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# Freud's Dream of Irma's Injection and Its Connection to Mythological Imagery

## CONDENSATE / ABSTRACT

The dream of Irma's injection is the most famous dream that Freud presents in his groundbreaking book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung*), published 1900. In the 125 years since its publication, the Irma Dream has been extensively analyzed by successors to the psychoanalytic scepter. However, one aspect that has remained unexplored is the implicit imagery of the scenic dream, in which four male doctors examine the young female Irma – at the time patient of Freud – who has been injected with a solution (German: “Lösung”). The implicit sexual material and latent content—or dream-thoughts—are connected to archaic mythological imagery found in the substratum of Western culture. This paper provides a deepened interpretation of the Irma dream's sexual content and elucidates its connection to mating practices seen in zoology as well as contact tracing in venereology. It also explores these images and their connection to Greco-Roman mythology as well as Western European art, converging in the legend of the Rape of the Sabine Women, the founding myth for the city of Rome.

In Chapter II of the book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Sigmund Freud<sup>i</sup> initiates the reader in his technique of dream analysis by providing a personal dream specimen and then expounding on its analysis. Since then, the dream has come to be known as that of “Irma’s injection” or the “Irma Dream”, and stands as the founding father’s most famous dream and extensive dream analysis. The Irma Dream’s central image—Irma surrounded, examined, and used by a circle of male doctors; the presence of injection; and Irma’s passive role—evokes not only Freud’s personal life context, but also latent archetypal patterns of sexual domination in the Western cultural unconscious, aligning with collective male assertion over a resisting female body. In the final paragraph of the chapter, Freud states that there is still work to be done and that the offered dream analysis is by no means complete. He acknowledges that personal considerations prevent him from pursuing the interpretations further, omitting certain parts due to decorum of the time.<sup>1</sup>

The Irma Dream has been subject to reinterpretation and reanalysis over the 125 years since publication, the ones made by psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson and professor in psychology Alan C. Elms being two well-known examples.<sup>ii</sup> Elms has drawn attention to the fact that Freud, in the instance of the Irma Dream, was uncharacteristically careful to avoid dealing with the dream’s sexual content.<sup>2</sup> Today, we have other possibilities and a another kindof freedom of speech, allowing for further analysis. Therefore, I have—and I urge the reader to do the same—heeded the call of those who came before us: “*Encore un effort!*” This paper provides a further exploration of contextual medico-historical components and its sexual symbolism, as well as mythological and legendary imagery present in the latent content—“dream-thoughts” in Freud’s terminology<sup>3</sup>—beyond the manifest dream material.

i Sigmund Freud (1856—1939)

ii Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994), and Alan C. Elms (b. 1938).

## THE IRMA DREAM

The dream, dreamt on the night between 23-24th of July 1895, goes as follows:

A large hall - numerous guests, whom we were receiving.  
- Among them was Irma. I at once took her to one side, as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my 'solution' yet [ *die "Lösung" noch nicht akzeptiert* ]. I said to her: 'If you [*du*] still get pains, it's really only your fault.' She replies: 'If you [*du*] only knew what pains I've got now in my throat and stomach and abdomen [*Schmerzen jetzt habe im Hals, Magen und Leib*] - it's choking me [*es schnürt mich zusammen*].' - I was alarmed and looked at her. She looked pale and puffy. I thought to myself that after all I must be missing some organic trouble. I took her to the window and looked down her throat, and she showed signs of recalcitrance [*Sträuben wie die Frauen*], like women with artificial dentures. I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that. [*Ich denke mir, sie hat es doch nicht nötig*] She then opened her mouth properly [*Der Mund geht dann auch gut auf*] and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modeled on the turbinal bones [*Nasenmuscheln*] of the nose. - I at once called in Dr M., and he repeated the examination and confirmed it ... Dr M. looked quite different from usual; he was very pale, he walked with a limp and his chin was clean-shaven [*Kinn bartlos*] ... My friend Otto was now standing beside her as well, and my friend Leopold was percussing her through her bodice [*Leibchen*] and saying: 'She has a dull area low down on the left.' He also indicated that a portion of the skin on her left shoulder was infiltrated. (I noticed this, just as he did, in spite of her dress.) ... M. said: 'There's no doubt it's an infection [*Infektion*], but no matter; dysentery [*Dysenterie*] will supervene and the toxin will be eliminated. ... We were directly aware, too, of the origin of the infection [*Wir wissen auch unmittelbar, woher die Infektion rührt*]. Not long before, when she was feeling unwell, my friend Otto [*Freund Otto*] had given her an injection [*eine Injektion gegeben*] of a preparation of propyl, propyls ... propionic acid ... trimethylamine [*Trimethylamin*] (and I saw before me the formula for this printed in heavy type) ... Injections of this

sort ought not to be given so thoughtlessly ... And probably the syringe had not been clean. [*Man macht solche Injektionen nicht so leichtfertig... Wahrscheinlich war auch die Spritze nicht rein.*]<sup>iii</sup><sup>4</sup>

#### FREUD'S DREAM ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

Freud analyzes the dream extensively, sentence by sentence, connecting the dream content and the latent dream-thoughts to his wife Martha<sup>iv</sup>— who, at the time of the Irma Dream, was in her second trimester of pregnancy with Freud's sixth child, the future Anna Freud,<sup>v</sup> whose name happened to be the same as the analysand Irma's real name<sup>vi</sup> — and other women important in Freud's life. This analysis can be studied in full in Freud's own writing.

It should be noted that even 125 years after the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, there is still no full consensus among psychoanalysts and scholars on how a dream analysis should be conducted. Normally, a dream analysis takes place between analyst and analysand, and the context—daily events, past experiences, and desires and wishes for present and future is taken into account— frames the interpretation. Both the dream and its interpretation are brought forth using live speech, with the range of information that such a mode of communication conveys. An analysis of long-past, written dreams is different for obvious reasons, and can be performed in various ways and on different levels. This paper explores the medico-historical context of the time of the Irma Dream, including Freud's formative

iii Nota bene, the English translation is in the past tense, while Freud's German original is written in the present. It is an easily verifiable fact that clock-time has no place in dreams; its relationships to time being porous, if not non-existent. Freud points out that the present tense is the one in which wishes are represented and fulfilled, and elaborates that «the dream-thought that was represented was in the optative: 'If only Otto were responsible for Irma's illness!' The dream represses the optative and replaces it with a straightforward present: 'Yes, Otto is responsible for Irma's illness!' [...] The present tense is the one in which wishes are represented and fulfilled.» (SE V 534-5). Here lies a similarity to how the unconscious works. «The processes of the unconscious system are timeless, they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all.» (SE XIV 187)

iv Martha Freud, born Bernais, (1861–1951)

v Anna Freud (1895–1982)

vi In reality, Irma is 33-year-old Anna Hammerschlag, widow after Rudolph Lichtheim who died of tuberculous within the year of their marriage 1885. The Hammerschlags were close family friends to the Freuds. (Jennings, 2024: p. 189)

educational experiences, his already documented sexual frustration experienced by Freud in his marriage, and the public and medical discourse around hysteria. It also introduces a connection to observable behavior in the animal kingdom and its parallels to human behavior executed in both fantasy and myth, and points out the presence and accessibility of an artwork this very motif, located only a short walk from Freud's home at Berggasse in Vienna. Through this approach, it is possible to elucidate potential conscious and unconscious latent dream material, transmuted and distorted through the dream mechanisms of condensation (*Verdichtung*) and displacement (*Verschiebung*). What is presented below—drawing on free association, interpretation, and knowledge of medicine, biology, biochemistry, art, literature, theater, psychoanalytic writings and clinical praxis—is one way to extract the unspoken material that resides in subtext and metatext at the time Freud dreamt the Irma dream.

#### A RE-ANALYSIS RICH IN SEXUAL UNDERTONES

Freud's own analysis, with its associations and elaboration of symbolism, and its condensation and displacement among the women in his proximity, carries an element of self-reproach and represents an attempt to clarify and free himself from the experienced guilt over Irma not feeling well.

Elms points out that Martha herself was unwell due to her pregnancy at the time. Martha's heart was a cause of concern for Freud, having been the "cause" and carrying "culpability" for her becoming pregnant as result of his "ardent embraces".<sup>5</sup>

In real life, Freud had presented a solution – *die "Lösung"* (my "solution") – to Irma's remaining symptoms, a solution that she had rejected ("noch nicht akzeptiert"). Elms points out that the German word "*Lösung*" (solution) carries a double meaning, lost in translation, referring to semen – an essential fluid for conception to occur – He further adds that yet another "*Lösung*" had been presented within Freud's marriage, in a kind of parallel process: Freud sought a solution that would allow for a satisfying sexual life while also limiting the number of mouths to feed, a solution that Martha did not accept.<sup>6</sup> The contraceptive options at the fin de siècle were, of course, not on par with those of today.

In the German text, Freud and Irma address each other with "*du*" instead of the polite and formal "*Sie*" and "*Herr Professor*." This

points towards the intimate relationship of the two.<sup>vii</sup> A recent article illustrates the real-life relationships of those who appear in the Irma Dream and Freud's analysis – Individuals who were all part of his everyday social circle.<sup>7</sup>

Erikson notes that the little word “*du*” implies “a therapeutic burden, a burden of countertransference in reality and of special meaning to the dream.”<sup>8</sup> He later later sharpens this point by stating that “the intimate *du* in the dream betrays the fact” that Irma and the dreamer shared a close bond, one of “blood relatives or intimate friendship”, thus identifying Irma as a key figure in Freud's (professional) life.<sup>9</sup> Given the importance Freud himself attributed to the Irma Dream and the developments that followed its analysis, history has proven that she was.

Freud finds no clear explanation for the symptoms of Irma's complaints – “Schmerzen jetzt habe im Hals, Magen und Leib” – at least none that he is able (or willing) to share with the reader. Thus, the field is open for speculation and interpretation. I propose that the dreamer locates Irma's symptoms on the bodily orifices, mouth and nether regions, due to the sexual nature that permeates the dream as a whole, and that this sexual allusion has partly been lost in the English translation. An observation is how Strachey translates the German “*Magen und Leib*” with a redundant “stomach and abdomen,” instead of interpreting “*Leib*” and its double meaning as referring to the female genital area and womb.

Later in the dream the word “*Leibchen*” is used in the given context of percussion – a clinical examination technique utilized to assess the presence of air contra dense parts (liquid, tumor, infiltration or inflammation) in lungs or abdomen – “*Leibchen*” is suitably translated as “bodice”, which point towards the upper part of a woman's dress.

In clinical practice, there have always been situations in which a patient refuses the offered solution – “*die “Lösung” noch nicht akzeptiert*” – even when, based on all gathered and available knowledge, it would be in their best interest. There are circumstances in which the

vii From published first-hand accounts of patients, it can be concluded that Freud did not show this courtesy to everyone. In 1934, some twenty odd years after the Irma Dream, Freud had the American poet Hilda Doolittle (1886–1961), also known by the penname H.D., and the American psychiatrist Joseph Wortis (1906–1995) in analysis. In their respective written accounts, *Tribute to Freud* (1956) by H.D. and *Fragments of an analysis with Freud* by Wortis, H.D. mentions the use of «*du*» while the latter does not, but instead repeatedly is addressed with the formal «*Sie*».

solution (“*Lösung*”) will have to be administered nonetheless, with a varying degree of soft and forceful persuasion, in the broadest sense of the word. The medico-legal use of compulsory psychiatric care is also in play here.

Freud decides to inspect one of Irma’s symptom-giving orifices, yet she again resists, showing signs of “recalcitrance”: “*Sträuben wie die Frauen.*” This is the second time in the dream that Irma refuses Freud’s proposed solution and associated action. Cultural-historical examples of patients – especially women – who show resistance are plenty, throughout history and in *fin de siècle*.

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MICROHISTORIC ALLEGORY:  
THE WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT  
AND FORCE-FEEDING

One example of women showing resistance is the Suffragettes, a movement of women in the first decade of the 1900’s who fought for women’s right to vote in public elections. Some were imprisoned and, while on hunger strike, were force-fed through the use of *gavage*, a practice involving tools such as a funnel, rubber tube, mouth gag and a wooden spiral mouth opener in order to open the mouth very wide; “*der Mund geht dann auch gut auf.*”<sup>viii</sup>

A grisly description of the procedure of force-feeding – utilized since the days of Ancient Egypt to feed geese in order to fatten their livers for preparation of foie gras was written by Lady Constance Lytton,<sup>ix</sup> who, disguised as a seamstress, was imprisoned for participating in a march for women’s rights. In prison, she, like others among the Suffragettes, went on hunger strike.<sup>x, xi</sup> Lady Lytton’s written account, ending with “The horror of it was more than I can describe,” is an act of undercover journalism and participatory observation, to put it mildly.

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viii The British Museum, 2024

ix Lady Constance Lytton (1869–1923).

x Lytton and Warton, 1914

xi UK Parliament, 2024

A RE-ANALYSIS RICH IN SEXUAL UNDERTONES  
(CONT.)

The mouth that opens wide has long been identified as a symbol of a woman's procreative inside.<sup>10</sup> The sentence "*Ich denke mir, sie hat es doch nicht nötig*" ("I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that") carries an association both to patients who resist "solutions" and to women (patients or not) who resist sexual advances.<sup>11</sup> Erikson elaborates on how young female patients – especially "merry widows" – found their way into medical wit, rumor, and scandal:

They were accentuated at the time by the common but not officially admitted knowledge that the large contingent of hysterical women was starved for sexual adventure. On the sly it was suggested that the doctor might as well remove their inhibitions by deeds as well as words. It was Freud who established the fact that the hysterical patient transfers to the doctor by no means a simply sexual wish, but rather an unconscious conflict between an infantile wish and an infantile inhibition.<sup>12</sup>

This contextual piece of information further highlights the sexual undertone of the Irma Dream. In real life, Irma was a young widow.

When Freud in the dream thoroughly examines Irma's mouth, he sees "big white patch [...] extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modeled on the turbinal bones [*Nasenmuscheln*]." The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan,<sup>xii</sup> in his second Seminar, points out the connection between the mouth and the female sexual organ by way of the nose.<sup>13</sup>

Lacan also addresses a point that Erikson makes – about the graphic nature and "stomach" necessary for a dreamer to be able to thoroughly examine an orifice in a dream without waking up – and calls Freud "a tough customer," in the admiring sense of the expression. Anyone who has performed clinical examinations knows from experience that it takes years of practice to gaze and examine into a mouth (or other orifices), to inspect and understandably describe what is seen, without flinching. It is not for the faint of heart. It can be, to use the words of Lacan, a "horrible image."<sup>14</sup> The man on the

street would deem such investigatory activity as coming close to vorarephilia.<sup>xiii</sup>

Freud immediately summons Dr. M, his senior and elder, to alleviate a crisis of confidence. To confide with and among colleagues can diffuse worry, manage doubt, and dispel horror, as well as ease the feeling of lone responsibility, potentially diffusing it into a “collusion of anonymity” as Michale Balint<sup>xiv</sup> called it. Erikson elucidates how the dream parallels cultural patterns and religious rites of conversion or confirmation, invoking a “higher authority” and the protection brought by a group of colleagues.<sup>15</sup>

The strange note that Dr. M is clean-shaven – “*Kinn bartlos*” – functions as a symbolic stripping bare, an exposure, echoing H.C. Andersen’s emperor with no clothes: “The emperor hasn’t got any clothes on!”<sup>xv</sup>

Despite the collective expertise, an “Infection” is diagnosed, and Freud quickly redirects blame to his colleague Otto: “*Wir wissen auch unmittelbar, woher die Infektion rührt. Freund Otto (...) eine Injektion gegeben.*” (“We were directly aware, too, of the origin of the infection (...) My friend Otto had given her an injection.”) The group of male doctors becomes a collective voice—“we”—while Irma remains a silent object under examination. Freud shifts between identification with Irma, the group, and himself as an analyst.

The elder, Dr. M, gives a reassuring prognosis; that dysentery, (*Dysenterie*), will eliminate the symptoms and their toxins. Freud associated dysentery with diphtheria – both feared and potentially lethal infections at the time – due to the fact that one of his children was ill with a respiratory infection. There is, however, a deeper symbolic interpretation of the original dysentery tied to the nature and symptoms of the disease. Dysentery is a parasitic or bacterial infection in the colon, leading to profuse and often bloody diarrhea. The resemblance between this and another bloody discharge from the nether regions

xiii The word *vorarephilia* is derived from the Latin *vorare* (to «swallow» or «devour»), and Ancient Greek *φιλία* (*philia*, «love») and is a descriptor of sexualised fantasy to be devoured or to enclose and consume something.

xiv Michael Balint (1896–1970), psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, born in Hungary and mostly worked in the United Kingdom. For more on the concept of Collusion of anonymity, see (Balint, 2000, p 76).

xv «But he hasn’t got anything on!» in the English translation; «Men han har jo ikke noget paa!» in the Danish original.

– lochia, the postpartum hemorrhaging discharge from the womb through the vagina – is striking.

Before the introduction of antibiotics, treatment of venereal disease involved using mercury to provoke expulsive reactions—lat. *purgare*, using the Ancient Tongue and terminology for the purging treatments. Being an educated medical doctor with extensive knowledge of and interest in language, history, anthropology, and literature, and with a valid fear of diphtheria and dysenteriae, Freud had the cognitive faculties to recognize the conceptual connection between Mercury and Venus. One does not have to be an alchemist or court astrologer to understand how treatment with mercury evokes its planetary connotation, bringing it into conjunction with the domain of Venus – both planets being between us and the Sun – where the Roman goddess governs the realm of love, in the broadest sense of the word. This underscoring the Irma dream’s sexual thematic.

When Freud analyses the in bold printed formula of “trimethylamin,”<sup>xvi</sup> he is reminded of a friend, Wilhelm Fliess,<sup>xvii</sup> who connected the molecule to sexual metabolism; and Lacan adds it as being a decomposition product of “sexual substance,” i.e. the fertile sperm carried in the semen.<sup>16</sup> Mark Solms<sup>xviii</sup> points out, in the chapter on the Irma Dream, that Freud mentions trimethylamin in his monograph on cocaine, and draws special attention to the smell; a characteristic fishy odor resembling vaginal discharge caused by bacterial imbalance, i.e. bacterial vaginosis.<sup>17</sup> In Freud’s own analysis of the Irma Dream, he writes:

Trimethylamine was an allusion not only to the immensely powerful factor of sexuality, but also to a person whose agreement I recalled with satisfaction whenever I feel isolated in my opinions (i.e. Fliess, my addition). [...] For he had special knowledge of the consequences of affections of the nose and its accessory cavities; and he had drawn scientific attention to some very remarkable connections between the turbinal bones [Nasenmuscheln, (my addition)] and the female organs of sex. (Cf. the three curly structures in Irma’s throat.)<sup>18</sup>

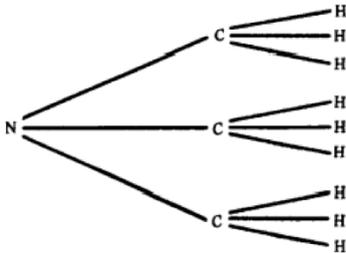
xvi German spelling, used from now on in this paper.

xvii Wilhelm Fliess (1858–1928), Berlin based otolaryngologist

xviii Mark Solms (b. 1961), psychoanalyst, neuropsychologist, editor of the Revised Standard Edition (RSE).

One can but fantasize about the origin of the white spots and how they emerged in the throat of the young widow Irma, who experiences it as “*es schnürt mich zusammen*” (“it’s choking me”). The German original points towards constriction – a tightening up of the orifice – rather than a blocking by an object.

In Elms’ reading of the Irma Dream, parallels between the white spots in Irma’s mouth and Freud’s marital activities – that is, the current life context – at the time of the dream. Martha had rejected Freud’s solution; “neither wanting his penis nor his semen in her mouth.” This rejection is supposed to have both angered and frustrated Freud, as this rejection in practice prevented him from having an active sex life (with his wife). This created inner tension, as he is supposed to have felt “having the right to an active sex life either with Marta or without her.”<sup>19</sup> Strategies for coping with similar rejection have varied through culturo-historical periods, as will be seen later in this paper. Freud seems to have taken the high road through sublimation into clinical work and intellectual endeavour.



Looking more closely at the molecular formula of trimethylamin, those who have done contact tracing for venereal disease may recognize the molecular structure as similar to those at times found within a cluster of intimate confidants. If the direction of the vehicle for transmission is reversed to flow in the opposite direction, from (H)ydrogen, through (C)arbon, to central (N)itrogen, the energy converges one single point, a point in which all attention and focus is gathered. Here resides a peculiar connection to nature.

## BIOLOGICAL ALLEGORY –

### THE QUEEN BEE AND THE FERTILIZING SWARM

Freud acknowledges the great difficulty and uncertainty involved in attempting to describe psychoanalytic investigative work and its methodology. For this reason, he borrows terminology from and uses analogy to chemistry and, especially, biology.<sup>20</sup> I shall do the same.

In the *Irma Dream*, four male doctors concentrate their full attention on a single woman – under the guise of medical diagnosis and bodily healing. Their efforts aim to restore her health, but symbolically, this concentrated male attention evokes an act of fertilization, a transformation intended to bring forth a new state of being—a metaphorical child.

A parallel to this structure can be found in nature, particularly in the mating behavior of the queen honeybee (*Apis mellifera*). During her nuptial flight, the queen mates with multiple drones mid-air, collecting and storing sperm in a specialized organ called the spermatheca. If insufficiently inseminated—fewer than 3.5 million sperm—the queen takes additional mating flights until the quota is met.<sup>xix</sup> In other words, the queen will continue to seek out drones – who’s fate is not pleasant, as they have their reproductive organs torn off and fall to their death after ejaculation – until her reproductive potential is fulfilled. Put tongue-in-cheek: the queen will “take her fill of love.”<sup>21</sup>

This biological tableau offers a compelling—if unsettling—analogy to the dream, but it also exposes a shift in agency and power. In both scenes, a single female body is encircled by multiple males and subjected to examination/insemination toward a generative end. Yet the distribution of agency differs radically: in bees, a matrifocal economy culminates in the queen’s reproductive sovereignty after the brutal courtship ritual (the drones perish); in the clinic, male-coded expertise conducts an invasive procedure (the injection) and close examination of the female body under the sign of care. This invites us, beyond the analogy of difference in terms of gender and species between the nuptial flight and the *Irma dream*, to consider how power is organized—who authorizes entry, who is rendered passive or active, and how consent is staged or foreclosed. The analogy is thus a homology of form (convergent male attention) but not of power: the nuptial flight centralizes the queen’s reproductive aim and purpose, while the *Irma* scene centralizes medical authority and diffused responsibility.

xix Woyek, 1962 and 1964

(CONT.)

Freud points out the potential carelessness of the injection – the solution containing trimethylamin – in the therapeutic relationship between Otto and Irma; “*Man macht solche Injektionen nicht so leichtfertig . . .*” (“Injections of this sort ought not to be given so thoughtlessly...”), and ends his recounting of the dream with doubt about the cleanness of the syringe used by Otto; “*Wahrscheinlich war auch die Spritze nicht rein.*” (“And probably the syringe had not been clean.”)

Anyone with a bit of a dirty, or “*nicht rein,*” mind can see how “*Spritze*” in a vulgare sense can refer to the act of ejaculation and to semen. Seminal fluid can be the carrier of “unclean material” and lead to a sexually transmitted infection. Erikson blatantly points this out, calling Otto a “dirty squirter.”<sup>22</sup>

The last two sentences of the Irma Dream are directed against Otto, who has injected infection into the cluster, first into the dyad of Irma and Freud, and also into the cluster of the gathered colleagues, as well as injected doubt and self-reproach, called for or not, into the mind of the dreamer.

Freud concludes that the meaning of the dream is that he does not bear the responsibility for Irma’s continuous (somatic) symptoms, instead allowing the dream to work as wish fulfilment by shifting the blame to, and taking revenge on, Otto in the sentence: “Thus its content was the fulfillment of a wish and its motive was a wish,” over time transforming the conclusive statement into: “Yes, Otto is responsible for Irma’s illness!”<sup>23, 24</sup>

The Irma Dream, then, is more than a clinical curiosity. It is a theatre of guilt, sexual frustration, displaced desire, medical authority, and the search for purification – the relief of inner pressure and suffering. It enacts the transfer of responsibility, the ambiguity of care, and the tension between healing and intrusion. In the space between patient and doctor, dreamer and dream, male and female, Freud captures the full force of an unacceptable “*Lösung*” – chemical, sexual, therapeutic – of all troubles.

## SCENIC SUMMARY OF THE IRMA DREAM

To better access the latent content and historical substratum of the Irma dream, a dramatized recapitulation of its scenic elements is offered – as if stage directions were written for the theatre:

A festive gathering. In a side room designated for undressing, a middle-aged man bearing the symbols of a doctor approaches a young widow. He addresses her firmly in a personal and familiar way. With reproach she points to her mouth, abdomen and genital area. The man leads her toward a window. After brief resistance, she yields and opens her mouth. The man thoroughly examines the orifices. On stage, close-up projections of a throat inspection flicker across a large screen. Alarmed and with a hint of horror, the man summons an elder colleague; two more friends—also doctors—join the scene. The four men now encircle the woman, scrutinizing her body, partly through clothing. She appears to have no agency in the situation, remaining passive and voiceless.

It is found that one of the men has injected the woman with a “*Lösung*” using a “*Spritze*”, suspected to be the cause of infection that affects her – and now also engages the four men.

The theatrical dream-space thus becomes a tableau of domination and submission, medicine and symbolic violence, exposure and concealment, as well as mysterious disease with venereal undertones. From a medical perspective, it is notable that syphilis – often called “the great imitator” – can manifest with persistent oral lesions. In correspondence with Karl Abraham,<sup>xx</sup> Freud acknowledged this possibility, though he redirected its symbolic meaning:

“Syphilis is *not* the subject-matter of the example you refer to. Sexual megalomania is hidden behind it, the three women, Mathilde, Sophie and Anna, are my daughters’ three godmothers, and I have them all! There would be one simple therapy for widowhood, of course. All sorts of intimate things, natural.”<sup>xxi25</sup>

Whether or not syphilis is explicitly named, psychoanalysis teaches us that powerful images and drives may remain latent – palpably present without being spoken.

xx Karl Abraham (1877–1925), psychoanalyst. Letter dated 9th January 1908.

xxi Again, please take note of the common joke in the medico-historical context, of hysteric widows just needing to get laid to achieve symptom relief.

That stated, if psychoanalysis has taught anything, it is that things – images, emotions, symbols – can be palpably present without being named. There is yet another theme that is available for extraction from the Irma Dream, a theme of a vulgar and graphic nature; that of sexual consent and symbolic rape.

#### FREUD'S AWARENESS OF SYMBOLIC RAPE

The concept of symbolic rape was not foreign to Freud, even if he never used the phrase explicitly. Literary critic Robert G. Davis<sup>xxii</sup> argued that the Irma Dream directly inspired William Carlos Williams's<sup>xxiii</sup> short story *The Use of Force* (1938)—a tale in which a male doctor forcibly examines the throat of a young girl named Matilda. The parallel is striking: both texts feature a beautiful girl, a reluctant medical examination of the throat, and the discovery of diphtheritic membranes. In his dream analysis, Freud himself recalls a traumatic case of diphtheria involving his eldest daughter – also named Matilda – and admits an error that may have cost a patient – also named Matilda! – her life.<sup>26</sup> The symbolic weight of this convergence is difficult to ignore. Davis goes further in his interpretation:

Williams' language requires even the least sophisticated students to interpret the doctor's passionate attempt to thrust a heavy silver spoon into the child's mouth as symbolic rape.<sup>27</sup>

While Freud did not explicitly frame such actions as symbolic rape, he was attentive to the overlap between medical intervention, linguistic ambiguity, and sexual aggression.

While Freud did not explicitly frame such actions as symbolic rape, he was attentive to the overlap between medical intervention, linguistic ambiguity, and sexual aggression. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud recounts the dream of an analysand in which an old lady pressures the dreamer to eat; he then links this image, via word-play, to the German verb “*nötigen*” (“to compel/force”). He notes that a colloquial variant—*notzüchtigen* (again ‘to force’, but in the ordinary sense of applying pressure of any kind, be it physical or psychological, in order to make someone do something or comply) – was used in place of *nötigen*. *Notzüchtigen* is explicitly sexual, denoting rape,

xxii Robert G. Davis (1908–1998).

xxiii William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), American poet and physician.

and was used jokingly in male speech.<sup>28</sup> My point concerns this semantic shift from general compulsion to explicit sexual coercion. Interestingly, “*nötig*” also appears in the Irma Dream: “*Ich denke mir, sie hat es doch nicht nötig*” (“I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that”). meaning that Irma does not need to resist or make matters difficult.<sup>29</sup> While the usage differs, the linguistic root is the same. Freud, renowned for tracing such linguistic linkages (as in his Signorelli analysis<sup>30</sup>), does not press the connection further. This silence reflects not ignorance but decorum—he was writing in a time when such explicit associations were likely unpublishable.

Freud’s restraint should not be mistaken for naivety. He was deeply familiar with Greco-Roman mythology, and later theories—developed in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921)—root collective violence and sexual domination in prehistoric fantasies of the “primal father” who claims unrestricted rights and sexual prerogative over the women of the tribe—the primal horde.<sup>31-32</sup> These ideas emerge not only in his theory but also unconsciously in the structure of his dreams.

In short, Freud was aware of the psychic and cultural dynamics of forced sexuality, but expressed them through the codes and limits of his era. Today, in a world more open to explicitly erotic content and direct language, we can read, write, and speak these latent elements more plainly. This does not diminish Freud’s legacy but expands our understanding of the rich—and often uncanny—symbolic universe in which psychoanalysis was born.

#### FANTASY, SEXUAL VIOLENCE, AND THE RAPE OF THE SABINE

Freud often used literary examples to illustrate his thinking, and I shall now follow in that tradition: The case of Unica Zürn,<sup>xxiv</sup> German poet and artist, exemplifies how early trauma, fantasy, and sexuality intertwine. In *Dark Spring* (1967), she recounts childhood experiences marked by incestuous rape, fantasies of abduction, and vivid

xxiv Unica Zürn (1916–1970) spent the lion’s share of her adult life living with fellow artist Hans Bellmer (1902–1975). Both artist’s drawings are worth mentioning, as they often fuse—condense—multiple motives into an alien-like form, often with erotic undertones. The drawings attempt to make the ‘physical unconscious’ come forth and be accessible for the viewer, and can be viewed as a concretisation of dreamlogic (if there is such a thing). The curious reader is pointed towards Bellmer’s short book *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or the Anatomy of the Image* (2004[1957]).

sadomasochistic dreamscapes involving groups of masked, violent men.<sup>33</sup>

A key image recurs nightly for Zürn is Paul Peter Rubens' painting of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*.<sup>xxv</sup> The image arouses conflicting feelings – loathing for the women (“These two naked, rotund women remind her of her mother”) but adoration for “the two dark, handsome robbers, who lift the women onto their rearing horses.” This painting becomes a psychic template for her sexual fantasies: menacing, powerful men dominating a passive female figure – herself.



Her internal world becomes saturated with violent, racialized, and romanticized fantasies of conquest, where she imagines herself as a trembling, bound victim on a black marble altar, the target of a silent, armed circle of men: A “[...] circle of men in black appears and they close in on her. Glowing eyes stare at her through the eyeholes of repulsive masks. Some wear gleaming helmets. When they tear off their masks, she sees the wild faces of Arabs, Chinese, Blacks and Indians.” These figures are both terrifying and revered:

xxv The Rape of the Sabine Women, probably painted 1635–40, by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). National Gallery, London.

“These are kings, lords, and princes.” The scene ends with a condensation of *la petite mort* and *Le Grand Mort*: “As she experiences the pleasure of this, an Indian slowly cuts her throat. [...] Nobody is there to rescue her. Night after night she suffers death anew.”

Zürn’s fantasies culminate in scenes of ritualized rape and murder, imagined with explicit visual detail. Though horrifying, these scenes offer her a sense of attention, importance, and erotic fulfillment. As the text states, “She feels greatly honored to be the center of these men’s attention.”

Zürn’s scenes introduce a crucial shift in point of view: we read not a man’s fantasy about a woman, but a woman’s own fantasy of violent capture. She thus functions both as an “Irma’s voice”—a possible inner monologue of peril and erotic focus—and as evidence that foundational patriarchal fantasies circulate within feminine fantasy life as well. The disturbing convergence of trauma, desire, and violence illustrates how fantasy can eroticize pain and passivity, often drawing from cultural and mythic images—such as the Sabine Women—to structure its narratives. Using Zürn’s biographical entry as a case study therefore serves a double function: (1) she articulates the subjective texture of passivity, dread, and exaltation that the Irma scene only implies; and (2) she demonstrates that the mythic templates (e.g., Sabine Women) are not confined to the male/rapist position but may also be appropriated within feminine fantasy. These are not mutually exclusive readings; holding them together clarifies the ambivalence at the heart of eroticized violence.

#### THE PREVALENCE OF RAPE FANTASY

The sensitive terrain of rape fantasy, its psychoanalytic understanding, cultural presence, and historical depth, requires nuancing. While non-consensual sexual acts are clearly condemned in modern discourse and law, psychoanalysis distinguishes fantasy from intent and action: a fantasy, no matter how violent or transgressive, does not imply conscious desire or will to enact it. The Irma Dream can be read as staging a group-assault configuration within a medical frame (encirclement, invasive procedure, diffusion of responsibility), but this interpretive claim about Freud’s dream imagery is not a claim about his personal wishes; it concerns the latent structure produced by dream-work.

The presence of abduction or rape fantasies has been studied in both psychoanalytical and psychological literature. Psychoanalyst

Michael J. Bader<sup>xxvi</sup>, in *Arousal: The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasy* (2002), notes the commonality of rape and gang rape fantasies in clinical settings, especially among women. Prevalence studies support this, showing that between one-third and over half of all women report having had such fantasies.<sup>34</sup> These two tracks serve different purposes here: the Irma reading identifies a structural configuration within the dream, while the prevalence data and psychoanalytical observation shows that similar fantasy forms circulate more broadly in culture—including women’s fantasy life.

The point with my reading of the Irma scene concerns a male-coded clinical fantasy of authority and intrusion – what the scene structurally represents – not the gender constellation.

To chart an essential component in the rape scenario, Bader describes the quality of desire that enables a person to exert their full force, without inhibiting the manifestation of their wish-fulfillment, which he terms “sexual ruthlessness.”<sup>35</sup> Sexual ruthlessness, which conflicts with social decorum, is a central component of rape fantasies.<sup>36</sup> These fantasies involve a displacement of guilt—especially when imagined as perpetrated by groups, due to the collusion of anonymity—which aligns with the diffusion of responsibility Freud stages in the Irma Dream, where multiple doctors appear as a shared “we.” The dream is filled with latent (sexual) content in the dreamer’s dream-thought, involving power imbalance, forced submission, and the diffusion of guilt through group dynamics, and carries an implicit erotic and violent charge.

Diverging impulses create tension in the negotiation between the pleasure principle (*Lustprinzip*) and the reality principle (*Realitätsprinzip*), to use Freudian terminology from the first topography introduced in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, later amended by the second topography laid forth in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).<sup>xxvii</sup> This

xxvi Michael J. Bader (b. 1952).

xxvii Freud introduces the Nirvana principle (term suggested by Barbara Low) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as a tendency toward the reduction of excitation to zero. In *The Economic Problem of Masochism* (1924) he remarks that he had «unhesitatingly identified» the Nirvana principle with the pleasure principle, calling them «supposedly identical». He then points out that the Nirvana principle is in service of the death drive—its aim to level tensions; no stimulus, no movement, mere peace. My usage in the main text, however, concerns the earlier formulation of the pleasure-unpleasure principle (*Lust-Unlust-Prinzip*) as set out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and elaborated in *Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning* (1911), where Freud states that an

inner tension is mirrored in Freud's own life at the time he dreamt the Irma Dream, as he struggled with constraints on his sexual expression due to Martha's pregnancy. Such inner conflict can be scenically "solved" in fantasy through forced submission, authority, and "safety in numbers" – sense of security and silent agreement that comes with being part of a lot of people doing a thing rather than acting alone – precisely the dramaturgy that the dream constructs.

*The Encyclopedia of Unusual Sexual Practices* (1992), defines gang bang as:

serial sex with more than two partners [...] The term is frequently used in rape situations where there is more than one rapist. However, it can also be organised and consensual [...] also a type of behavior engaged in by some of our closest relatives, the primates [...] The tension and anticipation is probably much higher than in ordinary group sex where everyone's attention is either scattered or focused on their current partner(s)<sup>37</sup>

This definition highlights the element of concentrated attention, distinguishing a gang bang from diffuse group sex. This focused, converging attention on a single subject reflects both natural and mythic patterns, visible in insect mating, primate behavior, sexual ruthlessness as a demonstration of power, and fantasy life.

Often this sexually explicit material is repressed, in accordance with Freud's observations. Across his work, Freud treats sexuality – in the broad sense of the word – as disproportionately subject to repression; when libido-charged material is warded off, it may return as symptom, fantasy, or dream, and, if sustained, contribute to neurosis/hysteria.<sup>38</sup> He insists on sexuality's central role in both normal and pathological mental life,<sup>39</sup> and famously illustrates how material involving death and sexuality is especially prone to being diverted or

organization «enslaved to the pleasure principle and neglecting the reality principle of the external world could not maintain itself alive for the shortest time» (SE XII, 219–220). The point at issue is not an identity between «sexual ruthlessness» and the Nirvana principle; rather, it is that before the second topography the unmodulated dominance of the pleasure principle—prior to reality-testing—can manifest as a force indifferent to consequence (Bader's «sexual ruthlessness»). The later metapsychology (post-1920) relocates the *equilibrium* aim (Nirvana) toward the death drive; my claim does not conflict with that revision but refers to the 1911 psychic economy in which the pleasure principle, without the counterweight of the reality principle, risks precisely such uncompromising discharge.

forgotten, as in the Signorelli parapraxis.<sup>40</sup> Read through this lens, the Irma Dream's latent sexual structure (power imbalance, forced submission, diffusion of guilt) is exactly the sort of compromise formation one expects when repressed material returns in symbolic form.

When interpreting the Irma Dream symbolically—Irma's initial resistance and later submission to bodily examination, the convergence of multiple male figures, and an invasive procedure—the dream can be read as a group-assault fantasy with medicalized fiction of care: “a gang bang moment,” in which two-or-more men do things with a woman who does not want to “take it,” yet “gets it” nonetheless.

This need not imply a single, gendered author of the fantasy; rather, it shows how a widely distributed fantasy form is assembled by the dream-work from personal context (Freud's clinical anxiety, sexual constraints) and a cultural storehouse of images (mythic seizure of women, medical spectacle, biological convergence). Thus the Irma Dream not only refracts Freud's immediate concerns about a “*Lösung*” (solution), but also echoes archaic Western scripts (e.g., the Sabine myth) and recalls zoological motifs of convergent attention—illuminating how sexual fantasy interweaves violence, guilt, pleasure, and social order. This aligns with cultural and mythological patterns, as well as sexual practices found in nature, such as those of the honey bee.

Thus the Irma Dream symbolically evokes not just Freud's clinical anxiety about a presented “*Lösung*” (solution), sexual constraints and repression, but also shows how a widely distributed fantasy draws from a cultural storehouse of images – mythic seizure of women, medical spectacle, biological convergence. As such, Freud's dream not only reveals latent content drawn from his personal context, but also from the mythic substrate of Western sexual imagination, thus casting light on sexual fantasy's interweaving of violence, guilt, pleasure, and the social order.

## MYTHOLOGICAL RAPE IMAGERY

### PRIAPUS AND THE NYMPH

The latent content of the Irma dream reaches beyond Freud's biographical context into the mythopoetic foundations of Western culture. As Erikson notes, the dream bears *priapic* elements—referring not just to the phallic but to Priapus, the Greco-Roman god of hypermasculine

fertility and transgressive desire.<sup>xxviii</sup> The presence of multiple male figures encircling Irma in a clinical examination scene recalls symbolic tableaux of domination and forced submission, as was present in fin de siècle medical practice. A painting that captures the essence of the medical zeitgeist was painted in 1887, one year after Freud practiced under Charcot; *A clinical lesson at the Salpêtrière* by André Brouillet.<sup>xxix</sup> What Brouillet stages – a female patient as didactic spectacle under an all-male gaze – is precisely what the Irma Dream stages as inner theatre: a clinical ritual that doubles as a fantasy of medical men’s domination, expertise, and the compliance of the female patient. A print of the painting hung in Freud’s office in Vienna, and still hangs above the legendary couch at 20 Maresfield Gardens in London.



Freud’s mechanism of condensation is central here: various ideas, affects, and historical symbols are compacted into a single dream image. Irma, ostensibly undergoing a medical inspection, becomes an

xxviii Erikson, 1954:26

xxix Painted by André Brouillet (1857–1914), *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière* hangs in Paris Descartes University, Paris, France. The painting shows the patient, Marie «Blanche» Wittman (1859–1913), in the arms of Doctor Charcot (1823–93). Blanch was often used to demonstrate a hypnotic induced hysteria. Behind Charcot and Blanche are one male assistant and two nurses. The audience consists of no less than 26 men, presumably doctors – judging by their clothing, style and prevalence of facial hair and the title of the painting – act as onlookers and voyeurs, awaiting their time with the patient(s).

ambiguous figure—at once patient and sacrificial body – subjected to the scrutinizing and invasive authority of male doctors. This scene may unconsciously echo mythological narratives of sexual violence disguised as ritual, art, or comedy.

One such parallel is found in the story of Priapus' attempted rape of the nymph Lotis, as told by Ovid<sup>xxx</sup> in *Fasti*. During a festival of Bacchus—himself a god of ecstatic boundary transcendence—Priapus approaches the sleeping nymph Lotis in a grove:

He happily began to have his way with her. / Suddenly Silenus'  
ass braying raucously [...] Terrified the nymph rose, pushed Priap-  
pus away [...] But the over-expectant god with his rigid member,  
/ Was laughed at by them all, in the moonlight.<sup>41</sup>

This comic framing of actions that today would not be looked upon with as much laughter conceals a scenario of non-consensual sexual advance, halted only by an accidental interruption – by awakening. The exaggerated phallus of Priapus, like the injection needle in the Irma Dream, may function as a symbolic condensate – linking medical penetration, sexual violation, and archaic male potency. Displacement further diffuses libidinal intensity. The explicit threat of sexuality is redirected into ostensibly benign medical imagery. Irma's encirclement, injection, and passivity crystallize Freud's context into an archetypal Western script of collective male domination. Such scenes, while culturally encoded in myth and art, reappear in the dreams in disguised forms and are part of our cultural substrate and heritage, prompted by what official law and public or social decorum dictates. Freud's own account and analysis of the dream emphasize Irma's resistance to treatment and the shared medical responsibility. The Irma dream not only encodes Freud's personal crisis of confidence and (sexual and professional) frustrations, but reactivate an existential, historical and mythopoetic structure: the convergence of male power, bodily intrusion, the use of (persuasive) force, authority and safety in numbers, and mythic transgression.

xxx Publius Ovidius Naso (20 March 43 BC – AD 17/18), known in English as Ovid, was a Roman poet who lived during the reign of Augustus. His most famous work is *Metamorphoses*, a poem containing a plethora of Greek and Roman mythological references.

## THE RAPE OF THE SABINE WOMEN: FOUNDING

### VIOLENCE AND THE SCENIC CONSTRUCTION OF POWER

The structure of the Irma dream echoes the recurring myth of The Rape (or Abduction) of the Sabine Women (*Raub der Sabinerinnen*), as chronicled by Titus Livius<sup>xxxii</sup> in Book I of his *Ab Urbe Condita*. In this myth, Rome, though fortified and sovereign, lacks one critical element: women. Romulus—the surviving of the she-wolf nursed twins after his brother Remus was murdered, potentially in a Cain and Abel-like dispute<sup>xxxii</sup>—having failed to acquire wives through diplomatic request, devises a theatrical ruse as “*Lösung*.” During a festival, at a prearranged signal, the Roman men seize the Sabine women by force:

“When the hour for the games had come [...] the preconcerted signal was given and the Roman youth dashed in all directions to carry off the maidens [...] The abducted maidens were quite as despondent and indignant. Romulus, however, went round in person [...] They would live in honourable wedlock [...] and—dearest of all to human nature—would be the mothers of freemen.”<sup>42</sup>

What begins as a brutal mass abduction (and likely adjacent sexual activity) is, within the myth’s logic, retroactively softened by promises of dignity, civic rights, and motherhood. This structure—of violent

xxxii Titus Livius (ca. 59 BC–17 AD), commonly known as Livy, was a contemporary Roman historian.

xxxii A callback from the conference’s closing presentation is in order. The presenter—dressed in scholastic black, spiral earrings matching unruly curls, and a brooch of a clown balancing on a red sphere—opened with a dramatic retelling of the Irma Dream. With Brouillet’s painting as backdrop and excerpts from Zürn’s childhood diary, the narrative journeyed from Freud’s clinical world to the mythic city of Rome. Beneath Rubens’ depiction of the Sabine myth, the origin story was evoked. Then, stepping from the lectern to the stage’s center, the presenter dropped to their knees, mimicking Romulus and Remus feeding at the she-wolf’s teats. The grotesque grimace of effort asked the question: how does one get the milk to flow? The answer came, freely quoted from Goethe’s *Faust*—a recurring reference at the conference—to the audience:

Das kommt nur auf Gewohnheit an.  
So nimmt ein Kind der Mutter Brust  
Nicht gleich im Anfang willig an,  
Doch bald ernährt es sich mit Lust  
Mit jedem Tage mehr gelüsten.  
So wird’s euch an der Weisheit  
Brüsten

You’ll get used to it, all in due time.  
A nursling doesn’t, in a blink,  
Take to its mother’s breast so fine,  
But soon it sucks with eager drink.  
So you anon will suck nutrition,  
From Wisdom’s breasts with blest  
fruition.

seizure and use of force veiled as benevolence—mirrors a key defense mechanism in Freudian dream theory: *reaction formation*, wherein a repressed desire or dream-thought—that is, the latent content of the manifest dream—is expressed in the opposite affect, even a rejection or complete contradiction of them, due to disgust, shame and morality.<sup>43</sup> The violent wish of possession becomes, on the surface, a fantasy of rescue, family, and reconciliation. The same transformation is visible in Freud’s manifest dream: a painful and not-risk free injection becomes the benevolent act of medical treatment.

Freud the archeologist, anthropologist and collector of Egypt-Greco-Roman antiques was very familiar with Rome and its lore, evidenced in his analogy of Rome’s archaeological layers on how the mind remembers, found in the first chapter of in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). As with dream analysis and its facets, Freud notes on memory that “The observer would perhaps need only to shift his gaze or his position in order to see the one or the other.”<sup>44</sup>

This idea—of shifting between temporal layers or symbolic registers—resonates with the dream-work’s processes of condensation and displacement. The mythic scene of the Sabine women may not appear in Freud’s dream directly, but its structure and logic are found in the dream-thought.

Western art, from the Renaissance to the Baroque, repeatedly visualized this foundational scene of male violence under the guise of civilizational necessity. In Rubens’ *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1635–40), bodies twist in a choreography of domination and resistance. Poussin’s version (1633–34) formalizes the violence into classical restraint, yet the terror on the women’s faces remains intact. Sebastiano Ricci (c. 1700)<sup>xxxiii</sup> and Girolamo del Pacchia (c. 1520) paintings, and Giambologna’s monumental marble (1583), further solidify this myth within Western visual memory.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

xxxiii Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734), *Der Raub der Sabinerinnen* (ca 1700). Liechtenstein. The Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna.

This painting was acquired by Prince Johann I of Liechtenstein in 1819 and present at his Garden Palace in Vienna, Austria. The Garden Palace has been opened at fixed times to the general public upon payment of an admission fee since 1810. The palace is located less than ten minutes walk from Freud’s home at Bergasse 19. To my knowledge there are no records of Freud having visited the museum, however, given his cultural interest and daily walk, it can be deemed highly likely that such a visit has occurred.

xxxiv Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (probably 1633–34). The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, United States of America. Girolamo del Pacchia (1477– after 1533), *The Abduction of the*

Just as these works canonize a violent origin myth under the frame of aesthetic beauty, so too does the Irma Dream mask a latent wish with a narrative of medical concern. The positioning of Irma as a central, immobilized figure encircled by male actors parallels the circular choreography of “Raub” (robbery; theft of property, to which women, in a historical context, is counted; rape) as seen in both myth and painting. The scenic dimension—its theatricality and group participation – resonates with Bader’s identification of *sexual ruthlessness* and the dispersal of guilt through collective action.

Thus, what begins as an individual manifest dream with its latent content connects, through symbolic resonance and historical repetition, to the founding fantasy of Western civilization: that the woman must be taken, so that the city – be it Rome or psychoanalysis – may be built.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RETOUR À FREUD

Returning to Freud, this paper has explored the Irma dream as a scene of power, gender, and mythic reenactment. The dream’s dynamic – Freud and his fellow doctors examining Irma – resonates with fin-de-siècle medical culture and deeper, mythological patterns of symbolic rape and abduction, exemplified in the legend of the Sabine Women.

By tracing these scenic patterns back to Greco-Roman mythology and art, we uncover how deeply cultural memory infuses the unconscious. Freud’s own remark points to this hidden depth:

There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown.<sup>xxxv</sup>

The probing of Irma mirrors this metaphorical probing into the dream’s unconscious core—its navel, as a seemingly dead-end orifice, yet open as a canal in the becoming of (intrauterine) life – revealing its reference to myths of antiquity, thus advancing the horizon of what is knowable.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Just as Rome’s seizure of the Sabine women ensured

Sabines (about 1520), Getty Los Angeles, United States of America.  
Giambologna (1529–1608), Abduction of a Sabine Woman (1581–83), Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence, Italy.

xxxv SE IV 111

xxxvi There are of course several other occasions found in Greco-Roman

its future, the scientific impulse can be viewed as a sublimated will to conquest—an appropriation of knowledge mirroring a desire for conquest in the intellectual domain—a sublimated impulse, an *Ersatz*—not unlike that of Freud’s favorite hero, Hannibal,<sup>xxxvii</sup> during his later school days.<sup>45</sup>

Freud gazed through the *Ginnungagap* of Irma’s throat, and saw the paradigm dream that opened up the king’s road to the unconscious and to psychoanalysis. In a letter to Fliess, he famously joked and imagined a plaque commemorating the moment:

‘In This House, on July 24, 1895,  
The Secret of Dreams was Revealed  
to Dr. Sigm. Freud.’<sup>46</sup>

Freud frequently turned to myth and tragedy – Oedipus, from the Athenian tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles<sup>xxxviii</sup> being the most famous<sup>47</sup> – to illuminate psychic life and portray the human inner drama, both individually as well as dynamically between members of a family.

Likewise, this paper has shown how the Irma Dream draws unconsciously from shared cultural legends and myths. Through the dream, we glimpse not only Freud’s own psychic world but also the enduring influence of myth on modern subjectivity—and the founding fantasies that continue to shape our collective unconscious.

The graphic nature and brutal content of this elucidation aside, no shade falls on Freud, who continuously, throughout the course of his life and psychoanalytic practice, attempted to work in the service of truth, sharing his insights and reflections as they emerged, as well as dream material that allows for his honorary grandchildren to hone their craft and contribute to the endless pursuit of a complete analysis. For this, we owe him gratitude and tribute. Freud was, as we all are,

mythology where men have done their will with non-cooperative and refusing women; Ajax abduction of Cassandra during the Sac of Troy, Hades *dito* to Persephone, Zeus’ rape of Europa, and Poseidons *dito* of Medusa, to mentions but a few examples.

xxxvii Hannibal (247 – between 183 and 181 BC) was a Carthaginian general and statesman who commanded the forces of Carthage in their battle against the Roman Republic during the Second Punic War ((218 to 201 BC), famous for having employed North African war elephants and walking them across the Alps.

xxxviii Sophocles (c. 497/496–406/405 BC).

bound by the historical context in which he lived. Although gifted with foresight and vision, it is too much to expect any single person in fin-de-siècle Europe to fully elaborate every intimate dream image or association for the public.

Today, in a world awash with imagery that would once have been deemed pornographic, such associations have become de-tabooed. The task of torch-bearing now falls to contemporary psychoanalysts to draw connections to the unconscious substrate of our civilization—however uncomfortable they may be. *Encore un effort!*

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- 1 Freud SE IV 120-21
  - 2 Elms 1980:93
  - 3 Freud SE IV 277
  - 4 Freud SE IV 107 ; RSE IV 95-6 ; GW II/III 112
  - 5 Elms 1980:94-7
  - 6 Ibid.: 100
  - 7 Jennings 2024: 190
  - 8 Erikson 1954: 24.
  - 9 Ibid.: 44-5
  - 10 Ibid.: 48
  - 11 Ibid.: 25
  - 12 Ibid.: 12
  - 13 Lacan 1991: 154
  - 14 Ibid.: 158
  - 15 Erikson 1954: 33-4
  - 16 Lacan 1991: 158
  - 17 Freud RSE IV 108
  - 18 Freud SE IV 117
  - 19 Elms 1980: 101
  - 20 Freud SE XVIII: 60
  - 21 Liber AL 1: 12
  - 22 Erikson 1954: 26
  - 23 Freud SE IV 119
  - 24 Freud SE V 534
  - 25 Freud & Abraham 1966
  - 26 Freud SE IV 111

- 27 Davis 1976: 10  
 28 Freud SE V 420–21  
 29 Freud SE IV 109  
 30 Freud SE VI 1  
 31 Freud SE XIII 125–6  
 32 Freud SE XVIII 122–8  
 33 Zürn 2000: 47–63  
 34 Bivona et al. 2012  
 35 Bader 2002: 147  
 36 Ibid.: 55–7  
 37 Love 2014: 217–8  
 38 Freud SE IV 116  
 39 Freud SE VII 133–34  
 40 Freud SE VI 3–4  
 41 Ovid 2004  
 42 Livy 1912  
 43 Freud SE XIX 118  
 44 Freud SE XXI 69–71  
 45 Freud SE IV 196  
 46 Freud SE IV 121; RSE IV 108  
 47 Freud SE IV 261–4

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