



MAGIC II. IN LITERATURE AND FOLKLORE IN THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

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General Introduction. Magic can be briefly described as the art of influencing the course of events by the occult control of natural phenomena through the application of ritual observances acquired through a study of esoteric and often closely guarded corpus of knowledge and traditions, oral and written, supposedly achieving results not obtainable through ordinary means (for a range of definitions and classifications see Marett, 245f; Marwick, pp. 12-13). In spite of the many implied connections between magic and “science” on the one hand, and magic and “religion” on the other, it is not easily possible to define magic either as “primitive science” or “primitive religion.” Jacob Bronowski has demonstrated that magic may not reasonably be associated with science in its modern sense because unlike science that assumes only one form of logic, magic posits two different logics: one of daily life, and another of the supernatural order (Bronowski 1978).

Long before scholars in the Renaissance established the difference between scientific and magical varieties of logic, Abu Rayḥān Biruni (d. 1048)



demonstrated the incompatibility of these two logics by a simple experiment. There existed a common belief in his time that emeralds had the magical power of blinding vipers; and if a viper happened to glance upon an emerald, his pupils would burst. In order to verify this, Biruni inserted a large viper in a container into which pieces of emeralds were set. He further placed a collar of emeralds around the serpent's neck and hung a string of emeralds where it was housed. After a time, since nothing happened to the viper, he concluded that the belief in the reported magical quality of emeralds with regard to their effect upon serpents' eyes was wrong, and facetiously added that the only way one could blind a viper through emeralds was by designing an emerald needle and thrusting it into its eyes (quoted in Homā'i's introduction to Biruni 1973, pp. 62-3). The fundamental difference between the type of logic that dominates science and that which governs magic was thus implicitly recognized by Biruni; although, even an exceptionally skeptical and bold observer like Biruni acknowledges the limitations of the rational mind when faced with the supernatural (Biruni, *Aṭār*, tr. Sachau, p. 235; Bürgel, p. 38).

The attempt to connect magic with religion by calling it a form of "primitive religion" is not satisfactory because neither "religion" nor "primitive" lends itself easily to attempts at definition.

In spite of these difficulties, many attempts at defining magic and creating classifications of magical texts and branches have been made, ranging in time from medieval and pre-modern scholars writing in Arabic, from Ebn al-Nadim (*Al-Fehrest*), to *Eḳwān al-Şafā'* and Ḥāji Ḳalifa (Marett, pp. 245-52; Fahd, 1996, pp. 567-68) to 19th and 20th century western sociologists and anthropologists including Edward Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas who have in turn exercised a seminal influence on historians writing on the prevalent notions of the supernatural and magical in the Late Antiquity and beyond (Brown, p. 12). An influential early treatment worthy of mention is that by Sir James Frazer. Frazer, whose elaboration of the notion of "sympathetic magic" has been influential since its detailed presentation in the *Golden Bough*, believed that magic everywhere rested on two principles or laws. First, the law of similarity according to which like produces like; and second, the law of contagion, according to which objects that have once been in contact with each other continue to act upon one another for ever. Thus, from the law of similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect by merely imitating it, while from the law of contagion he surmises that whatever he does to a material object that was formerly in touch with a person will affect that person in some



way. Practices that are based on the law of similarity are called “homoeopathic magic” (Frazer, 1959, pp. 7-31), and those based on the law of contagion are given the name of “contagious magic” (Frazer 1959, pp. 31-37). For instance, the magical belief cited by the polymath [Ḥobayš Teflisi](#) (d. 1227), according to which sprinkling some dirt from a grave on a sleeping person prevents the sleeper from waking up (Ḥobayš, p. 418) would be an example of homoeopathic magic because it implicitly ties the sleep of the dead to the quick. However, using a person’s clothing, hair, or fingernail parings in magical charms directed to that person would be an example of contagious magic.

From a folkloristic point of view magic is a variety of superstition (Brunvand, pp. 317-18). Alan Dundes has proposed a structural model of superstitions, including magic, which is followed here with minor adjustments for Persian practices (Dundes, p. 92). He points out that sign superstitions require only man’s belief, while magic requires his belief and practice. Unlike many superstitions that merely interpret signs (e.g., seeing a black cat [sign] is unlucky [interpretation]), the conditional part of a magical proposition requires human agency in order to qualify as magic: one intentionally places a horseshoe in fire in order to make someone else amorous. This intentional aspect of magic separates it from other forms of superstition. Furthermore, although like many other superstitions, magical superstitions are conditional statements, their conditional part may be quite complex (e.g. if A is done at time X when conditions Y and Z are present, then B). In other words, those who practice magic must also have knowledge of the manner in which their intentions may be translated into magical conduct. Thus, the structural pattern followed by magical practices may be further refined to follow the pattern: “if A is performed *appropriately*, B will follow.” Ḥobayš stresses this aspect of magic by stating that whoever engages in magic must perform it at an appropriate and auspicious time (Ḥobayš, p. 375).

Dundes allows that sign superstitions may be changed into magic by human agency. He calls this change “Conversion” (Dundes, p. 92). For instance according to a sign superstition in Khorasan, if tea-leaves are found suspended vertically in a tea cup, they presage the imminent arrival of guests. The number of the guests will be the same as the number of the tea-leaves that are suspended vertically. Now, if one does not feel particularly hospitable, one may take the suspended tea-leaves out of the cup and chew on their ends. This action should prevent the company from showing up (Šakurzāda, pp. 324-25).



The state of the leaves in the tea-cup is a sign that may be passively observed. One's action to prevent the outcome presaged by the sign is conversion magic by which one shapes the future rather than merely forecasting it.

Aside from the theoretical obstacles that hinder one's attempt at defining magic in general, a number of cultural and linguistic difficulties arise in discussing magic among Persians and in locating Persian magic in a cross-cultural context. The most important of these involves rendering the various words that denote "magic" in Persia into their western equivalents. Although the usually accepted definitions for the various Persian words such as *jādu*, *afsun*, *sehr* etc. include "witchcraft," it should be remembered that "witchcraft" *per se* is a European Christian phenomenon. Witchcraft was understood in Europe to be the kind of sorcery that involved worship of the Devil, and was therefore persecuted as an essentially anti-Christian religion that challenged both the civil and the ecclesiastical authorities of pre-modern Europe (Russell, pp. 3-4, 16-17, 23-24; Robinson; Thomas; Behringer). By contrast, the idea of witchcraft in Persian has no overt tinge of anti-religiosity or Devil-worship. It should be borne in mind that the situation was different in pre-Islamic Iran where sorcerers had close connections with the Evil Spirit and his host. This is well attested in Persian literature of the Zoroastrians. For instance, according to *Zarātošt-nāma*, Zoroaster's birth caused great consternation among witches, whose king and his allies attempt several times to have the prophet killed (*Zarātošt-nāma*, lines 198-214, 220-53, 325-50, 371-86). The head sorcerer however, dies rather suddenly after an altercation with the prophet (lines 387-427). Later in his career, Zoroaster kills a large number of witches by reciting the Avesta (lines 718-722). This may be evidence of an early state of rivalry between Zoroastrianism and the pre-Zoroastrian creeds, here represented by a host of witches. Nevertheless, this is a far cry from the witch trials and the Inquisition in the Europe of the Middle Ages.

Some authorities believe that man's belief in the power of magical incantations is related to his belief in the magical power of words (Krappe, p. 189; Budge, 1899, pp. xi, 170-71; Budge, 1978, p. 26; Thorndike, I, p. 10). The words of these incantations may be written rather than merely pronounced. When they are written, they may be called *afsun*, *ta'wid*, or *herz* in Persian (See [CHARMS](#)). Be that as it may, these incantations operate by activating the forces that are inherent in the objects upon which the incantation is pronounced (Budge, 1978, p. 26); and the appropriate performance of the magical act, which in the case of verbal magic means its correct utterance by a qualified



person, is of essence (Thorndike, I, p. 10; Budge, 1899, p. 4).

Some Persian scholars in the medieval period including Avicenna and Fakr-e Rāzi have divided all extraordinary occurrences into three kinds: those that are due to miracles or to magic; those that are inherent in the objects in which they are observed, such as the magnet's power to draw iron to itself; and those that result from some external force's effect upon the world, such as the congruence of heavenly bodies and the like (quoted in Homā'i, pp. 30-31). Of the magical class, two different kinds are recognized in medieval Persian and Arabic sources. The more benign is called *sehr-e ḥalāl*, "licit or permissible magic" (Onşori, line 2322). It is comparable to what was practiced by a class of harmless witches who were called *lamiae* in Roman law; and is known as "white magic" in European tradition (Loomis; Robinson, pp. 76-80, 104, 111). The forbidden variety, called *seáhr-e ḥarām*, "forbidden magic" is comparable to "black magic" or *maleficium* in Roman law. In classical Persian poetic usage *seáhr-e ḥalāl* is used as a metaphor for extraordinary eloquence or poetic feats (e.g. Nāşer-e Kōsrow, p. 251: 15; p. 255:24; p. 296:22; Bürgel, pp. 53-88).

The recognition of magic as something real and operative in our world is canonically established in Islam. Certain verses of the Qor'ān are believed to have both curative and compelling powers. A prophetic tradition quoted by 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb calls the Qor'ān "the best medicine" (Termeđi, trad. no. 3533). The text of the Qor'ān makes specific reference to the kind of magic that can cause enmity between man and wife (2:103), and to those, presumably witches, who summon the help of the *Jenn* for their own purposes (70:7; cf. Bāqellāni, pp. 91-97). Many Qor'ānic verses, especially some in chapters 113 and 114, are said to be powerful counter-charms on the authority of the Prophet himself (Qorṭobi, II, pp. 970-71; Nasā'i, pp. 16-19; Marşafi, pp. 162-63; cf. Nasā'i, p. 40; and cf. p. 69, 70; Marşafi, p. 174; Termeđi, VI, p. 252, trad. no. 2059, and p. 254, trad. no. 2061; Ebn Māja, trad. no. 3511). Furthermore, the Prophet is said to have been bewitched himself only to be cured of it later (Ebn Māja, trad. no. 3545; Qorṭobi, II, pp. 965-67). Books that explain the magical efficacy of Qor'ānic verses are called *Kawāşş al-āyāt* (Christensen, pp. 1-68). Islam also acknowledges the existence of black magic (*seáhr-e ḥarām*) and that it may be countered by appropriate charms. Some scholars, like Qoşā b. Luqā (9th Century CE; Costa ben Luca in medieval Christian sources), advocated a rationalist stance toward magic and argued that magical incantations may be best efficacious when those who pronounce them believe in them wholeheartedly. They, in other words, benefit from their confidence



in the incantations by a process of self-fulfilling prophecy rather than by the “power” of the magic (Thorndike, I, pp. 654-55). This opinion is shared by Ḥobayš who counsels that one should believe from the bottom of his heart (*wahm-e tiz ke bar del gomārad*) that the magical charm that he uses is most certainly potent in order for that charm to actually work (Ḥobayš, p. 375).

The skeptical attitude of scholars such as Biruni notwithstanding, many classical and medieval practitioners of high magic consider their activities to be “scientific” rather than magical. Ḥobayš, for instance, included much that would now be considered “magical” in his *Bayān al-Ṣanā’āt*. He claimed this information to have been experimentally verified, and pointed out that he excluded much that was false from his compendium (Ḥobayš, p. 374, and cf. p. 358). Ya’qub b. Eshāq al-Kendi (d. 850 or 873 CE), Ṭābet b. Qorra (835-901) were among those who considered a number of magical practices as “scientific” (Thorndike, I, pp. 643-45, 665-66). A book on exorcisms and incantations is attributed to Moḥammad b. Zakariyā Rāzi (d. 932 or 924 CE) of which a Latin translation survives (Thorndike, I, p. 671). Other texts on such practices are attributed to Avicenna and Ebn Sāvajī (Homā’i, pp. 12-16).

Some pre-modern scientists gained a reputation for magic among the “folk” by dint of their great intellectual achievements or technological innovations. For instance, Bahā’-al-Din ‘Āmeli (1547-1621 or 1622; also known as Šayḵ Bahā’i) whose philosophical speculations were not necessarily seen by himself or his as magical—although he did write on occult sciences, including a *fāl-nāma*—has gained something of a magician’s stature in Persian folklore because of his alleged ability to make wondrous things.

Magic among Persians. Two kinds of magic are discernable in Persian: high magic, and folk magic. Although, as pointed out before, magic and science can be defined differently and demarcated from each other, in practice, high magic is indistinguishable from science in medieval cultures of the Middle East and elsewhere. Its assumptions are rooted in a sophisticated tradition of philosophical speculation about reality and cosmos that is based on “scientific” norms and learning of the period and is transmitted largely by means of writing or formal discourse. Alchemy, astral magic, and numerology, are examples of high magic. Folk magic, by contrast, is practiced by those who belong to the less literate or entirely unlettered social groups, and is largely transmitted by oral tradition or by traditional training. Although there is a vast area of overlap between these two forms of magic, they are in general distinct and people who live in societies that practice them are able to



distinguish one from the other with reasonable ease.

In Persian usage, *afsun*, *jādu*, and the Arabic loan word *sehr*, are used interchangeably in the sense of magic. Those who practice magic are called *afsungar* (cf. also *afsunḳvān*, *afsun dām*), *jādugar*, and *sāher*. It may be that both *jādugar* and *sāher* have a greater negative connotation than *afsungar*. A number of other words whose primary meanings are not “magic” *per se* are occasionally used euphemistically in the sense of magic. Some of these are: *tonbol*, *dāstān*, *neyrang* (e.g., Farroḳi, lines 4181-82, 4212; and *niranj* in Arabic: Fahd, 1993, pp. 51-52). Religious texts in Persian tend to follow the conventional Muslim line that magic does exist, and that sorcerers learn their trade from one of two major sources. Some learn it from Hārut and Mārut (q. v.), the two fallen angels whom God has imprisoned in a well in Babylon (*Tarjoma-ye tafsir-e Ṭabari*, I, pp. 95-97). Others learn it from demons who eavesdrop near heaven, learn the holy words of the heavenly beings, and descend to teach them to their earthly followers, who then use these as magical formulae (Rāzi, XI, p. 314). However, even these texts are not immune from possible pre-Islamic Iranian influences. For instance, Muslim scholars point out that keeping a white cock in the house protects that house from sorcery (*Tarjoma-ye tafsir-e Ṭabari*, I, pp. 191-92), a belief that can be traced back to pre-Islamic Iranian sources.

Magic in Persian Secular Literature. The secular literary sources, although not explicitly concerned with magic, do provide interesting snippets of information about its perception among the general public and the learned elite. For instance, various magical gifts and talents are depicted in the verses of many classical Persian poets. Among these are: their knack for transformation, sometimes repeatedly (e.g., Farroḳi, line 965), calling up dragons and other such beings (Manučehri, line 1201), creating illusions by making things appear or disappear (Asadi, s.v. *farhast*), changing the color of a raven to white (Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, p. 380), and changing humans into animals and back (Bayhaḳi, p. 905).

Magic in the Šāh-nāma. We know from Iran’s national epic that some of the primordial kings were powerful magicians. For instance, king Tahmurat gains dominion over the Evil Spirit and his host by magic. He uses his powers to capture the devil that he rides as his mount (*Šāh-nāma*, Khaleghi, I, pp. 36-37). King Fereyduṅ’s magical powers are evident early in his career when he foils his brothers’ attempt to kill him by his sorcery (I, pp. 72-73). Another one of the primordial kings, Manučehr eradicates witchcraft by his own magic (I, p.



161, line 3). Prince Keykosrow manages to create a crack in the impenetrable walls of a demonic fortress probably by means of a magical spell written in a letter placed against the walls of the fortress (II, pp. 464-65). Although the magic of the primordial kings is depicted as efficacious, that of the non-Iranians is not. Foreign rulers and their agents only practice “black magic” in the *Šāh-nāma*. The most prominent among them is the Arab king Žaḥḥāk who is called “worshiper of sorcery” (I, p. 65, lines 162, 176). He promotes wizardry both in Iran and abroad (I, p. 77, line 356) and even teaches his Iranian wives to practice his craft (I, p. 55, lines 4-11). The Turānian king, Afrāsiāb is also capable of sorcery. Early in his career, his sorcery is mentioned by King Nodar, who warns his children against his witchcraft (II, p. 301, line 249). After his discovery and capture by an ascetic, he tricks the holy man into loosening his restraints, and dives into the waters of a sacred lake, where he magically hides under the waters (IV, pp. 316-319, lines 2271-2316).

Several types of magical practices are mentioned in the *Šāh-nāma*. The most common is transformation. King Fereydun appears to his sons in the guise of a dragon (*Šāh-nāma*, Khaleghi, I, pp. 103-4, lines 222-37). The king of Māzandarān transforms himself first into a rock (II, pp. 59-60, lines 806-16) and later into a cloud (II, p. 60, line 826). Sorceresses appear in the guise of beautiful women to Rostam, and to prince Esfandiyār. Rostam’s sorceress changes back to her hideous form upon hearing the name of God (II, pp. 30-31, lines 403-12), while Esfandiyār’s sorceress first transforms herself into a lion, and finally relents when the prince subdues her by the counter-magic of a steel chain (V, pp. 237-8, lines 207-24). Magicians are also able to change harmless material into poison. In the reign of Anuširavān a Jewish man who knows sorcery converts milk into poison (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VIII, pp. 48-149). A second common variety of magic in the *Šāh-nāma* is conjuring up darkness, cold, heat, or storm. The White Demon’s magic calls up such dense darkness that it blinds the Iranian forces when it falls on them (*Šāh-nāma*, Khaleghi, II, p. 15, lines 195-202). The Turānian king Afrāsiāb robs the hero Qāran of his sight in battle long enough to escape him (I, p. 299, lines 217-19). King Sarv of Yemen tries to freeze Fereydun’s sons to death by magically creating extreme cold where they sleep. However, his plans are foiled because Fereydun has already taught his sons the necessary counter-magic (I, pp. 99-101). A Turkish sorcerer conjures up a blizzard against Iranian forces but is discovered and killed by an Iranian warrior. His death calms the storm (III, pp. 127-29, lines 351-83). Šāva šāh orders his sorcerers to call up fire, wind, and a black cloud that rains arrows upon the Iranians. This must have been a case of creating the illusion



of these things rather than physically producing them because when the Persian general orders his troops not to pay attention to these tricks and fight till victory; they follow his orders without being harmed (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VIII, pp. 364-65). Later, a blue-eyed, red-headed Turk who is one of the magicians in the enemy's service is captured. He offers his services to the Iranian warlord, who although tempted to employ him, changes his mind and orders his execution (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VIII, pp. 370, line 921-32). Magicians' conjuring up fire against an army is implied earlier in the narrative in the story of Keykosrow (*Šāh-nāma*, Khaleghi II, p. 463, lines 601-10). A similar conjuring of cold and heat is mentioned in the story of Alexander, when he reaches a land beyond the realm of the amazons, where his forces suffer from severe cold and heat. Later, Alexander comes across monstrous beings capable of emitting fire out of their mouths. They claim that they conjured the heat and the cold on his path (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VII, pp. 77-78, lines 1307-15). Another reference to magical charms (*telesm*) in the *Šāh-nāma*, where Kosrow Parviz's envoys are tricked by the Roman emperor (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] IX, pp. 90-94) turns out to be an instance of technological wonders rather than magic *per se*. However, since the words *telesm* and *neyrang* used in this episode have double meanings of magical tricks as well as technological contrivances, some have misunderstood the passage as an instance of magic in the *Šāh-nāma* (Sarrāmi, pp. 575-6).

Magic in Later Epics: The epic and romance literatures after Ferdowsi are more informative about magic. To the extent that these sources are not as literary in character as Ferdowsi's poem is, their references to magic have a greater folkloric flavor. Indeed, the farther one moves from epic proper into the realm of romance, the more fantastic and elaborate the description of magical practice and adventure become. For instance, the *Garšāsp-nāma* agrees with the *Šāh-nāma* that Žahhāk was a sorcerer (*Garšāsp-nāma*, p. 87, lines 53-4). However, it adds that he employed many Babylonian magicians (*Garšāsp-nāma*, p. 56, line 34), whom he once ordered to conjure up darkness, fire, wind, monsters, and wild beasts in order to test the hero *Garšāsp* (p. 56, lines 1-3). In the course of his adventures, *Garšāsp* meets a handsome man with a third eye on his forehead, who reveals the hidden entrances to an enchanted fortress by singing a chant (p. 178, lines 8-11). Elsewhere in this story, sorcerers in the Chinese army practice their art from a mountain top, transforming clouds into dragons, conjuring up a blizzard, and releasing flying snakes against the Iranian forces. *Garšāsp* sends some of his men to kill the magicians on the mountain top, thus eliminating their harmful tricks



(*Garšāsp-nāma*, pp. 395-6). Irānšāh b. Abi'l-Ḳayr (d. sometime after 1108 CE) in a long epic devoted to the rule of Bahman, tells us that the king commanded a force of men and sorcerers (*Bahman-nāma*, line 9535), and provides a detailed description of witches. They live on an island a month's sail beyond the lands of the dog-headed (*sagsārān*) before one comes to the land of the rope-legged (*davālpāyān*). They can cause storms, burn ships, and transform themselves into beasts or fire (*Bahman-nāma*, lines 6954-62). One of them who joins Bahman's forces with an army of his own, lives in Babylon and has ten thousand warlocks in his forces. These have bodies of elephants and claws of wolves (*Bahman-nāma*, lines 9250-54). They can turn fire to ice and create frightening illusions by their chants (*Bahman-nāma*, lines 9278-81; 9288-93). The late epic, *Jahāngir-nāma*, is even more informative and tells us that witches may fall in love with humans. A witch by the name of Malikā, falls in love with the hero Ṭus, and kidnaps and imprisons him in her castle (*Jahāngir-nāma*, lines 3305-7, 3621-33). On their way to rescue Ṭus, Jahāngir and his entourage face dense fog, fire, cold, and wind, which they can only overcome by blowing the Great Name of God upon them (*Jahāngir-nāma*, lines 3677-89, 3707-50). At Malikā's castle they meet her husband, a monstrous demon called Sorḳāb, whom Jahāngir slays (*Jahāngir-nāma*, line 3758). Malikā is described as a hideous creature with a forked tongue, which emits fire from her mouth. Jahāngir dispatches her by a blow of his fist (*Jahāngir-nāma*, lines 3791-97). Another powerful sorcerer in the employ of one of Jahāngir's enemies is thirty cubits tall, and has his own army of witches. He conjures up a rain of fire and a fire-headed dragon that emits water from its mouth against the Iranian army, and nearly overwhelms them (*Jahāngir-nāma*, lines 5634-700). Once again Jahāngir's counter-magic saves the day. The sorcerers attack the Iranians in the form of wolves, lions, leopards, dragons, and crocodiles that hold banners of fire by means of which they throw flames upon the Iranians. Rāḥila the sorcerer appears riding a lion around the mountain where the Iranians had their encampment, and blows his magic upon them. However, the countercharm recited by the Persian forces renders his magic useless (lines 5725-52). Later Rāḥila is captured by the proper use of a counter-charm, and Rostam orders him burned in fire (lines 5879-97). The burning of Rāḥila as the method of his execution may be a borrowing from medieval European practice because apart from the fact that it would be absurd to burn beings whose chief weapon seem to be fire, no other instance of this method of punishment for witches in Persian epic or romance literature can be recalled.

Magic in Persian romances. Magic and magicians are more elaborately



described in Persian romance literature than in the *Šāh-nāma* or in the secondary epics. One of the earliest of these romances, *Vis o Rāmin*, has a great deal of information about magic scattered through it. Vis's husband, King Mubad, insults his bride, calling her of the lineage of dogs, and trained by the demons in that den of sorcery, Babylon (*Vis o Rāmin*, p. 138, line 42, cf. p. 218, lines 145-6). The text clearly establishes the connection between demons and sorcery, alluding also to demons' eavesdropping upon the high heavens to which we have already referred (*Vis o Rāmin*, p. 63, line 23; p. 194, line 36). The king further accuses his brother Rāmin of witchcraft and alludes to Žahhāk's sorcery (*Vis o Rāmin*, p. 314, line 25). Snake charming by means of sorcery (p. 103, line 197) and magicians who practice both harmful and curative charms by controlling fairies are also mentioned (p. 255, lines 4, 9-10). The most famous magic in this romance is, however, practiced by Vis's nursemaid (p. 103, line 198; p. 121, line 243). She makes Vis's sleeping husband remain dormant by one of her spells (p. 303, lines 34-8), and more significantly, renders him impotent. The details of the impotence charm, called "band" are interesting. She makes two figurines from copper and bronze, which she binds back-to-back together by an iron wire, and buries them on a river bank at dawn, thus rendering Mubad, Vis's husband, completely impotent (p. 93, lines 32-4, 36-44). She tells Vis that if the iron binding of the charm is broken, its effect will be nullified (p. 93, line 35). The way to cancel the spell is to dig up the charm and place it in fire (p. 93, lines 44-8). Unfortunately for Vis's husband however, the river overruns its banks and the talisman is lost forever, rendering him permanently impotent (p. 94, lines 51-8).

According to another early verse romance, *Homāy-nāma*, a witch who falls in love with the hero of the story, Homāy, appears as a beautiful maiden, and offers herself to the hero. However, when he refuses her, she disappears only to come back fully armed astride a horse. She attempts to defeat the hero by putting a spell on him that weakens him, but is unsuccessful because the hero counters her magic by reciting the name of God. The witch disappears again and reappears in the form of a lion, which is also put to flight by the counter-magical effect of the name of God. She materializes a third time in the guise of a dragon, which escapes when Homāy draws his sword, and responds by conjuring up a severe hail storm. Finally, the witch and the hero wrestle and the witch is killed when Homāy cuts her limbs, and this calms the storm. In death, she reverts to her true form of an old woman with a lion's head (*Homāy-nāma*, lines 1437-1535). Another witch in the *Homāy-nāma* tells the



hero that she is 360 years old and has many beautiful maidens in her castle. It is feasible to read homosexual undertones in this episode, although there is no overt mention of her relationship with the maidens whom she has captured (*Homāy-nāma*, lines 1550-68). In her case, she is converted at the point of death, and is buried after she is slain (lines 1570-92). The powers of this witch include the ability to turn night into day, soften stones, and conjure up lethal hail stones that freeze those on whom they fall (lines 1633-45).

The poet Neẓāmi of Ganja (1140-1207) also alludes to several varieties of magic in his narrative poems. For instance, magicians—be they human or not—are able to transform objects (*Haft Paykar*, p. 373, lines 51-53), themselves (pp. 469-72), or their environment (pp. 473-75). Magic may be taught by jinn and demons (p. 32, line 53) or by the magi. Interestingly enough, this notion reflects the European idea of associating magic with the magi. According to Neẓāmi's version of the adventures of Alexander, a Zoroastrian maiden by the name of Āzar Homāyun, who is attached to a fire temple in Isfahan, tries to stop Alexander from putting out the sacred flame. She appears to the Greeks in the form of a fire-emitting black dragon, and attempts to drive them away from the temple. However, Alexander's sage, Bālinās, annuls the girl's witchcraft by casting some *sodāb* (rue) on her, which cancels her magic, and turns back to her shapely form. Alexander gives her to Bālinās, who takes her home and learns magic from her (*Šarf-nāma*, pp. 256-58). Rue as the herb of counter-magical properties is referred to again in Neẓāmi's work, where the poet states that a terracotta container filled with rue can protect the house against magic (*Šarf-nāma*, p. 105, line, 29). Finally, like many other poets, Neẓāmi also refers to his own words as licit magic (*seḥr-e ḥalāl*) on account of their beauty and eloquence (*Leyli o Majnun*, p.72, lines 5-6).

Magic in the Narrative Oral Tradition. The description of magic and magicians in the repertoire of storytellers of the classical period must have been rather elaborate. Fortunately, some of this old lore has survived in one of the oldest prose romances in Persian, namely, in the *Samak-e 'Ayyār* which will be discussed in some detail below, although it must be borne in mind that other popular prose romances, such as the *Dārāb-nāma* or *Firuzšāh-nāma*, have their share of magic and long and grotesque descriptions of sorceresses (Biḡami, II, p. 48; tr. p. 135).

According to *Samak-e 'Ayyār*, since magic is a sin, those who practice it grow hideous of appearance, and foul of scent. Therefore, sorcerers are not only ugly but also malodorous (*Samak-e 'Ayyār* I, p. 25; II, p. 278; IV, pp. 190-4; V, p.



584). Even fairies, which are generally very beautiful in Persian folklore, grow repulsive as a result of dabbling in the black arts (*Samak-e 'Ayyār* V, p. 31). Evidently this rule was so well known that when Samak meets a beautiful sorceress, he is amazed that she has not lost her looks (II, pp. 329-30). Sorcerers live in a variety of places. The most interesting of these is an island called the Isle of Fire (Kānlari, p. 55; *Samak-e 'Ayyār* II, p. 249, 281). Some live in faraway valleys (V, p. 586) and others in Kashmir, Rum, and Babylon, where master sorcerers abound (II, p. 339; V, p. 459). Their powers are enormous. They can transform themselves into many shapes (I, p. 7, pp.14-15; V, pp. 20-4), and travel great distances quickly (Kānlari, p. 54). Some are so powerful that they exact tribute from kings (*Samak-e 'Ayyār* II, p. 49), or demand gifts from them for their services (II, p. 50). Often they exert total control over their employers. For instance, the nursemaid to the daughter of the king of China does virtually as she pleases; and the king confesses to his helplessness in her hands (I, p. 24). Almost all sorcerers are afraid of God's "great name" that is often used as a counter-charm against their sorcery (Kānlari, p. 54; *Samak-e 'Ayyār* IV, p. 102; V, pp. 66-7, 501). However, keeping this powerful counter-charm is not easy. Those who know it may forget it if they behave impiously or if they eat improperly slaughtered animals (V, p. 69). There are a number of other mysterious names and words that sorcerers may use in casting their spells. One character extracts these names from the daughter of a skillful magician by means of torture (V, pp. 532-34).

The most common form of bewitching someone is to blow an incantation upon him directly (*Samak-e 'Ayyār* III, p. 8, 19; V, pp. 518-19). Less commonly, magicians may blow their spells on a fistful of dirt (II, p. 335) or salt (II, p. 336), which could then be cast upon the object. Magic may be taught to anyone who is willing to learn it (III, pp. 56-7; V, p. 459, 469), and those who teach it may be of varying skills. In one instance, when Samak is taught two charms, one for dispelling snakes and another for calling them forth, he has to jot down the incantations lest he forgets them (III, pp. 56-7). Occasionally, the apprentice may prove more skillful than the teacher, and may overcome her (II, p. 326, 333-35; III, pp. 12-13; V, p. 493). The magical power of a sorcerer or the key to an enchantment may be kept in an external object. The destruction of that object would rob the witch of her powers, and break the spell (V, pp. 15-17, 29, 141-21). Some magicians perform their spells by the aid of a little banner (*'alam*), which may be black (V, p. 513) or red (V, p. 499). Shooting at the banner with arrows would destroy its magic. Alternatively, they may use a twig as the means of practicing their craft (V, p. 576). These instruments are



reminiscent of the magic wand or rod in the European folk tradition. Apparently, most magicians employed some tool that helped them cast their spells. This must have been taken for granted for when a magician comes to practice his trade without any tools (*hič sāz-e jādovi bā vey nabud*) the fact of his not using anything is remarked upon (V, p. 498).

Magicians know that if they use a talisman in bewitching someone their magic may be reversed when the talisman is destroyed. Therefore, witches who want to make their spells permanent would cast their talismans in the sea or hide it in a remote or inaccessible spot (*Samak-e 'Ayyār* V, p. 572). Some charms have special names. For instance, the magic that renders Samak paralyzed is called the *band-e bāboli*, “Babylonian talisman” (V, p. 521).

Sorcerers ride into battle on bizarre mounts with bodies made up from various parts of a number of animals (e.g., bulls, horses, elephants, etc.). Often the feet of these mounts resemble heads of dogs, and both the mounts and the witches can emit fire from their various weapons and body parts (e.g. *Samak-e 'Ayyār* II, pp. 321-35; III, p. 317; V, pp. 490-99, 513). These fires however, may be snuffed out by conventional methods, such as pouring dirt on them (IV, pp. 189-90; V, p. 607), or by the less conventional influence of a hero's glory or “*farr*” (V, p. 490, 500). Aside from their fiery weapons, witches of the popular oral tradition may attack by means of producing storms and clouds that rain very large hailstones on their victims. Usually, killing the sorcerer responsible for the storm puts an end to it (II, p. 321, 324-5; V, pp. 498-9). When the magician may not be accessible to those who seek to kill him, powerful counter-charms, often received from a saintly donor figure, can either cancel his magic, or turn it against him. The magic of a good witch may also be useful in eliminating that of a bad sorcerer (II, pp. 334-5; IV, pp. 193-5).

Magicians who are captured may be bound by rope only if the binder knows the special knots and manner of fastening them (*Samak-e 'Ayyār* II, p. 354; V, p. 532). Captured sorcerers could be subjected to various harsh methods of interrogation (I, p. 31, 35, 37; III, p. 23), and heroes can unceremoniously kill them either in a fight (I, pp. 39; II, pp. 325-6, 344; IV, p. 195; V, p. 499), while they sleep (II, p. 319), or by destroying the object or animal that holds their external soul (V, p. 130). Occasionally witches would repent and give up magic through the intercession of a saint, who would blow his own incantation upon them, thus making them forget all of their black arts (III p. 8, 17, 19). Purportedly, reformed witches would no longer practice their craft even to help their friends and family (III, p. 9, 12, 27).



Magic in Persian Folk Practice. Three types of magic may be distinguished in Persian folk practice. These are: curative, preventative, and supplicatory. Curative and preventative forms of magic are intimately connected with “magical medicine.” They heal either by driving away the cause of illness (curative) or by fortifying a person against it (preventative; Yoder, pp. 192, 203; Cf. Krappe, p. 190; Puckett, p. 207; See [EVIL EYE](#)).

To cure a variety of respiratory infection called *bād-e nazla* (probably a kind of common cold), seven knots are tied in two strings of different colors, which have been used to measure the patient’s height, certain prayers are blown on them, and they are hung around his neck (Šakurzāda, p. 334). Infants who appear to be too fat or limp are thought to lack some of their vertebrae. Those who notice this malady in the infant should quickly find a donkey and whisper the infant’s vertebral deficiency in its ear in order to prevent the infant’s death (Šakurzāda, p. 336; for cures of whooping cough in Khorasan see Šakurzāda, p. 270). When a patient who suffers from having been stung by a scorpion is treated by iron or the recitation of certain magical charm (Faḳiḥi, p. 759) we are dealing with curative magic. In Khorasan a pregnant woman who needs to scratch her abdomen does not use her fingers to relieve the itching. She would instead rub her belly by the seat of her husband’s pants. If she uses her fingers, she would get stretch-marks (Šakurzāda, p. 129). Placing a bleached decorated skull of a donkey into a well in order to prevent draught is another example of this type of magic (Donaldson, p. 54), as is the refusal of a pregnant woman to look at a corpse for fear of giving birth to a child cursed with the ability to harm others by the evil eye (Donaldson, p. 128).

Supplicatory magic functions to either persuade the supernatural powers to help bring about a desired end or seeks to influence others’ emotions by causing love or repulsion in them (cf. Hand, 1965, pp. 83-105). It was customary in Tehran to include in the wedding party that was going from the bride’s home to the groom’s residence, a pre-pubescent girl armed with a piece of black rope, a nail, and a piece of leather. When the hosts were distracted, the girl would find a secluded place where she would nail the leather to the wall, wrap the black rope around the nail, and would tie a knot in the name of each of the women of the groom’s family in the rope, while chanting the following spell:

bastam bastam zabān-e bad-gu

bastam bastam zabān-e Ḥavvā



bastam bastam zabān-e Sārā

“I tie; I tie the tongues of evil-speakers

I tie; I tie the tongue of Eve

I tie; I tie the tongue of Sarah”

She would then mention the names of the bride’s future mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, remove the leather, the nail, and the black rope, and return to the bride-to-be’s house. Later these items were buried in an old cemetery. This would magically prevent the bride’s in-laws from harming her by their words. This form of supplicatory magic was called *zabān-bandān*, “the binding of tongues” (Katirā’i, p. 190). Women whose husbands had more than one wife attempted to create discord between their man and his other wives by smearing his body or clothes with the fat of wolves or pigs in order to make him as repulsive to his other wives as wolves and pigs (Katirā’i, p. 237; Donaldson, pp. 53, 161). Some would smear the bodies of their co-wives (*havu*) with lizard-oil in order to make her undesirable to their shared husband. In order to prevent the lizard-oil from acting upon themselves, these women would urinate on the hand with which they had touched the oil (Katirā’i, p. 238).

Magical formulae that protect against noxious insects (e.g. Šakurzāda, pp. 299-300, and see notes 2 and 3 on page 299; Hedāyat, p. 148; Faqihī, p. 759) have also been mentioned by medieval scientists including Abu Rayḥān-e Biruni (quoted by Homā’i, p. 98). As pointed out above while referring to magic in romances and epics, many of these formulae are connected with a magically potent name of God, which is called *esm-e a’zam*, “God’s greatest name.” The manner of obtaining this name is interesting. Since all 40,000 names of God are said to have been mentioned in the Qor’ān, those who desire to obtain this name, should burn the holy writ. The *esm-e a’zam*, by virtue of its great magical potency will not burn in fire, and one can salvage it from the ashes for use in magic or counter-magic (Massé, p. 296).



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