice arises, that player should pointedly ask if everyone is holding to their potentially displeasing opinions before rolling the dice a second time.

Exile

When a player has no active bids, no currency, and has written all of the lines of the current verse, they must go into Exile to avoid even worse consequences from displeasing the Queen. They may not take part in the debate. If it is not the third and last verse they were Exiled in, they may select a card from those on the table and begin to write their first line for the next scene. They should not collect currency or select a second card until the actual beginning of that scene.

The first player to be exiled in a scene adds a point of Nature to their character sheet under that verse. A player may voluntarily choose to become the first exile even if they still have some currency should they believe their situation for this round is hopeless (holding no boxes with all boxes full, and should one become open due to Caprice other players have sufficient currently to beat all of their possible bids)

Ending a Scene

Once all of the players have written all four lines for a verse and at least one player has been sent into Exile, any player may Beseek the Queen for a final decision on the matter. This works much like the normal procedure for Beseeking the Queen, except that the consequences are greater. If a player's square is chosen, that player wins the scene and adds a point of Artifice to their character sheet. If the Queen's Caprice arises, any player whose square is chosen is immediately Exiled, with all of their bids and held currency forfeit to the bank. If this leaves only one player remaining un-exiled, that player wins the scene as above.

High and Low Rhetoric

Rhyme and meter are not the whole of poetic language. Indeed, there are many different techniques at the hand of any bard worth the name, some to amuse and inflame the hearts of the groundlings, and some to amaze and entrance a more sophisticated audience. Whenever a player writes a line, they may use some of these techniques and claim points in Nature and Artifice on their character sheet. As a general rule, any such claim should be accepted by the other players on the honor system, although some groups may find it useful to allow a three-quarters majority of other players to veto or alter a claim. This chart is not meant to be exhaustive or definitive: if a player wants to use some literary technique or figure of speech not here listed, use its general sense as a guide as to which category it should count as. In some cases a technique may take more than one line to complete. In those cases it should only be scored on the last such line.

Low Rhetoric	Definition	High Rhetoric	Definition
innuendo/double entendre	sexually suggestive language	alliteration or assonance	two or more words starting with the same sound
puns and wordplay	humorous plays on double meanings	internal rhyme	rhyming words within a single line
cultural allusion	referencing other works less than 100 years old	literary allusion	referencing other works more than 100 years old
hyperbole	extreme exaggeration	metaphor and simile	comparing unlike things
cliche	overused expression	synecdoche	Using a part of a thing to represent the whole
mixed metaphor	multiple comparisons yields an absurdity	irony	Meaning the opposite of what is being said
Repetition	Repeating a word (other than words like 'the' or 'a') within a single line	Opposition	Contrasting a thing with its direct opposite
Personification/ Pathetic Fallacy	Treating an object as though it were a person	Metatext	Text that references itself or its own author (as separated from its narrator)

Endgame

After the three verses are complete, the final stage of the game begins. The first exile from the last verse sets the scene for this phase, establishing how the decisions made so far have led to a disaster in which the fate of the entire nation now hangs in the balance. Each player, in order of exile with the younger age breaking ties, selects one of the remaining cards from the game table and writes the first line of the Heroic Couplet that will conclude their sonnet. These two lines should form an answer or conclusion to the argument that the rest of the Sonnet has been making.

In this final round, stakes are higher and currency more plentiful. Each player starts with as many Low Currency as they have Nature on their sheet, *and* as many High Currency as they have Artifice, as well as the currency generated by their first line. Play proceeds as during a verse, with the following exceptions:

- * When bidding on an open square, a player may bid either one or two of either currency. Mixing currency is still prohibited.

- * When bidding on an occupied square, they may bid one unit of currency higher than they might have in a verse. For example, if the current bid is 2 low currency, they may bid 3 low currency, 4 low currency, 2 high currency, or 3 high currency.

- * In this round, a character who is exiled for lack of resources permanently flees the kingdom. A character who is exiled as a result of Caprice is executed for treason.

- * A player may call for a final decision any time after all players have written both of their lines for this scene and all eight boxes are owned, regardless of whether a player has yet been exiled.

- * The character whose suggestion is rewarded for their timely and wise counsel with the Queen's hand, becoming Prince Consort. Any other characters who are not exiled at the end of the game continue to have the notice and favor of the Queen, and may prosper by it in their advancing years.

Blood, Love, and Rhetoric Character Sheet

Name:

Counter Set:

	Nature	Artifice

First Exile/Verse Winner?

	Nature	Artifice

First Exile/Verse Winner?

	Nature	Artifice

First Exile/Verse Winner?

Endgame Totals

	Nature	Artifice

Blood, Love, and Rhetoric Sample Character

Name: Arthur B.

Counter Set: Fool

	Nature	Artifice
Our country cousin thinks himself a man	1	1
Of wit and wisdom fit to conquer stars.		2
His talents would suggest a different plan		
Involving winning wagers placed in bars.		1
First Exile/Verse Winner?	_____	1_____

	Nature	Artifice
He has a certain gift, it must be said		1
For leaving foes with legs and egos bruised	1	
A shortened dirk can still chop off a head		
What matters more than size is how it's used.	1	
First Exile/Verse Winner?	_____	_____

	Nature	Artifice
With polished pride before you now he struts		1
A man who'd trade a kingdom for a horse		1
Or, failing that, a pair of coconuts	1	
To rattle him along his drunken course.	1	
First Exile/Verse Winner?	_____	_____

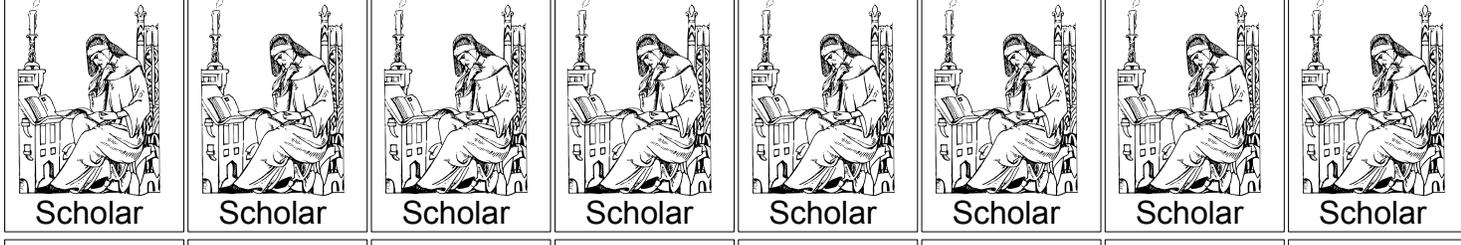
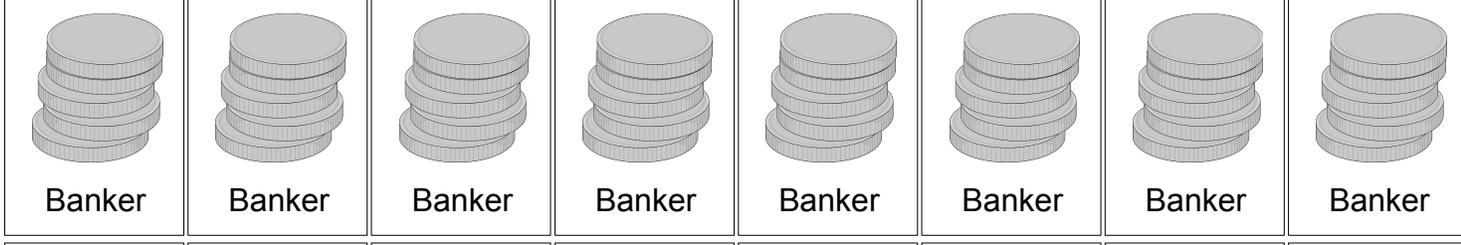
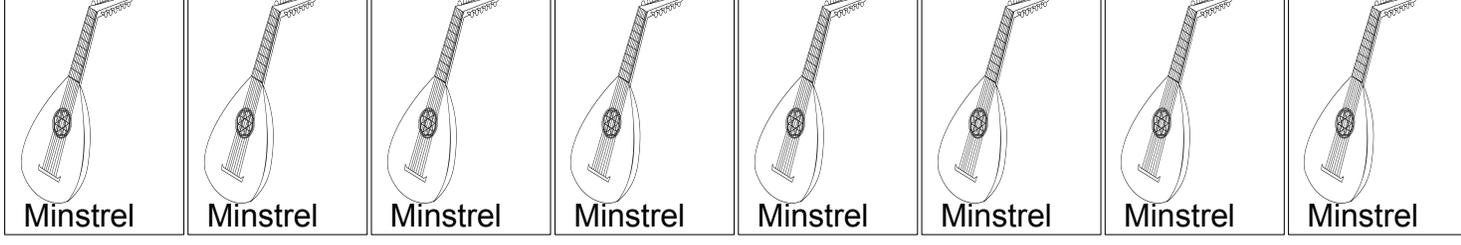
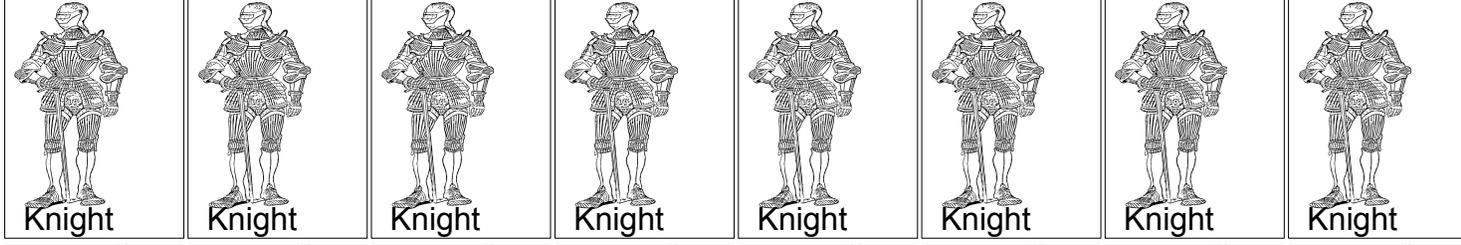
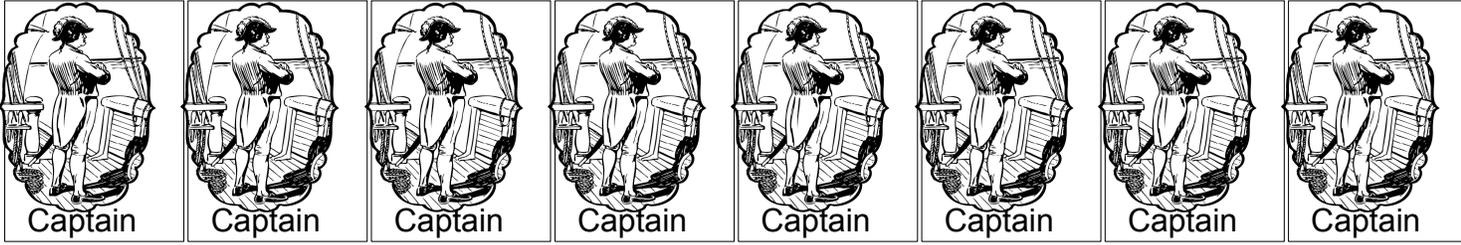
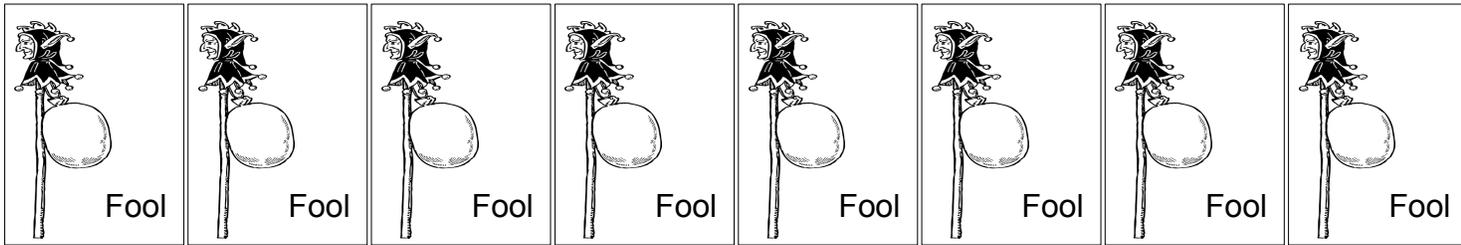
Endgame Totals

_____	_____
5	8
Nature	Artifice

How can it be this donkey-man succeeds?		1
And yet before him scatter lords like seeds.	1	1

Scoring Annotation, by line:

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| 1. Alliteration, cliché | 6. Wordplay |
| 2. internal rhyme, alliteration (the player could have chosen to score a point of Nature for 'cliche' instead of one of these, but cannot score more than two points for a line.) | 8. Innuendo |
| 4. Alliteration | 9. Alliteration |
| 5. Alliteration (this game is generous in scoring: 'he has' counts) | 10. Allusion, literary |
| | 11. Allusion, cultural |
| | 12. Personification |
| | 13. Metaphor |
| | 14. Metaphor, cliché |



Blood, Love, and Rhetoric- Counters

Blood, Love, and Rhetoric

7
Caprice

Bidding Chart

6
War

8
Money

5
Crime

9
Religion

4
Scandal

10
Nature

3
Treason

11
Legacy

2
Caprice

The Bank

12
Caprice

Author's Notes:

The initial idea for this game came when the Shakespeare theme was announced: to do a game that uses sonnets as character sheets. Much of the design fell out quickly from that idea, with a bit of help from some of the ingredients.

The basic scenario, of course, is strongly inspired by the second season of *Blackadder*, played straight rather than comic. The dice mechanics of the game are not exactly inspired by those in *Settlers of Catan*, but when I recognized the similarity to a stripped-down version of them I took it as a sign I was on the right track.

While the standard scenario speaks of a Queen in terms highly suggestive of Elizabeth I, there is not reason that it could not work equally as well for Queen Alundra of Charon, or Titania of Faerie, or the Heiress CEO of Transpacific Widgetronics. Similarly, no serious harm is done to the game should a group play with gender roles reversed or ignored.

If you enjoy the game but find that it is over too quickly, adapting the rules to other, longer forms of poetry should be fairly trivial. In particular, using sestinas rather than sonnets should produce a fairly epic experience.

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