

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 *Dēnkard*, a massive Pahlavi compendium committed to writing in the ninth century C.E.<sup>2</sup>

1. European demonology has begun to receive more serious and more respectful attention in recent years, in such works as Alain Boureau, *Satan the Heretic: The Birth of Demonology in the Medieval West* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1006); Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006); Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Sophie Houdard, *Les sciences du diable: Quatre discours sur la sorcellerie, XVIe–XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992); and Isabel Grüberl, *Die Hierarchie der Teufel: Studien zum christlichen Teufelsbild und zur Allegorisierung des Bösen in Theologie, Literatur und Kunst zwischen Frühmittelalter und Genreformation* (Munich: Tuduv, 1991). The study of Iranian and other non-Western demonologies is much less advanced at present. After sixty-plus years the standard work remains Arthur Christensen, *Essai sur la démonologie iranienne* (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard, 1941). Éric Pirart, *Georges Dumézil face aux démons iraniens* (Paris: Harmattan, 2007) is a welcome addition, but it treats Zoroastrian demonology more as a test of Dumézil’s theories than as a topic of intrinsic interest. Pierfrancesco Calliere, “In the Land of the Magi: Demons and Magic in the Everyday Life of Pre-Islamic Iran,” in *Démons et merveilles d’Orient*, ed. Rika Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l’Étude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 2001), 11–36 offers a useful summary of what is known about magical practices, based on textual and archaeological evidence, but is not particularly attentive to demonological speculation and theory.

2. For a general description of the *Dēnkard* and its contents, see Jean de Menasce, *Une encyclopédie mazdéenne: Le Denkart* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958) or Carlo G. Cereti, *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.”<sup>3</sup> In E. W. West’s pioneering translation—which we will have to revise in significant ways—the text reads as follows:

[And Aûharmazd spoke thus]: “Even unto thee, O Zaratûst! 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.”

Zaratûst proceeded to the habitable *and* friendly world, for the purpose of fully observing that beaten track (khâpisno) 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 Zaratûst 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 Zaratûst of the Spîtâmas! 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 Zaratûst 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-ahû-vairyô, was uttered aloud by Zaratûst; then that fiend *was* annihilated, and Kêshmak the Karap rushed forth.<sup>4</sup>

*abar-iz ô tô Zarduxšt druz bē dwārēd mādag-kirb zarrēn-<sup>+</sup>pusēn kū pestānbān darēd. ud hamhāgih ī az tō <sup>+</sup>zayēd ud dwarēd mādag-kirb zarrēn hampursagih az tō zayēd ud hamkardārīh az tō zayēd u-š ma hamhāgih dahē ud ma hampursagih ma <ham>kardārīh framāyē ōy ōy pasih frōd waštan ān ī pērōzgar gōwišn frāz gōwē Yatā-Ahū-Wēryōg. be raft Zarduxšt ō ān ī <sup>+</sup>māniš-nōmand <sup>+</sup>dōstōmand gēhān ān hāzišn ī axw ī astōmand be nigerišnih rāy. ēg ō druz frāz mad ka <sup>+</sup>pad nazdikih ī daxmag nišāst ān ī daxmag ī ka Wahman be ō hampursagih nayīd, a-š be nihād. <sup>+</sup>mādag-kirb zarrēn pad sēn u-š hamhāgih ud hampursagih ud hamkardārīh az ōy <sup>+</sup>zast. u-š*

Josephson, “The ‘Sitz im Leben’ of the Seventh Book of the *Dēnkard*,” in *Religions Themes and Texts of Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia: Studies in Honor of Professor Gherardo Gnoli*, ed. Carlo G. Cereti et al. (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2003), 203–12.

3. See, inter alia, A. V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroaster, the Prophet of Ancient Iran* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 51–53; Lewis H. Mills, *Our Own Religion in Ancient Persia* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1913), 29; James Hope Moulton, *The Treasure of the Magi* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1917), 117–18; Heinrich Junker, “Frau Welt in Iran,” *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Iranistik* 2 (1923): 237–46; Walther Hinz, “Persisches im ‘Parzival,’” *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 2 (1969): 177–81; Geo Widengren and C. Jouco Bleecker, *Historia Religionum*, vol. I (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 11; and Jes P. Asmussen, “‘Frau Welt,’ eine Orientalisch-Europäische Beziehung,” in *Orientalia J. Duchesne-Guillemin emerito oblata* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), 35–39.

4. E. W. West, *Pahlavi Texts, Part V: Marvels of Zoroastrianism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1897), 62–63. The text in question is *Dēnkard* 7.4.55–61, which is found at *The Complete Text of the Pahlavi Dinkard*, ed. D. M. Madan (Bombay: Fort Printing Press, 1911), p. 635, line 14 to p. 636, line 15. This passage is missing in the B Manuscript, edited by M. J. Dresden (*Dēnkard: A Pahlavi Text. Facsimile Edition of the Manuscript B of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute Bombay* [Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966]).

*jōyid kū az hōm +Spandarmad. guft-aš Zarduxšt kū be-m ān nigerēd +kē +Spandarmad andar ān ī rōšn rōz ī xwābar ud ān man sahist +Spandarmad hu-ōrōn ud hu-parrōn ud hu-tarist kū hamāg gyāg nēk būd. pasih frōd ward šnāsom agar tō hē +Spandarmad. u-š ō ōy druz guft kū: Zarduxšt ī Spitāmān kū awēšān amā hēm kē mādagān +nēkōg az pēš nēmag ud dušzišt az pasih ma man ō pasih framāyēn. paz az sidigar pahikārīd druz ō pasih frōd wašt. u-š ōy did Zarduxšt pas andarag haxt ka ahrāft estād purr gaz ud +udrag ud karbunag ud pazūg ud wazag. u-š ān ī pērōzgar gōwišn frāz guft Zarduxšt Yatā-Ahū-Wēryōg. ēg ān druz be +nēst ud Cēšmag-klp (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.<sup>5</sup>*

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.<sup>6</sup> Nor have studies of Zoroastrian demonology added to the little that West adduced.<sup>7</sup> 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 Zarathuštra’s birth.<sup>8</sup> 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 “Zarathuštra’s elemental body-substance” (*ān ī Zarduxšt tan gōhr*)<sup>9</sup> 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 Pourušāspa and Duγdōw would ultimately drink before conceiving their son.<sup>10</sup>

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 ī dušdānāg*).<sup>11</sup> 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 *Dēnkard* 7.4.61. Accordingly, they transliterated the Pahlavi phrase 3 SK ŠYA-’n Y +cγšmk klp’n as

5. *Dēnkard* 7.4.55–61 (Madan ed. 635.14–636.15; missing in Dresden ed.).

6. Marijan Molé, *La légende de Zoroastre selon les textes pehlevi* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1967), 52–53.

7. Cf. A. V. Williams Jackson’s brief discussion in *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie*, vol. II, ed. Wilhelm Geiger and Ernest Kuhn (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1895–1904), 660; idem, *Zoroastrian Studies* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1928), 93; Louis H. Gray, *The Foundations of the Iranian Religions* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala, 1930), 204; Christensen, *Essai sur la démonologie iranienne* (above, n. 1), 50; and Carsten Colpe, “Ältere und jüngere Dämonologie,” in his *Iranier—Aramäer—Hebräer—Hellenen: Iranische Religionen und ihre Westbeziehungen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 471–72.

8. West, *Pahlavi Texts*, 5: 63. The note says only “See Chap. II, 44, 45.”

9. The phrase recurs in variant forms: *gōhr ī tan* at *Dēnkard* 7.2.37, *gōhr ī Zartuxšt* four times between 7.2.38 and 42. In all of these, it denotes the quintessential bodily matter that will, upon gestation, develop into the person. Its usage in this passage may involve a bit of wordplay between Pahlavi *gōhr*, the ‘substance’ or ‘essence’ that passes from the cows (Pahlavi *gāw* < Avestan *gō*) to their milk and then to the bodies of Pourušāspa and Dugdōw, where it becomes seed (Pahlavi *cihr*). Mirroring this chain of events, in its phonology *gōhr* mediates between *gāw* and *cihr*.

10. *Dēnkard* 7.2.36–42 (Madan ed. 607.1–608.3; Dresden ed. 482.8–483.5). On this narrative, see William R. Darrow, “Zoroaster Amalgamated: Notes on Iranian Prophetology,” *History of Religions* 27 (1987): 109–32.

11. *Dēnkard* 7.2.44 (Madan ed. 608.11; Dresden ed. 483.12).

<i>West</i>	<i>Molé</i>	<i>Lincoln</i>	<i>Pahlavi text</i>
One <i>marvel</i> is this which is manifested in the struggle of the adversary for concealing and spoiling that milk,	Il est révéle, au sujet des efforts de l'Adversaire pour faire disparaître ce lait et le rendre inefficace.	This is revealed concerning the struggle of the Adversary to make that milk invisible and to render it powerless.	<i>ēk ēd ī andar kōšišn ī petyārag abar apaydāgēnīdan ud agārēnīdan ī ān pēm paydāgīhist</i>
<i>just</i> as revelation mentions thus: Thereupon, at that time, the demons formed <i>themselves</i> into an assembly, and the demon of demons growled thus:	Ainsi que le dit la Religion: Vers ce temps-là les dev tinrent une assemblée. Le dev des dev hurla:	As the religion says: At that time when the demons gathered in assembly, the demon of demons snarled at them:	<i>ciyōn dēn gōwēd kū ēg abar pad ān zamān dēwān hanjamanēnid. u-š jōyīd dēwān dēw kū:</i>
"You demons become quite unobservant:	"Vous allez disparaître, ô dev, jusqu'à la lie!	"Demons, you are being defeated.	<i>bē +wany bawēd dēw tar ul-iz.</i>
that food is really supplied fresh, so that the formation is settled which <i>will</i> extend as far as to that man who <i>will</i> be the righteous Zaratūšt;	La préparation (la confection) de cette nourriture a commencé, afin que cet homme, le juste Zoroastre, y soit conçu.	That food is created so that when it is placed in that man (Pourušāspa), it will become he who is Truthful Zarathuštra.	<i>ān xwarišn dād (kū sāxt) bē nihād kē tā andar ān mard ō bawēd kē ahlaw Zarduxšt.</i>
Which of you <i>will</i> undertake his destruction, all the while that he exists for mankind, so as to make <i>him</i> more contemptibly impotent?"	Qui parmi vous accepte de la détruire, tant qu'il n'y a pas d'homme en elle (la paralyser plus facilement)?"	Which of you accepts to destroy him, so that whenever that good man may exist, that doer of good, he is rendered powerless?"	<i>kē az ašmā ān padirēd murnjēnīdan hamē tā ka ān ast humardōm, kū +hukardar agār kardan?</i>
<b>Kēšmak</b> , astute in evil, growled thus: "I <i>will</i> undertake his destruction."	<b>Čēšmak</b> l'imbécile hurla: "J'accepte de le faire périr."	<b>Cēšmag</b> , who was unwise, snarled at him: "I accept to destroy him."	<i>jōyīd-iš Čēšmag ī dušdānāg kū: man ān padīrom murnjēnīdan.</i>
Astute in evil, he rushed away with thrice fifty of the demons who are Karaps of <b>Kēšmak</b> ;	L'imbécile se rua en compagnie de 150 dev, karap de <b>Čēšmak</b> ,	That unwise one stormed out with 150 demons, who were forms of <b>Cēšmag</b> .	<i>ān dušdānāg be dwārīd abāg 150 dēwān ī Čēšmag Kirbān [can also be read karbān].</i>
And that village <i>was</i> partly uprooted and partly destroyed by him, fellow-workers <i>were</i> ruined . . . <sup>12</sup>	renversa et démolit le village, détruisit le bois et la coupe . . . <sup>13</sup>	Together with him, they destroyed that village, together they returned, and together they shattered the trees . . .	<i>u-š ān wīs ham-iz kand ham-iz wašt ud ham dar škast . . .<sup>14</sup></i>

12. West, *Pahlavi Texts* 5: 27–28.13. Molé, *La légende de Zoroastre*, 22–23.14. *Dēnkard* 7.2.43–45 (Madan ed., p. 608, lines 4–14; Dresden ed., p. 483, lines 6–14).

150 *dēwān ī Cēšmag karbān* as “150 demons, who are Karaps of Cēšmag.”<sup>15</sup> 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-*)<sup>16</sup> or *kirb* ‘the external, visible form of living beings’ (from Avestan *kāhrp-*).<sup>17</sup> 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 Zarathuštra 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 Zarathuštra “in the form of a woman” (*mādag-kirb*).<sup>18</sup>

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 Zarathuštra, 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 Zarathuštra.<sup>19</sup> 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 légende de Zoroastre*, 22, transliterated the phrase as *150 dēwān ī Čēšmak karapān* (using the older orthography).

16. Henrik Samuel Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1964), 112 (cited under *karap*); D. N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), 49; cf. Christian Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1904; rpt., 1961), cols. 454–55.

17. Nyberg, *Manual of Pahlavi* 2: 113 (cited under *karp*) and MacKenzie, *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, 51 (who offers a simpler translation: ‘body, form’). Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*, cols. 467–68, provided a nuanced discussion of the term’s Avestan antecedent: “das sichtbare Äussere jedes Wesens und Dings, äussere Erscheinung, sichtbare Gestalt . . . insbesondere von lebenden Wesen; auch vom gestalteten Stoff selbst ‘Leib, Körper,’ von Menschen und Göttern . . . und Tieren.” See also the brief discussions of Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1943), 91 and 118. The homography of *karb* and *kirb* is noted by Nyberg, *Manual of Pahlavi* 1: 170 and MacKenzie, *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, 176.

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 Zarathuštra’s death at the hands of a *karb* include *Zand ī Vohuman Yasn* 3.3, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 72.8, *Dēnkard* 5.2.3, Pahlavi *Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī 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. I: *The Early Period* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 12.

requires such an inference and the fact that Cēšmag and his cohort all 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 Cēšmag? 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.<sup>20</sup> It states:

Cēšmag is that one who makes earthquakes and makes the whirlwind also and goes forth in opposition to the clouds.

*Cēšmag ān kē wizandag kunēd ud wād-girdag-iz kunēd, ud ō petyāragih ī abr šawēd.*<sup>21</sup>

Once again, there is no suggestion that Cēšmag 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 Cēšmag & Co. according to *Dēnkard* 7.2.42. Thus, in the latter we were told that after Cēšmag agreed to kill the unborn prophet, he rushed to attack Pourušāspa’s village. To describe this, the text uses the daēvic verb *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.<sup>22</sup> Joining their leader, the demons proceed to level the village and shatter its trees, and one comes to understand that if Cēšmag represents the power manifest in storms, whirlwinds, and earthquakes, the others represent the manifold forms and specific instances in which this power appears.<sup>23</sup>

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, Cēšmag’s forces devastate the village, but fail to destroy the cows, the milk, or Pourušāspa and Duydōw. 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.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV

Other stories follow, in which other demons try to accomplish what Cēšmag 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.

[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

20. West, *Pahlavi Texts* 5: 28, n. 1.

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

22. *Dēnkard* 7.2.45 (Madan ed. 608.12–13; Dresden ed. 483.12–13): *ān dušdānāg be dwārēd abāg 150 dēwān ī Cēšmag kirbān*. On the semantics of *dwāristān*, see MacKenzie, *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, 29, and Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi* 2: 69.

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

24. *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.”

Zarathuštra 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 co-operation. And she snarled at him: “I am Spandarmad.”

Zarathuštra 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 Zarathuštra, 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 Zarathuštra saw that between her raised haunches, she was full of snakes, hedgehogs, lizards, worms, and frogs. Zarathuštra recited that victorious act of speech, the Ahuna Vairiia formula. Then that Lie did not exist and the form of Cēšmag stormed forth.<sup>25</sup>

The text is careful to situate this incident at precisely that moment when Zarathuštra first proclaimed the Good Religion and began making converts of those who would help vanquish the powers of evil.<sup>26</sup> Perceiving this threat, the Evil Spirit responded by dispatching “the Lie” (*druz*) to do what Cēšmag 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 meet at a funerary platform (*daxmag* < Avestan *daxma-*),<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 Spandarmad, i.e., the divine being who is conventionally identified with the earth and is also regarded as the most beautiful, most fertile, most sustaining of females.<sup>29</sup> 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.): “Zarathuštra went to the inhabited, friendly world in order to see to the conversion of corporeal beings” (*be raft Zarduxšt ō ān ī +mānišnōmand +dōstōmand gēhān ān hāzišn ī axw ī astōmand be niğerišnīh 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 nazdikīh ī daxmag nišāst ān ī daxmag*). Where I transcribe *dhm*k and transliterate *daxmag*, West, *Pahlavi Texts* 5: 62 read <sup>2</sup>*jāmag* (*yāmak* in the older orthography) ‘clothing, garment’, and Molé, *La légende de Zoroastre* (above, no. 6), 52–53, read <sup>1</sup>*jāmag* (*yāmak*) ‘vessel, goblet’ (‘réceptif’). All three terms are homographic and the readings are all possible, but from the Avesta onward, the funeral 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 Zarathuštra’s question “Where is the demon?” (*kuua asti daēuuō*) by pointing him to the *daxma* and saying “Truly, this is the support of the demons” (*aēšō zī asti daēuuanam rapakō*).

28. Female personifications of the Lie appear already in the Avesta, as at *Yašt* 19.95 and *Vidēvdād* 18.30–59.

29. Most recently on Spandarmad and her association with the earth, see Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Ahura Mazdā and Ārmaiti, 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 Vairiia 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 Vairiia formula. Then that Lie did not exist and the form of Cēšmag stormed forth.<sup>30</sup>

*u-š ān ī pērōzgar gōwišn frāz guft Zarduxšt Yatā-Ahū-Wēryōg. ēg ān drūz be +nēst ud Cēšmag-kirb frāz dwāriid.*

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 the forces 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.

## V

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 druz be* ("Then that Lie . . .").<sup>32</sup> 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" (Aməša Spəntas), 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 Aməša Spəntas," 377–96.

30. *Dēnkard* 7.4.61 (Madan ed. 636.13–15; missing in Dresden ed.).

31. *Greater Bundahišn* 6C.0–1 (TD<sup>2</sup> 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" (*sidīgar ardiḡ zamīg kard. ciyōn gannāg andar dwārišt zamīg bē <wi>zandīd. ān gōhr ī kōf ī andar zamīg dād ēštād. pad wizandišn zamīg ham zamān kōf ī rawišn ēštād*). 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 \**wkst*, which he transliterated as \**vikast*, for which he reconstructed a verb \**vikastan* ‘to disappear’, while labeling the attempt “uncertain.”<sup>33</sup> Conceivably, West reached similar conclusions, since he translated the verb “was destroyed,” with no supporting explanation.<sup>34</sup> 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 \**nysyt*, transliterated \**nasit*, and posited a verb \**nasitan* ‘to perish’, which—like Nyberg’s \**vikastan*—is unlisted in the standard dictionaries and attested in no other text.<sup>35</sup> Preferable, in my opinion, is to transcribe \**nyst* (understanding the *-k-* of the manuscript as a not uncommon scribal error for *-y-*) and transliterate \**nēst*, i.e., the regular negative copula.<sup>36</sup> The sentence then reads *ēg ān druz be +nēst* “Then that Lie did not exist.”

*Dēnkard* 7.4.61 thus reports two events that follow on the pronouncement of the Ahuna Vairiia, 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 ān drūz be +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 Zarathuštra’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.<sup>37</sup> In that case, Zarathuštra’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 exorcised 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 (*nēstih*) amounted to the fact

33. Nyberg, *Manual of Pahlavi* 2: 212. Nyberg’s analysis reflects his uncertainty: “It could be < *vi* + Av. (459 sq.) *kas-* ‘to perceive’, v.s.v. *ākast*, a SW form with *-st* instead of *-št*; the NW form would be \**vikašt*. Perhaps better \**vi[ni]kist* ‘she was cut to pieces, she split’ < \**vi-* or *ni-kirst* < *vi-* or *ni-* + *kr sta-* from Av. (452 sqq.) *karət-*, v. *kirrēnitān*.”

34. West, *Pahlavi Texts* 5: 63.

35. Molé, *La légende 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.

37. Shaul Shaked, “Some Notes on Ahreman, the Evil Spirit, and his Creation,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, ed. E. E. Urbach et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 227–34, reprinted in Shaked, *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995); Jes P. Asmussen, “Some Remarks on Sasanian Demonology,” in *Commémoration Cyrus: Actes du Congrès de Shiraz* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 236–41; Hanns-Peter Schmidt, “The Non-Existence of Ahreman and the Mixture (*gumēzišn*) of Good and Evil,” in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute: Second International Congress Proceedings* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1996), 79–95. See also Antonio Panaino, “A Few Remarks on the Zoroastrian Conception of the Status of Angra Mainyu and of the Daēvas,” *Res Orientales* 13 (2001): 99–107, and Albert de Jong, “Eeuwig, ongeschapen, maar zonder ‘bestaan’: de Boze Geest en zijn werkelijkheid in het zoroastrisme,” in *Des Duivels. Het kwaad in religieuze en spirituele tradities*, ed. Rob Wiche (Leuven: Acco, 2005), 51–64, esp. 61–62.

that they had no material substance (*gētīg*) of their own.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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 dwārid*). Cēšmag, as we have seen, “. . . is that one who makes earthquakes and makes the whirlwind also and goes forth in opposition to the clouds.”<sup>40</sup> 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

38. On the opposed categories *mēnōg* ('spiritual') and *gētīg* ('material') in Zoroastrian thought, see Shaul Shaked, “The Notions *mēnōg* and *gētīg* in the Pahlavi Texts and Their Relation to Eschatology,” *Acta Orientalia* 33 (1971): 59–107, reprinted in *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam*, and Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte—Gegenwart—Rituale*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2002), 333–38.

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 ī 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).

*dām ī Ohrmazd mēnōg ud gētīg-iz. ōy <i> druz nēst gētīg be wad mēnōgih abyōzēd ō 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 šnāxtan frēftārīh ud wiyābāngarīh ī Ahreman ud dēwān ciyōn gumēxtagīh ī-šān bārikīhā andar weh-dahišnān nihuftārīh ī-šān rāh ī ristag ī rāst ud zūr-nimūdārīh ī-šān ast pad nēst . . .*

40. *Greater Bundahišn* 27.19: Cēšmag ān ke wīzandag (or: wīzandag) *kunēd ud wād-girdag-iz kunēd, ud ō petyāragīh ī abr šawēd.*

thirst), Waran (desire, lust), and others<sup>41</sup> 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 Wirāz Nāmag*, 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 Akōman (evil thought), Mihōxt (evil speech, falsehood), Frēftār (deceit), Spazg (slander), Xešm (wrath), Arešk (envy, jealousy), Bušāsp (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.

