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# Mythic Rhetoric: Love, Power, and Companionate Marriage in Puccini's Turandot

Valerie V. Peterson

*Using a rhetorical perspective, specifically Kenneth Burke's understanding of myths as "forward looking partisanship," this essay explores the mythic story of Turandot and its relationship to love, power, and companionate marriage.<sup>1</sup> First, Burke's understanding of myth is outlined and connected to the history and travels of Turandot. Then, a detailed rhetorical analysis of the 1998 PBS video of Puccini's opera performed at the Forbidden City, Beijing, suggests why the Turandot myth seems to appear in certain places and moments, and what it might have offered to audiences, in this instance, on a spiritual level.*

In the 1995 young teen "Junior Books" rendition of an ancient story, Marianna Mayer provides rare insights into the psyche of Turandot, enigmatic ice princess. In Mayer's view, Turandot dreads marriage and the prospect of becoming a "trophy" wife to a suitor more interested in challenge than he is in love. In an effort to deter her suitors, Turandot invents three riddles that the suitors must answer correctly to win her hand in marriage (and all the land and power that comes with it). The penalty for failure is death.

Like other recent incarnations of the story of Turandot, Mayer's version speaks to the challenges of courtship and the union of two separate people into one social (marital) institution.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Cinderella, which also features marriage and ranges from themes of Christian piety to successful social climbing across barriers of class, the story of Turandot is not originally Western, and its message is not about the virtues of humility, hard work or a good dress. Featured in countless bedtime stories, fables, plays, and operas told and performed across time and national borders, Turandot is more than a simple stock character, she is part of an enduring story of mythic dimension<sup>3</sup>, rich with implications for the sexes, power, love, and marriage. This is especially true today.

## Rationale

There are powerful women, these days, in the U.S., and many women of this historical moment find themselves in significant positions of power, relative to their male counterparts. Livable wages, employment opportunities, property rights, reproductive rights, advances in reproductive technologies, increased access to higher education, and reduced expectations regarding traditional forms of marriage and childrearing all have made it easier for women to aspire to any one of a number of pursuits, and enjoy the fruits of individuation and agency. Women's power of this sort often threatens traditional patriarchy and those who benefit from it, but it also presents a challenge to men and women – particularly young men and women who hope to establish significant and long-lasting love-based marital relationships.

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<sup>1</sup>The author would like to dedicate this essay to her parents, Aris and Grace Peterson, whose love of opera led her to this story, and whose love for each other inspired this interpretation. She would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for their helpful suggestions and insights.

<sup>2</sup> This analysis and this myth are concerned with heterosexual courtship, so the paper assumes such things as heterosexual desire, and challenges of gender/sex difference.

<sup>3</sup> Since the status of a story as "myth" is debatable, I will refer to Turandot primarily as a "mythic story" or "story" – especially when referring to specific performances. I may refer to it as "myth" when highlighting its existence through time and across cultures. Readers can decide for themselves whether or not the story has achieved mythic status.

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Some people grow into love over time in arranged marriages or marriages of necessity. Others rely on traditional gender-role-defined relations, or choose marriages (or relationships) of convenience. But those people who hold erotic love in high esteem and who want to be in a serious and lasting relationship face a special courtship challenge. Not only do they need to find love, they also often need to negotiate a broad spectrum (and abundant, sometimes overwhelming amounts) of womanly power, aspiration, and agency. Providing insight into how men and women might do this guides the interpretation of this version of the story of Turandot, and is the primary purpose of this rhetorical analysis.

Rhetorical critics use rhetorical theory, textual and historical analysis, semiotics, communication theory, philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, ideology studies, media studies, and other useful sources of analytical terminology to assess written, spoken, and visual/non-verbal phenomena. Among other things, rhetorical criticism is a practice that gives insights into stories, and the people who create and consume them. These stories often teach about life the easy way rather than the hard way – by giving audiences ways to “try on” ideas without or before living through a (metaphorically) similar experience themselves (Anton, 2013). In contrast to psychoanalytic criticism or cultural studies, which often focus on how stories are cathartic, compensatory, or emblematic of social taboos or ills; rhetorical criticism may just as likely highlight the positive functions, messages, and characteristics of popular discourses.<sup>4</sup> The rhetorical analysis of Turandot offered here draws from a wide variety of analytic resources, including some of those mentioned above. This is necessary not only because Turandot is a mythic story with a long history and broad cultural range, but because the version of the story at issue is a video made from a complex and opulently staged opera performance with limited and translated subtitles. As such, its analysis does not neatly or easily fit into just one area of disciplinary study (e.g., opera studies, folklore studies, translation studies, performance studies, theatre studies, women’s studies, etc.).

Rhetorical criticism is especially appropriate for this kind of artifact. In analyzing stories – their past, their range, their variations, and also their individual manifestations in close detail, we learn not only about our own historical moment, but about humanity more generally. Using a rhetorical perspective, then, specifically Kenneth Burke’s understanding of myths as “forward looking partisanship,” this essay explores the mythic story of Turandot and its relationship to love, power, and companionate marriage. It charts the history, travels, and varieties of the Turandot myth, and then offers a detailed rhetorical analysis of the 1998 PBS video of the opera performance that same year at the Forbidden City, in Beijing, China. Concluding remarks include speculation as to why the Turandot myth appears in certain places and moments, and what the 1998 video version of the story might offer, on a spiritual level, to its audiences.

### **Burke and Myth**

Myth has been defined as an alternative to ideology, a mode of signification, a system of communication, and a rhetorical form with historical limits, conditions of use, and social relevance. What “counts” as a myth is disputable because not all people will agree as to what stories rise to the level of historical and/or cultural significance. In some cases, a “minor” myth (e.g., the story of Narcissus and Echo) may become a “big story” (or at least a “bigger story”) through good or timely telling or retelling (e.g., Freud’s concept of “narcissism”). In other cases, myths may remain minor, but be no less meaningful for their partiality (e.g., the story of Paris using the golden apples of Aphrodite to defeat Atalanta in a footrace). Myths are endowed with

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<sup>4</sup> Some fine examples of analyses of Turandot from psychoanalytic and cultural studies perspectives include Patricia Juliana Smith’s (1996) critique of Turandot as anti-lesbian misogyny; Richard M. Berrong’s (1995) political reading of Turandot as the “Italian people” tamed by Mussolini; Ping-Hui Liao’s (1994) take on Turandot as a site of contention between communism, democracy, and multinational symbolic capital; and J. M. Balkin’s (1990) reading of Turandot as a feminist critique of masculinity.

significance not because they are concerned with facts, but because they are concerned with meanings. The facts of myths may be studied across time, or they may be defined and explored in a particular moment as tokens for something else.

Rhetorical studies of myth and mythic stories have recognized how myths function as part of the collective human psyche or spirit, as initiating forces (Eliade, 1969), as a types of speech (Barthes, 1979; 1994), and/or as responses to crises (Cassirer, 1953). Kenneth Burke (1969) has discussed how myths function as sources of motives that transcend reason. A Burkean approach to myth and mythic stories emphasizes action (motion combined with motive), symbolism, and the “message” of the story. Such emphases enable consideration of both how mythic stories make their way through time,<sup>5</sup> and how symbolic particulars of individual performances function.

Kenneth Burke (1969) writes about myth as a rhetorical force—a necessary and mundane source of motive for human action. Without myth, Burke argues, humans would lose the source of zeal for human effort. In his discussion of Carl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke explains how the effort to unmask ideologies might simultaneously undermine myth and its terminology of human motives:

. . . a motivational problem arises, if you treat the mythic motive as on par with the ideological motives. For you find that, if your method for eliminating all such bias were successful, it would deprive society of its primary motive power. For though bias is a false promise, it is promise. Hence, if you eliminate bias (illusion) from men's social motives, where do you find an equally urgent social motive? (p. 201)

"Myth," Burke writes, "might be said to represent a forward looking partisanship, in contrast with the backward-looking partisanship of the 'ideologies'" (p. 200). Myth differs from (and surpasses) ideology when it is the consequence of mutual exposure of imperfect ideas (ideas bound in the sensory image), dialectic concerning those ideas, and summarization of the vision of the pure idea into mythic terms. Using the encounter between Phaedrus and Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Burke illustrates how disciplined, co-created arrival at the mythic image is the figuring of a motive that transcends reason. It is preferable to the unexamined acceptance of myth or the adoption of a specific ideology because these are, by nature, partial. Mythic images may also make claims to be 'religious,' since they presumably represent humans' relationship to an ultimate ground of motives not available for empirical inspection (pp. 197-208).

### **The Travels and Varieties of *Turandot***

#### **Roots in Folklore**

Variations of the story of *Turandot* have been around for centuries. This in itself does not make *Turandot* mythic, but “staying power” is one quality of myth. Folklorist Christine Goldberg (1993) charts various versions of the story in her comparative study: *Turandot's Sisters: A Study of the Folktale AT 851*.<sup>6</sup> Goldberg identifies *Turandot* as a "genetic" variation of the tale type, "The Princess Who Can Not Solve the Riddle" (also referred to as AT 851). She charts variations

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this see Herbert Spencer Robinson and Knox Wilson, *Myths & Legends of All Nations* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961) and Christine Goldberg, "The Comparative Study of Folktales," in *Turandot's Sisters: A Study of the Folktale AT 851*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 1-11.

<sup>6</sup> In her macrocosmic and structuralistic study, Christine Goldberg describes folktales as organismic, with "wholes" greater than the sum of their parts and with certain innate aesthetic forms. She observes that European tales often tend to be more rigid and complex than their Asiatic counterparts and, consequently, appropriate units of analysis will vary, depending on the tale and its origin. Recognizing the complementarity of structural analysis and historic-geographic analysis, Goldberg locates the stability of a tale within the tale itself, but explains variations of component elements as a consequence of the circumstances of its telling.

of the story through time and space (history and geography) identifying influential forms or subtypes when they appear (pp. 43-78).

Goldberg writes that *Turandot* may be traced back to its earliest literary relative, the oriental romance "Kahramaneh and the Young Prince," which was written in New Aramaic, in the style of the first century B.C.E. or A.D., somewhere between the Mediterranean Sea and the Tigris River (p.25). A variant of this story was probably translated from Arabic, and then back into Arabic, where it appeared in *The Thousand and One Days*, the supplement to the Arabian Nights—both "advice books" written for young princesses encouraging them to trust men. This story was translated from Persian in 1675 and published in France in 1710 as "The Story of Prince Calaf and the Princess of China," or "Turandot." The French story was then used by Carlo Gozzi as the basis of a play by the same name in 1762 (p. 45). Set to music by at least a dozen different composers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the story found prominence once again when it was altered and used for Puccini's opera of 1926 ("Turandot Opera", 1984).

The elements connecting all variations of "The Princess Who Can Not Solve the Riddle" are the hero, a riddle or riddles the princess cannot answer, a night visit, and the eventual marriage of the hero and princess. In all cases, the audience learns the answers to the riddles before the hero, and the riddles suggest that a contest may be won or lost, under penalty of death. The Gozzi and Puccini versions of the folktale have little currency in oral tradition (beyond the popularity of Puccini's operatic version), and are distinguished by the fact that it is the princess who first poses three riddles to the hero.

### Riddle Themes

Goldberg's broad analysis of *Turandot* and related stories leads her to a discussion of riddle themes and their significance (1993, pp. 157-167). In later versions of the tale, changes in who poses the initial riddles (from the hero to the princess) reflect changes in the character of the princess (who is now of high station and averse to marriage) and affect the implications of the story. Specifically, the change in status and the new position as initial questioner suggest the female character's relative power has increased.

Riddles, while often appearing trivial, suggest power struggles. They are ritually associated with significant contexts (judicial, political, and matrimonial), and rites of passage (puberty, weddings, and funerals). Interpersonally, riddles function to establish and challenge hierarchy, and cultural and social bonds are negotiated between riddler, riddlee, and audience (Goldberg, 1993, pp. 162-163). Riddles are common in courtship tales because they may reconcile opposites, assert or undermine power, and convey sexual innuendo (Goldberg, 1993, 164-167).

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Transformations

Goldberg (1993) suggests the popularity of "The Princess Who Can Not Solve the Riddle" may be due to its elasticity: ". . . as soon as the riddle contest is described, we know that the princess will be married to the hero. The uncertainty is *how*" (p. 191). In Puccini's version of the tale, the matter of "how" the princess comes to marry the hero is related to that process as it unfolds in Gozzi's *Turandot*, because Puccini borrowed material from Gozzi's story ("Turandot Opera," 1984, p.9).

Gozzi's dramatic fable (fiabe) bolstered conservative patriarchal and political values using lighthearted satire and a healthy dose of misogyny.<sup>7</sup> Some of this carries over into Puccini's *Turandot*. But Puccini also made substantial changes to the Gozzi version, changes that shifted the natures of the characters and the trajectory of the story (Adami & Simoni, 1929). For

<sup>7</sup> See (Gozzi, 1962) and (Di Gaetani, 1988) in Suggested Bibliography.

example, Puccini removed Gozzi's conniving servant Aldema and added the character of the self-sacrificing slave girl, Liu (perhaps inspired by a virginal servant of Puccini's who committed suicide when falsely accused of an affair with Puccini by his wife). He also changed the reason for Turandot's riddling from a generalized misandry to a murdered ancestress, Lo-U-Ling, whose tragic fate inspires Turandot's hatred of men. In a letter to Giuseppe Adami, one of his librettists, we can see the difficulties of transformation Puccini faced as he attempted to describe the sort of story he hoped for:

Make Gozzi's *Turandot* your basis, but on that you must rear another figure; I mean—I can't explain! From our imaginations (and we shall need them) there must arise so much that is beautiful and attractive and gracious as to make our story a bouquet of success. Do not make too much use of the stock characters of the Venetian drama . . . (Adami, 1971; p. 263)

To complicate matters, Puccini died before the opera was finished and before he had sorted out the ending of the story. Newly discovered sketches for the opera suggest significant cutting and pasting in the writing process, which had already complicated Puccini's ability to craft a satisfactory resolution (Atlas, 1991, pp. 173-193). The final material varies by production. One frequently used ending, (composed by Franco Alfano) is controversial, and is often edited in production. In one famous instance, it was removed altogether. On *Turandot's* opening night at La Scala, on April 25, 1926, conductor Arturo Toscanini, who apparently detested the Alfano ending, set down his baton after the last of Puccini's material (Liu's suicide and subsequent funeral procession) with words to the effect of "Here, the maestro died." With this, and without the final resolution in marriage between the hero and the princess, Toscanini closed the performance

Since its first performance at La Scala, *Turandot* has been a hit with opera audiences in major cities around the world. By the end of 1926, it had played in Parma, Naples, Rome, Venice, South America, Dresden, Vienna, Berlin, New York, and Brussels (Ashbrook & Powers, 1991, pp.156-157). Numerous and varied performances of the opera since then have been celebrated (and criticized) for their larger-than-life costuming and staging, and for the larger-than-life voices required to sing the roles. *Turandot* has also appeared in smaller opera venues across the country (e.g., Grand Rapids Opera, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006), and other forms of the story, such as the Junior Books version mentioned earlier, also circulate. Recordings, websites, radio broadcasts, and a vast amount of scholarship on what Puccini considered to be his best opera, exist in multiple languages and continue to attest to the story's widespread appeal and resonance.<sup>8</sup>

This analysis of *Turandot* is primarily concerned with sex/gender and power. These elements afford the story its international, multicultural, and periodic popularity. Every tribe, every society, and every nation must deal in some way with the human realities of sexual difference, sexual desire, and the need for offspring. In many cultures, love, marriage, and property figure prominently in these dealings. This is why *Turandot* can be based on a Persian folk tale, set in "ancient China," written in German, sung in Italian, and subtitled in English. As a myth of courtship, love, and marriage, *Turandot* travels across cultures, foregrounds issues of power, and serves as a symbolic resource for dealing with historical moments characterized by turbulent gender relations.

### **The 1998 Opera**

After years of effort and a change of official minds in China, the teatro comunale di Firenze was allowed to perform *Turandot* in 1998 at its "original site," the Imperial Temple in the Forbidden City, Beijing. Conducted by Zubin Mehta and Directed by Zhang Yimou, this *Turandot* performance cost fifteen million dollars to produce—three million more than

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<sup>8</sup> For other examples of scholarly books on Puccini's opera *Turandot* see (Ashbrook, 1968), (Carner, 1968) and (Weaver & Puccini, 1994) in Suggested Bibliography.

projected—and ran for two weeks. Extravagant and controversial, the production created a stir in the opera world and beyond. After some criticism, a few reduced-priced seats at the live performance (approximately \$25.00 U.S.—still a relatively huge investment) were reserved for locals who could not possibly have afforded the \$150.00-\$1,250.00 priced tickets (Fang, 1998, p. 44). For the most part, however, pricing and location made the live performance almost exclusively an event for the wealthy opera fanatic and the elite, "globe trotting glitterati." To pay for its extraordinary expenses, the opera received some money from the Chinese government, but it also sought and found corporate sponsorship, and hoped for additional income from a video recorded version of one of the performances.

### **The 1998 PBS Video**

This analysis of *Turandot* refers to the video recorded version of the opera for two reasons. First, the video version reached, and continues to reach, a wider audience than the live performance. Broadcast on PBS stations with healthy promotion, and flanked by a one-hour show on the making of the opera (the story of the making of the story), the video version of *Turandot* brought the opera into the homes of people who could not have seen it live. These viewers were likely opera fans with less money to spend than live attendees, or PBS aficionados undaunted by subtitles and foreign voices. Video recordings of the opera and its making continue to be available for borrowing, rental, and sale, so interested parties may still view it or obtain copies of it, and share it with friends.

Second, the video version of *Turandot* is crafted for viewing in a unique way. Unlike the spectacle of live performance where audiences are inundated with a wide array of environmental stimuli and distanced from much of the action, the video version's selective and varied camera angles, abbreviated subtitles, and supplemental visuals distill the story of the opera and lead viewers to read the story in certain ways. My analysis of the story of *Turandot*, then, is based on the music and images as they were adapted to and presented in the video, and the story as it is told (written) in the subtitles of the video.<sup>9</sup>

### **Analysis of the 1998 PBS Video of the Opera Turandot**

#### **Getting to Know You: Compatibility and Attraction**

Because opera is a theatrical form big on theme and symbolism, and short on nuance, the drama of courtship begins immediately. At the outset of the first act, the hero, "the unknown Prince" (Calaf), is reunited with his father, the deposed King Timur. As Timur's son, Calaf is qualified to attempt the riddles of *Turandot* who, according to the law ". . . shall wed a man of royal blood who solves three riddles she sets forth. . . ." This law, designed by *Turandot* herself, requires a "prince" to match her as "princess." Taken literally, we can read this as a requirement, in companionate relationships, for similar social status.

Metaphorically, however, "similar status" may mean similar levels of talent, education, autonomy, and/or other qualities, including what Russell (1929) would call "a certain similarity in regard to standards and values" (p. 143). It may also signify shared interests or areas of expertise. In this sense, the similar status implied by *Turandot*'s decree does not necessarily signify a requirement of equality, or of equal socioeconomic status, but the sort of shared territory of expertise, interests, and/or values that characterize many successful adult relationships.

The importance of shared expertise, interest and/or values to companionate relations is also illustrated in the character of Liu. Liu is a slave girl who has cared for King Timur. She loves Calaf unrequitedly and has taken care of Timur for the sake of that love. On the face of it, Liu's poverty and enslavement (socioeconomic status) disqualify her from an "equal" relationship

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<sup>9</sup> The subtitles were transcribed by the author. Due to space limitations, the ten-page transcription of the opera captions is not included as an appendix.

with Calaf (she is a slave; he is her master). As a metaphor, she functions as the quintessential symbol of a profoundly power-imbalanced and thus untenable love match.

As Calaf and Timur reunite, a failed suitor of Turandot's, the Prince of Persia, is sent to his death. The people of Peking are perversely enthralled with the execution, but they also entreat Turandot to have mercy. Slowly, the Prince of Persia walks on stage carrying the means of his own execution (his head literally on a chopping block that he carries on his shoulders.). The chorus sings of his youth, nobility, bravery, courage, and even his apparent joy. With the wave of a hand, Turandot sends the Prince offstage, to his death. Before the axe falls, he sings out Turandot's name one last time.

Sometimes parallels are drawn between the Prince of Persia's love for Turandot and Liu's love for Calaf. But unlike Liu, the Prince of Persia is metaphorically "qualified" as a potential love-interest (he is a prince). Often, the execution is read as a sign of Turandot's cruelty. Yet unlike the people of Peking, she is not bloodthirsty. We find that Turandot created the law of the riddles in an attempt to *deter* the action of suitors and she even tries to dissuade strangers from the challenge, as she eventually does with Calaf.

Reading the death of the prince figuratively, we see the Prince of Persia representing a "mismatch" for Turandot. Though he is qualified for courtship at one level (as a prince), he has failed at courtship on another. He is quite simply a sign for the rejected suitor, a person who seeks relationship with another person, but in failing to understand that person ends up "getting his head chopped off." The peoples' perverse interest in the Prince of Persia's execution can be compared to popular interest in celebrity break-ups so commonly dramatized in modern tabloids.

Like other suitors before him, the Prince of Persia could not answer Turandot's riddles correctly. This is because Turandot's riddles are not simply intellectual challenges, they are also "about" Turandot herself (Goldberg, 187). Answering Turandot's riddles requires a proper frame of mind both intellectually *and* emotionally. Answering correctly also requires that the suitor have a sense of self (knowing who he is) and a sense of Turandot (who she thinks she is).

It's not just that previous suitors were unlucky, it's that they didn't "get" (the riddles of) Turandot—they didn't understand themselves and their own motivations well enough, nor did they understand her needs, desires, values, and aims. Like differences of interests, values, or other qualities, failures of relationship caused by immaturity and/or the inability to understand or empathize with others can be a serious hardship. One of the tasks of courtship is to discover if romantic partners are sensitive to each other's complexities.

Because the Prince of Persia could not answer Turandot's riddles, his love for her is "put to death." In all unrequited loves, if the lover is to love again, he or she must eventually give up on efforts to win the beloved. Stalkers may deny rejection out of fear or arrogance, but the noble and courageous go to their "love death" joyfully. In contrast to connections between the sun and life and love, the chorus tells us the "graves" of failed lovers await the moon's rising to "receive their dead." In this dramatization, (male) courage and bravery are figured as relational and romantic. The brave man is not, in this case, a soldier or an athlete who subdues his opponent; he is the man who faces the rejection of a woman the way he should face death: without denial, anger, or remorse. This bravery is similar to that exhibited by Liu in her later aria which also signifies a "love death." Not surprisingly, recently discovered documents suggest that Liu's funeral music in Act III may have been conceived originally as the Act I funeral music for the Prince of Persia (Atlas, 1991, p. 192).

When Prince Calaf sees Turandot for the first time, he is enchanted. Despite the reason for Turandot's arrival (to signal the Prince of Persia's execution) Calaf is "sick with love" at the sight of her. This visual appeal can be understood both literally and figuratively. Literally, Turandot is good looking and Calaf finds her attractive; metaphorically, Calaf "sees" beauty in Turandot. Because the matter of initial attraction is not as essential to courtship as other events, "love at first sight" is a useful operatic convention for condensing matters and making time for other action.



While love relationships between individuals are not typical of Mythology, some Oriental stories do address it. In these stories, Amor, or the romantic "love of the eyes," exists beyond social norms (such as marriage), and is a mysterious and often disruptive force in itself (Campbell, 1988, p. 7). In the *Kama Sutra*, for instance, Vatsyayana (1964) mentions "Love of the eye" as the first of ten increasing degrees of love (p. 173). In the Western world, however, the ideal of love has become a social system (Campbell, 1988, p.7). Where arranged marriage and children once dictated marriage, "love" now figures significantly as both motivator and glue of marital relations.<sup>10</sup> Because of this, Western notions of marriage are primarily spiritual (Campbell, 1988, p. 7). "When you make the sacrifice in marriage," says Campbell:

you're sacrificing not to each other but to unity in a relationship . . . You're no longer this one alone; your identity is in a relationship. Marriage is not a simple love affair, it's an ordeal, and the ordeal is the sacrifice of ego to a relationship in which two have become one. . . It's not simply doing one's own thing, you see. It is, in a sense, doing one's own thing, but the one isn't just you, it's the two together as one. And that's a purely mythological image signifying the sacrifice of the visible entity for a transcendent good. (p. 7)

The myth of Turandot combines an appreciation for the power of individual romantic love relations with the Western notion of companionate marriage. In companionate marriages, as opposed to arranged marriages or marriages of convenience, success in partnership is seen as a kind of death<sup>11</sup> of the individual:

there are at least two major incentives to equate Love *with* Death . . . Physiologically, the sense of release through sexual orgasm can be likened to a pleasurable form of dying (an association frequently found in poetry). Sociologically, there is the fact that the lovers' immersion in a common identity implies the 'death' of whatever separate identities they may have outside the circle of their mutual engrossment. It is a way of "transcending" ordinary "mortal" concerns, a kind of claim to "immortality" . . . (Burke, 1966, p. 389)

Such a partnership demands not just coordinated action and interdependence, but fairness, shared values, intimacy, and freedom (Russell, 1929, 143).

Campbell (1988) points out that an "elementary aspect" of marriage is the perpetuation of self in children (p. 7). Not surprisingly, children figure into the scene of Calaf's and Turandot's first meeting. In the background, a chorus of young voices can be heard. They lend poignancy to Turandot's icy state, which might otherwise appear simply brutal. Their song sounds like lamentation:

The stork sang high above the mountains. But April did not yet return . . . and snow still lay cold upon the ground. From the desert to the sea, a thousand voices sigh. O princess, come, and bring with you the springtime! (PBS, 1998)

Signs of fertility such as the stork, the children's chorus, and the thaw of springtime suggest Turandot's chill may be at least partly a measure of untapped procreative potential.

### **Getting to Know You More: Do You Understand Me?**

When Calaf falls for Turandot, he announces his intentions to undergo the test of riddles. Others try to dissuade him from what they believe to be grave folly with arguments of the kind that a person would have to resist if they wanted to follow Amor. First Timur and Liu make their pleas. Timur represents the father who does not want to lose his child and his heir. Liu represents the lover whose affections may or may not be returned, but whose other qualities, interests, values, and/or concerns make companionate relationship impossible. Neither succeeds in their efforts. Turandot's father, Altoum, also tries to dissuade Calaf from trying to answer the

<sup>10</sup> For more on the companionate marriage, its appearance in times and places when women gain relative (economic, reproductive) power to men, and the special challenges it poses to those who participate in it, see (Fromm, 1956), (Borowitz, 1969), and (Peterson, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Ping, Pang and Pong's extended comparison of marriages and funerals in Act II may be related to this idea.

riddles. However, even Altoum, revered and most powerful Emperor, cannot override the power of Amor and convince the unknown Prince to his change plans.

Ping, Pang, and Pong, characters of the *commedia del arte*, also try to dissuade Calaf from his decision. They threaten him with the grizzly consequences of failure and act as mouthpieces for various sexist ideas. "Give up women or marry a hundred," they say, women are all the same: "even the sublime Turandot has only one face, two arms, two legs" (PBS, 1998). Moreover, Turandot (the Amor she represents, the image Calaf has of her in his mind) doesn't exist: only the Tao exists. Showing Calaf a picture of a bloody sword, Ping Pang and Pong use a sign of castration as a signifier in a second level of meaning. At the second level, castration signifies the loss of masculinity (of masculine disability, of being unmanned). This fear is related to power relations between the sexes and perhaps also to sexual performance; it differs from the fear of rejection and "love death" symbolized in the story by decapitation.

Ping, Pang, and Pong also fantasize the solution of the political and social ills of China: Turandot surrendering to a lover. In this imaginary scenario, Turandot is aflame with passion, and realizes that despite her mighty empire, it is her husband who rules the palace. This conventional patriarchal fantasy reveals the trio doesn't really understand the challenge facing Turandot or Calaf.

Turandot the princess has power and pride. She will not easily give up what she has and change who she is for a man/husband.<sup>12</sup> Like a modern-day feminist, or "self-made" individualist, Turandot will not be won simply or solely by the kisses of a prince, or by the broader pleasures of the body they may signify. At the same time, Calaf will need to grow and mature in relationship to Turandot, and this will include surrendering his power and control over her.<sup>13</sup>

After the law of the riddles is read and before the riddles are presented, Turandot explains the reason for the contest: the vanquished ancestress Princess Lo-U-Ling. In Puccini's telling of the mythic story, Turandot's chill does not come out of a vacuum—she has reasons for hating men. Men conquered and silenced her ancient predecessor. Her anger does not come from actions taken against her directly, but from actions (some) men took against other women. Like the daughter of a deserted or divorced and bitter mother, or like a girl or woman who has seen too many of her girlfriends abused by men, or like a feminist who takes on the cause of women who suffer from domestic violence and other abuses, Turandot's hatred and disdain for men stems from harms inflicted upon others, rather than on herself personally. This harm may have been rape (as signified by conquered lands and references to Princess Lo-U-Ling's purity), but Turandot's words also refer to the silencing of a voice. The silencing (death) of Princess Lo-U-Ling, then, signifies not simply the conquering of a woman's body, but also her spirit.

Despite Turandot's explanation and final warnings, Calaf asks for the riddles. This insistence may be seen as arrogance or youthful enthusiasm, but as the riddles progress Calaf proves himself more than simply proud or bold. Encouraged by the chorus of "failed lovers" from Act I, Calaf answers each riddle correctly. Singing with optimistic words, he refutes Turandot's pessimism at every opportunity.

Turandot's first riddle is this:

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<sup>12</sup> In her interesting interpretation of Puccini's Turandot, Smith (1996) finds vestiges of Gozzi's more female-identified (lesbian) Turandot. Educated and articulate women, she argues, present a threat that the mythic story of Turandot subdues (in Gozzi's version, by means of conservative, aristocratic, patriarchal, and Roman Catholic misogyny; in Puccini's version, by means of love, heterosexuality, and marriage). While Smith reads Turandot as a lesbian, the insight that the popularity of Turandot coincides with the emergence of "strong women" is relevant whether one sees heterosexual love and marriage as ideologies (and false consciousness) or as a "forward looking partnerships" and motives for action. <sup>13</sup>See Balkin (1990)

There hovers in the dark of night a phantom of many colors. It spreads its wings and soars high above all human life. All the world invokes it...and all the world implores it. But the phantom vanishes at dawn...to be reborn in the heart. Every night it is born anew, only to die again each day. (PBS, 1998).

To it, Calaf answers, "Yes...it is reborn! It is reborn, rejoicing, and it carries me upon its wings! Turandot...it is Hope!" (PBS, 1998). The passion and optimism in Calaf's voice expresses not simply the joy of "getting" the riddle, but also Calaf's "hopes" concerning Turandot. She counters with "Yes, Hope...which always fails us" (PBS, 1998). Yet despite Turandot's pessimism, her suitor does well and stays positive. In answering the question correctly and expressing the very hope that Turandot says "always fails us," Calaf does not fail her; he keeps the "hope" of romantic possibilities alive.

Turandot gives a second riddle:

It darts like a flame...but it is not fire. At times it brings delirium, and burns like a fever. Inertia leads it to languor. If you are lost, or die, it grows cold.[!] If you dream of conquest, it flares again [!] Its voice fills you with dread...and its glow is like the sunset [!] (PBS, 1998)

Again, Calaf succeeds in answering the riddle. "Yes, Princess!" he sings, "It surges, and yet it wants. It courses through my body [!] It is Blood!" (PBS, 1998). For Calaf, the answer "blood" comes to his mind, but not in a way implied by conquest, dread, or death. In his energetic response, Calaf refigures blood in more romantic, sexual terms; his blood "surges" and "wants." Such passion, consistently expressed to a love interest, is a vote of confidence in a physical direction, not only by the person expressing the passion, but also for the promise of a return from the person to whom it is expressed.

This leads to Turandot's final riddle:

Ice that sets you afire...and fire that turns to ice. It is both light and dark. In wanting you free, it enslaves you. It enslaves you and makes you a king. Come now, stranger! You are pale with fear. And you know you are lost. Tell me, stranger! What is the ice that turns to fire? [!] (PBS, 1998)

To this Calaf replies, "My victory now has made you mine! My fire thaws your heart of ice...Turandot!" (PBS, 1998). In this final riddle, Turandot, herself, *is* the answer to the question.

The answer to the third riddle is "Turandot" herself—a direct reference to the importance of having a sense of who the other person in a relationship is (and who they think they are). Unlike previous suitors, Calaf "gets" or "understands" (all three riddles of) Turandot. He isn't simply lucky, he has the right intellectual and emotional frame of mind to hear the riddles in the right way. Once the last riddle is answered, Calaf asserts his (eventual) success: "My fire thaws your heart of ice . . . Turandot." At this, the "losers' chorus" celebrates in song, but the celebration is premature (PBS, 1998).

### **Assessing Affections: Do You Love Me?**

Turandot, re-dressed in a red robe (symbolizing marriage in China) pleads with her father, the emperor, to spare her the consequences of the law of the riddles. She argues against his sacred oath to honor the law (designed by Turandot herself and representative of man-made law) by appealing to the sacredness of a daughter (representative of natural law). Turandot begs her father not to give her over to a man as if she were a slave, but Altoum's oath is binding. Calaf is moved by Turandot's fear and backs off from claiming his prize, despite his "legal" right. He offers a counter-riddle: "Tell me my name . . . before the dawn. And at dawn I shall die" (PBS, 1998). In response, the chorus sings of Calaf's bravery and daring and the emperor prays that at break of day, Calaf will become his son.

Calaf's counter-riddle is full of symbolic significance. On the one hand, Calaf seems to hand over power to Turandot by not immediately "claiming his prize." He seems moved by her argument to prefer natural law (love) over man-made law (arranged marriage) and gives Turandot a chance to get rid of him even after successfully answering the three riddles. On the other hand,

a person asking a riddle (in this case, Calaf) usually has more power than the person to whom a riddle is posed, because the person asking the riddle knows the answer.

With this counter-riddle, the emperor Altoum, and the chorus, embrace Calaf as a worthy suitor. Calaf is able to "get," understand, and empathize with the Princess, and his counter-riddle shows that he wants her only if she is "burning with love." Such qualities are good enough to satisfy Turandot's royal father and the people, but they are not good enough for Turandot.

The wording of Calaf's counter-riddle is also noteworthy: "Tell me my name . . . before the dawn. And at dawn I shall die" (PBS, 1998). Literally, Calaf seems to be saying that he will let Turandot kill him if she can discover his name by morning (Calaf is still only known as "the unknown Prince" to all but Timur and Liu—and Turandot is known for executions). Metaphorically, however, death is both a sign for a failed suitor—the ending of an unrequited love, and a sign for the death of the ego when two individuals in a romantic couple become one. That both implications could be read in Calaf's riddle leaves his fate open to how Turandot figures herself in the events that follow.

The decree given by Princess Turandot in Act II is "let no one sleep." On pain of death, the stranger's name must be revealed before the dawn. Calaf echoes this decree in *Nessun Dorma*, a romantic aria made more popular by its appearance in numerous venues:<sup>14</sup>

Let no one sleep. And you, O Princess . . . there in your lonely chamber, you gaze at the stars. They tremble with love and hope. But my secret is locked within me. No one shall know my name! Only upon your lips shall I reveal it . . . as the morning light appears. My kiss shall break the silence that makes you mine . . . O night, depart . . . and stars, grow pale! Let them fade from the sky! At dawn, I shall be victorious! (PBS, 1998).

The Princess will let no one sleep on pain of death (associating with the moon, the night, and failed lovers), but Calaf wants the Princess sleepless with love and hope. He banishes the stars from the sky with an eye to the morning, light, sun, and love.

The secret locked within Calaf is his name, but proper names are more than labels—they "stand for" unique individuals. Calaf says no one will know his name but Turandot—he will reveal it on her lips (with a kiss). This suggests exclusive relationship, with the kiss a sign of the physical aspect of lovemaking. Calaf seems to be saying that this is how he will "be victorious," but he also says, "My kiss shall break the silence that makes you mine" (PBS, 1998). If Calaf's kiss is the speaking of his name, then the handing over of that name would free Turandot from her obligation to marry (and allow her to kill him). From this perspective, Calaf's victory requires that he willingly undermine his advantage over her. (Balkin, 1990).

The significance of Calaf's name also may be read backward from the end of the opera. In the third and final Act, after Calaf tells Turandot his "proper" name, she announces to the people of Peking "His name is Love." Reading backward to Calaf's aria, then, we may substitute "love" for Calaf's name: "Only upon your lips shall I reveal [love]" (PBS, 1998). Reading the aria thus, Calaf's claim that he will be victorious is not simply the result of him giving Turandot control over his life. It is the ego death he is willing to undergo that will engender love in Turandot and bring the two together into the "morning light" of a freely entered union.

Ping, Pang, and Pong again try to dissuade Calaf from his pursuit of Turandot. Like populist hucksters of any era or culture, they tempt Calaf with pleasures of sex, riches, and glory—all distractions that can lead people away from Amor to other pursuits. Calaf rejects all their enticements, begging the dawn to "dispel this nightmare" (PBS, 1998).

Later, Timur and Liu are brought forward as prisoners. As Turandot demands the prisoners speak Calaf's name, Calaf must watch them suffer under her torture. That Calaf forsakes these loving and most beloved people in his pursuit of Turandot suggests the necessary though unenviable posture of the serious suitor. Liu steps forward, claiming to be the only one who

<sup>14</sup> Pavarotti sang the aria at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy, it is popular at Three Tenors concerts and on romantic compilation CDs, it appears in a Barbara Streisand film, etc.

knows Calaf's name (or, re-reading back from the end of the story--Liu is the only one who "knows love" of Calaf). When Turandot asks what it is that gives Liu such a strong heart, Liu says "Amor." Turandot echoes the word "Amor" and for a moment the voices are in harmony. Liu sings sweetly of the joy her love for Calaf brings, despite (and even because of) her abject condition. She "gives" Turandot Calaf's love, predicts Turandot's eventual love for Calaf, and then kills herself with a stake grabbed from Turandot's headdress.

Liu appears as the self-sacrificing feminine victim of love—the kind of heroine Puccini was best at creating (e.g., *Madama Butterfly*). An entirely original addition by Puccini to the Turandot story, Liu is often seen as peripheral, episodic, and inessential. Some critics say Liu exists outside the drama of the story, and simply adds pathos to an otherwise cold and disturbing scenario.<sup>15</sup> Other critics say the addition of Liu causes difficulties in plot (Valente, 1971, p. 84). Specifically, devising romance between Liu's torturer and Calaf is seen as awkward and insulting, especially so soon after Liu's death. If we take Liu's character metaphorically, however, new implications appear.

Self-sacrifice and femininity notwithstanding, Liu also belongs with the Prince of Persia in the more general category: unrequited lover. She expresses her love for Calaf explicitly, in song, and metaphorically in her assertion that only she "knows his name." However, Calaf does not love Liu (and she acknowledges this). In order for Calaf to "win" Turandot, Liu's love for Calaf must die. Like partners retained for the sake of convenience and losers in love triangles strung along by those who can not, do not, or will not love them back, Liu must give up on a losing proposition so that the object of her affections can be free to love another. Liu's death, then, like the Prince of Persia's death, represents the death of love. While the Prince of Persia had to bravely face death in execution (rejection), Liu must bravely face death in suicide (sacrifice), that is, she must relinquish Calaf, the object of her affections, and all the hope and possibilities to her that he represents.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim (1976) explains how, in many fairy tales, a hero or heroine actually may be distributed among several characters, each of whom represents a different aspect or stage of in that character's life. For example, he argues, we may read the story of the three little pigs *not* as a story of three different pigs, but as a story of one pig progressively learning to build stronger and stronger houses to resist the attacks of the wolf (pp. 44-45). Similarly, we may see the female characters in the story of Turandot as representing different situations or stages in the life of one female, and the male characters in the story of Turandot as representing different situations or stages in the life of one male.

The female characters, Turandot and Liu, occupy opposite situations: one is loved but does not love back (or at least not yet), and the other loves but her love is not returned. Neither is necessarily more emotionally mature than the other, nor is one necessarily an earlier form of the other, still, each represents a possible moment or span of time in a woman's life. The male characters, Calaf and the Prince of Persia also occupy opposite situations: one loves and progresses in his efforts and the other loves but fails in his efforts. Again, neither is better than the other, nor is one an earlier form of the other, still, each represent a possible moment or span of time in a man's life. Timur, and Altoum each represent paternal situations, the former is the father of the lover, the latter is a judge, and the father of the beloved (and betrothed). Each of these two must come to terms with love, its disruptive power (particularly in the face of law) and its potential beauty.

### **Victory: Does Love Transcend Power?**

Liu's suicide is treated as profound, but quickly acknowledged and reconciled. When Timur exclaims, "O dreadful crime. . . We will all atone for it. . . The offended spirit will be

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<sup>15</sup> As described on the album cover of Pradelli, F. M. (Conductor) (1966). *Great Scenes from Turandot*. Rome Opera Orchestra and Chorus: Angel-EMI Records.

avenged!" there seems reason to fear (PBS, 1998). Yet because the offended spirit is love, there may be reason for hope instead. In this emotionally charged moment, Calaf and Turandot are left alone together. Their dialogue suggests a new line of contention. When Calaf says, "behold the innocent blood that was shed for you," Turandot asserts her distance from it all (PBS, 1998). She insists she is "no mortal being," a "Daughter of Heaven," "Free and pure," and that her soul "dwells on high" (PBS, 1998).

With blood the sign of life and passion, we see Turandot trying to make a transcendental escape. However, Calaf wishes to (re)introduce her to her body, and does so with a much (verbally) resisted kiss. Frequently, this kiss is interpreted as rape (stage notes have Calaf "rip away" Turandot's veil and seize her with force), but this is not the only way to read the scene. Calaf says "with burning hands I will grasp the hem of your robe . . . I will press my trembling lips upon yours . . . To feel you alive!" (PBS, 1998). Clearly Calaf is full of energy and even force, but his desire seems to be more than simple self-gratification. With burning hands and trembling lips (and starting at her hem), Calaf wants to bring Turandot's own body to life. In full voice and right before the kiss, Calaf sings "But your kiss gives me eternity!" Read more literally, physical intimacy is a means by which men may participate in the infinite (spiritual/sexual bliss and/or having children).

Turandot is physically awakened by Calaf's kiss. Visibly shaken, she asks, "What has become of me?" and "How did you win me?" Some critics locate Calaf's victory here, and some variations of the ending make it seem that this is the place where Turandot "succumbs," but this is not the case in the version performed in the *Forbidden City* PBS video. In this version, although Calaf has impressed Turandot physically, she is still not "sold" on him. She weeps, saying "Let no one see me. My glory is ended . . . Do not seek a greater victory. Depart, O stranger! And carry your secret with you" (PBS, 1998). These are not the exclamations of a woman who wants to be in a relationship—they are the exclamations of a woman who fears her weakness for intimacy has been discovered and will be exploited. Despite Turandot's obvious responsiveness to Calaf's physicality, she would still, at this point, prefer him to depart and carry his secret (his name—his love) with him.

This situation is not uncommon in the lives of women. In some cases, women decide that having no partner is better than having a partner who can't be trusted, or a partner who won't commit himself fully in relationship or marriage. There are other times when a woman turns away from a partner who has the potential to radically transform her life, even if she enjoys that partner physically. The skeptical woman, the independent-minded woman, the virgin who wants to "wait until marriage," the career woman, the woman who has been burned by past loves; all these, and others, might be implied by Turandot's character.

Up until now, Calaf has passed many "tests." He is similar enough in interests, values and/or other qualities to be at least a possible match for Turandot, and he has proved himself a match by answering Turandot's riddles correctly. He has avoided typical sexist pitfalls (as argued by Ping, Pang, and Pong), and has resisted the easy route of forced marriage to instead seek the harder victory of Amor. In the name of Amor, he has forsaken his family, his friends, and the emperor, and he has even stoked the flame of Turandot's desire. At this crucial moment, however, Calaf does one last and most important thing—he tells Turandot his name: "I have no secret now . . . you are mine! You who tremble at my touch can destroy me if you wish! I give you my name and my life! I am Calaf . . . son of King Timur!" (PBS, 1998).

At *this* moment, Turandot comes around. With great energy, she sings "I know your name!" Then she refers to him directly: "Calaf, come stand with me before the people!" To this, Calaf replies "You have conquered." In the end she announces, "Venerable father! I know the stranger's name! His name is Love!" (PBS, 1998).

What "wins" Turandot here is the gift of Calaf's life, that is, his "ego death." Unlike a material gift of life such as military sacrifice, where a man gives his life in battle for a cause, Calaf's gift is spiritual. By relinquishing the power over Turandot that he had gained by

answering the riddles, and by telling her the answer to his own riddle, Calaf proves his love to Turandot and is victorious. He is willing to share, even give up control over his own life. He gives Turandot the power to execute (reject) him and in doing so leaves her free to claim him as her partner, if she wants, from a position of power. Before saying his name, Calaf is a man worth loving, but that is all. After giving his name, Calaf becomes something more: a man worthy of a companionate love relationship, in this case, marriage. In response, Turandot 'conquers' her skepticism, her hostilities, and her fears on an individual level, and her victory foreshadows even greater benefits for the people of Peking.

### Conclusion

Beholden to no one culture, the various transformations and periodic resurgence in popularity of the myth of Turandot suggest a deep connection to the human psyche. Of course, the 1998 video production of Puccini's opera is only one version of the story, and the analysis offered here is only one interpretation of the performance. In real life, most women are not princesses and most men are not princes. Likewise, suitors are not usually beheaded, answering riddles does not typically lead to marriage, and love and power are not reconciled in a few short hours. And yet, torture is often part of courtship, unrequited lovers can suffer great pain and loss, and there can be much to lose (or gain) in love-relations and marriage. The benefit of this analysis is not simply that it recognizes these facts in a popular, mythic story, but that it teases out the metaphorical guidelines of courtship by which audiences of this version of Turandot may proceed.

Not coincidentally, the story of Turandot appears when and where women have made quick and significant progress asserting their individual autonomy. In Gozzi's intellectually and politically tumultuous Italy of the mid 1700s; in Puccini's post WWI Italy, Europe, and "Roaring Twenties" America; and in the sex-revolutionary latter half of the twentieth century; the story of Turandot has been revisited and refigured. These varied (re)appearances suggest the complications women's autonomy brings to traditional marital practices. When women gain power relative to men, they challenge foundational social practices, disturb the social order and, like some Turandots across time, breed fear in the public imaginary.

As a "forward looking partisanship," myth differs from ideology when it is the consequence of mutual exposure to imperfect ideas, dialectic over these ideas, and summarizing the resulting pure vision in mythic terms (Burke, 1969, p. 200). Puccini's opera fits this description. Other manifestations of the story such as the 1995 young teen "junior books" version by Marianna Mayer are part of this phenomenon. These and other mythic images are 'religious' to the extent they represent humans' relationships to an ultimate and otherwise inaccessible ground of human motives.

What the 1998 PBS video version of Puccini's opera, *Turandot*, offers, then, is not simply a story "evolved" through time, or an "ideology of love" where hetero-normative patriarchy tries to reinscribe "traditional" marriage practices. Instead, this version of "the Princess Who Can Not Solve the Riddle" is a source of zeal in human courtship and motive for related human actions. It offers an ideal or myth of relationship, specifically marriage, in which love—a spiritual force—figures prominently. In this ideal, the best partner is a person of similar enough interests, values, and/or other qualities who "gets" (understands) the other, avoids sexist and relational pitfalls to Amor, stirs desires, relinquishes power over the other, and is willing to "die" the ego death required for a transcendent union. Put simply, the 1998 PBS video version of Puccini's opera offers hope in dating and a rationale for marriage.

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