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**THE LÜROTH SEMIGROUP OF PLANE ALGEBRAIC CURVES**

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A “gap” for a smooth irreducible complete algebraic curve  $C$  is a non-negative integer  $n$  such that no rational function on  $C$  has degree  $n$ . The non-gaps form the so called “Lüroth semigroup” of  $C$ .

We give methods to find gaps and non-gaps when  $C$  is a plane curve of degree  $d$ , based on properties of linear series and Hilbert functions. It turns out that for  $d \leq 14$  the Lüroth semigroup depends only on  $d$ ; and for larger  $d$  we point out where two curves might have different gaps. Bounds are also given for the conductor of the Lüroth semigroup, depending on  $d$ .

**Introduction.** The Lüroth semigroup (LS) of a smooth irreducible complete algebraic curve  $C$  is the additive semigroup  $S_C$  containing all the degrees of the rational functions of  $C$  (equivalently: the degrees of the linear series on  $C$  without base points). As such it was introduced by Heizer and Moh [HM], but the problems related to it are as old as the theory of curves: indeed the knowledge of the degrees of the rational functions on  $C$  is a remarkable step towards the knowledge of the geometry of  $C$ .

A systematic account on  $S_C$  is available only in a few cases, namely curves with general moduli, hyperelliptic curves, and plane curves up to degree 9 (see 1.3 below).

The main purpose of this paper is to study  $S_C$  for a plane curve  $C$  of degree  $d \geq 4$  (the situation being trivial for  $d \leq 3$ ). After some preliminaries collected in §1, we prove, in §2, that if a curve carries a very ample linear series of degree  $m$  and dimension  $r$ , then all the integers  $n$  such that  $m - r + 1 \leq n \leq m$  belong to its LS (Corollary 2.2). This fact follows from a theorem of Bertini (proved in arbitrary characteristic by Laksov [L]), and implies that, if  $C$  is as above, then  $S_C$  contains all integers  $n$  such that  $ad - a(a + 3)/2 + 1 \leq n \leq ad$  for  $a \in \mathbb{N}$  and  $1 \leq a \leq d - 1$  (Corollary 2.6).

In §3 we show that no integer  $n$  with  $(a - 1)d < n < ad - a^2$  ( $a \in \mathbb{N}$ ) can belong to  $S_C$  (Theorem 3.1). To prove this we use some results of Davis [D] to study the Hilbert function of a zero-dimensional subscheme of  $\mathbb{P}^2$  contained in  $C$ ; in this way we can

get control on the indexes of speciality of certain divisors on  $C$ , and we can conclude, by Riemann-Roch, that every linear series on  $C$  of degree  $n$  has a base point.

In §4 we show (Theorem 4.1) that if  $3 \leq a \leq d-1$  then  $S_C$  contains at least an integer  $n$  such that  $ad - a^2 \leq n \leq ad - a(a+3)/2$ ; in particular we get that  $3d - 9$  always belongs to  $S_C$ , thus answering a question raised in [HM]. The proof consists in showing that there is a pencil of curves of degree  $a$  with sufficiently many base points on  $C$ ; and this follows from the existence of suitable nets, whose construction is possible by results of Maggioni-Ragusa [MR].

We also show, following a suggestion by P. Ellia, that for any  $d \geq 2a - 2$  and any  $n$  as above there is a curve  $C$  of degree  $d$  such that  $n \in S_C$  (at least in characteristic zero, Proposition 4.3).

The above results on plane curves are summarized in §5 (Theorem 5.1), where they are used to give bounds on the conductor of  $S_C$  (Corollary 5.3), and to compute  $S_C$  when  $d \leq 14$ : in this case it turns out that  $S_C$  depends only on  $d$  (Corollary 5.5).

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**1. Preliminaries.** We shall denote by  $C$  a smooth irreducible complete curve of genus  $g$  over an algebraically closed field  $k$  of arbitrary characteristic. We denote by  $k(C)$  the field of rational functions on  $C$ , and we use freely the basic facts on divisor and linear series on  $C$  (see [H] for a reference). We denote by  $\mathbb{P}^r$  the projective  $r$ -dimensional space over  $k$ .

**1.1. DEFINITION.** A non-negative integer  $n$  is said to be a “gap” if every linear series of degree  $n$  on  $C$  has at least a base point.

The set of non-gaps is denoted by  $S_C$ , and is an additive sub-semigroup of  $\mathbb{N}$  (as one shows easily by using the sum of linear series).

Following [HM] we call  $S_C$  the “Lüroth semigroup” (shortly LS) of  $C$ ; the motivation for this name can be found in [HM].

**1.2. REMARK.** It is easy to show that the following are equivalent for a given  $n \in \mathbb{N}$

- (i)  $n \in S_C$  (i.e. there is a  $g'_n$  without base points).

- (ii) There exists a  $g_n^1$  without base points.
- (iii) There is a rational function  $f \in k(C)$  of degree  $n$  (i.e. the divisor of zeros (or poles) of  $f$  has degree  $n$ ).
- (iv) There is a finite morphism  $C \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^1$  of degree  $n$ .
- (v) There is an invertible sheaf on  $C$  of degree  $n$  and generated by global sections.

1.3. EXAMPLES. (i)  $S_C = \mathbb{N}$  if and only if  $C \simeq \mathbb{P}^1$ .

(ii) If  $g = 1$  then  $n = 1$  is the only gap.

(iii) If  $g \geq 2$  and  $C$  is hyperelliptic then  $S_C$  is generated by  $2, g + 1, g + 2$  (see [HM]).

(iv)  $S_C$  is known for every plane curve  $C$  of degree  $d \leq 9$  (see [HM]). We shall see later how to compute  $S_C$  for  $d \leq 14$ .

(v) It is known that if  $C$  has “general moduli” then  $S_C = \{n \in \mathbb{N} \mid n \geq (g + 1)/2\}$  (in characteristic zero, see e.g. [HO], introduction).

**2. An elementary method to find non-gaps.** If we know that  $n \in S_C$ , i.e. that there is a  $\sigma = g_n^r$  without base points, we can try to consider the residual series of  $\sigma$  with respect to a general point  $P$ , to get a  $g_{n-1}^{r-1}$ . If this linear series happens to be without base points, then we get  $n - 1 \in S_C$ . This elementary idea can be carried out in several cases, giving in a unified way a number of (mostly well-known) facts. Our argument is based on the following lemma.

2.1. LEMMA. *Let  $\varphi: C \rightarrow C' \subset \mathbb{P}^r$ ,  $r \geq 2$ , be a birational morphism, where  $C'$  is a (possibly singular) curve of degree  $n$  not contained in a hyperplane.*

*Then:*

(a)  $n, n - 1 \in S_C$ .

(b) *If  $C'$  is non-strange and  $r \geq 3$  then  $n - 2, \dots, n - r + 1 \in S_C$ . (See [H], p. 311 for the definition of a strange curve.)*

*Proof.* (a) The hyperplanes (resp. the hyperplanes through a general point  $P \in C'$ ) determine, by pull-back, a linear series without base points of degree  $n$  (resp.  $n - 1$ ).

(b) If  $C'$  is non-strange and  $i$  is an integer such that  $2 \leq i \leq r - 1$  then by [L], Lemma 1 there are non-singular distinct points  $P_1, \dots, P_i$  on  $C'$  such that the linear space  $L$  they span determines on  $C$  exactly the divisor  $D = P_1 + \dots + P_i$  (we identify  $P_i$  with  $\varphi^{-1}(P_i)$ ).

Thus the hyperplanes through  $P_1, \dots, P_i$  cut out on  $C$ , outside of  $D$ , a linear series of degree  $n - i$  without base points.

2.2. COROLLARY. Let  $\sigma = g_n^r$  be a linear series on  $C$  without base points, and let  $\varphi: C \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^r$  be the corresponding morphism. Assume that  $r \geq 2$  and that  $\varphi: C \rightarrow C' := \varphi(C)$  is birational. Then

- (a)  $n, n - 1 \in S_C$ .
- (b) If either  $\text{char}(k) = 0$  or  $\sigma$  is very ample then  $n, n - 1, \dots, n - r + 1 \in S_C$ .

*Proof.* By assumption  $C'$  is a non-degenerate curve of degree  $n$ . Then (a) follows immediately from 2.1(a). To prove (b) we may assume  $r \geq 3$  (otherwise apply (a)). Then  $C'$  is neither a line nor a conic, and hence  $C'$  is non-strange ([H], Theorem 3.9), and the conclusion follows from (a) and 2.1(b).

2.3. REMARK. In characteristic zero the existence of  $P_1, \dots, P_i$  as in the proof of 2.1 is a classical theorem of Bertini. Thus in characteristic zero 2.1 and 2.2 are much simpler to state and to prove.

- 2.4. COROLLARY. (i) If  $n \geq g + 1$  then  $n \in S_C$ .  
(ii) If  $C$  is non-hyperelliptic then  $g \in S_C$ .

*Proof.* By a theorem of Halphen's ([H], Prop. 6.1) for any  $n \geq g + 3$   $C$  has a very ample linear series of degree  $n$ . Then (i) follows from 2.2.

Similarly if  $C$  is non-hyperelliptic the canonical series is a very ample linear series of degree  $2g - 2$  and dimension  $g - 1$ , and (ii) follows again by 2.2.

2.5. REMARKS. (i) Corollary 2.4 is well known in characteristic zero (e.g. [ACGH]), but we are not aware of any proof in positive characteristic.

(ii) If  $C$  is non-hyperelliptic of genus 3 then  $2 = g - 1 \notin S_C$ : this follows easily by considering  $C$  as a non-singular plane quartic (see Theorem 3.1 below for details). On the other hand if  $g \geq 4$  then  $g - 1 \in S_C$  ([ACGH], p. 372, F). For further information on the gaps "near  $g$ " see e.g. [HO].

2.6. COROLLARY. Assume  $C$  is a plane smooth curve of degree  $d$ , and let  $a$  be an integer such that  $1 \leq a \leq d - 1$ . Then every integer  $n$  such that  $ad - a(a + 3)/2 + 1 \leq n \leq ad$  belongs to  $S_C$ .

*Proof.* The linear series cut out on  $C$  by the curves of degree  $a$  has dimension  $a(a + 3)/2$  and degree  $ad$ . Moreover it is easily seen to be very ample. The conclusion follows then by 2.2(b).

**3. Finding gaps on a plane curve.** In §2 we have shown that certain sequences of integers always belong to  $S_C$ , where  $C$  is a plane curve of degree  $d$ .

In this section we find something opposite: namely we produce sequences of integers, none of which belong to  $S_C$ . The main result is Theorem 3.1, whose proof is based on the study of the Hilbert function of certain zero-dimensional subschemes of  $\mathbb{P}^2$ .

**3.1. THEOREM.** *If  $C \subset \mathbb{P}^2$  is a non-singular curve of degree  $d \geq 4$  and  $(a-1)d+1 \leq n \leq ad-(a^2+1)$ , with  $a \in \mathbb{N}$  and  $a \geq 1$ , there is no  $g_n^r$  on  $C$  without base points (i.e.  $n \notin S_C$ ).*

**3.2. REMARK.** It is only a matter of computation to show that  $n$  as above exists if and only if  $d \geq a^2+2$  and that  $ad-(a^2+1) \leq g-1$  if  $a \geq 1$  and  $d \geq a^2+2$ . So 3.1 agrees with Corollary 2.4(ii).

Before giving the proof of Theorem 3.1 we recall some basic facts about the Hilbert function of a zero-dimensional closed subscheme of  $\mathbb{P}^2$ .

**3.3. Some basic facts about Hilbert functions.** If  $X \subset \mathbb{P}^2$  is a zero-dimensional closed subscheme of degree  $\delta(X) = n$ , we denote by  $H(X, i)$  the Hilbert function of  $X$  and by  $\Delta H(X, i) = H(X, i) - H(X, i-1)$  its first difference, for every  $i > 0$ ,  $H(X, 0) = \Delta H(X, 0) = 1$ .

It is well known that, if  $\alpha$  is the least degree of a curve through  $X$ ,  $\Delta H(X, -)$  is characterized by the following properties (see [D]):

$$(3.3.1) \quad \Delta H(X, i) = i + 1 \quad \text{for } 0 \leq i \leq \alpha - 1,$$

$$(3.3.2) \quad \Delta H(X, i) \geq \Delta H(X, i + 1) \quad \text{for } i \geq \alpha,$$

$$(3.3.3) \quad \Delta H(X, i) \text{ is eventually zero,}$$

$$(3.3.4) \quad H(X, s) = \sum_{i=0}^s \Delta H(X, i); \quad \text{in particular}$$

$$\delta(X) = \sum_{i=0}^{\infty} \Delta H(X, i) = H(X, s) \quad \text{for } s \gg 0.$$

Moreover it will be important to know

$$(3.3.5) \quad \text{If } X' \subset X \text{ then } \Delta H(X', i) \leq \Delta H(X, i) \text{ for every } i \geq 0$$

(see [D] or, for more details, [R]).

In the following we will set  $\Delta H(X, i) = c_i$  and  $t = \max\{i \in \mathbb{N} \mid c_i \neq 0\}$ .

Let  $s$  be an integer such that  $\alpha \leq s \leq t$ ,  $\Gamma_s$  any curve of  $\mathbb{P}^2$  of degree  $c_s$  and  $\Sigma_s = \Sigma_s(X)$  the linear system of curves of degree  $s$  through  $X$ .

**3.4. LEMMA.** *With the previous notation we have:*

$$(1) \quad \delta(X \cap \Gamma_s) \leq c_s \cdot s - \frac{c_s(c_s - 3)}{2} + \sum_{i=s+1}^t c_i.$$

(2) *If there exists  $s$  such that  $c_{s-1} = c_s$  then  $\Sigma_s$  has a fixed component  $\Gamma$  of degree  $c_s$  and:*

$$\delta(X \cap \Gamma) = c_s \cdot s - \frac{c_s(c_s - 3)}{2} + \sum_{i=s+1}^t c_i.$$

*Proof.* (1) follows from [D] (2.2)(a) if we observe that by (3.3.2), as  $s \geq \alpha$ , it is  $c_s \leq s$ .

(2) follows from [D] (2.2)(b) and (2.3).

**3.5. LEMMA.** *Let  $X$  be a zero dimensional subscheme of  $\mathbb{P}^2$  and suppose that  $0 < c_{j-1} = c_j = h < \alpha$  for some integer  $j$ . Then there exists a subscheme  $Y \subset X$  such that:*

$$(1) \quad \delta(Y) = \delta(X) - 1,$$

$$(2) \quad H(Y, i) = H(X, i) - 1 \quad \text{for every } i \geq j - 2.$$

*Proof.* By (3.3.4) it is equivalent to show that there exists  $Y \subset X$ , with  $\delta(Y) = \delta(X) - 1$ , such that  $\Delta H(Y, i) = c_i - 1$  for some  $i \leq j - 2$ . If we denote by  $s$  the least integer for which  $c_s = h$ , by (2) of Lemma 3.4, the curves of  $\Sigma_s$  contain a fixed component  $\Gamma$  of degree  $h$  and it is

$$\delta(X \cap \Gamma) = c_s \cdot s - \frac{c_s(c_s - 3)}{2} + \sum_{i=s+1}^t c_i := m.$$

As  $c_s < \alpha$  we get  $\delta(X \cap \Gamma) < \delta(X)$ , and hence there is a scheme  $Y$  such that  $X \cap \Gamma \subset Y \subset X$  and  $\delta(Y) = \delta(X) - 1$ . For such a  $Y$  we have  $\Delta H(Y, i) \leq c_i$  for every  $i$  and  $\Delta H(Y, i) = c_i - 1$  for exactly one  $i$  respectively by (3.3.5) and (3.3.4). By assumption  $c_s = c_{s+1} = \dots = c_{s+k}$ ,  $k \geq 1$ ; it can be neither  $\Delta H(Y, i) = c_i - 1$  if  $s \leq i \leq s + k - 1$  by (3.3.2) nor  $\Delta H(Y, i) = c_i - 1$  if  $i \geq s + k$  for

otherwise Lemma 3.4(1) would imply  $\delta(\Gamma \cap X) = \delta(\Gamma \cap Y) \leq m - 1$ , a contradiction. Then  $\Delta H(Y, i) = c_i - 1$  for some  $i < s$ .

**3.6. LEMMA.** *Let  $D$  be an effective divisor on  $C$ , and let  $X \subset \mathbb{P}^2$  be the corresponding closed subscheme. Then the following are equivalent:*

- (1) *There exists a closed subscheme  $Y \subset X$  such that  $H(X, d - 3) = H(Y, d - 3) + 1$  and  $\delta(Y) = \delta(X) - 1$ .*
- (2) *The linear series  $|D|$  has a base point.*

*Proof.* (1)  $\Rightarrow$  (2). Let  $E$  be the divisor of  $C$  corresponding to  $Y$ . Then  $E$  is effective and  $E = D - P$  for a suitable  $P \in C$ . Moreover, since the canonical series of  $C$  is cut out by the curves of degree  $d - 3$ , we have

$$i(D) = \binom{d-1}{2} - H(X, d-3) < \binom{d-1}{2} - H(Y, d-3) = i(D-P).$$

Then, by Riemann-Roch,  $P$  is a base point of  $|D|$ .

(2)  $\Rightarrow$  (1). Reverse the above argument.

*Proof of Theorem 3.1.* Clearly we may assume  $d \geq a^2 + 2$ , for otherwise  $n$  does not exist.

Let  $D$  be an effective divisor of degree  $n$ ; we have to show that the linear series  $|D|$  has a base point i.e., by Lemma 3.6, that if  $X$  is the closed subscheme of  $\mathbb{P}^2$  corresponding to  $D$ , there is a closed subscheme  $Y \subset X$  of degree  $n - 1$ , such that  $H(X, d - 3) = H(Y, d - 3) + 1$ . We argue by contradiction.

So we assume:

(a)  $H(X, d - 3) = H(Y, d - 3)$  for every subscheme  $Y \subset X$  of degree  $n - 1$ .

If  $Y$  is any subscheme of  $X$  of degree  $n - 1$  we have then  $n - 1 \geq H(Y, d - 3) = H(X, d - 3)$  which implies:

(b)  $\Delta H(X, d - 2) > 0$ ,

for otherwise, by (3.3.2) and (3.3.4),  $H(X, d - 2) = H(X, d - 3) = \delta(X) \leq n - 1$ .

If  $a = 1$ , we have  $n \leq d - 2$  and then  $\Delta H(X, d - 2) = 0$  by (3.3.1), (3.3.2) and (3.3.4), contrary to (b).

So we may assume  $a \geq 2$ .

Now if  $\alpha$  is the least degree of a curve containing  $X$  we have  $a \leq \alpha$  by Bezout, whence  $\Delta H(X, a - 1) = a$ . It follows:

(c) if  $s$  is any integer such that  $a - 1 < s < d - 2$  and  $\Delta H(X, s) < a$ , then

$$\Delta H(X, s) > \Delta H(X, s + 1) > \cdots > \Delta H(X, d - 2) > 0.$$



Indeed if  $\Delta H(X, i) = \Delta H(X, i + 1)$  for some  $s \leq i \leq d - 3$  by Lemma 3.5 there exists  $Y \subset X$  such that  $\delta(Y) = \delta(X) - 1$  and  $H(Y, i) = H(X, i) - 1$  for every  $i \geq s - 1$ , in particular  $H(Y, d - 3) = H(X, d - 3) - 1$  against (a).

We shall get a contradiction by showing that (c) implies:

(d)  $\Delta H(X, i) \geq \Delta H(Z, i)$  for all  $i$ 's, where  $Z$  is a complete intersection of type  $(a, d - a)$ .

Indeed if (d) holds, by (3.3.4) and (3.3.5) we have  $n \geq a(d - a)$  which is absurd.

To show that (c) implies (d) recall first that, since  $d - a > a$  (as follows easily from  $d \geq a^2 + 2$ ), from the free resolution of the homogeneous saturated ideal of  $Z$  we have:

$$\Delta H(Z, i) = \begin{cases} i + 1 & \text{for } 0 \leq i \leq a - 1, \\ a & \text{for } a \leq i \leq d - a - 1, \\ d - i - 1 & \text{for } d - a \leq i \leq d - 2, \\ 0 & \text{for } i \geq d - 1. \end{cases}$$

As  $a \leq \alpha$ , (d) holds for  $0 \leq i \leq a - 1$  by (3.3.1) ((c) is not used here). Next observe that (c) implies

$$\Delta H(X, d - 2 - j) \geq \min\{a, j + 1\}$$

for all  $j$  such that  $d - 2 - j > a - 1$  and in particular for  $j = a - 1$  since  $d > 2a$ . This implies (d) for  $d - a - 1 \leq i < \infty$ . Finally for  $a \leq i \leq d - a - 2$  the inequality (d) follows easily from (3.3.2). Thus (c) implies (d) and the proof is complete.

**4. Finding non gaps on a plane curve.** The sequences of gaps and non-gaps for a plane curve  $C$  of degree  $d$  found in 3.1 and 2.6 leave out the integers  $n$  such that  $ad - a^2 \leq n \leq ad - a(a + 3)/2$ ,  $3 \leq a \leq d - 1$ .

In this section we show that, for given  $a$ , at least an integer as above belongs to  $S_C$  (Theorem 4.1), and that if  $d \geq 2a - 2$  then for any  $n$  as above there is a curve  $C$  of degree  $d$  having  $n$  as a non-gap (characteristic zero, see 4.3).

**4.1. THEOREM.** *If  $C \subset \mathbb{P}^2$  is a non-singular curve of degree  $d$  and  $a$  is an integer such that  $d > a \geq 3$  there is at least an  $n \in S_C$  such that  $ad - a^2 \leq n \leq ad - a(a + 3)/2$ .*

*Proof.* Since  $d > a$ , we can choose on  $C$  a set  $X$  of  $\binom{a+2}{2} - 3 := k$  distinct points such that:

(1) no  $\binom{a'+2}{2}$  among the  $k$  points,  $1 \leq a' \leq a - 1$ , lie on a curve of degree  $a'$ .

(2)  $\dim \Sigma_a = \binom{a+2}{2} - 1 - k = 2$ .

This follows from the proof of Lemma 3.3. in [MR]. Moreover, (cfr. [GM], Theorem 3.4), as  $a \geq 3$ , every curve in  $\Sigma_a(X)$  is irreducible hence every pencil contained in  $\Sigma_a$  has exactly  $a^2$  base points.

Let  $D$  be the divisor on  $C$  corresponding to  $X$  and  $\sigma$  the complete linear series cut out on  $C$  by  $\Sigma_a(X)$  outside of  $D$ . Note that  $\sigma$  has dimension two.

If  $\sigma$  is without base points it cannot be very ample otherwise the projective image of  $C$  by  $\sigma$  would be a non-singular plane curve of degree  $ad - k$  and then, by the genus formula, we would have  $ad - k = d$ , i.e.  $d = (a + 4)/2$ , which is absurd.

Hence there exists a divisor  $P + Q$  on  $C$  such that

$$\dim |\sigma - (P + Q)| = 1.$$

So there are two different curves  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  in  $\Sigma_a(X)$  such that  $C_i \cdot C \geq D + P + Q$ ,  $i = 1, 2$ .

If  $\sigma$  has base points the same follows easily. Moreover, as  $C$  is non-singular, we can see that  $i(A, C_1 \cap C_2) \geq \min i(A, C_i \cap C)$ ,  $i = 1, 2$  and  $A$  any point on  $C$ . (This follows from [F], Ch. 3 §3; see [C], Lemma 5.2 for details.) Then if  $E$  is the largest divisor such that  $0 \leq E \leq C_i \cdot C$  for  $i = 1, 2$ , and  $h = \deg E$ , we have:

$$\frac{a(a+3)}{2} = \deg D + 2 \leq h \leq a^2.$$

Hence the divisors  $D_i = C_i \cdot C - E$  are linearly equivalent and have disjoint support. Hence they belong to a  $g_{ad-h}^1$  without base point; and since  $ad - a^2 \leq ad - h \leq ad - a(a+3)/2$  our proof is complete.

**4.2. COROLLARY.** *If  $d \geq 4$  then  $3d - 9 \in S_C$ .*

*Proof.* Apply Theorem 4.1 with  $a = 3$ .

**4.3. PROPOSITION.** *If  $\text{char}(k) = 0$  and  $ad - a^2 \leq n \leq ad - a(a+3)/2$ ,  $a \geq 3$ , then for every  $d \geq 2a - 2$  there exists a curve  $C$  of degree  $d$  such that  $n \in S_C$ .*

*Proof.* Let  $\Gamma$  and  $\Gamma'$  be two non-singular curves of degree  $a$  which intersect in  $a^2$  distinct points  $P_1, \dots, P_{a^2}$ . Then, by considering the

Hilbert function of a complete intersection of type  $(a, a)$  we see that  $2a - 2$  is the least degree of a curve to which they impose independent conditions. Hence, if we fix  $d \geq 2a - 2$  and  $k$  points  $P_1, \dots, P_k$  among  $P_1, \dots, P_{a^2}$ ,  $a(a + 3)/2 \leq k = ad - n \leq a^2$ , there always exists a curve  $C$  of degree  $d$  which contains these  $k$  points and no one of the other  $a^2 - k$ . Now we prove that such a  $C$  can be found non-singular. So we consider the linear system  $\Sigma$  of curves of degree  $d$  through  $P_1, \dots, P_k$ . Since  $a \geq 3$  we have  $d \geq 2a - 2 > a$  and then all the curves having  $\Gamma$  or  $\Gamma'$  as a component belong to  $\Sigma$ . Then the base locus of  $\Sigma$  is contained in the set of points  $P_1, \dots, P_{a^2}$  and so, by the above argument, it is exactly  $\{P_1, \dots, P_k\}$ . Then, by Bertini's theorem, the generic curve of  $\Sigma$  is non-singular off of  $P_1, \dots, P_k$ . The same argument shows that  $\Sigma$  contains some curve non-singular in  $P_1, \dots, P_k$  and then the generic curve in  $\Sigma$  is non-singular.

So the pencil generated by  $\Gamma$  and  $\Gamma'$  cuts out on  $C$ , outside of  $P_1, \dots, P_k$ , a  $g_{ad-k}^1$  without base points.

**4.4. REMARK.** If  $d \gg a \geq 3$  we can find a curve  $C$  of degree  $d$  such that  $n \in S_C$  for every  $n \in [ad - a^2, ad - a(a + 3)/2]$ .

We can argue as in the proof of the above proposition if we make the following construction. First we fix  $t + 1$  curves  $\Gamma, \Gamma_1, \dots, \Gamma_t$  of degree  $a$ , where  $t$  is the number of integers in the interval we are considering, and we choose them in such a way that  $\Gamma \cap \Gamma_i, i = 1 \dots, t$ , are disjoint sets  $X_i$  of  $a^2$  distinct points. Then we fix subsets  $Y_i$  of  $X_i$  in order to obtain all the integers in  $[ad - a^2, ad - a(a + 3)/2]$  and finally we consider the curve of degree  $d$  through  $Y_1 \cup Y_2 \cup \dots \cup Y_n$ .

This construction works, if  $d$  is very large with respect to  $a$ .

**5. The Lüroth semigroup of a plane curve and its conductor.** In this section we summarize all the results we know on the Lüroth semigroup of a plane curve  $C$  of degree  $d$ , and we apply them to give a lower and upper bound for the conductor of  $S_C$  in terms of  $d$ , and to compute  $S_C$  for  $d \leq 14$ .

If  $d = 1, 2, 3$  then  $C$  is rational or elliptic, and the situation is clear, see 1.3. For  $d \geq 4$  we can summarize 2.6, 3.1 and 4.1 in the following theorem.

**5.1. THEOREM.** *Let  $C$  be a smooth plane curve of degree  $d \geq 4$  and let  $a$  be an integer,  $1 \leq a \leq d - 1$ . Then:*

(a) *If  $(a - 1)d + 1 \leq n \leq ad - a^2 - 1$  then  $n \notin S_C$ .*

(b) If  $a \geq 3$  there is at least an integer  $n \in S_C$ , such that  $ad - a^2 \leq n \leq ad - a(a+3)/2$ . In particular  $3d - 9 \in S_C$ .

(c) If  $ad - a(a+3)/2 + 1 \leq n \leq ad$  then  $n \in S_C$ .

5.2. REMARKS. (i) As remarked before statement (a) of 5.1 is void iff  $d \leq a^2 + 1$ .

(ii) Statement (b) is really meaningful if  $d \geq a(a+3)/2 + 1$ . Indeed if  $d \leq a(a+3)/2$  by a direct calculation we have

$$(1) \quad (a-1)d - (a-1)(a-2)/2 + 1 \leq ad - a^2,$$

$$(2) \quad ad - a(a+3)/2 \leq (a-1)d,$$

and then (b) follows from (c), applied with  $a$  replaced by  $a-1$ .

Recall that if  $S \subset \mathbb{N}$  is an additive semigroup, the *conductor* of  $S$  is the least integer  $c$  such that every  $n \geq c$  belongs to  $S$ .

If  $C$  is a curve we denote by  $\gamma_C$  the conductor of  $S_C$ .

5.3. COROLLARY. Let  $d \geq 4$  and put

$$b = \min\{a \in \mathbb{N} | a(a+3)/2 \geq d-1\},$$

$$c = \max\{a \in \mathbb{N} | a^2 + 2 \leq d-1\}.$$

Then:

$$cd - c^2 \leq \gamma_C \leq bd - b(b+3)/2 + 1.$$

*Proof.* By 5.1.(a) we have  $cd - c^2 - 1 \notin S_C$ , and this gives the first inequality.

Moreover  $b(b+3)/2 \geq d-1$ , and hence by 5.1(c)  $S_C$  contains at least  $d-1$  consecutive integers, namely:

$$\{n \in \mathbb{N} | bd - b(b+3)/2 + 1 \leq n \leq bd\}.$$

And since  $d-1 \in S_C$ , we easily get the second inequality.

5.4. REMARKS. (i) The upper bound for the conductor given in 5.2 was first proved by M. Boratynski (unpublished), by a different method.

(ii) From 5.2, by a direct calculation, one gets

$$\gamma_C \leq \frac{1}{2} \left( d\sqrt{8d+1} - 5d + 6 \right).$$

This shows that for  $d \gg 0$ ,  $\gamma_C$  is bounded above by an integer of order  $\sqrt{2}d^{3/2}$ , whence  $\gamma_C \ll g - 1$ . This should be computed with 1.3 (ii), 1.3 (v) and 2.5 (ii).

Now we turn our attention to the LS of  $C$  for small  $d$ 's. By a straightforward calculation we get, from 5.1 and 5.3:

**5.5. COROLLARY.** *If  $d \leq 14$  then  $S_C$  depends only on  $d$ , and is given by the table below.*

$d$	$\mathbf{N} \setminus S_C$
1, 2	$\emptyset$
3	1
4	1, 2
5	1, 2, 3
6	1, ..., 4; 7
7	1, ..., 5; 8, 9
8	1, ..., 6; 9, ..., 11
9	1, ..., 7; 10, ..., 13
10	1, ..., 8; 11, ..., 15
11	1, ..., 9; 12, ..., 17; 23
12	1, ..., 10; 13, ..., 19; 25, 26
13	1, ..., 11; 14, ..., 21; 27, ..., 29
14	1, ..., 12; 15, ..., 23; 29, ..., 32

**5.6. REMARKS.** (i) Corollary 5.5 was proved in [HM] for  $d \leq 9$ , by different methods.

(ii) It is not clear to us if Corollary 5.5 holds for  $d > 14$ . The first unknown situation occurs for  $d = 15$ , where the only dubious integer is  $46 = ad - a(a + 3)/2$  with  $a = 4$  (see 5.1).

Note however that  $46 \in S_C$  for some curve  $C$  of degree 15 (see Proposition 4.3).

(iii) If for  $d \gg 0$  the LS of a curve of degree  $d$  is not independent on  $d$ , it is natural to ask for the structure of  $S_C$  where  $C$  is a general curve of degree  $d$ . This makes sense because almost all the curves in an irreducible family have the same LS, see [G].

(iv) It is reasonable to believe, as suggested to us by A. Hirschowitz, that for a general curve  $C$  of degree  $d$  the integers of the form  $ad - a(a+3)/2$  belong to  $S_C$ . Some intuitive evidence for this to be true is given by our proof of 4.1.

*Added in Proof.* We have recently found out that the interesting preprint (to appear in J. Algebra) *Free linear systems on integral Gorenstein curves* by Marc Coppens contains a proof of our Theorem 3.1 for arbitrary integral plane curves, in the context of Hartshorne's theory of generalized divisors (R. Hartshorne, *Generalized divisors on Gorenstein curves and a theorem of Noether*, J. Math. Kyoto Univ., **26** (1986), 375–386). Coppens' result clearly implies ours, but his approach to the problem is completely different. It might be interesting to know what happens if one considers Cartier divisors instead.

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# Pacific Journal of Mathematics

Vol. 151, No. 1

November, 1991

<b>Fernanda Maria Botelho</b> , Rotational entropy for annulus endomorphisms . . . .	1
<b>David F. Cowan</b> , Some infinite chains in the lattice of varieties of inverse semigroups . . . . .	21
<b>S. Greco and G. Raciti</b> , The Lüroth semigroup of plane algebraic curves . . . .	43
<b>Kang-Tae Kim</b> , Automorphism groups of certain domains in $\mathbb{C}^n$ with a singular boundary . . . . .	57
<b>R. James Milgram</b> , Surgery with finite fundamental group. I: The obstructions . . . . .	65
<b>R. James Milgram</b> , Surgery with finite fundamental group. II: The oozing conjecture . . . . .	117
<b>Shahriar Shahriari</b> , On central type factor groups . . . . .	151
<b>Lynne Walling</b> , Hecke eigenforms and representation numbers of quadratic forms . . . . .	179