

# Freud's Couch: A Case History

MARINA WARNER

---

A symbol is something of a time machine. It's an inconceivable compression of the time taken by operations of the spirit.

—Paul Valéry, *Mauvaises pensées*

THE *Arabian Nights* is a book of stories told in bed: in the celebrated frame story, Shahrazad instructs her younger sister, Dunyazad, to ask for a story after she has made love with the Sultan of the Indies, her husband, and excite his curiosity about the outcome. In this way Shahrazad and Dunyazad defer the sentence of death night after night. In the tales of 1001 nights that follow, many nighttime adventures take place in many different beds. Some beds have a dramatic part to play: in “Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles,” for example, one makes its appearance at the end, and represents the lovers’ state of transport when they embark on it and sail out of the window to fly back home to Alexandria.

In some translations of the tale the bed is not a bed as such, but a flying sofa, and in the oriental tales that followed the *Nights*, a *sopha* became the coded site of passion—sometimes licit, sometimes illicit. The word *sofa* from *suffah* in Arabic, a bench, is recorded in English from 1717 onward. In Europe and America, the sofa presented a comfier alternative to the carved settee or settle. Other words from the Near and Middle East were also borrowed to name novel seating arrangements, such as *divan* (1702 in English) and *ottoman* (1806 in English). In both English and French, such words summon visions of luxuriating on a kind of daybed, and associations with other Eastern comforts, such as garden swings, sometimes draped and upholstered, color the appearance of the sofa in both fact and fiction.

Such places for lounging and loafing turn up with almost comical insistence in scenes of bliss in orientalist picture making, images

produced by foreign and local artists alike; domestic scenes show interiors lined with sofas, covered in carpets, and scattered with brocade throws, satin cushions, and figured tapestries. Sofas became the epitome of oriental hedonism, of Ottoman culture, luxury, and sophistication, the place where daydreaming readers lie, bringing up imaginary voyages in their mind's eye, stimulated by the words and images on the printed or illuminated page. In a Turkish or Egyptian interior, as recorded by the Swiss-born artist Jean-Étienne Liotard (*A Woman Reading*, ca.1750), and later, pictured by John Frederick Lewis (*A Lady Receiving Visitors*, 1873), for example, the oriental sofa becomes a nesting place for dreams and pleasure, a daybed, a low lying couch for reclining and abandoning oneself, alone or with others—to lovemaking, autoeroticism, smoking, daydreaming, storytelling, reading and studying, quietness and reflection. Such sybaritic mores excited Western admiration, and the furnishings were much copied.

The bliss figured by the flying bed in “Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles” suffuses some of the earliest licentious parodies of the *Nights*: sofas became a cipher for forbidden intimacies in works like Claude Crébillon’s novel *Le Sopha* (1742), a jocular homage to the *Nights* which tells its story mostly in the first-person voice of the sofa. The seating became such a fashion in London society in the 1780s that when the poet William Cowper was suffering one of his severe depressions, his friend Lady Austen, thinking that writing something light would help him to rally, set him “the sofa” for his theme. Cowper, who was devout as well as depressive (he wrote the famous hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”), rose loquaciously to the occasion in a sequence of mock-Miltonic poems he called *The Task*:

I sing the Sofa. . .  
 Thus first Necessity invented stools,  
 Convenience next suggested elbow chairs,  
 And Luxury th’ accomplished sofa last.

Both the flippant licentiousness of Crébillon’s concoction and the mock-solemn loftiness of Cowper pick up the sofa’s links with

sex and secrecy, with pleasure and carnal knowledge. When lovers embark on a flying carpet or bed in the *Arabian Nights*, a constellation of objects forms, communicating pleasure, coziness, intimacy, magical powers, and enchantments. Together, they assemble a space for love, and in some ways, they reflect the original setting of the storytelling: the bed where Shahrazad, the Sultan, and Dunyazad are secluded. Those tales are unfolding in the nighttime, whereas the flying sofas in a tale like “Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles” are strictly daybeds and, as furnishings, suggest a specific form of consciousness: the state of reverie that arises when someone is still awake or semi-awake, and in a receptive state of consciousness. Such beds stimulate daydream rather than dream, and tap into subconsciousness rather than unconsciousness. In such states of reverie, the mind opens to “l’invitation au voyage,” to travel toward “luxe, calme et volupté.”



This relation between couch, confession, erotics, daydreaming, and storytelling reverberates wonderfully in the figure of the most famous daybed in modern culture and a prime site of modern fantasy: Freud’s analytical couch, which he covered with an oriental rug and cushions. Were there reasons for this choice? No other analyst imitated him, as far as records show, then or since: clinical austerity is the note most of his colleagues and followers prefer to strike. Were they deliberate, these confessional and erotic associations of the oriental sofa? Can we detect a sense of mischief and provocation on Freud’s part? In her catalogue to the exhibition *Die Couch: Thinking in Repose*, Lydia Marinelli writes that Freud’s choice of “examination bed” “opens a wide spectrum of experience between dreaming and waking, dissoluteness and moral control.” It serves as a therapeutic instrument, as a site of free association, and as a vehicle of poetic production. From a prone position, “the clear certainties of thought can be diverted from their course into a twilight state of drowsiness and further into the anaesthetized state of sleep or into the depths of illegitimate sexuality.”

There is plenty to analyze in the stories of the *Nights*, but I am more interested in interpreting the symbols Freud chose to set the scene for his hermeneutics. It would be unfair, though tempting, to draw attention to his given name in Judaism: Schlomo, Solomon. Yet nothing was accidental for Freud in the psychopathology of everyday life, so his choice of furniture for the treatment of his patients was designed to help them tell him their stories and their dreams. He covered his couch with “the Smyrna rug” that he had been given for an engagement present, and added other oriental rugs and cushions. Did Freud’s consulting room present a careful *mise-en-scène* for the modern variation on Shahrazad’s talking cure, for continuing the “nocturnal poetics” of the Arabic fantasy tradition?



Freud called the couch an ottoman or, at other times, his examination or consulting bed, but it is referred to now as “the analytical couch.” It is the prime symbol of psychoanalysis, and its presence in his final home, 20 Maresfield Gardens, Hampstead, London (now the Freud Museum), is truly auratic. This sofa has taken on all the qualities of a relic; saturated with historic memories, it stands as a powerful witness, a thing changed and affected by its uses, charmed. The curtains are drawn to preserve Freud’s *Wunderkammer*—his collection of books and works of art, prints, pots, and statuettes, fabrics and carpets including rugs on the floor and on the furniture, and, most notably, “the Smyrna rug” on the couch.

Freud’s library-study has become a modern shrine, where the presence of the great man can be felt, conducted through his possessions, his things; the couch is its centerpiece and now lies beyond a barrier. In a secular spirit, the room offers a prophet for veneration, and assembles attendant genii around his twin cenotaphs: his seat at the desk—a swivel chair which was made for him by a friend to look like a Cycladic goddess, with a violin-shaped body—and the arm-chair positioned behind the head of the couch. He called his collections “my old and dirty gods” in a letter to his friend Fliess. They stand in cabinets and on bookshelves and tables all around both the

library and the study, and include divinities from Egypt, Greece, and India, many of them oracular, scribal, channelers of wisdom, solvers of riddles: Thoth, the counterpart of Hermes Trismegistus; Oedipus and the Sphinx; Athena; several more sphinxes and griffins and other monsters associated with riddles, their hybrid limbs embodying a puzzle asking to be decoded. Among them, also tellingly, stand *shabti* figures or “Answerers”—the surrogate figurines from ancient Egypt who work in the afterlife on behalf of another.

The poet H.D. was analyzed by Freud in 1933–1934, and his collection of antiquities plays an active and vivid part in her memoir (Freud commented that she was the first visitor ever to look at his things before looking at him). H.D. wrote twice about the experience, the first time from memory in *Writing on the Wall*, the second time in *Advent*, which was composed from her notes, notes which Freud did not want her to make, fearing such conscious activities would interfere with the deeper, spontaneous processes of her mind. Her mystico-poetic interests shape her accounts of the sessions, and she collided with him over her interpretations, but her own hermeneutical processes complement Freud’s different enterprise of patterning and enciphering. She sensed the living quality with which Freud had imbued the objects that surrounded him in his professional space: “length, breadth, thickness,” she writes, “the shape, the scent, the feel of things.”

H.D. remembers the figurines forming a hemisphere facing Freud at the desk, whereas today the protective phalanx watches over the ashtray and cigar end, the pen and the pair of spectacles that stand in metonymically for the man himself. The shadowy interior—dimly wrapping so many deities and seers, figures of curiosity and desire, the monochrome prints on the walls, the twilit bookshelves, the terracotta and black figure pots and bronzes in their wooden framed vitrines—intensifies the sense of something holy about the room, and elicits exchanges in hushed voices and reverent behavior from the museum visitors, turning them into pilgrims. The study was Freud’s last consulting room; the accumulation of his things a darkling mirror of the furnishings of his mind, and by instinct H.D.

reached eastward to capture their mystery: "Today, lying on the famous psychoanalytic couch, I have a feeling of evaporating cold menthol, some form of ether, laid on my morbid brow. Wherever my fantasies may take me now, I have a center, security, aim. I am centralized or reoriented here in this mysterious lion's den or Aladdin's cave of treasures." The allusion to the prophet Daniel, one of the most prominent interpreters of dreams in the Bible, precedes a clichéd allusion to the *Nights*. But H.D. is coasting here, not creating a poem, and she is responding to the combined divinatory and oriental atmosphere of Freud's inner sanctum.

With the help of Marie Bonaparte, Freud's collections were salvaged and brought to London from Vienna. The Hampstead address may not be the birthplace of psychoanalysis, but Freud's collections carry the aura of those origins. The couch is the selfsame piece of furniture from the beginning of Freud's talking cure, "the same old-fashioned horsehair sofa," H.D. wrote, "that had heard more secrets than the confession box of any popular Roman Catholic father-confessor in his heyday, the homely historical instrument of the original scheme of psychotherapy, of psychoanalysis, the science of the unraveling of the tangled skeins of the unconscious mind."

Hard and lumpy by all accounts (although the lumpiness may have developed over time), Freud's couch is a Victorian chaise longue, but with a difference. It does indeed have the classic raised end ornamented with a sausage cushion, which the carpet covering it conceals from view. H.D. was propped up somewhat like Mme Récamier, she recalled. Freud certainly did not intend to associate his new treatment with the notorious rest cures of his contemporaries in the United States, which were prescribed for neurasthenics and famously represented by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose ferocious parable "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) dramatizes a woman going mad under the constraints of such treatment. His couch does not resemble the daybeds on which reclined young ladies of good family who might be given to the vapors, nor is it a look-alike of those divans which several contemporaries, including creative and hypochondriacal female intelligences such as Florence Nightingale and

Alice James, would take to for life. Were those current associations, well known in fin-de-siècle Vienna, repulsed by design by the doctor who pioneered his treatment by studying cases of hysteria?

With regard to a thinker celebrated for singling out the meaningfulness of the slip, the pun, the double entendre, it is funny and crucial that, far from sweeping things under the carpet, Freud lifted his carpet off the ground. His couch, in fact, does not have legs, but sits on an Art Deco boxlike support flush to the floor, and from the start was covered with the carpet and several cushions, and, on top of the Persian rug, another plain blanket, embroidered with the interlaced initials of Freud's monogram. The effect creates a kind of nest and brings this stiff Western piece close in style to an Eastern furnishing—it becomes a divan.

Victorian interiors, in Vienna and London and New York alike, were notoriously bedizened with bows and frills, and it was customary to drape everything from the parrot in his cage to the piano. It was only in certain aesthetic milieus in Western Europe that oriental carpets were draped on sofas, namely, in the richly ornamented and luxurious interiors of Symbolist Paris and the *Yellow Book* circles of London. (The young Oscar Wilde, during the period he was orientalizing the necrophiliac perversities of *Salome*, similarly cushioned and covered his sofa and salon with Persian carpets.) In fin-de-siècle Vienna, the inspired art historian and theorist Alois Riegl (1858–1905) became Curator of Textiles in the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry in 1887 (a position he held until 1898), leading the way in raising appreciation for the applied arts and particularly carpets; the first international exhibition of oriental rugs was held in Vienna in 1891.

By that time, Freud had already been collecting rugs: in 1883, his cousin Moritz Freud gave him the carpet he used to drape over his couch. On the wall above it in Freud's study, beside the analytical couch, another small, brownish-gray patterned rug hangs on the wall. Woven in two sections, the half toward the head of the couch is worn and faded compared to the other half: one patient after another must have stroked or rubbed or patted it with their left hand as they lay

there and talked. Below it, the rug on the couch glows by contrast, the most opulently colored and richly patterned object in the room.

Freud sat behind the head of the couch when listening to his patients talk. In London, in the last months before Freud's death, the analysand would lie stretched out under the celebrated print of Charcot displaying a female hysteric to his class in the Hospital of La Salpêtrière in Paris, during the lectures that made such a deep impression on the young Freud. This print replaced the engraving of the temple at Abu Simbel that had hung above the couch in Vienna, offering—rather less provocatively—an image of colossal guardian deities. At the foot of the couch, and striding toward the analysand, hung the image of Gradiva, the Pompeian bas-relief of a young woman in sandals, moving forward swiftly, her tunic fluttering against the contours of her body. Gradiva was a key figure of inspiration for Freud. Visitors are not allowed to lie on the couch, but I was given permission to touch it, and the carpet—which looks thick and bristly—turns out to be unexpectedly soft and silky, with the thick nap running down from the head to the feet of the person lying on it (H.D. found it slippery and slid down it from her propped position).

The rug was a modern piece when Moritz gave it to Freud; he was a trader in oriental antiquities who traveled widely in the Middle East. A photograph of him in one of the Freud family albums shows him wrapped in a white djellaba, with his head covered; like many orientalist scholars, explorers, and artists as well as traders, he took to native dress the better to pursue his profession as he traveled throughout the eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Experts have since identified the rug as a Ghashgha'i piece (not from Smyrna as Freud thought). It was woven farther east by that great nomadic tribe who herd sheep and goats in the changing prairies and valleys of Fars province, on the borders of Iran and Turkey. Women and young girls do the weaving in this tribe, by contrast to most of their neighbors. The Italian art historian Sergio Bettini quotes an Iranian informant who told him that an old local proverb says, "Up to the age of eleven girls are good for carpets; after the age of eleven for love." He went on, "There wasn't a young girl in the past who did not know

how to make rugs: it was an essential precondition of marriage, more important than beauty. And girls made rugs everywhere, in the pastures, under the tents, in the harems. It was domestic work, not done with commercial intent or for gain. The rug served for weddings, for the birth of a son; there was a rug for funerals, and rugs for praying. Millions of Persians are born, have lived, and died on rugs." The weaving was sometimes done in workshops, where the pattern of the rug was given out by a man, often an old man, chanting; each color, each motif called out, strand by strand, knot by knot, to the girls and women at the looms.

In a film called *Gabbeh* (1996) after a traditional style of rug woven by this same people, the Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf opens with a scene of the final stages of the process, as a new piece is being rinsed over and over again by an old woman in the dancing waters of a mountain stream. Her husband is looking on, and as she works, he begins to sing in a cracked rough voice; the old ballad invokes the spirit of the carpet, and she appears, stepping out of the stream, an ardent young woman with straight thick dark brows, a powerful gaze, a water pot on her shoulder, wrapped in brilliant ultramarine. She names herself "Gabbeh," like the carpet. The singer also directs his song to his wife, the maker of the carpet, and it may be that the apparition is her younger self. Accompanied by his ballads and love songs, Gabbeh then tells a story drawn from tiny images that appear in the weave—two blurry figures on a pony, for instance, or a line of dancing children.

Emblems and vignettes of this kind punctuate the rug on Freud's couch, too: zigzag white birds with long necks are knotted into the deep blue ground of the central panels, some of them facing the same way, some of them facing outward, mirror-style, while at either end, in the deep brown-red of the outer field, are four winged creatures with majestically fanned tails, close cousins of the riddling griffins and sphinxes with which Freud surrounded himself.

Every carpet made by the Ghashgha'i tribe tells a story: in the film, the old man unfolds this gabbeh's story of yearning passion, as a young man begins following the tribe as it pastures its sheep and

goats. Howling with love from the mountain ridges under the moon, he calls to the young woman Gabbeh night after night, until she at last agrees to run away with him. But then her father, dishonored according to tribal tradition by her disobedience and unchastity, pursues them both and shoots them. The tragic romance unfolds in the ballad sung by the old man to the beautiful young emanation of the carpet.

The “Smyrna” rug on Freud’s couch has a story to tell, like *Gabbeh*, suggesting Freud’s awareness of the relations between the structures of the unconscious and the patterning and weave of a rug. The Persian rug, the *Arabian Nights*, and the psychoanalytic process are all forms of storytelling: examining their interactions can open up the function of narrative itself, oral and textual, as a prime activity of human consciousness.



The magic carpet was already proverbial in Freud’s lifetime, as can be seen in the letter he wrote to his future wife Martha Bernays in 1882:

If only I knew what you are doing now. Standing in the garden and gazing out into the deserted street? Ah, I am no longer passing by to press your hand, the magic carpet that carried me to you is torn, the winged horses which gracious fairies used to send, even the fairies themselves, no longer arrive, magic hoods are no longer obtainable, the whole world is so prosaic, all it asks is: “What is it you want, my child? You shall have it in time.” “Patience” is its only magic word. And in saying so forgets how things get lost when we cannot have them then and there, when we have to pay for them with our own youth.

With this reference to the magic carpet in the English translation, it would seem we have “struck oil,” to use the ugly phrase that H.D. noticed, with something close to dismay, Freud liked. (She preferred older, mythic tropes, such as tapping a well of living water or salvages from the sea depths.) However, the original German of Freud’s

letter does not invoke a *Zauberteppich* but a *Zaubermantel*, one of those enchanted instruments from northern folklore, which Mephistopheles gives the hero at the beginning of Goethe's *Faust*.

The exclamation comes from one of the well-known and most quoted speeches in the dramatic poem, when Faust cries out (in David Luke's translation):

In me there are two souls, alas, and their  
 Division tears my life in two.  
 One loves the world, it clutches her, it binds  
 Itself to her, clinging with furious lust;  
 The other longs to soar beyond the dust  
 Into the realm of high ancestral minds.  
 Are there no spirits moving in the air,  
 Ruling the region between earth and sky?  
 Come down then to me from your golden mists on high,  
 Give me a magic cloak to carry me  
 Away to some far place, some land untold,  
 And I'd not part with it for silk or gold  
 Or a king's crown, so precious it would be!

The imagery implies a form of transcendence, of otherworldly sublimation, as well as fulfilled dreams and desires. But at a deeper level, this love promises a realm where fantasies can be plumbed and allowed to flourish, where magic words give access to pleasures and knowledge to be possessed now, not deferred. Speaking in the persona of the most mythopoeic of magi, the enchanter Faust, Freud lists the magic cloak alongside other legendary paraphernalia to express his ardor to Martha—and the translator has responded instinctively in changing Faust's magic coat into the flying carpet of the *Nights*, in order to bring out Freud's intention—his desire—to fly to Martha's side. A young man trying to express his passion to his fiancée, Freud does not want to be invisible; he wants to be beside her.

The two magic instruments, the flying carpet and the magic cloak, have become intertwined in storytelling (as shown by Douglas

Fairbanks's use of both in *The Thief of Bagdad*) through their common metaphorical bond—fabric and fabrication. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud returns to Goethe's *Faust* and, quoting Mephistopheles, reflects on the imagery: "Numerous trains of thought converged upon it [a dream]. Here we find ourselves in a factory of thoughts where, as in the 'weaver's masterpiece'":

a thousand threads one treadle throws,  
Where fly the shuttles hither and thither,  
Unseen the threads are knit together,  
And an infinite combination grows.

Freud describes how his method requires him to look intently at the threads and, he continues, at "the nodal points" where they meet. The lines connect to H.D.'s "tangled skeins," and to her own finely spun metaphor about Freud's voice dipping the gray web of conventionally woven thought "into a vat of his own brewing" and drawing out scraps of thoughts in new colors to become flags and pennants and signs. The imagery is hardly original, but it gave Freud and H.D. a way of speaking about a deeper layer beneath conscious and deliberate utterance. In the same decade Freud pressed it further, to provide a metaphor for the unconscious order of expression. He analyzed his own dream-thoughts and invited his patients to express theirs as they lay on the couch; in collaboration with them, he tried to discern the patterns and connections in the weave, the figure in the carpet.

In relation to the concept of the psychoanalytic method, it is worth reconnecting the linguistic uses of this figure of speech to the material properties of carpets. A carpet maker conjugates structural motifs "in infinite combination," as Freud wrote about his dream analysis, within a basic structure of frame, ground, and figure, and then inflects each one differently through variations of color, dimensions, quality of materials. The presence of the borders within borders has been explored in relation to the *Arabian Nights*' structure by the literary scholar Ferial Ghazoul. She distinguished three orders

of imbrication, which she calls subordination, coordination, and superordination, a consciously Freudian arrangement, patterned on the relations of id, ego, and superego. The orders contain the sprawling vagaries of the tales—sometimes barely so—as the storyteller tethers the expanding pattern. In some of the stories, this is a struggle. The restraints take the form of internal structural devices—repeats, recursive plotting, mirror pairs, interlacements—and are also conveyed by the fundamental outside frame, the space of a single night.

The three central diamond medallions of the rug on Freud's couch are framed inside several borders of different width and elaboration, one set inside the other. I counted ten, but others may distinguish them differently. This structure echoes the unfolding of significance in psychoanalysis, as one circle of meaning encloses another, moving in toward the core. It is as if Freud chose to give his patients a place to lie and dream and speak, which itself reproduces the modes of patterning, knotting, repeating, interlacing, and combining that he was there to decrypt as he listened in. He then imposed a time limit on the analysis in order to set a temporary border around the desired play of free-floating thought until the next session, when the narrative would be picked up again.

As H.D. recounts her memories of Freud, or Virginia Woolf captures the flashing epiphanies of consciousness, time is made to curl up end to end, so that distance draws near and the past becomes present; depth disappears in a flattening effect that brings up to the surface what once lay buried. The seating arrangement Freud devised, still practiced in analysis today, interestingly sets up a scene of eavesdropping, not conversation, which places the analyst in the position of the Sultan in the frame story of the *Nights*. The potential for truth telling this possesses was already understood, as seen in George Crabbe's poem "The Confidant" (1812), which takes up the form of an oriental morality tale to create a parable about a loving marriage.

The heroine, Anna, has had a child before she married, but has never told her husband. Only one friend—Eliza—knows her dreadful secret, and while watching Anna rise in society, she has fallen on hard times. After Anna becomes Countess of Stafford, Eliza

blackmails Anna mercilessly, tormenting her with the possible revelation of her past, until the poor woman begins to waste away.

The husband, the Earl of Stafford, enters the plot, and he begins to tell another tale, according to the manner of the *Nights*, about the legendary caliph Haroun al-Rashid who threatens anyone poaching from his gardens with dire punishments. But one day, while walking in his garden, the caliph overhears someone blackmailing a young boy who has stolen an apple, threatening to expose him. The outcome springs a surprise, for the caliph punishes the blackmailer and forgives—and saves—the thief.

Anna's agitation in her supposed friend's company had not remained unnoticed by her husband. Concealing himself, he had overheard their conversation and discovered that Eliza the confidante was blackmailing Anna. Like Shahrazad warning the Sultan about the consequences of injustice and anger, the Earl of Stafford has decided to show his wife and her friend that he knows about her former life and does not hold it against her. Like Haroun, he denounces the blackmailer and sends her packing. In 1812, this rejection of the double standard was indeed extremely tolerant and magnanimous.

The tale within a tale ransoms Anna from her fate. But in relation to sofas, secrecy, and sexual experience, Crabbe's poem captures the structural importance of eavesdropping in the *Arabian Nights*: Dunyazad, present throughout the night in the bedroom, prompts the stories Shahrazad tells, and they are first told to her, and only to the Sultan when he asks. He overhears them being told by one sister to another, as the younger keeps vigil beside the bed, and his curiosity is all the more aroused.

Crabbe reached for a story form that is inherently suited to the telling of guilty secrets: the literature of the harem. At the same time, he moved a scandal of fallen female sexuality into the territory of the morality tale, and specifically the genre of morality literature called "The Mirror of Princes," in which potentates like Haroun al-Rashid receive instruction in how to rule justly. The princely behavior in this story, in which the Earl of Stafford issues a Solomonic judgment on

two women in conflict, involves eavesdropping. Spying, telling tales against others, gossiping, whispering behind closed doors, and other forms of clandestine information gathering were considered endemic in oriental society, and whatever the historical status of the stereotype, this association persisted.

It is piquant in this respect that Freud's prescribed arrangement for the consultation required the analyst to sit out of sight of the analysand on the couch, as if overhearing her private utterances—addressed not to the analyst *per se*. Above all, the very idea of the ransom tale bears on the uses of storytelling in the talking cure; the patients' narratives were primarily aimed at releasing them from sexual repression, and at helping them psychically to survive through the interpretation of the elements, symbols, and motifs in their stories.

Alongside the structural analogies between the narrative of the *Nights* and the experience of psychoanalysis, corresponding metaphors of flying operate at an unconscious level around the function of the couch. Everything the stories in the *Arabian Nights* communicate when genies magically whisk the heroes and heroines through the air—gravity-free mobility of mind and body, desire's dominion over time and space—are objective and literal happenings that are sought after, metaphorically, in the state of consciousness the couch is designed to produce. The flashing fugitive passage of thought matters: the psychoanalytic hour demanded that the recumbent subject move, and move through time without regard for the drag of the present, like Gradiva stepping forward with such élan.

H.D. refers twice to a moment when Freud, sitting behind her head, suddenly thumped the high end of the couch, and the interruption is also shocking for the reader, who has been traveling swiftly and weightlessly with H.D. and her reverie; we too experience the unexpected hardness and material irreducibility of the couch as Freud strikes it, and its physical properties, solidly standing in the room on the floor, seem incongruous. The page, the woman's voice speaking from it, have paid out a surface that seems light and gravity free, and Freud has broken into this with his enfleshed fist on the hard hair stuffing.

Levitation was above all associated for Freud with sexual delight, occasioned by the literal, physical rising of the penis—and of the clitoris. Dreams of flying, he considered, translate erotic impulses. Discussing such experiences, the psychoanalytic circle in Vienna in 1912 was aware of the comical but highly regarded amulets of the classical world, which represent genitals as bird-winged phal-luses and vulvae and which were worn as lucky charms. This widespread popular symbolism inspired the psychoanalyst Paul Federn to comment despondently, “We encounter an ever more universal symbolism, in the analysis of which infantile material proves useless.” Erections can fail, the psychoanalysts glumly recognized. Fears of falling, as in vertigo, offered more fertile ground for psychoanalytical probing.

Vertigo is the penalty of rising; the sensation of plunging to one’s death a consequence of dreaming too far. The connection of flying and fantasy has long excited opprobrium, for such dreams drag error and pride, lies and illusions in their wake; after all, Faust’s desires will be granted by none other than Mephistopheles. These are the attitudes to fantasy that Freud wanted to explore, in order to liberate the psyche from repression, overcome the vertigo, and alleviate dysfunction in sexual fulfillment. The process of psychoanalytical reverie did not always lead to rapturous flight, but often down a hard and bumpy road.



The case history of the couch has a tragic postscript. Moritz Freud, the original giver of the Smyrna rug, said of himself that his love of stories and “hunger for knowledge” led him to “swallow up” ships’ libraries, and when he and Freud’s sister Marie, known as Mitzi, got engaged in November 1883, Freud wrote to Martha that Moritz was “a fantasist, but that he will bring some lighter blood into our pessimistic self-tormenting family manner.” Moritz was away—in Egypt, Saint Petersburg, and Greece—when his children were born, but made it up later to his youngest daughter, Martha, born in 1892, by taking her on his journeys. This child decided to take on

a male identity, rather in the manner of the loving heroines of romances in the *Arabian Nights*, like Zumurrud in the story of Ali Shar and Zumurrud, and Princess Badoura in the tale of Camar al-Zaman and Badoura, both of whom cross-dress to fulfill their heart's desires. She called herself "Tom," became a designer and writer for children, and married Jankew Seidmann, a scholar of Kabbalah, who ran Ophir, a small publishing house in Berlin that specialized in orientalist books and Judaica. The *Verwandlungsbucher* (Books of Transformations) which Tom Seidmann-Freud made include tabs to pull and discs to revolve and other imaginative, early interactive stimuli. In the first of these, *Das Wunderhaus* (The Magic House, 1927), the house in question shelters an extended family not unlike the Freuds; two years later, in the sequel *Das Zauberboot* (The Magic Boat, 1929), a tab when pulled reveals Tom's uncle at an upstairs window, smoking his signature cigar. Later, a picture of the interior comes with a piece of red film which changes what you see. In one room, a child is lying tummy down on a couch looking at a picture book; he is dressed like a boy, but the features are pretty, with long eyelashes, bright red cheeks, and a twenties bob, so it could be a girl (a "tomboy"?). When you cover the image with the red film, the couch disappears: the child reading is no longer lying face down, but flying. In this children's picture book, Freud's niece gave graphic expression to the idea that reading—and reverie—can fly you away.

Tom Freud's husband committed suicide in late 1929; she followed him a few months later in 1930. The crash of 1929 and the looming political storm clouds had disastrously affected his business. *The Magic Boat* was published a few months before her death: the copy in the Freud Museum Library is inscribed to Anna Freud in September 1929. The picture book, resourceful and delightful, gives no sign of the impending double horror.

Tom's history is sad enough, but through her own death before the war she never knew the fate of her mother Mitzi who, like three of Freud's other sisters, was deported to the concentration camps and died between 1942 and 1943. The fate of Tom Freud adds to the knowledge conveyed by Freud's last consulting room, that all of this

would have been destroyed if he had not left with his collections (and the couch) when he did. The *mise-en-scène* speaks above all of Freud's method, of the uses of fantasy, the interactions of myth, imagination, narrative, and consciousness. It speaks of a way of thinking and living that was denounced and (nearly) destroyed; it testifies to the ravages of intolerance and fanaticism, and more hopefully, to the richness of conversations between cultures across huge stretches of time and geography.

A couch is a couch is a couch. Or is it? As Gertrude Stein implies through the celebrated repetition, more lies under the rose than a rose.