Cēšmag, the Lie, and the Logic of Zoroastrian Demonology

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I

For all that demonology was a major part of many theological systems, the topic has received relatively little serious attention. The claims made by demonological discourse having been conclusively discredited in the European Enlightenment, it is as if the topic had been drained of all but antiquarian interest. While mild curiosity about the benighted beliefs of distant others may still be permitted, until recently most research remained distanced, condescending, and superficial, as if reflecting residual anxiety that the foolishness of these beliefs might be contagious or—a less magical construction of the same dynamic—that showing too much interest in such things might damage one’s reputation.\(^1\)

As the result of such skittishness, our understanding of many religions is impoverished, for some of the most serious issues of ethics, cosmology, anthropology, and soteriology were—and still are—regularly engaged via demonology. Though we may now reject the foundational assumptions of that discourse, this does not force the conclusion that beliefs about demons were of necessity naïve, ridiculous, or infantile. As a working hypothesis, it seems preferable to assume that the demonological components of any religion are no less intelligent, complex, or profound than those of its other constituent parts and thus deserving of equally serious study.

As a small, but convenient example of the results to be gained from such an approach, I propose to consider an obscure Zoroastrian demon: Cēšmag, who makes an abrupt and bewildering entrance toward the end of a celebrated incident recounted in Book Seven of the \textit{Dēnkard}, a massive Pahlavi compendium committed to writing in the ninth century C.E.\(^2\)


2. For a general description of the \textit{Dēnkard} and its contents, see Jean de Menasce, \textit{Une encyclopédie mazdéenne: Le Denkart} (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958) or Carlo G. Cereti, \textit{La Letteratura Pahlavi: Introduzione ai testi con riferimenti alla storia degli studi e alla tradizione manoscritta} (Milan: Mimesis, 2001), which summarizes the content of Book Seven as follows: “Here, one not only narrates the life of the prophet, but inserts it in universal history as the point of contact between history, epic, and eschatological myth” (p. 68). See also Judith
This is the episode in which Zarathuštra resists temptation by the Lie, a tale that has often been compared to similar stories about the Buddha and Māra, Jesus and Satan, Grail-seekers and “Frau Welt.” In E. W. West’s pioneering translation—which we will have to revise in significant ways—the text reads as follows:

[And Aûharma zd spoke thus]: “Even unto thee, O Zarâtûst! A Fiend will rush, a female, golden-bodied and full-bosomed (so that she wears a bodice), and she rushes to request companionship from thee; a female, golden bodied and full-bosomed, to request conversation from thee, to request co-operation from thee. But thou shouldst not grant her companionship, nor conversation, nor shalt thou prescribe any conduct for her; afterwards, to revert her downwards, thou shalt utter aloud that triumphant saying the Yathâ-ahu-vairyô.”

Zarâtûst proceeded to the habitable and friendly world, for the purpose of fully observing that beaten track (khâpi smo) of the embodied existence; then that fiend came forward when he sat in the vicinity of a garment—that garment which, when Vohûmanô was conveying him to the conference, was deposited by him—a female, golden-bodied and full-bosomed, and companionship, conversation, and co-operation were requested by her from him; she also whined (dandîdo): “I am Spendarmad.”

And Zarâtûst spoke thus: “She who is Spendarmad was fully observed by me in the light of a cloudless day, and that Spendarmad appeared to me fine behind and fine before and fine all around (that is, in all positions she was handsome); do thou turn thy back, and I shall know if thou art Spendarmad.”

And the fiend spoke to him thus: “O Zarâtûst of the Spítâmas! where we are, those who are females are handsome in front, but frightfully hideous behind; so do not make a demand for my back.” After she had protested a third time, the fiend turned her back, and she was seen by Zarâtûst behind in the groin; and when matter was exuded, it was full of serpents, toads, lizards, centipedes, and frogs.

And that triumphant saying, the Yathâ-āhû-vairyô, was uttered aloud by Zarâtûst; then that fiend was annihilated, and Kêshmak the Karap rushed forth.

jöyid kā az hōm *Spandarmad. guft-aš Zarduxšt kā be-m ān nīgerēd *kē *Spandarmad andar ān ī rōš hā yā fī xwābar ud ān man xahist *Spandarmad hu-orōn ud hu-parrōn ud hu-tarīst kā hamāg gyāg nēk būd, pasīh frōd ward śnāsom agar tō hē *Spandarmad. u-s ō ōy druz guft kā: Zarduxšt i Spītāmān kā awēsēn āmā hēm kē mādāgān *nēkōg az peš nēmād ud duxēstīt az pasīh ma man ō pasīh framāyēn. paz az sidigār paḥikārīd druc ō pasīh frōd wašt. u-s ōy dīd Zarduxšt pas āndārār hakt ka ahrūft ēstād purr gaz ud *udadrag ud karbaunag ud pazūd ud wazag. u-s ān i pērōsīgar gūvīnīn frāz guft Zarduxšt Yātā-Aḥū-Wērōy. ēg ān druz be *nēst ud Cēšmag-kīlp (NB: this word is ambiguous, as we shall see. West interpreted it as karap [= karb in modern orthography], but it can also be read as kirb, which makes a very important difference) frāz dwārīd.5

Subsequent translators, most notably Marijan Molé, have improved on West’s rendering in several details and there is room for further improvement, but to date no one has reconsidered the mysterious Cēšmag, who is our prime point of interest.6 Nor have studies of Zoroastrian demonology added to the little that West adduced.7 Cēšmag remains an enigma.

II

With regard to Cēšmag, West provided a note directing the reader to Dēnkard 7.2.44–45, which recounts certain events that transpired when Ahremen sought to forestall Zarathūṣtra’s birth.8 The story is rather complex, and the preceding narrative details how all the Wise Lord’s good creation contributed to the prophet’s conception. Thus, what it describes as “Zarathūṣtra’s elemental body-substance” (ān i Zarātūšt tan gōhr)9 fell from the sky with rain, entered the earth, then entered plants that were eaten by two cows who, as a result, began to produce a miraculously pure milk that Pourūsāspa and Durgdōw would ultimately drink before conceiving their son.10

Hoping to forestall the birth that would threaten his power, the Evil Spirit called an assembly, which is described in the passage West cited. West’s translation, however, is sufficiently flawed that it is useful to cite two other versions.

Interestingly, the passage never identifies Cēšmag as an evil priest (Pahlavi karb [=karap in the older orthography]), only as “Cēšmag, who was unwise” (Cēšmag i duṣdānāg).11 A bit later, however, the text does make reference to the one hundred fifty demons led by Cēšmag, using terms that West, Molé, and others understood to confirm the testimony of later, however, the text does make reference to the one hundred fifty demons led by Cēšmag, who was unwise. West did Zarduxšt pas āndārār hakt ka ahrūft ēstād purr gaz ud *udadrag ud karbaunag ud pazūd ud wazag. u-s ān i pērōsīgar gūvīnīn frāz guft Zarduxšt Yātā-Aḥū-Wērōy. ēg ān druz be *nēst ud Cēšmag-kīlp (NB: this word is ambiguous, as we shall see. West interpreted it as karap [= karb in modern orthography], but it can also be read as kirb, which makes a very important difference) frāz dwārīd.5

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growled thus: "I impotent?"

him that he exists for destruction, all the while undertake his

And that village Karaps of the demons who are away with thrice fifty

Astute in evil, he rushed

fellow-workers partly destroyed by him, fellow-workers were ruined . . .

150 dēwān i Cēšmag karbān as “150 demons, who are Karaps of Cēšmag.” The crucial word is open to question, however, given the inadequacies and ambiguities of the Pahlavi writing system, where short vowels regularly go unrepresented. Accordingly, what is written as klp can be transliterated as either karb ‘a priest hostile to Zoroaster’ (from Avestan karapan)-16 or kirb ‘the external, visible form of living beings’ (from Avestan kahrp-). If the latter is correct, pace West et al.), then the demons are all “forms of Cēšmag” and not priests in his retinue. Correspondingly, in Dēnkard 7.4.61 it is not “Cēšmag the Karap” (Cēšmag karb), who suddenly appears in place of the seductive Lie when Zarathuṣtra has bested the latter, but rather “the form of Cēšmag” (Cēšmag kirb). Such an interpretation is particularly attractive here, since the immediately preceding text uses the grapheme klp in unambiguous fashion, when stating—three separate times—that before Cēšmag entered the story, the Lie appeared to Zarathuṣtra “in the form of a woman” (mādag-kirb).18

This philological detail is important for several reasons, as we will gradually see. Inter alia, it permits one to understand that the narrative portrays the Lie as an entity that has no proper form of its own, “form” (Pahlavi kirb) being an aspect of material existence. As a result, when attempting to seduce Zarathuṣtra, the Lie is forced to adopt the bodily form of a beautiful woman (mādag-kirb). And when that fails, it shifts to the form of Cēšmag (Cēšmag-kirb).

III

That West wanted to make Cēšmag a karapan is perfectly understandable. After all, the Older Avestan texts consistently denounce the practices of these priests as antithetical to the Good Religion, and Pahlavi literature goes further still, providing stories of how one of their number murdered Zarathuṣtra.19 Given that Cēšmag and his assistant demons show similar hostility to the as-yet-unborn prophet, it was reasonable enough to imagine they shared this evil-priestly identity. Still, there is nothing in either of the two passages in question that

15. Dēnkard 7.2.45 (Madan ed. 608.12–13; Dresden ed. 483.13). The translation is that of West, Pahlavi Texts 5: 29, who provided neither transcription nor transliteration of the Pahlavi text. Molé, La legende de Zoroastre, 22, transliterated the phrase as 150 dēwān i Cēšmak karapān (using the older orthography).


18. Twice at Dēnkard 7.4.55 (Madan ed., 635.15 and 16) and once at 7.4.57 (Madan ed., 636.2).

19. Older Avestan references to the karapans include Yasna 32.12, 44.20, 46.11, 48.10, and 51.14. Occurrences in the Younger Avesta are more formulaic, but always hostile. Pahlavi accounts of Zarathuṣtra’s death at the hands of a karb include Zand i Vohuman Yasn 3.3, Dādestān i Dēnīg 72.8, Dēnkard 5.2.3, Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān i Dēnīg 36.6 and 47.23, Selections of Zādspram 9.0–10.20 and 12.1–10. This tradition was discussed by Jackson, Zoroaster, the Prophet of Ancient Iran (above n. 3), 124–32, and a good deal more critically by Mary Boyce, Zoroastrianism: Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour (Costa Mesa, Cal.: Mazda, 1992), 14–16. On the karapans in general, see the differing interpretations advanced by Herman Lommel, Die Religion Zarathustras nach dem Awesta dargestellt (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1930), 57, 248–49, and Mary Boyce, A History of Zoroastrianism, vol. 1: The Early Period (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 12.
requires such an inference and the fact that Čēšmag and his cohort are demons (dēwān) is more than enough to explain their hostility. What might it possibly mean, then, to speak of the “form” (or “forms”) of Čēšmag? To the best of my knowledge, there is only one other passage in Pahlavi literature where this demon appears, and it is there that we get our fullest description. This is Greater Bundahišn 27.29 (= Indian Bundahišn 28.24), to which West alerted his readers.\textsuperscript{20} It states:

Čēšmag is that one who makes earthquakes and makes the whirlwind also and goes forth in opposition to the clouds.\textsuperscript{21}

Once again, there is no suggestion that Čēšmag was a karapan and it is difficult to imagine how the demonic force manifested in “natural” disasters (i.e., those phenomena we theorize as such) might assume a priestly identity. The information provided by the Bundahišn is fully consistent, however, with the kinds of destruction wrought by Čēšmag & Co. according to Dēnkard 7.2.42. Thus, in the latter we were told that after Čēšmag agreed to kill the unborn prophet, he rushed to attack Pourušāspa’s village. To describe this, the text uses the daēvīc verb \textit{dwāristān}, which would also be appropriate for the flight of a whirlwind, since it denotes motion that is distressingly erratic, unpredictable, menacing, abrupt, and/or violent.\textsuperscript{22}

Joining their leader, the demons proceed to level the village and shatter its trees, and one comes to understand that if Čēšmag represents the power manifest in storms, whirlwinds, and earthquakes, the others represent the manifold forms and specific instances in which this power appears.\textsuperscript{23}

However destructive such power may be, Zoroastrian scriptures make clear that the demonic can never prevail in any absolute or final sense. Thus, in the case at hand, Čēšmag’s forces devastate the village, but fail to destroy the cows, the milk, or Pourušāspa and Duy-dōw. On the contrary, once the storm abates, husband and wife drink the milk (mixed with haoma), make love for the first time, and thereby conceive Zarathuštra.\textsuperscript{24}

IV

Other stories follow, in which other demons try to accomplish what Čēšmag could not: the destruction of Zarathuštra. The story with which we began is one of those many stories, and in order to appreciate some of its complexities it is necessary to improve on West’s translation.

\[\text{[The Wise Lord said to Zarathuštra]: “In the form of a woman, with gold on her breast, she slinks up to you, Zarathuštra, to ask friendship from you, to ask consultation from you, to ask}\]

\textsuperscript{20} West, \textit{Pahlavi Texts} 5: 28, n. 1.

\textsuperscript{21} Although West (\textit{Pahlavi Texts} 1: 110) properly transliterated \textit{wznk} as \textit{wizandag} (his \textit{vazandak}), which means ‘quaking, earthquake’ (MacKenzie, p. 92), he apparently confused it with \textit{wizend} (written \textit{wzd}, or, more properly, \textit{wznd}), ‘hurt, harm, injury’ (MacKenzie, p. 93). Clearly, the earthquake was meant to parallel the whirlwind, as was recognized by Behramgore Tehmuraz Ahklesaria, \textit{Zand Akāsih: Iranian or Greater Bundahišn} (Bombay, 1956), who treated the term correctly at pp. 238–39.


\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Dēnkard} 7.2.45 (Madan ed. 608.13–14; Dresden ed. 483.14): \textit{u-ś ān wis ham-iz kand ham-iz waštān ud ham dar škast}. Note that the associative particle \textit{ham} is repeated three times (twice with the emphatic suffix -\textit{iz}), each time reasserting that the demons were part of a collaborative group that ‘together’ (\textit{ham}) accomplished these acts of destruction.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Dēnkard} 7.2.46–52.
collaboration from you. Do not give her friendship, nor consultation, nor collaboration. Order her to turn her rear to the front and recite that victorious act of speech, the Ahuna Vairiia prayer.”

Zarathuṣtra went to the inhabited, friendly world in order to see to the conversion of corporeal beings. There he met the Lie when he sat close to a funerary platform (the funerary platform to which Good Mind led him for an exchange of questions and answers. He placed him there). Female in form, with gold on her breast, she asked him for friendship, consultation, and cooperation. And he snarled at him: “I am Spandarmad.”

Zarathuṣtra said to her: “I have seen Spandarmad in the clear light of a fine day and it seems to me that Spandarmad is fair in front, fair in back, fair all around, beautiful in every place. Turn your rear to the front and I will recognize if you are Spandarmad.”

And the Lie said, to him: “Spitāma Zarathuṣtra, we who are women are beautiful from the front and hideous from the rear. Do not order me to show my rear.”

The Lie resisted three times, then turned her rear. And then Zarathuṣtra saw that between her raised haunches, she was full of snakes, hedgehogs, lizards, worms, and frogs. Zarathuṣtra recited that victorious act of speech, the Ahuna Vairiia formula. Then that Lie did not exist and the form of Čēšmag stormed forth.25

The text is careful to situate this incident at precisely that moment when Zarathuṣtra first proclaimed the Good Religion and began making converts of those who would help vanquish the powers of evil.26 Perceiving this threat, the Evil Spirit responded by dispatching “the Lie” (druz) to do what Čēšmag and others had failed to accomplish, for it was through falsehood that he would thwart the nascent power of truth. The place of encounter is also significant, for they met at a funerary platform (daxmag < Avestan daxma-),27 a contradictory space where life and death, purity and pollution, matter and spirit come into the closest and most anxiety-ridden contact, thereby establishing the possibility for a similar confrontation between male and female, the best of humans and the most dangerous demon, truth and the lie.

That “the Lie” is personified as female surely reflects a certain patriarchal misogyny, but is also motivated by an older Avestan tradition, where the corresponding noun (druj-) is feminine in gender.28 More striking than the simple fact of female identity in the present passage is the precise kind of woman the Lie is made out to be, for she is not only sensuous, seductive, and beautifully adorned, but also duplicitous, and that—fittingly enough—in two different fashions. First, she is not who she claims to be, for she calls herself Spendarmad, who is conventionally identified with the earth and is also regarded as the most beautiful, most fertile, most sustaining of females.29 Second, in the most literal

25. Dēnkard 7.4.55–61 (Madan ed. 635.14–636.15; missing in Dresden ed.). The text was given above.
26. Dēnkard 7.4.57 (Madan ed. 635.20–22; missing in Dresden ed.): “Zarathuṣtra went to the inhabited, friendly world in order to see to the conversion of corporeal beings” (be raft Zarduxšti ō an i *mānišnōmand ‘dōstōmand gēhān ōn hāzišn i asxv i astōmand be nigerišnīh rāy).
27. Dēnkard 7.4.57 (Madan ed. 635.22–636.1; missing in Dresden ed.): “There he met the Lie when he sat close to a funerary platform” (ēg ō druz frāz mad ka *pad nazādākiḥ i daxmag nišāti ōn i daxmag). Where I transcribe dlnk and transliterate daxmag, West, Pahlavi Texts 5: 62 read jāmāg (yānak in the older orthography) ‘clothing, garment’, and Molé, La legende de Zoroastre (above, no. 6), 52–53, read jāmāg (yāmak) ‘vessel, goblet’ (‘récipient’). All three terms are homographic and the readings are all possible, but from the Avesta onward, the funerary platform was identified as a site where demons congregated, while clothing and goblets have no associations that are particularly appropriate to the characters and narrative in question. See, inter alia, Vidēvdād 7.53–57, where the Wise Lord responds to Zarathuṣtra’s question “Where is the demon?” (kuṣa asṭi daēvuša) by pointing him to the daxma and saying “Truly, this is the support of the demons” (aēšō zī asṭi daēuvanam rapākō).
29. Most recently on Spendarmad and her association with the earth, see Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Ahura Mazdā and Ārmaity, Heaven and Earth, in the Old Avesta,” JAOS 122 (2002): 399–410. On the Zoroastrian system that
fashion, she is shown to be two-sided: gorgeous from the front, hideous from the back, and she systematically hides her unattractive rear (which harbors all manner of verminous creatures [Pahlavi xrafstarān]), until Zarathuštra—coached by the Wise Lord—puts a stop to her deception.

Zarathuštra’s insistence that she turn around thus produces a first act of disclosure, revealing that the female in question was not simplex and lovely, but duplex in form; not Spendarmad, but the Lie or—to put it differently—the bodily form of a woman, distorted (literally de-formed) by the demonic presence inside it. Having accomplished this unveiling, the prophet then compounded his victory by reciting the most powerful, most perfect, and most profoundly truth-filled utterance known to the Zoroastrian tradition: the Ahuna Vairīa formula, which constitutes the opening verse of the Gāthās, i.e., the oldest, most sacred section of the Avesta. With this act of truth, he produced a second revelation. As the text states:

Zarathuštra recited that victorious act of speech, the Ahuna Vairīa formula. Then that Lie did not exist and the form of Cēšmag stormed forth.30

That Cēšmag appears in this climactic moment makes a certain amount of sense. First, we are reminded of this same demon’s attempt to preempt the birth of the prophet, in light of which we understand the current episode as a continuation of the ongoing—but always unsuccessful—battle of evil wage against Zarathuštra and the truth he introduces. Second, insofar as Cēšmag is the demonic force that manifests itself in violent disruptions of the natural order, we remember that Ahreman’s original attack on the earth took the form of an earthquake that disfigured the previously level, tranquil, perfect plain created by Ohrmazd.31 Which is to say, having claimed to be the Earth (= Spendarmad), the Lie shows herself to be the Earth’s arch-enemy. Not only is she not what she appears and claims to be, she is its very antithesis.

One last interpretation might be advanced, if only tentatively, since it rests on a textual emendation of the phrase that reads ADYN ZK dlwc BRA w [or: n] kst. The first four of these words are unproblematic and can be confidently transliterated as ēg ān drāz be (“Then that Lie . . .”).32 Where one expects the verb, however, one finds w kst (or: n kst), identifies the Wise Lord’s six original material creations with the divine beings known as “Beneficent Immortals” (Amaša Spantas), see two articles of Herman Lommel that are conveniently collected in Zarathustra, ed. Bernfried Schlerath (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft, 1970): “Symbolik der Elemente in der zoroastrischen Religion,” 253–69, and “Die Elemente im Verhältnis zu den Amaša Spantas,” 377–96.

30. Dēnkard 7.4.61 (Madan ed. 636.13–15; missing in Dresden ed.).
31. Greater Bundahišn 6C.0–1 (TD2 MS 65.12–14): “The third battle was waged by the earth. When the Evil One stormed in, the earth trembled and the substance of mountains was created in the earth. At the same time as the quaking of the earth, the mountains were set in motion” (sidigar ardig zamīg kard. ctyōn gannāg andar dwārist zamīg bē <w>zandīd. ān gōhr i köf i andar zamīg dād ēstād. pad wizandišn zamīg ham zamān köf ō i ravišn ēstād). Cf. Selections of Zādspram 2.5 and 3.28. I have discussed this motif in Discourse and the Construction of Society (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 38–50.
32. Dēnkard 7.4.61 (Madan ed. 636.15).
which makes no sense and is best explained as a scribal error. Attempting to resolve this problem, H. S. Nyberg eliminated the space and transcribed *wikst, which he transliterated as *viktast, for which he reconstructed a verb *vikastan ‘to disappear’, while labeling the attempt ‘uncertain’.

Conceivably, West reached similar conclusions, since he translated the verb “was destroyed,” with no supporting explanation. For his part, Molé also collapsed the letters into one word, but took the ambiguous initial letter as n, rather than w (perfectly possible, since the same grapheme does service for both phonemes) and read the next ligature as sy, rather than ks (also possible, given the formal resemblance of the letters involved). Accordingly, he transcribed *nyst, transliterated *nasit, and posited a verb *nasitan ‘to perish’, which—like Nyberg’s *viktastan—is unlisted in the standard dictionaries and attested in no other text. Preferable, in my opinion, is to transcribe *nyst (understanding the -k- of the manuscript as a not uncommon scribal error for -y-) and transliterate *nëst, i.e., the regular negative copula. The sentence then reads ēg an dru z bē *nēst “Then that Lie did not exist.”

Dēnkard 7.4.61 thus reports two events that follow on the pronouncement of the Ahuna Vairīra, correlating the two via the conjunction ‘and’ (Pahlavi ud). The first of these is far the starker and more sweeping of the two: “Then that Lie did not exist” (ēg an dru z bē *nēst). Use of the negative copula (Pahlavi nēst) rather than the verb būdan (‘to become’) suggests that what is described is a state of being—or, more precisely, a state of non-being—and not a transformative process. Perhaps we are meant to understand that Zarathuṣṭra’s speech-act was so powerful that it utterly annihilated the Lie. Alternatively, following lines advanced by Shaul Shaked, Jes Asmussen, and Hanns-Peter Schmidt, the phrase might suggest not that the Lie ceased to be, but that it never was. In that case, Zarathuṣṭra’s act of truth did not destroy something extant; rather, it dispelled an illusion through which something non-extant conjured up the simulacrum of being or, more precisely, it exercised a demonic force from the bodily form (kirb) it temporarily inhabited. This is consistent with the tendency of Pahlavi sources to theorize Ahreman, the Lie, and the demons as spiritual (mēnōg) entities or forces of an evil sort, whose non-being (nēstīh) amounted to the fact

33. Nyberg, Manual of Pahlavi 2: 212. Nyberg’s analysis reflects his uncertainty: “It could be < vi + Av. (459 sqq.) kas- ‘to perceive’, v.s.v. ākast, a SW form with -st instead of -st; the NW form would be *vıkast. Perhaps better *v[i][u]k[ast] ‘she was cut to pieces, she split’ < *vi- or ni-kir[ast] < vi- or ni- + kr sta- from Av. (452 sqq.) kar-ast-, v. kirrēnītan.”

34. West, Pahlavi Texts 5: 63.

35. Molé, La legende de Zoroastre, 52. The verb is listed in his glossary at p. 292, with reference to other occurrences at Dēnkard 7.7.34 and 7.7.39, but it does not show up in Nyberg, Manual of Pahlavi, MacKenzie, Concise Dictionary of Pahlavi, nor in the glossaries to other more recently published Pahlavi texts.

36. Nyberg, Manual of Pahlavi, 87 and 137, MacKenzie, Concise Dictionary of Pahlavi, 59. One must acknowledge, however, that nēst is most often represented by the logogram LOYT, rather than being spelled out.

that they had no material substance (gētīg) of their own. As a result, when they sought to take physical action, they were obliged to penetrate, appropriate, or colonize the bodies and forms of the Wise Lord’s creatures, who—by virtue of his good acts of creation—possessed both mēnōg and gētīg existence.

The second event of the Dēnkard passage confirms this interpretation and holds keen interest of its own: “and the form of Cēšmag stormed forth” (ud Cēšmag kirb frāz dwārīd). Cēšmag, as we have seen, “... is that one who makes earthquakes and makes the whirlwind also and goes forth in opposition to the clouds.” This translation, however, is somewhat distorted by the demands of English, and the phrase rendered “that one who” (Pahlavi ān kē) could be either personal or impersonal. With equal justice, one can translate “... is that which makes earthquakes,” etc.

Given our own cultural predilections, we are inclined to see Cēšmag as a fully personified demonic being responsible for whirlwinds, earthquakes, and the like. The Bundahišn, however, is equally disposed to theorize it as a sinister impersonal force: a disembodied, intangible, but eminently destructive energy. It is not the earthquake or whirlwind per se, but the motion that ripples through air and soil, causing them to wreak havoc or, more abstract still, the negative intention that unleashes such violent energies.

If the test of existence is materiality and concretion of substance, then Cēšmag—like the Lie, also like death—does not exist in precisely this sense, for even the whirlwind lacks materiality of this sort (not to speak of the whirlwind’s cause or source). Yet the effects of forces like these are real, material, and palpable enough. Mulling over these ambiguous texts and elusive issues, one begins to realize that Zoroastrian demonology is not an incoherent jumble of ignorant superstition and puerile fears. Rather, demonological speculation and discourse possessed intellectual seriousness, existential depth, and philosophical originality. The category of the demonic was constituted as that spiritual (i.e., non-material) force that manifests itself in material destruction, while specific demons like Cēšmag, Zarmān (old age, decrepitude), Astwihād and Wizarš (the onset of death), Nas (post-mortem decay, bodily corruption), Niyāz (need, want, scarcity), Āz (greed, appetite), Tariz and Zariz (hunger and


39. Numerous examples are provided in the articles of Shaked, Asmussen, and Schmidt cited in n. 37, to which one might add the following passages.

Dādestān i Dēnīg 36.51: The Wise Lord’s creation is spiritual and also material (mēnōg ud gētīg-iz). That of the Lie is not material (nēst gētīg). The Lie joins (its) bad spiritual being to the material being (of the Wise Lord’s good creations).

dān i Ohrmazd mēnōg ud gētīg-iz. ūy ċā drez nēst gētīg be wad mēnōgīh abyūcēd ā gētīg.

Dēnkard 5.7.2 (Madan ed. 440.6–8): [Self-protection obliges one] to recognize the deceit and delusion-production of the Evil Spirit and demons as the process of their subtly mixing themselves into good creations; their concealment of the right path and way; their false-guiding of being into non-being (ast pad nēst) . . .

be śnātxān frēštārīh ud wiyāmbāngarīh i Ahreman ud dēwān ciyōn gūmēxtaśīh i-sān bārtikāh āndar weh-dahīstenān nihūstārīh i-sān rāh i ristag i rāst ud zūr-nimūdārīh i-sān ast pad nēst . . .

40. Greater Bundahišn 27.19: Cēšmag ān ke wizandag (or: wizndag) kunēd ud wād-girdag-iz kunēd, ud ā petyāragīh i abr šawēd.
thirst), Waran (desire, lust), and others represent those aspects of non-being that can—and periodically do—reach aggressively into the realm of being with profoundly disruptive consequences. At such times, they threaten to drag something that is (or, viewing things from the opposite perspective, that was) into the land of the empty and dead. Behind even the most cursory depiction of demons (as in certain vignettes from the Arda Wiráz Nâmag, for instance) stood much more sophisticated theories, in which the category of the demonic summarized the threat of dissolution that non-being ever poses to humanity and to the rest of God’s creation. Within such an optic, these demons assume a new, and in fact more terrifying importance, apparent even to the most jaded modern, as we come to recognize them as something quite literally like the black holes of a pre-modern cosmology, where physics, metaphysics, and ethics remain inextricably intertwined.

41. Similar are those demons who represent negative states of speech, thought, or emotion, i.e., non-material entities that pose threats to the equilibrium, happiness, and ultimately the life of living creatures. These would include demons like Akôman (evil thought), Mîhôxt (evil speech, falsehood), Frêftâr (deceit), Spazg (slander), Xeşt (wrath), Arešk (envy, jealousy), Bušasp (sloth), Wadag (wickedness), etc. The demons associated with diseases (Tab [fever], Kapasti [infection], Yask [sickness], Dard [pain], Aš [evil eye], etc.) are similar, representing non-material forces that invade, afflict, and distort the person. The site of their activity is the body, however, and not the mind.