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The Fractious Eye: On the Evil Eye of Menstruants in Zoroastrian Tradition*

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Abstract

Like all religions, Zoroastrianism evolved, and its rich textual record provides us with the material to trace some of its developments across the centuries. This article attempts to reconstruct an ancient Iranian myth preserved in Zoroastrian tradition about the dangerous powers of the gaze of menstruating women, and traces its development as it grows out of the *Avesta* and interacts with Western philosophical traditions in the Middle Persian writings of late antiquity and the early middle ages.

Keywords

Zoroastrianism, evil eye, menstruation, *Videvdad*, Avestan, Pahlavi, Zand, Iranian mythology, Babylonian Talmud

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Menstrual Impurity in Zoroastrianism

In classical Zoroastrianism,¹ as in many religions, menstruation and menstruating women are deemed ritually impure.² In Zoroastrianism, as in many cultures and religions, there is a belief in the power of the human eye to inflict damage on people and property.³ And in Zoroastrianism, as in a number of societies across time and space, the gaze of menstruating women is thought to be especially harmful. Despite achievements in Iranian philology as well as an onslaught of field journal entries, ethnographic reports, and anthropological analyses devoted to malevolent ocular powers, the peculiar Zoroastrian myth of the evil eye of menstruants has yet to receive its proper due. In the present study, I focus on this topic and collect, analyze, and contextualize the relevant Zoroastrian texts. I then attempt to reconstruct an ancient Iranian mythological complex about the harmful eye of menstruants, and suggest how it may have evolved from ancient beginnings in the *Avesta* into a multifaceted set of beliefs in late antiquity, when it also interacted with related non-Zoroastrian traditions. Besides illuminating the somewhat obscure topic at hand, I hope this inquiry will advance understanding of Iranian myth, the dynamics of intercultural exchanges in Sasanian Iran, and the shape of Zoroastrian gender politics.

The Zoroastrian laws of menstruation are illustrated at length in the sixteenth chapter⁴ of the *Videvdad* ("The Law Discarding/Against the Demons") — an

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- 1 Like all abstracted monikers for religions, "Zoroastrianism" is neither a static nor monolithic entity. The term is one of convenience, though truthfully it can be seen as including numerous communities, texts, beliefs, and modes of self-understanding. The late antique Zoroastrianism of the Middle Persian texts, which constitutes the focus of this paper, is not entirely the same as that practiced today nor, as will be shown, is it identical to texts produced in more ancient times. Furthermore, it is likely that the Zoroastrianism of the Middle Persian textual tradition may not have been accepted or even known by lay Zoroastrians at the time those texts were compiled. While many Zoroastrian women may have kept away from the fire while menstruating, and traditional Parsis may still contend that a "bad aura" is exuded at this time, a good number of modern Zoroastrians do not feel that a menstruating woman's gaze is harmful, nor that she herself is impure. For an interesting collection of contemporary views on the topic, see the relevant interviews collected by Kreyenbroek 2001.
 - 2 A helpful resource on the subject is Buckley and Gottlieb 1988. See also the bibliographical appendix in Shail and Howie 2005, which lists all the major studies on the topic prior to 2005.
 - 3 The scholarship on the evil eye is perhaps even more immense than that on menstrual impurity. For a good introduction to the topic from the perspective of folklore studies, see Dundes 1981.
 - 4 In addition, *Videvdad* 5.59–60 contains two discussions about bedding stained by menstruation. A section on abortion (*Videvdad* 15.9–15.14) and one on post-partum impurity (*Videvdad*

Avestan work from the first millennium B.C.E. devoted to the containment and removal of ritual impurity.⁵ The chapter describes a woman's path to seclusion following the onset of her period, which sacred elements (fire, water, plants, cattle, and righteous human beings) must be avoided, what she may eat, how she achieves purification, and the punishment for either "suppressing menstruation" or for having sex while still ritually impure. The tone of the opening section is quite matter of fact and indicative of a view that simply sees menstrual impurity as something that must be kept at a distance:

Orderly creator of the material living beings!
 If in this house belonging to a Mazdayasnian [a worshiper of Ahura
 Mazdā]
 a woman with signs, with menses, with blood, sits down,
 how should these Mazdayasnians behave?
 Then Ahura Mazdā said: here these Mazdayasnians should select a path
 for her
 away from plants, growing things, and firewood.
 They should place her in a place with dry dust . . . (*Videvdad* 16.1–2)⁶

Although later in the chapter sex during menstruation is described as a heinous crime, the menstruant herself is never once described in misogynistic or demonological terms.⁷ Indeed, it is noteworthy that despite the prominence of demonology in Zoroastrianism and particularly in the laws of impurity,⁸

5.45–58, 7.70–72) also have bearing on the laws of menstruation. For an important discussion of the prohibition against sex with menstruants, see König 2010b:141–150.

5 For a description of the *Videvdad*, see most recently Skjærvø 2006, which surveys previous scholarship and argues that the *Videvdad* was first composed orally in the earlier half of the first millennium B.C.E. even though the oldest written texts to have survived are a pair of fourteenth century manuscripts.

6 The translation is based on Skjærvø's unpublished translation of the *Avesta*.

7 The final paragraph of *Videvdad* 16, which describes those who do not "uphold the teaching" as "not having readiness to listen," being "unrighteous," and having "forfeited their bodies," may refer to those who ignore the laws of menstruation, although the meaning is not entirely clear.

8 In classical Zoroastrian cosmic dualism, demons constitute the army of Angra Mainyu (Pahlavi: Ahrimen), the Evil Spirit, whose goal is to defeat Ahura Mazdā (Pahlavi: Ohrmazd), his world, and his creatures. Regarding demons and other personified forms of evil in Zoroastrian texts about impurity, see Choksy 1989. In contrast, *Videvdad's* treatment of corpse impurity details the role of demons and other maleficent forces during the onset, transmission, and purification of corpse impurity (*Videvdad* 7.1–10, 8.41–72, and parallels).

demons are conspicuously absent from this chapter, and they show up only as a factor in the special case of an unusually long menstrual flow.⁹ Yet, when we turn to Middle Persian texts that were composed over a millennium later, a clearer connection can be found between menstruation, demons, and evil — including discussions about the malevolent eye of menstruants. In Zoroastrian studies, where the history of ideas is frequently obscured by apparently “early” notions appearing in “late” Middle Persian texts, this is not surprising. In the current context, refraining from prematurely determining a date for the emergence of the demonological and evil eye of menstruants in Zoroastrianism will hopefully allow for a richer and more nuanced mythology to emerge.

Dēnkard 5.24.20

My survey of the sources begins with ninth and tenth-century Middle Persian texts, and proceeds, chronologically speaking, backwards in time. The first passage appears in the fifth book of the *Dēnkard* (“Works of the Tradition”), a wide-ranging Middle Persian compilation that although edited in two separate stages during the ninth and tenth centuries C.E., preserves material stemming from late antiquity (Gignoux 1986). The relevant passage is part of a series of questions and answers posed by a Christian interlocutor named Bōxt Māri to Ādurfarnbag ī Farroxzādān, a ninth-century Zoroastrian priest who was the *Dēnkard*’s first editor: “Why is menstruation polluting? And why is the entire body polluting and to be avoided when it comes out of just a hole?” (*Dēnkard* 5.24.20).¹⁰

Before proceeding to Ādurfarnbag’s answer, it is useful to speculate about how Bōxt Māri’s question might have resonated in its cultural context. Indeed, whether or not the question reflects an actual historical dialogue between an early medieval Zoroastrian and Christian in Iran — as the text claims — the Zoroastrian menstrual laws would have struck some Christians of the region and time period as curious. The matter is complex, but a number of early Christian texts, including a famous passage in the Gospels, were understood by some

9 See *Videvdad* 16.11. Interestingly, as part of Angra Mainyu’s attempt to destroy the world, while Ahura Mazda creates the earth, Angra Mainyu is described as producing a “counter-creation” of irregular menses (*araθβiiāca daxšta*; *Videvdad* 1.17–18). The implication is that only irregular menses are demonic. This is an important point, as some have incorrectly read *Videvdad* 1.17–18 as deeming all menstruation demonic.

10 “ud daštān rēmanih az čē ud čē rāy ka az sūrāg-ēw bē āyēd hamāg tan rēman ud dūr az-iš pahrēzišn.” The text appears in Dresden 1966:356 and Madan 1911:455. The translation is based on Skjærvø 2011:254. See also Amouzgar and Tafazzoli 2000:74–75.

Christians to signify a break with the purity concerns of the Old Testament.¹¹ Some Church leaders responded to these ideas by saying that even if menstrual sex was problematic for other reasons, menstruants should be allowed to take communion (Marienberg 2013:277–278). At the same time, there is evidence that some Christians attempted to strike a balance between traditional notions of purity, including those relating to menstruation, and ideas of “moral” impurity (Fonrobert 2000:166–188). In response, some Christian texts polemicize the notion of observing the menstrual laws out of a belief in the metaphysical impurity of menstruation. It is possible that in Iran and neighboring lands, one of the targets of related Eastern Christian polemics was Zoroastrianism.

A good example of the trend can be found in the canons attributed to St. Epiphanius of Salamis, which have survived in tenth and eleventh-century Armenian collections (Dowsett 1976:112–114).¹² The canons provide a medical reason for avoiding menstruation, and state that menstruants should be avoided not “as from uncleanness of the spirit, but (only) as avoiding the impurity of a dirty body . . .” (ibid.:122). They also highlight some of the positive, potentially creative aspects of menstrual blood according to Aristotelian notions,¹³ yet at the same time claim that unused menstrual blood produces a kind of “pestilence” that can harm fetuses engendered during the menstrual period.¹⁴ Strategically, the text attempts to separate the bare biblical prohibition of sex with menstruants¹⁵ from more metaphysical, cultic notions of impurity, while at the same time maintaining the relevance of the prohibition by way of appeal to a public health measure.¹⁶

11 See for example Mark 7:15 and parallels. Furstenberg 2008 has argued that Jesus did not actually reject the purity laws outright. But regardless, over time some Christians came to understand that passage and related traditions as indeed signifying a break with the Hebrew Bible’s purity laws.

12 I am grateful to Geoffrey Herman for this reference. While the text opens with an explicit reference to Jewish practice, given the demographic composition of Armenia there is reason to believe that the rest of the selection may be directed at other religious groups, including the Zoroastrian community.

13 Dowset 1976:120, fn. 7. For an in-depth discussion of Aristotle’s views on menstruation, see Dean-Jones 1994 and the discussion below.

14 The view that menstrual sex produces defective children was a common one in ancient and medieval times. Satlow 1995:305 collects classical Jewish opinions on the matter along with some Graeco-Roman parallels.

15 According to a number of important Christian writers, this law continued to remain in effect. See, for example, Jerome’s commentary to Ezekiel 6:18, as well as Caesarius of Arles, sermon 44 (Marienberg 2013).

16 For other examples of this strategy in a Jewish context, see Cohen 1991:273–299.

It is therefore possible to read Bōxt Mārī's question within a milieu in which the meaning and import of traditional approaches to menstrual impurity were contested. This is apart from any "ethnographic" curiosity that a Christian encounter with Zoroastrian menstrual practices may have generated.¹⁷ Interestingly, Ādurfarnbag's response also emphasizes the "naturalistic" aspects of menstrual impurity, which he does in order to explain how the demonic impurity of menstruation actually manifests itself in the physical world.

The menstruation that has come out of that one hole — by the vinegar-smelling (?) poison of that demon (*druz*), she pours all her own stench and the pollution of the physical [and] mental worlds into the entire body, and so it comes out. For that reason one must keep as far away from her as the *nasuš* [corpse demoness]¹⁸ has the strength to blow. And the purer its cleanness is, because of its greater sensitivity, the more one must keep away from the pollution. This holds for the various specific tools used in the sacrifice to the gods, as well.

And menstrual matter is also of different color from the other blood, it is grievous stench, and it soils everything. That selfsame body in which it has this destructive effect, by nearness to water and plants, also causes [them] to diminish and foods to lose their taste and turn their smells. And even in conversation [with a menstruating woman], the extensive damage from it to intelligence, memory, wisdom, [and] so on, is perfectly clear among those who know. (*Dēnkard* 5.24.20)¹⁹

17 It should also be noted that there was some inter-religious friction relating to menstruation in the late antique Near East. In a collection of legal responsa attributed to Ādurfarnbag it is stated that one may not purchase wine or other drinks from Christians since they do not observe the laws of menstrual purity (Baghbidi 2005:104). A Mandaean polemical text claims that Zoroastrians "take the garments / vessels of menstruating women and cover themselves and say, 'we did not become impure'" (Shapira 2004:267). There are also a few Talmudic sources that seem to reflect competition between rabbis and Zoroastrians over which religion possessed the oldest and most effective menstrual laws (Secunda 2008:29–60).

18 On *nasuš* and its imagery, see Choksy 2002:59–63.

19 "ud daštān kē az ān sūrāg-ēw āmad pad wiš-sirtkīh ī ōy druz andar hamāg tan ud rēzišn ī-š xwēš gandagih ud rēmanih <ī> gētīyīg mēnōyīg ō-iz bērōn bawēd ud ān rāy čand-iš zōr ī nasuš-damišnih and az-iš dūr pahrēzišn ud harw čē-š pākīh abēzagtar wēš-nāzūkīh-iz rāy az rēmanih wēš pahrēzišn ōh-iz ān ī nāmčīštīg abzārihā <ī> andar yazišn ī yazdān dāšt ēstēd.

ud daštān juḍ-gōnih-iz ī az abārīg xōn ud grāy-gandih ud āhōgēnidārīh xwad-iz ōy tan kē padiš wināhidārīh pad nazdikīh ō-iz āb ud urwar kāhišnih ud xwarišnihā a-mizag ud

The first part of the passage describes how the emission of menstrual blood is caused by demons and is therefore severely polluting. The power of the demonic force apparently comes from the corpse demoness' breath ("strength to blow"), and Ādurfarnbag seems to connect this fact with the ability of menstrual impurity to traverse space — perhaps akin to the way that moderns might describe an airborne disease infecting others even without direct contact. The next line provides some additional ritual information, namely, that sacred tools are more susceptible to menstrual impurity and must therefore be kept at an even greater distance than that which is normally required. The subsequent section functions as a meditation on the peculiar qualities of menstrual discharge: it is unlike other blood as its color is unique and it gives off a terrible odor. Connected to the negative characteristics of menstrual blood is the fact that the body that emits it is negatively affected. In turn, the menstruant herself harms water, plants, and both the taste and smell of food merely through her presence. Likewise, the mental faculties of people who converse with menstruants are diminished. The final line appeals to the authority of certain "knowers" and claims that they support Ādurfarnbag's descriptions of menstruation's dangerous power.

As mentioned above, Ādurfarnbag's claim that menstrual impurity and its dangerous qualities should be attributed to the involvement of demons is not present in the *Videvdad*, at least in the way it has come down to us. Interestingly, if we remove the references to demonological powers from the *Dēnkard* text, its naturalistic bent vaguely resembles a well-known passage from Pliny's *Natural History*, which was composed circa 77–79 C.E.:

But it would be difficult to find anything more bizarre (*magis monstrificum*) than a woman's menstrual flow. Proximity to it turns new wine sour; crops tainted with it are barren, grafts die, garden seedlings shrivel, fruit falls from the tree on which it is growing, mirrors are clouded by its very reflection, knife blades are blunted, the gleam of ivory dulled, hives of

bōy-wardišnīh ud pad-iz hampursagīh ō ōš ud wir ud xrad *abārigān was wizend ī az-iš andar šnāsagān rōšn." See Dresden 1966:363 and Madan 1911:464. This transcription is also based on manuscript *DH* (this is how the manuscript, owned by Dastur Hoshang Jamasp, is generally known), and along with other texts cited in this article has greatly benefited from an unpublished transcription of Pahlavi texts prepared by Skjærvø. The translation derives from Skjærvø 2011:254, with some changes. Cf. Amouzgar and Tafazzoli 2000:92–95.

bees die, even bronze and iron are instantly corroded by rust and a dreadful smell contaminates the air (*aira*²⁰).²¹

This passage and an extensive parallel have received much treatment by classicists (Beagon 2005:228–242). For the present, we might point to similarities between the *Dēnkard* selection and Pliny's language of menstrual "distinctness": the negative effect that menstruation has on crops and other vegetation and Pliny's reference to menstruation's allegedly terrible odor. Many of Pliny's observations may of course be attributed to the tendencies of humans, and particularly men, to see in the physiology of menstruation the wondrous and not far behind, the monstrous. Likewise, some anthropologists have suggested that the loss of *potential* life thought to be inherent in the loss of menstrual blood — particularly in the Aristotelian view of conception subscribed to by Pliny²² and in the *Bundahišn's* (the "Primal Creation" — a Zoroastrian Middle Persian cosmological tract) physiology as well²³ — may have further encouraged a negative view of menstruation.²⁴

These approaches to menstruation are common enough not to require postulating a direct historical connection between the Pliny and *Dēnkard* passages. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider how the *Dēnkard* passage's particular *articulation* of menstrual impurity might have come to resemble Pliny's observations. Both seem to be constructed from two primary elements — the fruits of misogynistic speculation about menstruation and a "naturalistic" frame of mind interested in the workings of causality. The former exists in all times and places. The emphasis on the latter may have at least been encouraged by the influence of Greek writings on Middle Persian literature,²⁵ which

20 "Air" follows Rackam 1942:549. Beagon 2006:73 emends this to "bronze (*aes*)" in light of a close parallel in *Natural History* 28.79, yet there is no manuscript evidence supporting the emendation.

21 *Natural History* 7.15. The translation is from Beagon 2005:72–73. Cf. Rackham 1942:548–549.

22 In this view, the woman's blood contributed to the formation of the fetus (Beagon 2005:230, 236).

23 See *Greater Bundahišn* 15 (Anklesaria 1956:138–139). For its part, the *Bundahišn* subscribes to a dual seed theory that, similar to the view of the Babylonian Talmud, describes female seed as a form of blood. It is possible that the *Bundahišn* and the Talmud's views were shaped by Galenic science (Secunda 2012b:70).

24 The scholarly literature is replete with attempts to explain these common reactions to menstruation. See in particular Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:1–26.

25 The only possible reference to a source of knowledge for the phenomena described in the passage of *Dēnkard* 5 are the *šnāsagān* ("those who know"), who appear in the final line

increased in the sixth century C.E. under King Khusrau I.²⁶ Indeed, on the whole, the *Dēnkard* passage seems to reflect a Greek scientific orientation towards the acquisition of knowledge and the explanation of natural phenomena, though it is difficult to pinpoint how precisely this is so.²⁷ It is also possible that the passage more specifically evinces the influence of Western medicine and the natural sciences in Iran.²⁸ Regardless, while it may be true that both the encounter with Christianity and the adaptation of philosophical and scientific discourses in Middle Persian literature helped shape the style and form of the *Dēnkard* passage in book five, as we shall see the actual content of Ādurfarnbag's response derives equally, if not predominantly, from ancient Iranian conceptions.

Dēnkard 3.26

A passage in *Dēnkard* 3 also discusses the nature of menstrual impurity, though there the point of departure is not a question posed by a Christian interlocutor, rather an apparent logical problem internal to the Zoroastrian system:

Someone asked: The [required] distance of the corpses of men [and] dogs from something ritually cleaned is thirty steps. And [the required distance from] a menstruant woman is fifteen steps [or] more. [And it is manifest] from the fact that a menstruant woman smites by her gaze

of the cited text. It is unclear what this term means, although based on *Dēnkard* 4.108 (Madan 1911:429, lines 12–15) it seems to refer to indigenous Iranian wise men and not foreign philosophers.

- 26 The scholarly literature on this subject is considerable. For a general orientation, see Shaki 2003. Walker 2006:164–205 also contains a helpful discussion with references to previous research. It has been argued that the influence of Greek modes of thinking came through the massive Abbasid translation movement in the ninth century, or earlier, in the fifth and sixth centuries, when at different periods Western theologians, physicians, and philosophers crossed the border from Byzantium into the Sasanian Empire. For a related case study that considers the *Dēnkard's* incorporation of Neo-Platonic philosophy, see Adhami 2002.
- 27 One may detect a similar posture in other passages of the Ādurfarnbag–Bōxt Mārī dialogue, for example, in question twenty-four that discusses why a woman must wash herself after sex.
- 28 For some recent work on the general topic of Western scientific influence in Sasanian Iran, see Gignoux 2001. For relevant, though more general remarks concerning the combination of scientific, magical, and religious discourses, see Tambiah 1990.

something ritually cleansed [that is] in front of her [from a distance of] more than thirty steps that the pollution of a menstruant woman is greater than the [that of] corpses of men and dogs. What is the reason?

Answer: Yes,²⁹ it is manifest that corpses of men and dogs constitute more severe pollution than that of a menstruant woman. The reason why, at more than thirty steps, a menstruant woman smites by her gaze something ritually cleansed is that the *nasuš* scurries onto a menstruant woman as a living thing. Through the *nasuš*-containing gaze of that woman, her sight reaches something ritually cleansed. And something ritually cleansed [becomes] ineffective/useless [*akārih*]³⁰ thereby, just as with a puff against the wind of insubstantial substance, a bad smell reaches the nose more strongly than against a wind from the rump and even a harsher stench. (*Dēnkard* 3.26)³¹

This passage attempts to answer an apparent contradiction in the Zoroastrian system of purity. The first lines articulate a straightforward hierarchy: it can be deduced from the fact that human and canine corpses contaminate ritually cleansed objects at a greater distance than menstruants do that corpse impurity is more severe than menstrual impurity. The question then is why menstruants are able to convey impurity through their gaze at a distance greater than thirty steps. Unfortunately, the explanation is quite difficult to parse. We are told that the form of the *nasuš* — a term referring to “dead matter” that in many texts is associated with a certain corpse demoness (*druz ī nasuš*) and perhaps other demonic figures — comes over the menstruant like a living thing, and is thus presumably more mobile. Her gaze contains *nasuš* and is capable of reaching ritually pure objects. The mechanics of this eye-contagion are described as similar to passing gas.

29 For this rendition of the particle *hād*, see Skjærvø 2010.

30 See, for example, Pahlavi *Videvdad* 5.4E for a discussion of the parameters of the technical term *akārih*.

31 “pursīd kū dūrih ī nasāy ī mardōm sag az pādyābīh 30 gām ud daštān zan 15 gām wēš rēmanīh ī mardōm ud sag wēš az daštān az frāy az 30 gām pad wēnišn-zanišnih ī daštān zan ō pādyābīh ī-š *handēmān {MS: *h'nd'm'n'*} wēš rēmanīh ī daštān zan az mardōm ud sag nasāy paydāg čim čē.

passox hād mardōm ud sag nasāy *grāytar {MS: *y'l'tl*} rēmanīh ī az daštān zan paydāg frāy az 30 gām pad wēnišn-zanišnih daštān zan ō pādyābīh čim zīndag-čīhrīg dwāristan ī nasuš abar daštān zan pad nasušōmand wēnišn ī ān zan bē ayāftan ī [MS: *ayāft tā*] ō pādyābīh ī-š didār ud akārih ī pādyābīh az-iš čiyōn abāg *dam {MS: *d'm*} padīrag wād xwār-mādī gand saxtar ō wēniḡ bē ayāftan ī az padīrag kūn wād ud škeftar-iz gand.” See Dresden 1966:15 and Madan 1911:21. Translation by the author with input from Skjærvø.

In at least three respects, the passage seems to be related to the selection from *Dēnkard* 5 studied above. Both sources highlight the special role that demons — identified here as the corpse demoness (*nasuš*) — play in menstrual impurity. At the same time, both sources seem to evince a certain naturalistic bent that attempts an understanding of the movement of impurity by using certain rules and analogies from “physics.” What is again fascinating is the way in which the texts meld demonology with naturalistic and causal speculation. In this effort, both texts point to the role of the “breath/puff,” although in *Dēnkard* 3 it is used as a metaphor for the mechanics of visual contagion while in *Dēnkard* 5 it actually explains the source of the impurity’s strength. Of course, the passage of *Dēnkard* 3 is a more limited inquiry into the power of the menstruant’s gaze, so it does not contain a lengthy exposition on the peculiarity and toxicity of menstruation comparable to the reflections of *Dēnkard* 5.

As much as the belief in a polluting gaze is emphasized in *Dēnkard* 3, it is important to note that a kernel of this idea already appears in the *Avesta*. Specifically, the *Videvdad* requires that menstruants sequester themselves at some distance from the home so that they do not look at the fire: “They should go about their work farther away from the house, either a half or a third or a fourth or a fifth; if not, the woman may see the fire, if not, the woman may look back at the light of the fire” (*Videvdad* 16.2).³²

Although the original Avestan text of the *Videvdad* does not elaborate on the matter, the Pahlavi *Videvdad* — the traditional Middle Persian rendition of the Avestan *Videvdad* that took shape during Sasanian times³³ — explains that were the menstruant to gaze at the fire, she would have committed a sin. At 16.4 the Pahlavi *Videvdad* adds other items that are rendered impure by the menstruant’s gaze. It seems possible that the laws governing the menstruant’s gaze described in *Videvdad* 16.2 lead the *Dēnkard* to speculate about the nature of this power, which again is unique to menstrual impurity and does not apply to corpse impurity.

Since the *Dēnkard*’s argument here turns on the difference between menstrual and corpse impurity, the metaphysics used to explain the menstruant’s gaze must somehow make this distinction clear. Because the author assumes that we are dealing with a *nasuš* demoness, its role in menstrual impurity cannot constitute the difference, since as its name implies, the *nasuš* (the Pahlavi

32 The translation is from Skjærvø’s unpublished translation of the *Avesta*.

33 The Pahlavi *Videvdad* is an example of a larger Sasanian project, known as Zand, to translate and elucidate the *Avesta*. On the Zand’s date and provenance, see Cantera 2002:164–239 and Secunda 2012a.

form related to Avestan *nasu* ["corpse"]) also embodies corpse impurity.³⁴ It is also difficult to say that the distinction between the two kinds of impurity stems from the fact that the *nasuš* appears in the form of a living thing, since the *Videvdad* describes the fly-like form of the *nasuš* at *Videvdad* 7.2. Rather, the key term in the passage probably is "*nasušōmand wēnišn*" ("the *nasuš*-containing gaze"), which expresses the fact that unlike corpse impurity, the demon of menstrual impurity "infects" a living person, particularly their eyes. For this reason, the menstruant's vision can convey impurity at a distance. Curiously, this is said to operate according to the "physics" of a puff of air.

Classicists have noted that a sentence in the Pliny passage cited above — "mirrors are clouded by its very reflection" — actually derives from Aristotle's *On Dreams* (Beagon 2005:232). Interestingly, the latter might shed further light on the passage of *Dēnkard* 3:

If a woman looks into a highly polished mirror during the menstrual period, the surface of the mirror becomes clouded with a blood-red color . . . The reason for this is that, as we have said, the organ of sight not only is acted upon by the air, but also sets up an active process, just as bright objects do; for the organ of sight is itself a bright object possessing color. Now it is reasonable to suppose that at the menstrual periods the eyes are in the same state as any other part of the body; and there is the additional fact that they are naturally full of blood-vessels. Thus when menstruation takes place, as the result of a feverish disorder of the blood, the difference of condition in the eyes, though invisible to us, is none the less real (for the nature of the menses and of the semen is the same); and the eyes set up a movement in the air. This imparts a certain quality to the layer of air extending over the mirror, and assimilates it to itself; and this layer affects the surface of the mirror. (Aristotle, *On Dreams* II)³⁵

The Aristotelian passage is interested in the sense of sight and mirrors are used as an example to demonstrate the rapid ability of the eye to sense objects in its purview. Scholars have argued that the passage cited above appears to be a later interpolation (Dean-Jones 1994:229–230), but regardless, it would have been added centuries before the growth of Middle Persian literature. Significantly,

34 The *nasuš* is described as attacking the dead at *Videvdad* 7.2–4, fleeing on account of purification at *Videvdad* 8.41–72 (and parallels), and attacking a living person who carried a corpse alone at *Videvdad* 3.14.

35 Translation from Hett 1936:357.

the text explains the alleged ability of menstruants to affect mirrors, and claims that since the eyes are naturally full of blood vessels, the “sickly” blood that fills them during menstruation³⁶ causes a reaction that “sets up a movement in the air,” which “imparts a certain quality to the layer of air extending over the mirror.” In other words, there are two steps that occur: first, the eyes are filled with “diseased” blood; second, they set about a reaction in the air that extends to the affected object. The *Dēnkard* emphasizes the menstruant’s “*nasuš*-containing gaze” as opposed to the Aristotelian “sickly-blood full eyes,” and it also compares the passage of impurity through the air to a specific kind of “movement in the air,” analogous to the passing of gas. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two texts are worthy of consideration. While I am not arguing for incontrovertible Aristotelian influence on the passage of *Dēnkard* 3, given what we know about the role of Greek science and medicine in later Sasanian and Abbasid times, it may still shed some light on this Middle Persian explanation of the damaging gaze of menstruants.³⁷

At the same time, as we stated above, even if it is possible that a Middle Persian formulation is partially indebted to Western sources, this does not preclude an “internal” development. As noted, the power of the gaze to harm sacred elements (those objects or phenomena that Zoroastrianism perceives as intimately connected with the good creation of Ahura Mazdā) is present already in the Avestan *Videvdad*’s proscription against menstruants looking at fire. Still, neither the Avesta nor even its Middle Persian rendition explains how or why the menstruant’s gaze is considered to be so dangerous. Must we then say that the metaphysical descriptions of menstrual impurity that appear in the two *Dēnkard* passages are indebted solely to western philosophical and scientific trends in Sasanian Iran? As a matter of fact, they can also be located in Iranian texts closely associated with the Zand and even earlier Zoroastrian traditions.

36 As Dean-Jones points out, this conception of menstruation goes against Aristotle’s elaborate physiology of menstruation. This contributes to the sense that the passage is a later interpolation.

37 It should be noted that the Aristotelian passage became quite influential in the West. Examples include Pliny’s reference, cited above, as well as medieval formulations, as in the work *Women’s Secrets*, which was attributed to the Catholic Saint Albertus Magnus. For further discussion of the motif, which even entered Jewish mystical literature, see Koren 2004.

Šāyest nē šāyest 3.29

A passage that appears in the Middle Persian legal work, *Šāyest nē šāyest* (“Allowed and Not Allowed”) contains another reflection on the danger of a menstruant’s gaze.

And she should not look at the sun nor at the other luminaries. And she should not look at cattle and plants. And she should not engage in conversation with a righteous man, for a demon of such violence is the demon of menstruation that, [where] the other demons do not strike things with the evil eye, this one strikes [them] with the evil eye. (*Šāyest nē šāyest* 3.29)³⁸

Like the Pahlavi *Videvdad*, this passage adds further items from which menstruants must avert their gaze.³⁹ Yet unlike the Pahlavi *Videvdad*, the *Šāyest nē šāyest* passage actually reflects on the nature of menstrual impurity, which it maintains operates by way of a particularly violent demon. What makes the menstrual demon distinct is its ability to strike objects with the evil eye (*aš*).

In an influential article on Middle Persian literature, Mary Boyce assigned *Šāyest nē šāyest* a *terminus post quem* of 632 C.E. (1968:39). Boyce maintains that works like the *Šāyest nē šāyest* represent the efforts of Zoroastrian scribes to select passages from previously written works — in this case she probably means the Zand, which she assumed was transmitted primarily in written form in Sasanian times — in order to organize Zoroastrian teachings according to certain themes and categories. For Boyce, these collections were necessarily produced after the transcription of the Zand and represent a further evolutionary step in the history of Middle Persian literature. Actually, a synoptic study of *Šāyest nē šāyest* and its Pahlavi *Videvdad* parallels reveals a far more complicated picture (Cantera 2004:220–229). Although some passages in *Šāyest nē šāyest* do appear to have been excerpted from the Pahlavi *Videvdad* (Secunda 2008:368–369), and others surely evince conceptual development from the Pahlavi *Videvdad*’s more basic formulations (ibid.:332–335), in still other cases *Šāyest nē šāyest* seems to preserve more original material (ibid.:344). Even though the Zand as it has come down to us contains little beyond the fact that

38 “u-š ō xwaršēd ud abāriḡ rōšnih nē nigērišn u-š ō gōspand ud urwar nē nigērišn u-š abāḡ mard ī ahlaw hampursagih nē kunišn čē druz ī ēdōn stahmag ān druz ī daštān kū abāriḡ druz pad aš tis nē zanēd ōy pad aš zanēd.” For the text, see Tavadia 1930:81. Translation by the author.

39 In addition, *Šāyest nē šāyest* 3.27–28 rules that menstruants gazing at fire or water incur a type of sin known as a *famān*.

the gaze of menstruants is damaging, the brief *Šāyest nē šāyest* passage that reflects on the nature of menstrual impurity seems to preserve an articulation that predates the more philosophically inclined *Dēnkard* texts.

Zand ī fragard ī jud-dēw-dād, MS TD2, 562–563

A passage that appears in a hitherto neglected Middle Persian composition may confirm this sense. The text is from the *Zand ī fragard ī jud-dēw-dād* (=ZfJ; “Zand on the Chapter[s] of the *Videvdad*”), a work that has recently been rediscovered and will probably have important implications for the way scholars understand the development of Middle Persian ritual literature.⁴⁰ As its name implies, ZfJ is related to the *Videvdad*, though at this early stage it is impossible to determine what precisely that relationship is, and whether ZfJ works off of the surviving “canonical” Pahlavi *Videvdad*, or accesses a different, no longer extant version. The following section appears at the beginning of ZfJ’s extensive treatment of the menstrual laws, which parallels chapter sixteen of Pahlavi *Videvdad* and *Šāyest nē šāyest*, chapter three. Prior to this, ZfJ discusses the punishment for bringing menstruation to the fire (from a Zoroastrian perspective this consists of contaminating one of the most sacred elements, fire, with one of the most impure substances, menstruation) and other such misdeeds. This serves as a bridge into a longer treatment of the menstrual laws.

This adversary of menstruation — how then does it contaminate and destroy? It is much more destructive than corpse impurity because it always strikes with the evil eye.

It is manifest in the Avesta: For that demon is so powerful, O Spitaman Zarathustra, which is the adversary of the menstruant woman, [that] it scurries upon the entire bony existence like the one who annihilates it by [his] destruction — i.e., kills (it).⁴¹

40 A facsimile of the MS TD2 — the only surviving manuscript of direct philological value — can be found in Jamasp Asa, Nawabi, and Tavousi 1979. For a description of the text, see de Menasce 1959:59–60; de Menasce 1983:1177; Tavadia 1930; Tavadia 1956:43; and West 1974:106. For some tentative conclusions about the nature of ZfJ, see König 2010a and Secunda 2010.

41 “ēn petyārag ī daštān ēg-iš paywēšag [MS: ptwd’k’] marnjēnišn čiyōn. was-marnjēnidārtar az nasāy čē pad aš hamē zanēd.

az abestāg paydāg čē ast ān druz ēdōn was-ōz spītanman zardušt kē nāirig ī daštān petyāragēnēd <ī> čiyōn ān kē [MS: az] harwisp ōx ī astōmand bē pad marnjēnišn abesihēnēd kū bē ōzanēd u-š abar bē dwārēd.” See MS TD2, 562, lines 5–11.

Like all three texts that we have examined thus far, *ZFJ* is interested in understanding the destructive power of menstrual impurity. And like the passages from *Dēnkard* 3 and *Šāyest nē šāyest*, *ZFJ* pursues the matter by contrasting it with corpse impurity. Interestingly, somewhat unlike *Dēnkard* 3's naturalistic explanation, *ZFJ* maintains that the very fact that the menstrual "adversary" itself strikes through the woman's vision renders it ultimately more destructive than corpse impurity. Even more interesting is the alleged quotation from the Avesta.⁴² The general meaning of the quotation and its function in the passage remains unclear. It would seem that this text, too, represents a kind of reflection on the unique power of menstrual impurity and the ability of the so-called menstrual demon to destroy the material ("bony") world. The way it attacks the world, according to the gloss, is apparently by rushing onto the woman. *ZFJ* maintains that the demon is the parallel adversary of the menstruant and therefore has some control over her. As for the verse's function in a paragraph that claims that menstrual impurity is greater than corpse impurity on account of the menstruant's powerful gaze, it may simply support the general claim that menstruants possess dangerous impurity. Alternatively, it might somehow function as proof that menstruants strike via their gaze. Regardless, it is fair to say that *ZFJ*'s description of the mechanics of menstrual impurity is not nearly as developed as that of the passage of *Dēnkard* 3, and they differ from that account in significant respects. Nevertheless, the *ZFJ* passage seems to demonstrate an early attempt to come to some metaphysical, if not naturalistic understanding of menstrual impurity.

The next section in *ZFJ*, which in the interest of space must be summarized, names three kinds of people who harm the world through the evil eye — menstruants, people who carry corpses alone (a serious prohibition in Zoroastrianism), and those afflicted with corpse impurity who have washed themselves but have not yet waited the requisite nine days to purification.⁴³ *ZFJ* contrasts these people with one another by considering the procedure for a

42 *ZFJ* frequently cites Middle Persian translations of the Avesta by using the formula "*az/pad abestāg paydāg*" ("it is manifest in/from the Avesta"), just as it does in this instance. While use of that formula does not necessarily indicate a direct quote from the Avesta — for example, the Pahlavi term *abestāg* can refer to the Middle Persian rendition with its glosses and commentaries — the vocabulary and syntax of the sentence that follows this citation formula does sound like a translated Avestan fragment. Further, the inclusion of a gloss introduced by the word *kū* ("i.e.") to explain an opaque Avestan text is typical of the Zand. It therefore seems possible that this is an authentic Middle Persian translation and gloss of an Avestan sentence that has not survived in its original Avestan form.

43 MS TD2, 562:11–563:10.

case in which a fire needs to be attended by one of them lest it burn out. Again, menstrual impurity is deemed more severe than other forms of impurity:

If the one [who can light the fire] is that one of menstrual pollution, she abandons it so that the fire of Ohrmazd [the Pahlavi form of Ahura Mazdā] passes away from the pain of hunger and thirst.

How is it so severe [that] they must let the fire of Ohrmazd pass away [and] they are not permitted to light it? Because of this: Within the [first] three nights, she defiles one-fourth of the creation of the *dēn*⁴⁴ of the Mazdayasnians — i.e., she makes them worse in character. (And) she makes worse one-fifth each [?] of the nature of the water (and) the fruits (of) the plants.⁴⁵

After describing the high level of impurity that menstruation and menstruants convey, *ZFJ* details the extent of its severity. The ambiguous phrase, “she defiles one-fourth of the creation of the *dēn* of the Mazdayasnians” (*ān kē dēn ī mazdēsñān dām ahōgēñēd*), is glossed to mean that the menstruant affects the creation’s character. Likewise, she damages water and the fruit of plants. This claim is reminiscent of the *Dēnkard* 5’s description of the negative effect that menstruants have on the same two elements. A more distant echo of *ZFJ*’s mention of menstruants worsening the character of the creation might be found in *Dēnkard* 5’s claim that various mental faculties (*ōš*, *wir*, and *xrad*) are affected or that the taste and smell of food is affected.

The second *ZFJ* passage may hint at a fascinating connection to Avestan material that has indeed survived. *ZFJ* measures the effect that menstruants have on the world in fractions:⁴⁶ during the first three days of her period, the menstruant injures the character of the “creation of the *dēn* of the Mazdayasnians” by one-fourth. Likewise, she damages the character of water and the fruit of

44 The term “*dēn*” is multivalent and in many instances is difficult to translate. Among other possibilities, *dēn* can refer to (a) a certain component of the “soul” — the seeing soul (related to the Iranian root, *di-* “see”) that greets the deceased in the form of a young woman; (b) something approximating “religion” — though certainly not in the modern, Western sense; and (c) the sacred Zoroastrian oral tradition.

45 “ka ēk ān ī rēman daštān bē hilēd tā ātaxš ī ohrmazd az suy ud sarmāg ranj bē widerēd. čē rāy ēdōn grāy ātaxš ī ohrmazd bē abāyēd hilēd tā widerēd nē šāyēd ka bē abrōzēñēd. ēd rāy čē andar sē šabag čahār-ēk ān kē dēn ī mazdēsñān dām ahōgēñēd kū pad xēm wattar bē kunēd panj- *ēk {MS: ‘*ywynk*’ = ēwēnag} ēwēnag ī āb ud urwar bar wattar kunēd.” See MSTD2, 563:10–564:1.

46 On fractions in the Avesta along with treatment of some passages relevant to the current discussion, see Panaino 1997.

plants by one-fifth. Notably, this tradition is somewhat reminiscent of a passage in the Avestan *Videvdad*, which may ultimately provide an important key for understanding the Zoroastrian myth of the evil of menstruants.

Videvdad 18.62–64

Then Ahura Mazda said: Well, the whore (*jahi*), O Orderly Zarathustra, who mingles the semen of the (religiously) qualified and unqualified, of those who sacrifice to the *daēwas* and those who do not, of those who have forfeited their body and those who have not. She causes to stand still one-third of the rushing waters flowing in *riverbeds by her looking at them, O Zarathustra. She takes away the growth of one-third of the plants growing up, beautiful, green, by her looking at them, O Zarathustra. She takes away one third of the *wool of Life-giving Humility by her looking at them, O Zarathustra. She takes away one-third of the good thoughts that the Orderly man has thought more (than others), the good speech he has spoken more, the good deeds he has performed more, of his bodily strength and obstruction-smashing strength, and of his Orderliness when she falls upon him, O Zarathustra.⁴⁷

This passage describes the destructive powers of a promiscuous woman (*jahi*) who sleeps with both righteous and wicked men. Interestingly, as in *ZFJ*'s discussion of menstruants, the harm is inflicted through the woman's gaze and is measured in fractions — in this case, thirds. The Avesta lists elements damaged by her gaze that might be considered expressions of the vibrancy and lushness of life. Together, they seem to correspond to the three sacred elements, water, vegetation, and cattle. The fourth victim of the *jahi*'s gaze is the righteous (“Orderly”) man whose good thoughts, words, and deeds are also diminished by a third.

In his treatment of the structure of the *Videvdad*, Prods Oktor Skjærvø has highlighted the importance of this work's “bookends” — specifically, chapters 1–2 and 18–22 — which describe the myth that undergirds and organizes the *Videvdad* as a whole (Skjærvø 2006:122–123). An important component of this myth is the expansion of the earth by Yima — an Indo-Iranian character who functions in Zoroastrian tradition as an early proponent of Ahura

47 The translation of this and the following Avestan text is taken from Skjærvø's translated Zoroastrian texts available at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Zoroastrianism/Zoroastrianism3_Texts_II.pdf (accessed 13 June 2013).

Mazdā's will in this world — as it becomes overcrowded with people and animals (*Videvdad* 2.8, 2.13, and 2.17). On three separate occasions the earth grows by a third (*Videvdad* 2.11, 2.15, 2.19). Subsequently, Ahura Mazda warns Yima of an impending natural disaster and advises him to construct a bunker that will protect the creatures in his charge.⁴⁸ The bunker functions like a kind of “biosphere” for the seeds of the greatest people, cattle, and plants to grow and flourish regardless of the conditions outside. Interestingly, some of the bunker's characteristics are similar to the luscious elements that the *jahi* harms in *Videvdad* 18: “Make water flow forth there the length of a “league” (*hāthra*). Place meadows there, with green . . . [?], with inexhaustible savory foods. Place homes there, with roof and awning, *porch and *fence” (*Videvdad* 2.26).

As noted previously, the bulk of the *Videvdad* is concerned with the rules of pollution, which are taken up after Zarathustra asks Ahura Mazda where the earth is least happy (*Videvdad* 3.1). The hellish abode of demons is deemed the area of the earth's greatest unhappiness, followed by places where men and dogs are interred, tombs are built, demon lairs are found, and captives are unjustly dragged away. Skjærvø has suggested that Zarathustra's successful sacrifice — as described in *Videvdad* 19 — chases the demons back to hell and initiates the healing of the cosmos that closes the book's mythic circle (2006:124). This climax is immediately preceded by a dialogue between the ideal priest-sacrificer, Sraoša, and the hypostatized Lie regarding the latter's sexual partners and related matters. The passage about the promiscuous woman appears in that discussion, and I suggest that the effect of the woman's gaze on the world in thirds is a kind of evil reversal of Yima's expansion, which was also in fractions of thirds.

Notwithstanding *ZFJ*'s list of three people who can harm with the evil eye, the *Videvdad* passage about the promiscuous woman is apparently the only reference in the extant Avesta outside of the menstrual laws to mention a character with an injurious gaze. *Videvdad* 18.63–64 seems related to *ZFJ*'s description of the damage that menstruants inflict — in fractions — on “the creation of the *dēn* of the Mazdayasnians,” water, and vegetation. Still, the relationship between these two passages is not entirely clear. Most obviously, while the *ZFJ* passage discusses menstruants, the *Videvdad* deals with a promiscuous woman. Is there any way to bring these sources closer together?

48 It is not entirely clear whether the idea is that Yima's bunker is the world that is inhabited today or whether the narrative describes events that took place in the mythic past or future (Skjærvø 2006:124).

It appears that the missing link may be found in an etiological account of menstruation preserved in the *Bundahišn*.⁴⁹ In this source, the “primal whore,” Jeh, awakes a temporarily dazed and impotent Ahrimen by offering the following encouraging words:

“Rise up, our father, for in that battle I shall let loose so much harm upon the Righteous Man and the toiling Bull that by my doing their lives will not be worth living. And I shall rob their Fortune, I shall harm the water, I shall harm the earth, I shall harm the fire, I shall harm the plant, I shall harm the entire creation established by Ohrmazd.” And she enumerated her evil-doings in such detail that the Foul Spirit was pacified. And he jumped out of his stupor and placed a kiss on the Whore’s (*jeh*) head. This filth they call “menses” then appeared on the Whore. (*Bundahišn* 4.4–5)⁵⁰

Jeh’s words are convincing enough to rouse Ahrimen from his stupor, and when he kisses her, she begins to menstruate. The text does not make it explicit, but it seems that menstruation was at least partially invented to help Jeh execute her destructive plan. A further implication is that menstruation in contemporary women derives from the primordial demonic desire to harm the world.⁵¹

49 On this account, see König 2010b:135–138.

50 “abar āxēz pid ī amāh čē man andar ān kārēzār and čand bēš abar mard ī ahlaw ud gāw ī warzāg hilam kū kunišn ī man rāy zindagih nē abāyēd u-šān xwarrah bē apparam bēšēm āb bēšēm zamīg bēšēm ātaxš bēšēm urwar bēšēm harwisp dahišn ī Ohrmazd-dād u-š ān duškunišnih ōwōn pad gōkān ošmurd kū ganāg mēnōg bē rāmihist ud az ān stardih frāz jast ud sar ī jeh abar bōsīd ēn rēmanih ī daštān xwānēnd pad jeh paydāg būd.” The translation is taken from Skjærvø 2011:96. Compare this transcription with that of Pakzad 2005:55–56.

51 In a misogynistic passage found in *Greater Bundahišn* 14a, the *jeh* “species” is described as women’s adversaries: “Ohrmazd said when he created the woman: Even you are my creation, you who are the adversary of the Whore-types.” (“guft-iš ohrmazd ka-š zan brēhēnīd kū dād-iz-im hē tō kē-t jehān-sardag petyārag”). This does not mean that women are actually equivalent to the mythic whores (*jehān*). Nevertheless, the fact that the *jehs* function “opposite” to women can also mean that they are parallel to, and even exert influence on their lives. See de Jong 1995:36. A related idea is found in the *ZFJ* text quoted above, and is more clearly explained in a passage that appears in *Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* 34:30–31: “It is manifest in the Tradition (*dēn*): When Ahrimen *scuttled into creation, he kept the Whore-type (*jahī-sardag*) of evil Tradition (*dušdēn*) as a partner, just as men [keep] women *partners. There he [Ahrimen] himself is the *king demon; and she, the *Whore-type (*jahī-sardag*) of evil Tradition, is herself a *queen, the chief of all the Whores (*jahihā*) [and] demons, a grievous adversary of the Righteous Man. And he [Ahrimen] joined himself to the Whore (*jahī*) of Evil Tradition. He coupled with [her] for

Albert de Jong has recently criticized the widespread translation of *jahi*, *jahikā*, and *jeh* as “whore,” or even “the primal whore” in the *Bundahišn* passage (1995).⁵² Yet scholars have put forward some compelling arguments that the word can retain such a meaning (e.g., Bartholomae 1904:606; Kellens 1974:177; Bailey 1969:94–95). Regardless, the *Bundahišn*’s etiological myth of menstruation suggests that the description of the *jahi* of *Videvdad* 18.61 is related to the woman (*nāirika*) menstruant of *Videvdad* 16, since both damage the world with their gaze. As such, in some respects the two *Videvdad* passages are linked in *ZFJ*’s description of the menstruant’s ability to damage the world in fractions through her gaze.

Summary: The Development of the Zoroastrian Myth of the Menstrual Eye

In sum, it would appear that at the heart of the two demonological accounts preserved in the *Dēnkard* lie the ancient Iranian beliefs that the menstrual gaze harms the world and that its power can be attributed to the role that demonic forces, and perhaps Ahrimen himself, plays in menstruation. Interestingly, these ideas do not appear explicitly in the extant *Avesta*. However, fragments preserved in Middle Persian literature seem to reflect lost passages of the Zand, and even of the *Avesta* itself.⁵³ It seems that a connection was drawn between the *jahi* of *Videvdad* 18.61–64 and menstruants, and these sources were joined

the defilement of [human] females so that she might defile females, and on account of the defilement of [human] females they [the females] might defile the males and cause [the males] to turn away from [their] proper function.” (“pad dēn ōwōn paydāg kū ahrimen ka andar ō dām *dwārist dušdēn *jahī [MS: yhyyw’]-sardag ōwōn pad hambāz dāšt čiyōn mard zanihā ī *hambāyān [MS: hambišn] ānōh xwad ast dēw *šāh u-š dušdēn *jahī [MS: yhyyw’]-sardag *bānbist[?] [MS: b’n’pstrn’] xwad ast sar ī hamāg *jahihā [MS: yb’yh’] dēwān garān petyāragtar ō mard ī ahlaw u-š dušdēn *jahī ham-juxt āhōgēnīdan ī mādagān rāy abāg ham-juxtihist kū tā mādagān āhōgēnād ud āhōgēnidagih ī mādagān rāy narān āhōgēnānd ud az xwēskārih wardānd.”) Compare this transcription and translation with Gignoux 1993:120–121; Choksy 1989:96; and König 2010b:136.

52 Based on the context of some passages, the term can indeed refer to a regular woman. See de Jong 1995:25–31. Note that even in this case, *Videvdad* 18.61 is quoted almost verbatim in the Avestan and Pahlavi work, the *Hērbedestān* 12.4.3, and in place of “*jahi*” the text substitutes the Avestan word “*nāirika*,” or “woman.”

53 There is also some evidence that the entire etiological myth about menstruation at *Bundahišn* 4.4–5 might in effect be a translation of an Avestan original (Widengren 1967).

together in a hitherto neglected Pahlavi work, *ZFJ* and, in a different form, in the *Bundahišn*.⁵⁴

The contours of the early myth are unclear, and not all of the pieces as we now have them fit perfectly together. Still, it can be said that an idea circulated from relatively early on in Iranian literature that menstruants diminish the flourishing elements of the world in fractions⁵⁵ — perhaps in a reversal of Yima's expansion of the world that also took place in fractions. In addition, it was assumed that menstruants became a tool through which demonological forces could harm the world. This ability was thought to have originated when Ahrimen kissed Jeh, causing impurity to spread to all of womankind. In time the influence of philosophical writings and the encounter with Christians encouraged some Zoroastrians to develop novel explanations for their rituals and to account for menstrual impurity according to more naturalistic conceptions. Thus, one formulation in the *Dēnkard* is somewhat reminiscent of the Aristotelian belief that menstrual blood fills the eyes and then infects the air, and another loosely parallels Pliny's idea of the negative effect that the mere proximity of menstruants can have.

Irano-Judaic Postscript

According to Aristotle, "The organ of sight not only is acted upon by the air, but also sets up an active process." Like the eye, Zoroastrian beliefs about the injurious gaze were not only "acted upon," but they also influenced other traditions as well. The past decade has seen an increase in research on the relationship between the Babylonian Talmud and its Iranian context.⁵⁶ In the current case, source-critical philological tools enable the localization of the Iranian motif of the fractious gaze in the Babylonian Talmud — the monumental text of the Sasanian Mesopotamian Jewish community and the central religious work for nearly all forms of Judaism since the Middle Ages.

In a narrative that is well known to Talmudists, a prominent, if controversial sage named Rabbi Eliezer is excommunicated and as a result harms the world. The Babylonian Talmud's version of the story is as follows:

54 The connection between these two passages has been noted by modern scholars (Choksy 1989:154). With the "discovery" of the *ZFJ* passage, this connection is further confirmed.

55 Again, it is not clear why *Videvdad* 18.62–63 measures the *jahi's* destruction in thirds and *ZFJ* measures the menstruant's harm in fourths and fifths.

56 For a summary and introduction, see Secunda 2014.

Tears streamed from his eyes. The world was then smitten — a third of the olive [crop], a third of the wheat, and a third⁵⁷ of the barley. And some say, the dough in women's hands swelled up. A *tanna* [early rabbinic teacher] taught: Great was the [calamity] on that day, for everything which Rabbi Eliezer cast his eyes towards was burned. (Babylonian Talmud *Bava Metzi'a* 59b)

A comparison with the version of the story that appears in the Palestinian Talmud — a work produced in Roman Palestine that predates its Babylonian counterpart by at least a century — reveals a number of differences. One variant relates to the nature of the damage done to the crops: “Wherever Rabbi [E]liezer's eyes looked was blighted. And not only that, even (with) one wheat kernel, half was blighted and the other half was not blighted” (Palestinian Talmud *Mo'ed Qattan* 3.1[81d]). The Palestinian version makes perfect sense. Since the damage originated with Rabbi Eliezer's eyes, only the half of the wheat kernel that was visible to him was damaged. However, it seems that when this tradition traveled from Roman Palestine to Sasanian Mesopotamia and made its way into the Babylonian Talmud, the damaging gaze of Rabbi Eliezer was recast in a way that corresponded to Iranian conceptions of injurious gazes. Of course, Rabbi Eliezer was no menstruant. But as an insulted and magically powerful scholar,⁵⁸ his fractious gaze mimicked the menstrual eye in the way it damaged the luscious crops of the world not completely, but in fractions.

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57 Note however that all the manuscripts have “half” for barley. See the variants collected in Rabinowitz 1976. This may partially reflect the Palestinian version, which we will see below, though it is unclear why it would only be maintained regarding the barley.

58 See, for example, Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 68a and parallels.

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