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What does Turandot want?
From Puccini's Freudian riddles,
back to Nezami's silent Pythagorean questions*

This paper analyses how the synopses of Nezami's *Haft Paykar* and of Puccini's *Turandot* both revolve around a riddling session. Riddles are a fascinating narrative tool and in these two cases, they encapsulate and illuminate the core message of the stories of two very different "belles dames sans merci." In attempting to unravel Nezami's riddle, this paper proposes for the first time a comprehensive decoding of the riddle of the Princess in the Red Pavilion. Puccini and Nezami both created an interesting web of riddles, which, although different, do indicate a similar understanding of the Princess's search for a suitable husband.

Nezami; Puccini; *Turandot*; Riddles; Ideal husband.

Puccini's posthumous 1926 opera[1] reaches its dramatic peak when Princess Turandot enounces three darkly ominous riddles: «An iridescent ghost flies in the dark night. It spreads its wings over infinite humanity! The whole world invokes it, the whole world implores it! But the ghost disappears at dawn to be reborn in the heart! And every night it is born, and every morning it dies»[2]. The nameless suitor gives the correct response: «Hope». The second riddle follows: «It darts like a flame, but it is

[1] Puccini passed away before reaching the end of the score, though the libretto was complete. «We can say of the libretto for Turandot, as we cannot say of many other operas, that it is as much the work of the composer as it is of the nominal librettists» (Balkin 1990: 306).

[2] Burton 2002: 34-36. I would like to warmly thank my colleague Dr Laura Moretti who has kindly supervised and corrected my translation.

not a flame! It is delirious, it is febrile with impetuous ardour. Inactivity transforms it into languor! If you lose it or if it dies, it becomes chilled! If you can conquer it, it inflames you! You listen to its voice with fear, and it glows like the setting sun!». Again, the response is the right one: «Blood». Finally comes the third riddle: «Ice that inflames you and that becomes colder because of your fire! Candidly white and darkly obscure! If you want to be free, it enslaves you further. If it accepts you as servant, it makes you King!». The final response, which saves the suitor's life and should earn him the Princess as his prize is: «Turandot».

The three riddles bring Puccini's opera to a tense pitch of suspense. The will of Turandot, who does not ever want to marry and has devised this way of discouraging and eventually exterminating the unwelcome suitors, is opposed to that of the hero, who is guided by an irresistible feeling of "love at first sight". The opera's narrative appears to favour the warmly human and courageous suitor who risks his life to marry … the psychopathic and frigid Turandot. As one inevitably wonders why any man in his right mind would wish to do such a thing, it becomes manifest that Puccini's synopsis holds complex psychological insights.

Literature offers numerous examples of a suitor who is submitting to a session of hard questions in order 'to win the love' of a *belle dame sans merci*, who attracts suitors, tests them, and promptly sacrifices them as they fail the test[3]. «The general theme of the winning of a bride through the giving or solving of a riddle, is already present in Greek romances»[4]. The theme has left a trail of fascination, enabling authors to romanticise about all-conquering love, a point of view which, I argue here, only represents the lesser flip-side of a more intriguing situation: that of a powerful, learned and wise woman who publicizes that she will only marry (i.e. submit to?) a powerful and wise man. Self-assurance and ambition being basic qualities in a leader, the advertisement attracts possessors of these qualities and discourages the others by stating that the punishment for failure is death.

The roots of the Turandot story are deep. Giacomo Puccini (d. 1924) and his two librettists, Giuseppe Adami (d. 1946) and Renato Simoni (d. 1952) had based the synopsis of their *Turandot* opera on two rewritings of

[3] The contests are rarely physical, as is the case in the story of Atalanta, who organises a running contest against the suitors. Most stories put the contest on the intellectual level, such as the Bible story in Kings 10:1-13 where the Queen of Sheba poses numerous riddles to Solomon. The contents of the riddles are not given, but Solomon's responses satisfy the queen. See also Balkin 1990: 327.

[4] Dorst 1983: 417-18, citing S. Thompson, *The Folktale*, New York 1946, p. 156. See also Aarne-Thompson 1964: type AT 851 (*The Princess Who Cannot Solve the Riddle*) and AT 927 (Out-riddling the Judge).

the story, that by the famous Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi (d. 1806) and especially that by the German poet and scholar Friedrich Schiller (d. 1805). Schiller's versified German play *Turandot Prinzessin von China* in 1801-2, was itself transforming and translating Gozzi's successful 1761 commedia dell'arte play *Turandot*[5]. Impervious to the story's dark drama, Gozzi mentions that he chose «from among the Persian fairy tales the comic story of Turandot to serve as basis for a play». It is particularly interesting for the present study that he specifically liked «the artificial and tragic situation» created by the three life-threatening enigmatic riddles that the princess of China imposes on her suitors[6]. Gozzi's *Turandot* is said in turn to be based on a story he found in *Les Mille et un Jour. Contes Persans traduits en françois par M. Pétis de la Croix* (1710-1712), a collection of tales by the Orientalist diplomat François Pétis de la Croix (d. 1713)[7]. And thus, Puccini's opera can be traced back through Schiller and Gozzi and Pétis de la Croix, to a passage in the long narrative Persian poem in the *masnavi* form, called *Haft Peykar* (*Seven Pictures*, henceforth *HP*) composed in 1197 by the poet Nezami of Ganja (d. ? 1204)[8]. His *HP* has also fascinated the Persianate world and it was rewritten several times, with changes in details or in the synopsis.

Nezami's *HP* is one of his most finely wrought and memorable works[9]. Famous and attractive as it is, the *HP*'s meaning remains elusive. Nezami's intellectual sophistication challenges his readers to an analytical exercise. A web of intertextual references underpins the poem. In the authorial introductions of several of his works, Nezami describes the laborious process of consulting multilingual sources around his topic, the relevant elements of which he then combines in a multi-layered narrative with themes woven into one another[10]. His eclecticism and the way in which he

[5] Gozzi 1988: 1 and 46-54. At least seven operas based on Schiller's version appeared in the nineteenth century (Balkin 1990: 310).

[6] Ashbrook and Powers 1991: 44.

[7] Pétis de la Croix (1785). See also Zakaria 2004; also Hahn 2002.

[8] Pétis de la Croix's familiarity with Nezami's *HP* is evident in his use of another *HP* story in order to introduce the Princess's fatal attraction power. There is an evident echo of the *HP*'s Story of the Black Prince, when the old woman explains to Calaf the universal unhappiness caused by falling in love with Turandot. Rather than acting as a warning, this will fascinate Calaf into rushing to his death.

[9] There are several editions and translations of Nezami's work. I used Nizami 1934. For an English introduction to various aspects of the author and his work, see for example the most recent translations: Nezami (1995) by J. Meisami (tr.) and Nezami (1997) by J.C. Bürgel (tr.). For an overview on the scholarship around *HP*, see F. de Blois (2012).

[10] Nezami 1995, tr.: 11, v. 18. Nezami's syncretic style is a prime illustration of how Piemontese's «common learned and literary library of the Middle Ages» has left its impact on the Medieval and pre-modern literary world across cultural regions (Piemontese 2011: 127-44).

mixes literary references and genres suggest a multiplicity of keys. Teasingly, the keys themselves demand creative thinking and the poet manifestly expects a lot from his well-read audience. He has left no obvious indications on how deep or how wide the probe should be, but he claims that he «searched through books both fine and rare/ for what would free sore hearts from care»[11].

The *HP* is tightly structured and centred around the character of Bahram Gur, fashioned with much authorial freedom on the historical figure of the Sassanian emperor Bahram V (r. 421-439 AD). As in several of his other works, Nezami examines love's impact on humans. In this case, he creates an astronomical frame and background for a tale of sensual and regal education. The work's best-known part is the succession of seven weekdays when Bahram visits his seven wives, the daughters of the kings of the seven Climes of the world. Each Clime is ruled by one of the then known planets. Bahram has built a pavilion for each of his queens, each of the colour of the planet that rules the relevant part of the world. Bahram visits each of them on the right day of the week. He starts in the Princess of India's black pavilion on Saturday, ruled over by Saturn, and ends in the white pavilion on Friday with the Princess of Iran, ruled over by Venus. During that astronomical week, each princess tells him a story. The fourth of these climates, Sclavonia, is likely to be of central interest, as it relates to the Red Planet, Mars, Bahram's namesake. Bahram visits the Red Pavilion on the central day of the week, Tuesday, the "navel of the week".

The story told to Bahram in the Red Pavilion appears to be an 'orphan story': scholarship has not yet identified Nezami's possible source. Most of its elements feature in the later Turandot versions, but the form and contents of the riddle sessions differ widely. The story is thus: a remarkable princess has studied wisdom and art, magic and sorcery. She will only marry a suitor of her own choice. Nezami comments on marriage as a demeaning status for a talented woman[12]. She withdraws into an unattainable fortress, guarded over by an army of killer talismans, disseminated all over the mountain. The fortress also has a hidden entrance. As soon as the whole system is in place, she starts a publicity campaign to attract as many candidates as possible. Her self-portrait, plastered on the city's door, proclaims publicly that she will only wed a man "of good name", who is successful in the challenges she sets him.

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[11] Nezami 1995: 11, v. 18b.
[12] *Ivi*: 1995: 159, vv. 26-29: «She'd every mode of wisdom learned; of every art a page had turned; Perused all books of magic; read of sorcery and all things hid. Her face with her dark locks she'd veiled, at plans to marry had rebelled. How can one peerless in her time agree to wed?».

What does the Princess want? She is evidently not opposed to marriage, but is desperate to find a specific type of man. The nature of the challenges will show us what she considers as essential qualities. Her expectations are very high and she has no pity for the arrogance of unsuitable competitors. Her advertisement campaign, mingling life-threats and incredible lustre for the eventual winner, is irresistible. Many suitors present themselves and die. When the hero also falls in love with her portrait, he first seeks the lessons of a sage. Having painstakingly acquired as much wisdom as the Princess herself, he attempts the challenges. He survives the talismans and discovers the entrance to the fortress. The Princess sends him back to town to await her arrival for the last test, but she is already rejoicing. The suitor has shown courage and ambition as well as physical and intellectual power. His patient studies show his wisdom and commitment to win. In destroying the talismans, he also shows the ability to use his knowledge in life-threatening circumstances. In finding the hidden entrance of the fortress, he shows intelligent search. As he is ordered back to town, he shows cold-blood, and patience, respect for her decision and readiness to submit to the last challenge. It consists, says the Princess, in four questions and the suitor's responses will determine whether she marries or executes him.

As we have come to expect from such a sophisticated author, Nezami's riddles are one of literature's most teasing puzzles. He plays with a cluster of riddles in two ways: in a first part, he describes the unusual riddles whose four questions and four answers are not expressed in words, but in silent metaphors. In a second part, he proposes pseudo-keys to the riddles. In the first part, the Princess remains hidden from sight. Silence adds a level of difficulty to the riddles as the suitor first needs to decode the questions before he can respond. It seems that he also needs to fashion his responses within the semantic field created by each of the Princess's questions. The suitor is equal to this task, while we are baffled by the characters' prowess at conversing in a metaphoric language that remains closed to us. In the second part of the puzzle, Nezami uses a conventional riddling technique. He teases us with false solutions to the four questions and their four answers, disguised as the Princess's explanations to her puzzled father.

The first question: The princess sends two tiny pearls, which the suitor weighs in his hand. His response is the addition of three similar tiny pearls, weighing the same, making five in total. The second question: The princess now grinds the five pearls to dust, weighs this powder and mixes it with sugar. The suitor adds milk, in which the sugar dissolves. Having drunk the sweet milk, the Princess makes a paste with the dregs of pearl-dust, which she weighs to check that the full weight of the five pearls is

still there. The third question: the princess sends one of her rings. The suitor keeps the ring and sends back a priceless pearl[13]. The fourth question: she finds in her necklace a pearl exactly similar, binds the two magnificent jewels together. The suitor adds a blue bead without any value because he is aware that it is impossible to find a third matching pearl. The princess laughs, wears the two pearls on her ears, the bead on her hand, and agrees to the match. She then provides the pseudo-solution, which I examine below.

We have only meagre theoretical tools to help us, as Persian riddles (*chist-ān or loghaz*) have not attracted much scholarly attention, apart from the 1965 work by C.T. Scott and the 2010 monograph by A.A. Seyed Gohrab[14]. Globally, research on riddles, across literary traditions, is also limited[15]. It is possible to define the riddle in general, and in the Persian tradition, as a verbal expression which contains one or more images or descriptive elements, and a seeming contradiction. They intend to mislead the listener into guessing the wrong answer. Typically, they operate by dressing the unexceptional objects of everyday experience in fantastic costumes and create a feeling of amused surprise with the unmasking[16]. Although, in Arabic literature, riddles are associated to folklore, in Persian, they are mostly expressed as sophisticated lyrical metaphoric puzzles, either as single, brief or long, poems, or as *nasib*s introducing *qasida*s, where they provide a platform for the demonstration of a poet's humour and poetical bravura. The pre-modern theorist of Persian poetics, Shams-e Qeys, mentions that in essence a *loghaz* is an ambiguous or punning question: «A *loghaz* consists in a question about a concept amongst others, dressed as a difficult expression and creating ambiguity». He also explains that the «meaning mutates away from the correct orientation of the understanding». He pairs the *loghaz* with mathematical riddles and stresses its difficulty, which requires «abundant thought and perfect concentration»[17]. There is no reference here to humour, although Persian riddles are verbal and metaphoric games. This conforms to the general view that associates riddles with jokes «in the way they mix creative or innovative word play, making the familiar seem unfamiliar, pulling the rug from

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[13] Nezami 1995: 171, v. 249. The first two questions deal with *lu'lu'*, an Arabic term, meaning «a pearl, gem, jewel (*lu'lu'i maknuun*, A pearl concealed in the shell; (met.) a virgin». Steingass: 1132); *lu'lu'-ye khord*: minute, little, small (Steingass: 453). Questions three and four relate to *durr*, meaning "pearl" (Steingass: 506).

[14] Scott 1965; also Seyed Gohrab 2010. See the bibliography Seyed-Gohrab provides. See also Orsatti 2012.

[15] Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001; also Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2018.

[16] Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2018; also Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001: 9; Dorst 1983: 422; Chyet 1988: 270.

[17] Shams-i Qeys 1935: 426-27.

under the riddlee's feet by violating the norm, wielding power, and dis-
covering comic elements even in places where no one thought to look for
them»[18]. Success seems to depend intrinsically on the metaphor's punning
force and multiple ambiguity[19]. Players in a riddling game accept the fact
«that they will be confronted with statements that do not observe the
principles of cooperation normally applied to communication. The aim is
then linguistic ambiguity, by means of which the riddlee is misled into fo-
cusing on the wrong detail». If the riddlee actually manages to give the
right answer, it is an indication that he «has learned the cultural art of
how to manipulate ambiguity»[20].

Riddles also feature in Persian *masnavi*s, that is, in a narrative context,
where they take the form of metaphoric questions, as is the case with
Nezami's *HP* passage. These narrative works take over the context found
in older literary traditions (see above). Riddling questions are usually put
to a male character, very often in a marriage context. Frequently associat-
ed with death and related to the Freudian archetype opposing the life
forces of Libido and Eros, to Thanatos, the death instinct, they create
tense moments in a story[21]. Rather than testing "intelligence", they ascer-
tain the respondent's religious or philosophical views and thus his suit-
ability to become part of a new social structure[22]. Their lightweight pun-
ning structure and their irrelevance are jarring compared to the punish-
ment attached to failure. This apparent imbalance seems to weaken the
narrative and creates a disappointing anti-climax. I argue here that the in-
terpretation of such episodes might benefit from an analysis that does not
lose sight of the humorous essence of riddling as a literary device.

In Nezami's *HP*, the silent riddles are compounds of objects and of
actions that are linked to these objects. The objects act as metaphors and
are combined in certain ways and quantities that also hold a metaphoric
significance. The character's actions provide a second level of ambiguity.
Several of these characteristics relate Nezami's silent dialogue to the more
common visual riddles. Such riddles require first a sort of initiation to an
"iconic code", a frame of semiotic references. Once acquainted with this,
the respondents «gain a point of reference for recognizing and decipher-
ing specific sign-codes across visual texts». This potential transparency «is

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[18] Kaivola Bregenhøj 2017: 208.
[19] Chyet 1988.
[20] Kaivola- Bregenhøj 2001: 131.
[21] Freud 1961.
[22] Khaleghi-Motlagh traces similar riddles in the Avesta. He argues that these pas-
sages are the ancestors of the riddles in narrative contexts. (Khaleghi-Motlagh 1381: 169).
Seyed-Gohrab 2010: 71-84, briefly describes several riddles in romances and especially in
Ferdowsi's work. As I demonstrate below, the *HP* passage does not test the suitor's sagaci-
ty, but rather his attitude towards male dominance in marriage.

not inherent to the figures themselves. Instead, it depends on the respondents' acquired competence in visual riddling»[23]. Nezami's silent riddles are related to such visual riddles, as there is no verbal accompaniment to the objects which are sent from the one to the other character. They are also a compound of several other recognised riddle genres[24]. They are true metaphoric riddles in that the cluster of questions contain enough elements for the riddlee to decode the metaphors. They are also wisdom questions, as the answers need a thorough grounding in numerology and poetical metaphors. They are sexual riddles as they partly refer to physical lovemaking. They are false neck-riddles as the riddlee risks his life during the contest. In a true neck-riddle, it is the person in danger (e.g. the nameless suitor in Puccini's Turandot, see below) who invents a neck-riddle; this is usually a non-answerable riddle. In the present case, the suitor must answer by inventing responding riddles, demonstrating that he is thoroughly acquainted with the semiotic references of the sign-codes used by the Princess. Both her and his riddles are not unanswerable riddles: the suitor can and should answer the riddle in order to save his neck and win the Princess[25].

Several Nezami scholars over the years have commented on, or attempted, the interpretation of, this silent dialogue, although most references to the *HP* story simply take over Nezami's teasing "solution" provided by the Princess. G. Krotkoff focuses on the numerical values in the exchange. He does not explain what happens during the two characters' silent dialogue, but proposes that the enigma holds the explanation of the whole cycle of stories in the *HP*[26]. Piemontese also focuses on numbers. He suggests that the riddle relates to the «preliminary ritual exchange of symbolic gifts between the maiden and her aspirant, providing evidence of fitness for the nuptial pact»[27]. The oft-mentioned 1941 article by F.

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[23] Roemer 1982: 177.

[24] Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001: 64-70.

[25] *Ivi*: 64-65: «The concept of "riddle" embraces both those traditional verbal expressions most commonly known as "true riddles" and a number of different subgenres appearing under different names [and which] have not yet been subjected to exhaustive investigation».

[26] Krotkoff 1984: 107: «the central story in the HP is loaded with meaning and may contain the key for the understanding of the entire structure. If such a key is provided, it is only logical that it will have to be looked for in the riddles. Disregarding the given explanation, we can extract from them some quantifiable information and keep it in evidence as follows: $2 + 3 = 5$ (pearls), 1 ring, $1 + 1 = 2$ (pearls), 1 blue bead, sugar, milk».

[27] Piemontese 2011: 131-32: «As a wedding gift, the hero presents the maiden, ex officio guardian and transmitter of the royal legitimacy, with a small blue-eyed shell (muhra-yi azraq). This is the precious countermark the Maiden of the Castle has long been waiting for. She, now a sweet loving bride, unfolds the sense of the emblematic enigma». This enigma can be solved with the help of a magic square around the number five.

Meier describes the silent riddles and accepts the pseudo-solution as the key. That same year however, in a brief "Nachtrag", Meier reports the explicitly sexual angle with which H. Ritter, the masterful editor of the *HP*, interprets the enigma: the two pearls suggest female sexual parts (two lips); the three pearls, the male sexual parts. The sugar stands for female, or general love lust; the milk means the semen through which lust is freed. Ritter also understands milk as maternity: love-lust (sugar) remains mixed with semen (milk) until the child is born, when the mother-milk destroys the love-lust[28]. This perceptive, but still partial, explanation does not however convince Krotkoff, who rejects it as «too simplistic and crude»[29]. Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh takes over the Princess's pseudo-key, but also proposes (without reference) Ritter's sexual decoding, as another level of meaning for the *chist-ān*[30].

None of the above suggestions is fully satisfying. None addresses all the elements within the narrative context, none seems to do justice to Nezami's sophisticated humour and complex reference system. In my attempt below, I base myself on several premises, the first of which is the realisation that the exchange is of paramount importance in the Princess's search for an ideal husband. It comes as the ultimate test and is likely to be relevant to an aspect that the earlier challenges had not yet touched on. The riddles are not a contest that will create a winner and a looser. Rather, they are a tool to probe the suitor's mind. They will clarify whether he is close to the ideal the Princess is looking for. The four questions and their four answers need to combine and form a coherent "dialogue" which ought to make sense within the narrative. Such a true dialogue emerges thanks to a coherent key to decode the metaphors. In order to find this key, I depend on further assumptions: the numerals are meaningful; the pearls are a key metaphor; the triple weighing of the pearls is relevant.

The first riddle. The debate opens with a question consisting of two tiny pearls, to which the response is the weighing of the pearls and the addition of three similar pearls making five in total. The key is found in the numbers. Nezami is experienced in Classical and Hellenistic science, including Pythagorean lore[31]. These traditions provided metaphysical speculations built on numerical symbolism within which the gendering of num-

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[28] Meier 1941a and Meier 1941b. Ritter also hypothesises that sugar stands for surface stories, milk for esoteric knowledge. This is problematic as he takes this suggestion from an unrelated passage in Jami's *Salaman o Absal*.

[29] Krotkoff 1984: 116 note 52.

[30] Khaleghi-Motlagh (1381 H.sh.).

[31] See for example van Ruymbeke 2018; also Krotkoff 1984: 111; also Nezami 1997: Bürgel's Nachwort, esp. pp. 375-88.

bers was common[32]. Even numbers are female, odd numbers, male (the number one is androgynous), and the conjunction of the first female and the first male numbers, making five, is the symbolic value of marriage[33]. The Princess and her suitor express themselves through this Pythagorean symbolism and the silent dialogue unashamedly and immediately targets the sexual aspect of marriage. Her two tiny pearls announce that her nature is female. The suitor responds with three similar pearls, which mean that he is male. The pearls he sends back, five in total, propose the conjunction, the marriage, of the female and male symbols. Incidentally, Nezami's text is unclear about a crucial detail: the suitor weighs the two tiny pearls and finds three that are equal, but Nezami does not specify whether this equality relates to each pearl separately, or to the groups of two and three pearls. A lot depends on whether each of his three pearls has the same weight as each of her two pearls (thus weighing three fifths of the total) or whether his three pearls together weigh the same as her two pearls together (thus weighing half of the total)[34]. I suggest that in order to please the Princess, the ideal is for the male set of three pearls together to weight the same as the female set of two. The alternative would contain an implicit indication that the male set is heavier, weightier than the female. This latter hypothesis then holds the necessity for the suitor to change his view towards women in order to find the third and fourth responses.

The second riddle. The princess now grinds the pearls to dust, weighs this powder and mixes it with sugar. The suitor adds milk, in which the sugar dissolves, but not the pearl dust. Having drunk the sweet milk, the princess checks that the full weight of the five pearls is still there. The metaphors have become openly erotic. By grinding the two sets of pearls to dust, the princess reduces the female and male elements to atoms that become inextricably mixed. She weighs this powder, thus ascertaining the symbolic value of the couple before intercourse. The sugar, which she adds, stands for the sweetness of physical desire. Thus, she tells the suitor that male and female union should come with sexual intercourse. By adding milk, the suitor metaphorically enacts the lovemaking. He proposes that she drinks the milk in which the sugar has dissolved. The princess does so, thus metaphorically consummating and enjoying the sweetness of physical union. But, when she weighs the dregs, she finds that nothing has changed, no weight, no value, has been added to the original male and female elements. Physical love results in no gain.

[32] Kalvesmaki 2013. The gendering of number was both extensive and old, going back to Aristotle and the Pythagoreans (Burkert 1988: 33-34).

[33] *Ivi*: «[Plutarch] notes that five is the sum of the first odd and even numbers, and is therefore called 'marriage' (Plutarch 8 [387f-388c])».

[34] Nezami 1995: 170, vv. 233-38.

The third riddle creates the moment when the suitor needs all his in-genuity to re-open the dialogue. The Princess sends one of her rings. The suitor keeps the ring and sends back a priceless pearl. Having ascertained that physical lovemaking brings no gain, she sends a ring, both as pay-ment for the suitor's good services and as a signal that she has no further use for him. End of the dialogue. The suitor keeps the ring, thus agreeing with her, but re-opens the dialogue by sending back a perfect priceless (presumably) unpierced pearl. The pearl *dorr*, is charged with several metaphorical meanings for a classical Persian audience. I suggest that in this specific context the unpierced pearl relates to a virgin[35]. Thus, the suitor's response is that he does not value her only as sexual partner. As a virgin, as an independent woman and non-sexual partner, she is beyond price in his eyes. This is an ingenious way of remaining within the seman-tic field of pearls, but the suitor's wonderful jewel is beyond comparison with the small pearls of the two previous questions.

The fourth riddle. She finds in her necklace a pearl exactly similar, binds the two magnificent jewels tightly together. The suitor adds a blue bead without any value, a traditional symbol to avert the evil eye. By matching the (unpierced) pearl that symbolises herself as a virgin, with an-other similar but pierced pearl from her necklace, she comes back to the beginning of the silent conversation, recreating the number two for the fe-male element. This time, she gives details, telling the suitor that her femi-nine nature is complete as a compound of virgin and bride. The suitor now forms the male number three by adding a worthless blue bead, thus saying that his maleness exists only as the protection of her twofold price-less feminine perfection. He presents himself, not as a threatening con-quering male, but as the worthless protector of her compound and pre-cious personality. This is the attitude towards union which the Princess had been hoping for and she is thus able to agree to their marriage.

In general, sexual riddles are a favoured type, as is the case for many other forms of jokes. The ambiguity of euphemistic mentions of sex and

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[35] The unpierced pearl is *inter alia* a common metaphor for a precious virgin bride who will be "pierced" on her wedding night. See for example, Khaleghi-Motlagh 1381: 170, citing a *Shāhnāma* riddle: «The emperor of Rum sends a locked box to Iran, contain-ing a pierced, a half-pierced and an unpierced pearl. The sage Bozorgmehr solves the rid-dle: the pierced pearl is the woman who is married and has a child, the half-pierced pearl is the married woman without child and the unpierced pearl is the virgin girl» (*Shāhnāma*, J. Khaleghi-Motlagh (ed.), New York, 1988/1366, book 8, p. 260, vv. 2556 ff.). In the *HP* story, the Princess is first described as a pearl when the hero spots her portrait on the gate to the town: (Nezami 1995: 164, v. 119) «That pearl that's round a shark's neck hung: how shall I flee it? I'm undone». Female pudenda is also explicitly mentioned with the pearl metaphor when the two characters finally unite: (Nezami 1995: 173, v. 294 and 295a) «Now kissed her cheeks and now her lips, now tasted pomegranates, now dates; The pearl [*dorr*] by diamond [*almas*] pierced at last…».

sexual organs causes excitement and amusement[36]. Sexual or erotic humour is certainly frequent in Nezami's poetry. Expressed in the most delicate metaphoric descriptions, it becomes explicit when read through the relevant nezamian code. Indeed, there is a close resemblance between metaphoric descriptions of wedding nights within Nezami's oeuvre, and those of the Princess's riddles[37]. Together, the Princess's first question joined to the suitor's first response, contain all the keys: the importance of numbers (which inevitably leads us to search within the field of the Pythagorean number theory and this leads us to the erotic meaning of the exchange), the importance of weight, and the metaphor of the pearl. But the pseudo-key now provided by the Princess contains further essential indications *ad absurdum* that help unravel the riddles.

This pseudo-explanation has often simply been adopted as the bona fide key, although at first blush, it is unlikely that Nezami would have provided the explanation to his wonderful riddles, thus deflating his audience's joy in the search to unravel the learned and erotic enigma. He uses a literary ploy: the father, whose bafflement mirrors that of the reader, provides the poet with the opportunity to tease his riddlees in a traditional way. This game consists in disorienting the respondent, «denying him the necessary adequate information by manipulating or omitting various metacommunicative cues, and complicating the correlation of tokens with their appropriate content»[38]. Such a teasing technique is frequent with sexual riddles: it provides a solution that plays on the ambiguous imagery and proposes an innocent "wrong" non-erotic explanation to an erotically charged riddle[39]. The pseudo-key is not meant to unravel the meaning of the riddle, but simply to surprise and amuse the participants.

The passage also makes excellent storytelling. It provides an amusing narrative detail showing that the Princess is unwilling to explain the rid-

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[36] Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2018: 198.

[37] As Seyed-Gohrab argues, it might be that the practice of riddles were at the origin of the development of the genre of literary description (*vasf*) (Seyed-Gohrab 2010: 11). For a comparison with Nezami's explicit sexual descriptions in metaphoric garb, see van Ruymbeke 2002.

[38] Roemer 1982: 196.

[39] Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001: 79-80: «Riddles are among the most outspoken expressions of folk eroticism. […] The use of sexual vocabulary is, however, rare in riddles, unlike in other forms of erotic folklore. […] Sexual riddles are in their forms of expression usually of two different types. Among the most common ones are images disguised as sexual and arousing erotic fantasies that do not actually mention a single improper word. […] But because the image inevitably sets the respondent's imagination seeking for a sexual answer, he is surprised when offered the innocent answer. […] Far rarer are the riddles in which the answer is given quite frankly as either sexual intercourse or the male or female sexual organs, sometimes in a way that is coarse».

dles' charge of eroticism to her parent. When asked to reveal the significance of the silent Q&A session, here is what she says:

> I loosened the pearls from my ears, By their example I said "Know that this life is but two days" – He added three to these two, replying: "It passes quickly, even if it lasted five days". I ground the pearls and sugar to dust, saying: "This life is mixed with desire. Who, by spells or by alchemy, can separate the two?" He poured the milk, so the sugar dissolved, the pearl dust remained, saying: "Sugar mixed with pearls will melt and vanish with a drop of milk". In drinking from his cup, I signed to him that I was but a child to him and I sent the ring consenting to marry him. He send me back that pearl, "Like this, you'll find no mate for me". Joining my pearl to his, I showed that I was his equal. He saw that there was no third pearl like these two in the world, and added a blue bead against the Evil Eye. When I put on that bead, I meant thereby, the seal of my consent: Upon my breast his seal of love is that which guards my treasure-hoard. Because of those five mysteries, I bowed before his mastery"[40].

Nezami flashes several signals that this is a pseudo-explanation, but he also provides clues. Only part of the exchange is explained, for instance no mention is made of the repeated weighing of the pearls. The jumble of elements contradict each other, and contradict the context of the riddles. Thus, the opening gambit relates to the stock remarks of mystics who are aware that life passes in the blink of an eye and that this short time ought to be used in preparing for the hereafter. In such a frame of mind, the aspiring mystic is encouraged to stay away from human entanglements and human love affairs and to focus on searching for divine love. Such an opening could hardly lead to a marriage proposal. The numerals two, three and five have no relevance in this context, but, in stressing them, Nezami teasingly highlights their importance as a real key to the riddles[41]. Continuing with the pseudo-mystical theme, the Princess regrets that desire (sugar) is mixed with life (pearl dust). While Nezami gives a correct clue with the sugar-sensuality metaphor, the censure with which it is presented here is again counterintuitive in a marriage context. The Princess then abandons the mystical ambiance and states that only magic can separate life and desire. But the suitor uses the most natural and obvious of methods, easily separating them in milk. Milk often appears in sexual metaphors, but the Princess leads us astray in explaining that the suitor opposes it to maternity (breastfeeding stops sexual desire). The suitor contradicts himself with the conventional view that the point

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[40] Nezami 1995: 172-73, vv. 269-86.
[41] The numbers here might also be meaningful in the *abjad* system (numerical alphabet), though I have not attempted to decode them in this way.

of marriage is procreation opposed by the decision to stop sexual desire within married life. He nevertheless provides a clue to the erotic ambiance of the dialogue. The trick with the milk appears to convince the Princess, but she misunderstands her role in procreation: she admits to being like an infant (drinking milk) towards the suitor. The infant reference re-introduces the mystical ambiance of the disciple feeling as a child towards his *pir*. Evidently, this sudden self-belittlement and pledge of filial obeisance to her future husband are opposed to the Princess's independent character. Furthermore, it does not make sense, as, by drinking the milk, the Princess is in fact nurtured with the desire that was dissolved in the milk. Next, she offers the suitor a ring, which signals her agreement to the match. This is absurd, as this should close the exchange and express the suitor's victory. But the suitor reopens the dialogue on an aggressively self-satisfied tone, sending a unique priceless pearl, meant to advertise his own unique priceless worth. Recovering some of her spirit, the Princess contradicts him with a similar pearl, stating that he and she are of equal worth and both unique. This is opposed to her recent recognition of male mastery. The suitor relents without dispute and adds a bead to protect them both from the evil eye. Again, this is a clue to the real explanation. Mixing real and fake elements, the Princess concludes that she wears the modest bead as a signal that her "treasure-hoard" belongs to and is guarded by him. Intriguingly, while there should be four riddles, here she concludes with the mention of five mysteries.

The Princess's pseudo-explanation is anticlimactic: nothing meaningful happens to signal the suitor as her equal partner in marriage. She is overwhelmed by his superiority after the trick with the milk. Her self-belittlement and his self-satisfaction are to be put in context with Nezami's representation of the father's male dogmatism. He interprets the conclusion of the riddle-match as his daughter's bowing to a dominant master: «When the king saw that wild colt tamed by wisdom's whip»[42]. He views the match as one of submission and subjugation towards a wiser and more knowledgeable man who will become the husband. In his eyes, this marriage will not be an equal match, which would safeguard his daughter's independence and power.

Nezami's teasing pseudo-key robs the passage of focus, meaning and relevance and has lost the sophistication of the silent dialogue. Beyond humour, the pseudo-key's exaggerations offer Nezami the opportunity to highlight the almost revolutionary feminism of the story in the Red Pavilion. If the reader remains unaware of this *reductio ad absurdum*, the proposed key hopelessly jumbles the point of the riddles. This explains why

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[42] Nezami 1995: 173, v. 286.

each of the story's rewriters have missed the beauty of Nezami's silent dialogue and have rewritten the riddles, creating puzzles that target their specific audiences. Excepting Puccini's version, the rewriters lost the riddles' relevance as insights to the psychology of the two characters. Pétis de la Croix's enigmas are of a universal and trite character, with a flavour of Greek mythology. The three responses refer to general concepts: the sun, the sea and the year[43]. When he rewrote Pétis de la Croix's tale, Gozzi kept the riddles about the sun and about the year, but introduced in his third riddle an ad hoc reference to "the lion of Adria (St Mark)". The play was first performed in Venice and this riddle directly involved Gozzi's target audience in the riddling[44]. Schiller kept the riddle about the year, created one about the eye and referred to a then popular Chinese motive for his third riddle whose answer is "the plough"[45].

Puccini's riddles that are cited at the beginning of this article, show his in-depth reworking of the synopsis. In particular, he rethought the function of the weak and irrelevant riddles inherited from Gozzi and Schiller, and sought to give them a different dimension and relevance within the narrative. As a result, Puccini's story integrates key Freudian concepts and comes back full circle to several of Nezami's essential points. The suitor is able to decode Turandot's metaphors only if he has managed correctly to interpret her psychological pathology. More than intellectual nimbleness, the metaphors demand the suitor's awareness of different aspects of desire, whether physical or psychological. He also needs to understand the reasons for repressing it. The contents of Turandot's three riddles and the suitor's offer of a fourth one smash the traditional view about the opera, which warms to the suitor and shudders at Turandot's cruelty and misandry. Turandot eventually switches from rejection to acceptance of marriage, but the story is especially about the suitor's growth and radical transformation. From the start, we ought to question the depth and reliability of his sudden passion for Turandot. He is ready to risk his life for the fleeting vision of female physical perfection and fame, even though this woman appears to be a deranged men-hater[46].

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[43] Pétis la Croix 1710-1712: 346-48.

[44] Gozzi 1988: 147.

[45] Schiller 2004; also Ashbrook and Powers 1991. The riddle of the plough referred to the chinoiserie fashion of the eighteenth century. Schiller might have been influenced by *Fortunate Union* (*Haoqiu Zhuan*), a popular Chinese novel in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The German translation of the novel by the German polymath Christoph Gottlieb von Murr (d. 1811), mentioned the use of plough in Chinese worship ceremonies, and as a symbol of fortune, safety, and health. (Kii-Ming Lo and Maehder 2004: 33).

[46] Balkin 1990: 337-38, on the theme of the Woman as Sign, as representational rather than real.

Thus, his desire to win Turandot is the combination of adolescent hormones and rashness to take up the challenge and triumph where others have failed. Love does not intervene. One sympathises with Turandot's misgivings about a suitor who is ready to gamble with life even though his prize will be the hand of someone he does not know, but who happens to be beautiful and, perhaps more importantly, the heiress to the throne. Turandot's opposition to the male sex is far stronger than that of Nezami's Princess. She presents the inversion of traditional fairy tale heroine who waits eagerly for her prince to arrive. For Turandot, as she explains with the miserable story of her ancestor, the suitor, «who symbolizes the entire male sex, is the source of violence, brutality, and subordination». The opera examines «how it is possible for women, who are aware of the wrongs done to women by a system of patriarchy, nevertheless to love and be loved, to transform themselves and others and move from hate and destruction towards love and fulfillment»[47]. This relates to the contents of Turandot's two first riddles, which show her psychological torment between fear and hope to find someone with whom to share emotional and physical love.

The structure and contents of the first riddle illustrate her complex love psychology, subverting the usual "code" around the meaning and imagery of "hope"[48]. She builds a gloomy semantic field of darkness and ghosts. She links Eros and Thanatos, night and dawn, love and death. She is afraid of the recurring dream of requited love, but does not have the power to escape that ghost. Daylight brings back harsh reality and all the reasons to refuse love, but the powerful dream nestles in her heart and will come back to tempt her every night. The second riddle relates to the physical aspect of love. This is a signal for the suitor that Turandot knows the power of burning physical passion. The semantic fields of fire and blood for this particular riddle again mingle Eros and Thanatos and announce her psychopathic response to her own terror: transforming it into horror for the suitors.

The Love-Death opposition that nestled in the psychological and the physical experience of love plagues Turandot and results in an impossible wish, which she states in the third riddle. Her coldness is a challenge to suitors' passion, but their passion frightens her and increases her frigidity. And then comes the core of this convoluted description: the suitor must submit to her in order to rule over her. Not only will male psychological submission achieve female physical submission, but also, the suitor's total

[47] Balkin 1990: 321-23.
[48] Eco 1976: 592, defines the "code" as a culturally conventionalised system of rules; each code consists of a set of customary ways in which culture members, regarded as a group, think and perceive.

submission will allow her to trust him and to submit as well. The fact that the suitor manages to see through the riddles does not convince Turandot that she might trust his love. She is frightened because this man will rule over her legally and physically, as her husband. But he also has psychological power now that he has understood her psyche. She has as yet no proof of how he will use this double power.

Interestingly, after solving Turandot's three riddles, and apparently understanding her despair, the victorious suitor chivalrously puts his life in the balance again and proposes a riddle of his own: if she finds his name by dawn he will forfeit his life. This typical neck-riddle is introduced to the original plot by Gozzi. Neck-riddles or «neck-saving riddles» are an old and odd phenomenon. They have affinities with the secular pre-novelistic prose of late antiquity[49]. They are unsolvable riddles, and are in fact unfair tricks proposed as a ploy to the party in power by the party at risk. The ruler's failure to solve the unsolvable riddle will save the condemned prisoner. But in the opera, the suitor's decision to propose a fourth riddle is not a chivalrous ploy to give her the upper hand again. He is no longer at risk and does not need to propose an inherently unsolvable enigma to solve his neck. Quite to the contrary, he knows that Turandot will fail to find the answer and that this failure will further humiliate her, confirming her subjugation and his mastery[50]. This finds confirmation at end of opera, with the suitor's kiss. «What Puccini appears to reenact here is nothing more than the most banal form of male sexual aggression against women socialized to passivity and sexual submission»[51].

J. Balkin has analysed Turandot's story with the help of Puccini's relation to Freudian theories. He reconstructs the full version of the libretto, which was partially left out by Toscanini who gave the first performance of *Turandot* after Puccini's death. It showed that the suitor Calaf too has changed in extremis: offering the key to the neck-riddle and telling his name to Turandot, he states that he relinquishes his position of power and gives it back to her. She can now trust him and accept his matured love and understanding[52]. Thus, Balkin concludes, the Riddle of *Turandot* is «a question about men's relationship to women – a question about how the men who live within that same system of patriarchy should relate to

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[49] Dorst 1983.
[50] Balkin 1990: 325: «Calaf is so brave, so convinced of his power, that he is quite willing to show Turandot that his first victory was no fluke-that he can defeat her again and again. Then she will know that he really is superior, and she will submit to him willingly».
[51] Balkin 1990: 314.
[52] *Ivi*: 329.

them. It is thus the question of men's transformation in order to under-
stand what women want, what men should want to become in relation to
them»[53].

   This is where Puccini and Nezami meet, across the centuries. They
both created an interesting web of riddles, which, although different, do
indicate a similar understanding of the Princess's search for a suitable
husband. In Puccini's *Turandot*, men must ask themselves how mature,
stable relationships with women are possible. It is the story of the quest
for male growth and maturity especially in relationships with women.
This is possible «by surrendering male power and control over women»[54].
In his demonstration, Balkin places Turandot's problem on the level of
power and submission, which inevitably leads to an unsolvable situation:
«Turandot's abhorrence of submission to greater power places her in a
double bind. A less powerful man who could not solve Turandot's riddles
is unworthy of respect and therefore must be destroyed. Yet a more pow-
erful man who could solve these riddles would simply begin the process
of subordination anew». The suitor is also «in a double-bind – he can on-
ly prevent his death by demonstrating his superior power-the very power
that will prevent Turandot from loving him unreservedly. … [This inter-
pretation] recognizes the fundamental paradoxes of Turandot – the pow-
erlessness of power, and the power of powerlessness»[55].

   I have argued here that Nezami's suitor is not meeting the Princess in a
challenge about power, but in a dialogue about respect within a marital re-
lationship which includes sex. And it seems that, at the very last moment,
Puccini's Calaf, also reaches the realization that what he needs to do is to
give Turandot the power over him and show that he can trust her. The
suitor in Nezami's Red Pavilion goes beyond that and manages to express
with his blue glass bead that power and control is not an issue because
male power is meant to protect female independence and perfection. Both
authors have used the story to make a point about the conundrum of the
subordination of wise women. It can only be to men of equal wisdom.

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alla narrativa, al teatro, all'opera lirica

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