



Research Paper

Archetypal Discourse in Comparative Epic: A Study of Rostam and Hercules through Campbell and Frye

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the mythological heroes Rostam from the Persian Shahnameh and Hercules from Greco-Roman tradition, employing the archetypal theories of Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye within the framework of René Wellek's comparative literature. The study argues that despite their distinct cultural origins, both figures exhibit a recurrent heroic pattern, revealing foundational cross-cultural mythic structures. Applying Campbell's "monomyth," the investigation traces the parallel narrative trajectories of their lives, from miraculous births and early trials to the completion of heroic labors and eventual deaths—Rostam's tragic demise in familial conflict and Hercules' apotheosis through suffering. Frye's theory of mythoi situates their epics within the mode of romance, characterized by transcendent quests and cyclical struggles against chaos. Framed by Wellek's emphasis on intrinsic literary connections beyond historical influence, the comparison not only reveals profound similarities in their function as culture heroes but also highlights critical divergences: Hercules' narrative centers on personal atonement and tragic flaw, whereas Rostam's saga is deeply interwoven with national identity and filial duty. Ultimately, this study concludes that Rostam and Hercules serve as powerful exemplars of the archetypal hero, whose shared narrative essence affirms the unifying power of myth across human cultures.

1. Introduction

The comparative analysis of epic traditions offers invaluable insights into how civilizations conceptualize heroism, honor, and human destiny. Two towering figures dominate their respective cultural imaginations: Rostam, the paramount champion of Ferdowsi's Persian *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings), and Hercules (Herakles), the legendary hero of Greco-Roman mythology. Despite their shared status as culture heroes embodying martial prowess and tragic vulnerability, systematic, textually-grounded comparisons of these figures remain conspicuously absent from scholarly discourse. Existing scholarship has extensively examined both heroes in isolation—Hercules through psychological, political, and reception studies (Kerényi, 1959; Galinsky, 1972; Blondell, 2002; Blanshard & Shahabudin, 2011), and Rostam through national epic analysis (Davis, 2006; Omidasalar, 2011; Davidson, 2013)—yet the integration of Persian and Greek heroic traditions into a unified comparative framework constitutes a significant gap in comparative mythology. The core problem this study addresses is the lack of a systematic analytical approach that juxtaposes the narratives of Rostam and Hercules to uncover the profound universal patterns of the hero archetype they share while simultaneously accounting for the distinct cultural particularities that define their unique characters and legacies. This research moves beyond a mere thematic listing of similarities and differences to investigate the very structure and essence of their heroism through an interdisciplinary theoretical lens.

This investigation addresses three research questions: 1. To what extent do the narrative trajectories of Rostam and Hercules conform to Campbell's monomythic structure, and what foundational cross-cultural patterns does this conformity reveal about the archetypal hero? 2. How do the divergent resolutions of Rostam's and Hercules' narratives—Rostam's tragic death in familial conflict versus Hercules' apotheosis through suffering—reflect culturally specific conceptions of heroism, duty, and national identity in Persian and Greco-Roman traditions? 3. How can Wellek's framework of comparative literature be integrated with Campbell's monomyth and Frye's mythoi to produce a balanced analysis that attends to both universal patterns and cultural specificity?

2. Materials & Methods

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in archetypal criticism and comparative literary analysis. The primary method is close reading of primary texts—Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (translated by Davis, 2006) and Greco-Roman mythological sources—analyzed through the complementary lenses of Campbell's (1949/2008) monomyth and Frye's (1957) archetypal modes. The analysis proceeds through four thematic categories: (1) origins and divine favor, (2) heroic labors and symbolism, (3) monster-slaying and supernatural encounters, and (4) tragic human flaws and cultural roles. The Wellekian framework ensures that the comparison does not force false equivalence but illuminates cultural specificity through juxtaposition, attending to what Wellek (1958) termed the "perspectivism" that respects the integrity of individual national literatures.

3. Discussion & results

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework. First, Joseph Campbell's (1949/2008) monomyth theory provides a narrative roadmap for the hero's adventure, delineating the universal pattern of Departure (Separation), Initiation, and Return that underlies heroic myths across cultures. Campbell (1949/2008) posits that "the hero's adventure is always and everywhere the same: a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (p. 37). This structure is not confined to any single culture but resonates across mythological traditions. Second, Northrop Frye's (1957) archetypal criticism provides a structural schema for locating literary works within a universal mythic framework. Frye's myths of romance—characterized by adventure, quests, and the struggle between good and evil where the hero is superior in degree to other people—serves as the primary mode for analyzing both epics. Frye (1957) emphasizes that "the romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream" (p. 186), and the hero's fight with monsters represents "the triumph of life over the waste" (p. 187). Frye's concept of the "tragic paradox" also illuminates how grandeur and catastrophe are inextricably linked in the heroes' narratives. Third, René Wellek's comparative literature theory provides the necessary corrective against Eurocentric assumptions. Wellek (1958) vigorously critiqued the traditional "Franco-Italian" school of comparative literature, which focused predominantly on tracing debts, influences, and reputations across national borders. He argued for a reorientation of the discipline toward studying literature as a unified, global phenomenon, where the primary concern is "intrinsic" literary qualities and the "perspectives" gained from juxtaposition. Wellek's insistence on "intrinsic" analysis—studying literature as a whole rather than through historical contacts—legitimizes the comparison of Persian and Greek traditions as a genuine cultural dialogue rather than a hierarchical evaluation. As Wellek and Warren (1949) articulated, comparative literature should treat literature as an interconnected system where individual works illuminate universal human concerns through their distinct cultural expressions.

4. conclusion

This study demonstrates that Rostam and Hercules serve as powerful exemplars of the archetypal hero, whose shared narrative essence affirms the unifying power of myth across human cultures while their divergent destinies—one achieving godhood through suffering, the other dying a mortal death in service to his nation—reveal profound cultural differences in conceptions of heroism, duty, and human destiny. The integration of Campbell's (1949/2008) monomyth, Frye's (1957) archetypal criticism, and Wellek's (1958) comparative literature theory provides a balanced analytical framework that neither universalizes nor isolates these epic heroes. The study contributes to comparative mythology by integrating Persian epic tradition into broader discourse, challenging Eurocentric orientations that have historically privileged Greek models (Omidshafar, 2011). Future research could extend this comparative approach to other heroic figures, such as Achilles (Greek) and Sohrab (Persian) (Zulfi & Vahaddost, 2013), or examine the afterlife of these archetypes in contemporary literature and film (Blanshard & Shahabudin, 2011). This study affirms that the hero's journey, in Campbell's formulation, remains a "constant"

across human cultures, yet its specific articulation—whether toward individual transcendence or collective sacrifice—illuminates the distinctive values that define civilizations.

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مقاله پژوهشی

گفتمان کهن الگویی در حماسه تطبیقی: مطالعه رستم و هرکول از دیدگاه کمپیل و فرای زادمهر ترابی (نویسنده مسؤول)

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چکیده

این مقاله با بهره‌گیری از نظریه‌های کهن‌الگویی جوزف کمپیل و نورثروپ فرای در چارچوب ادبیات تطبیقی رنه وِلک، تحلیلی تطبیقی از قهرمانان اسطوره‌ای رستم از شاهنامه فارسی و هرکول از سنت یونانی-رومی ارائه می‌دهد. این مطالعه، استدلال می‌کند که علی‌رغم ریشه‌های فرهنگی متمایزشان، هر دو شخصیت، یک کهن‌الگوی قهرمانی جهانی را تجسم می‌بخشند و الگوهای اسطوره‌ای بنیادی و بین فرهنگی را آشکار می‌کنند. این تحقیق با بهره‌گیری از «تک‌اسطوره» کمپیل، ساختارهای روایی موازی زندگی آنها را، از تولدهای معجزه‌آسا و آزمایش‌های اولیه تا تکمیل زحمات قهرمانانه و عروج نهایی، ردیابی می‌کند. نظریه اسطوره‌ای فرای، حماسه‌های آنها را در قالب رمانس طبقه‌بندی می‌کند که با کاوش‌های متعالی و مبارزات چرخه‌ای علیه هرج و مرج مشخص می‌شود. این مقایسه که با تأکید وِلک بر پیوندهای ادبی ذاتی فراتر از تأثیر تاریخی شکل گرفته است، نه تنها شباهت‌های عمیقی را در عملکرد آنها به عنوان قهرمانان فرهنگی آشکار می‌کند، بلکه تفاوت‌های اساسی را نیز برجسته می‌سازد: روایت هرکول بر کفاره شخصی و نقص تراژیک متمرکز است، در حالی که حماسه رستم عمیقاً با هویت ملی و وظیفه فرزندی در هم تنیده شده است. در نهایت، این مطالعه نتیجه می‌گیرد که رستم و هرکول، نمونه‌های قدرتمندی از قهرمان کهن‌الگویی هستند که جوهره روایی مشترک آنها، قدرت وحدت‌بخش اسطوره را در فرهنگ‌های بشری تأیید می‌کند.

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رستم، هرکول، تک‌اسطوره کمپیل، کهن‌الگویی‌های فرای از رمانس، تراژدی و کنایه.

1. Introduction

The comparative analysis of epic traditions offers invaluable insights into the cultural psyche of civilizations, revealing how societies conceptualize ideals of heroism, honor, and human destiny. This study undertakes a rigorous examination of two seminal warrior-heroes: Rostam, the paramount champion of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings), and Hercules, a central figure of Greek mythology. As foundational texts of Persian and Greek literature respectively, these epics not only shaped their respective cultural imaginations but continue to influence contemporary understandings of heroic virtue. The *Shahnameh*, composed in the 10th century CE but drawing on much older oral traditions, serves as Iran's national epic, chronicling mythical and historical kingship while articulating Persian ideals of justice and sovereignty. Zulfi and Vahaddost (2013) believe that Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* ... is considered among the most beautiful and greatest epic work of the world's nations (1).

At the heart of both narratives stand Hercules and Rostam, warriors whose extraordinary capabilities and tragic flaws encapsulate their cultures' highest values and deepest anxieties. Both heroes embody the warrior-hero archetype - figures of unmatched martial prowess whose personal struggles mirror larger cosmic and societal tensions. "The great hero of *The Shahnama*," writes Yarshater (1998), "is Rostam, and his career is no exception to this rule. Descended from a long line of Seistani rulers tracing their lineage back to the mythical hero Keresaspa, Rostam, like many heroes in world literature, was born by cesarian section and showed astounding prowess practically from his first day (99). Rostam represents the Persian ideal of *javānmardi* which is the Persian code of chivalric virtue, combining martial prowess, moral integrity, loyalty, generosity, and commitment to justice and the protection of the vulnerable, combining physical strength with moral fortitude (162). Hercules, the semi-divine son of Alcmene, exemplifies the Greek concept of *aristeia* (battle excellence), where personal glory and honor supersede all other considerations. Their shared attributes – including their trials and labours, near-invincibility in combat, complex relationships with divine forces, and ultimately tragic

destinies - invite comparative analysis, while their cultural particularities reveal profound differences in worldview.

The core problem this study addresses is the lack of a unified analytical approach that juxtaposes the narratives of Rostam and Hercules to uncover the profound universal patterns of the hero archetype they share, while also accounting for the distinct cultural particularities that define their unique characters and legacies. This research is not merely a thematic listing of similarities and differences; rather, it seeks to investigate the very structure and essence of their heroism through an interdisciplinary theoretical lens.

To solve this problem, this study will employ a tripartite theoretical framework. First, it will utilize the archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye, which provides a schema for locating literary works within a universal mythic structure. Second, it will integrate the monomyth concept of Joseph Campbell, which outlines the common stages of the hero's journey—departure, initiation, and return. Applying these frameworks to the lives of Rostam and Hercules will allow for a systematic deconstruction of their narratives to identify the core, trans-cultural elements of the hero archetype, such as the miraculous birth, the call to adventure, the series of trials, and the confrontation with mortality.

However, an analysis based solely on universal archetypes risks erasing critical cultural distinctions. Therefore, the third crucial component of the theoretical framework is the theory of comparative literature as articulated by René Wellek. Wellek's insistence on studying literature as a union of history, criticism, and theory, and his advocacy for a "perspectivism" that respects the integrity of individual national literatures, provides the necessary corrective. This study will leverage Wellek's principles to ensure that the comparison does not force a false equivalence but instead illuminates how the specific historical, religious, and social contexts of ancient Persia and Greece—their differing conceptions of kingship, duty, divinity, and the afterlife—shaped the unique manifestations of the hero in Rostam and Hercules. Despite the prevalence of monomythic and archetypal approaches in comparative mythology, systematic, textually-grounded comparisons of Rostam and Hercules that attend equally to shared patterns and cultural specificity remain conspicuously absent.

This study addresses this gap by integrating Campbell and Frye's archetypal frameworks with Wellek's comparative literary theory, thereby offering a balanced analysis that neither universalizes nor isolates these epic heroes.

1-2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs the complementary theoretical lenses of Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism and Joseph Campbell's monomyth to conduct a comparative analysis of the heroic figures Rostam from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and Heracles from Greek mythology. The core premise is that these narratives, despite originating in distinct cultural contexts-pre-Islamic Persia and Ancient Greece-exemplify universal archetypes and a shared narrative structure, suggesting underlying patterns in human storytelling.

The foundation of this analysis rests on Northrop Frye's proposition that literature constitutes a self-contained universe of interconnected symbols. Frye argues that within this system, archetypes-recurring images, character types, or narrative patterns-connect individual works to the broader corpus of world literature (Frye, 1957). For this study, the most relevant of Frye's concepts is the mythos of romance. This narrative structure is characterized by a world of adventure, quests, and the struggle between good and evil, where the hero is superior in degree to other people and to his environment. The central action is the quest, which involves battling monstrous forces to restore order. Both the labors of Heracles and the major exploits of Rostam fundamentally align with this romantic mode.

Complementing Frye's structural classification, Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth, or the Hero's Journey, provides a narrative roadmap for the hero's adventure. Campbell posits that a universal pattern underlies heroic myths across cultures, which he delineates into three core stages: Departure (Separation), Initiation, and Return. The stage of Departure involves the hero receiving a call to adventure, often aided by supernatural forces, and crossing a threshold into a realm of wonder. The Initiation stage consists of a series of trials and ordeals-the core of both Rostam's Haft Khan and the Twelve Labors of Heracles-where the hero confronts powerful entities and achieves a decisive

victory. Finally, the Return stage concerns the hero's journey back to bestow the won boon upon their society.

Crucially, this archetypal analysis is framed and justified by the principles of comparative literature as articulated by René Wellek. Wellek vigorously critiqued the traditional "Franco-Italian" school of comparative literature, which focused predominantly on "literary diplomatics"—the tracing of debts, influences, and reputations across national borders. In his seminal essay "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" (1958), Wellek argued for a reorientation of the discipline towards the study of literature as a unified, global phenomenon, where the primary concern is not "who borrowed what from whom?" but the intrinsic literary qualities and the "perspectives" gained from juxtaposition. He championed an approach that views "literature as a whole," analyzing works based on their artistic structures and meanings rather than their historical contacts.

Applying Wellek's theory, this study does not seek to prove that the Shahnameh was influenced by Greek myth or vice versa. Instead, it uses the archetypal frameworks of Frye and Campbell to perform what Wellek advocated: an "intrinsic" analysis of two literatures placed side-by-side to illuminate their shared participation in a universal "literary universe." The comparison of Rostam and Hercules is thus validated not by genetic connection, but by the "perspectives" it offers on how two great civilizations constructed their ideals of heroism within a recognizably similar archetypal pattern. This Wellekian approach liberates the comparison from Eurocentric constraints of influence and allows for a genuine dialogue between Persian and Greek epic traditions, revealing both universal human concerns and their unique cultural expressions.

By synthesizing Frye's archetypal modes with Campbell's narrative structure within this Wellekian comparative framework, this study establishes a robust basis for analysis. It provides the conceptual tools to explore how the stories of Rostam and Heracles, as archetypal heroes, navigate universal patterns while simultaneously highlighting the distinct "perspectives" of their respective cultures.

1-3. Research Questions

This investigation addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the narrative trajectories of Rostam and Hercules conform to Campbell's monomythic structure, and what foundational cross-cultural patterns does this conformity reveal about the archetypal hero?

2. How do the divergent resolutions of Rostam's and Hercules' narratives—Rostam's tragic death in familial conflict versus Hercules' apotheosis through suffering—reflect culturally specific conceptions of heroism, duty, and national identity in Persian and Greco-Roman traditions?

3. How can Wellek's framework of comparative literature, which emphasizes intrinsic literary connections, be integrated with Campbell's monomyth and Frye's mythoi to produce a balanced analysis that attends to both universal patterns and cultural specificity?

1-4. Review of literature.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined Hercules from multiple angles, collectively revealing a figure whose interpretations consistently oscillate between two poles: the celebration of his extraordinary power and the critique of his profound vulnerabilities. Critics have approached this tension through psychological, political, and cultural lenses, generating a rich but fragmented body of work.

Scholarship on Hercules has followed three interrelated trajectories. The first, encompassing psychomythological approaches, interprets the hero's labors as symbolic journeys toward psychological integration. Carl Kerényi (1959), applying a Jungian framework, reads the twelve labors as a path to individuation, wherein each creature Hercules defeats represents "the overcoming of the animal nature in man" (p. 74), a symbolic confrontation with unconscious primal instincts. This psychological reading resonates with William Allan's (2001) literary analysis, which, though coming from a different methodological tradition, similarly emphasizes Hercules as a figure of profound internal struggle; Allan argues that Euripides' *Heracles* presents a "radical deconstruction of heroism" in which the hero's *aretê* proves "incapable of protecting him from

the irrational violence that Hera sends" (p. 121), rendering his legendary strength meaningless against divine malice.

The second trajectory, comprising socio-political and gender-based analyses, examines how the Hercules myth has been mobilized to reinforce or subvert cultural norms. Ruby Blondell (2002) analyzes the Omphale episode as a "ritual inversion of gender roles" (p. 34), arguing that Hercules' temporary servitude and cross-dressing paradoxically reinforces hyper-masculine identity by exploring its antithesis. Carl Galinsky (1972) traces a similar dynamic of ideological appropriation in the Roman context, demonstrating how emperors such as Commodus co-opted the hero's image for "political self-representation and legitimation" (p. 88), positioning themselves as the "divine protector of the cosmos and the state."

Finally, the third trajectory, encompassing reception studies, investigates how the myth transforms across historical and cultural contexts. Alastair Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin (2011) critique Disney's *Hercules* as a sanitized adaptation that replaces the hero's "dark, violent and passionate origins" with a "narrative of adolescent identity crisis" (p. 124), reflecting contemporary commercial and familial values.

Taken together, these studies establish Hercules as a remarkably versatile cultural symbol, but they also leave a significant gap: the Persian heroic tradition of Rostam, with its comparable complexity and cultural centrality, has yet to be integrated into this critical conversation.

From Hercules' scholarship, we now proceed to Rostam's scholarship. Davis, D. (2006) in *Epic and Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh* focuses on Rostam as a national symbol and his role in Persian kingship narratives and discusses his semi-divine lineage (descendant of Zal and the Simurgh) and tragic flaws (e.g., killing his son Sohrab). Davis does not engage with Greek heroic parallels. Mahmoud Omidshar (2011) in *Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic: The Shahnameh* analyzes Rostam's archetypal heroism in Indo-Iranian myth and compares him briefly to Indian heroes (e.g., Arjuna) but not to Greek counterparts. Omidshar's study lacks cross-cultural mythological analysis. Olga Davidson, (2013) in *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetics* examines Rostam's oral-epic roots and narrative structure and suggests heroic

typologies (e.g., the "tragic warrior") but avoids Homeric comparisons. There is no systematic comparison between Rostam with Hercules. Jalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, D. (1997) in *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam* detailed study of Rostam's father-son conflict as a heroic dilemma and contrasts with Greek tragedy (e.g., Oedipus) but not Hercules' relationships. Shayegan, M. R. (2012) in *Rostam: The Evolution of an Epic Hero* traces Rostam's historical and mythical layers and briefly notes Indo-European warrior codes but does not link him to Hercules of the Greek mythology.

However, systematic comparisons between these heroes remain surprisingly scarce, with most comparative work focusing on Greek and Indian traditions rather than Persian. This study seeks to fill that gap while challenging Eurocentric approaches to comparative mythology. The present study addresses this gap by conducting a systematic, textually-grounded comparison of Rostam and Hercules using Campbell's monomyth and Frye's archetypal framework, thereby integrating Persian epic tradition into the broader discourse of comparative mythology and challenging its prevailing Eurocentric orientation.

2. Discussion

2-1. Origins and Divine Favor

Campbell's seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), identifies a recurrent monomythic pattern observable across numerous heroic traditions, arguing that "the hero is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations... and has found the life within" (16). This study adopts Campbell's framework not as a universal template but as a heuristic tool for tracing cross-cultural narrative parallels. This journey of transcendence, of moving from the particular to the universal, is not merely an adult endeavor but is often prefigured and prophesied from the very moment of the hero's birth. The infancy stories of the Greek demigod Hercules and the Persian champion Rostam from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* serve as powerful foundational texts that establish this theme of destined transcendence from the outset. While both heroes are marked by the supernatural, the nature of their miraculous births—one defined by divine antagonism and the other by benevolent guidance—creates a

fundamental divergence in their heroic identities, a contrast illuminated by Northrop Frye.

In the Greek tradition, Hercules (Herakles) is the quintessential example of what Campbell calls the “miraculous birth” and the “call to adventure”(1957, 23). Campbell notes that this first stage often begins when “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder” (28). Hercules’s very conception plunges him into this supernatural realm. He is the son of Zeus, the king of the gods, and the mortal woman Alcmena. This divine patrimony immediately sets him apart, marking him as “superior in degree to other men,” a key characteristic of the hero in Frye’s mythos of romance (1957, 34). However, his birth is not a simple blessing; it is fraught with cosmic conflict. His existence is a provocation to Hera, Zeus’s wife, whose wrath transform from marital jealousy into an enduring, supernatural persecution. This dynamic perfectly illustrates Campbell’s idea that the hero’s destiny is often forged in the crucible of divine caprice.

The most iconic dramatization of this fraught relationship is the tale of Hercules in his cradle. In an attempt to eliminate the infant symbol of her husband’s infidelity, Hera sends two giant, venomous serpents to kill him and his mortal twin brother, Iphicles. The reaction of the children is telling: Iphicles cries in terror, representing the world of common humanity, while Hercules, “the hero,” with preternatural strength and courage, grasps a serpent in each hand and strangles them. This episode is what Campbell terms the “first threshold” of the hero’s journey—a preliminary trial that announces his exceptional nature and his destiny (121). It is a violent, defensive act that establishes his primary mode of being: battling monstrous threats. This world, where a goddess torments a child out of spite, is one where, as Frye would argue, the hero is superior to other men but not to his environment (11). The gods are unpredictable and often malicious, shading the romance with what Frye identifies as an ironic tone, where the protagonist is at the mercy of forces greater and more arbitrary than themselves. Hercules’s journey is thus framed from birth as a contentious struggle for legitimacy against a hostile divine order.

In stark contrast, the birth narrative of Rostam, the legendary hero of the Persian epic *Shahnameh*, operates within a different cosmological framework. Rostam is a human being, not semi-divine like Hercules. However, Rostam is born into a lineage deeply intertwined with benevolent supernatural forces. His father, Zāl, was born an albino and abandoned by his own father on a mountainside, only to be rescued and raised by the mythical Simurgh, a colossal, wise, and compassionate magical bird. This established a legacy of supernatural aid that flows directly into Rostam's origin story. His mother, Rudabeh, faces a labor so protracted and deadly that it seems neither she nor the child will survive. At this critical juncture, the Simurgh reappears. Zāl, remembering his foster-parent's wisdom, summons it, and the great bird instructs him to perform a miraculous cesarean section, saving both mother and child.

This intervention is a direct manifestation of Campbell's principle that "supernatural aid is given... at the very threshold of adventure" (2008: 69). The aid is not earned through a trial of strength but is granted through wisdom, lineage, and a pre-existing covenant of care. The Simurgh does not represent a capricious or hostile power like Hera; instead, it functions as a beneficent mediator, a symbol of divine wisdom and order. This aligns with the core Zoroastrian principle of *āšā* (truth, order, righteousness) that underpins Persian epic tradition. The hero is not a contested figure but a protected one, his birth safeguarded to ensure the survival and prosperity of the community.

It is here that Frye's framework becomes essential for clarifying the profound contrast. Frye posits that the hero of romance is "a symbol of the community's survival and defense" (2008: 192). This definition fits both heroes, but the nature of that defense is colored by their origins. Hercules, the "contested child of heaven," (Walt Disney Pictures, 1997) must constantly prove his worth and fight for a place in a cosmos that actively resists him. His heroism is individualistic, often focused on atonement and personal glory. Rostam, however, is from his first breath the "safeguarded guardian of Iran." His birth is a national event. The supernatural aid he receives is not for his personal aggrandizement but to ensure

that Iran has its destined protector. His entire life is framed as a service to the Shah and the kingdom, a series of labors undertaken to preserve cosmic and social order against the forces of chaos. The world of the *Shahnameh* is still one of adventure and danger, but the supernatural environment is not inherently hostile; guidance and aid are available to the righteous and the noble.

Comparing the fully human Rostam of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* with the demigod Hercules of Greek mythology is an ontological mismatch. This very distinction illuminates the profound cultural and philosophical differences between their respective epic traditions. The assertion that their shared failures make them comparable is astute, but it is through the nature and consequence of these failures that their true significance is revealed. As Ehsan Yarshater notes, the world of the *Shahnameh* is one where "the human condition is accepted with all its limitations,"(32) and heroism is defined by navigating a world where divine favor is fickle and moral ambiguity is rife.

The essence of the Greek gods as "magnified humans," as Edith Hamilton (1947) posits, is crucial here(32). The Greek pantheon, with its Olympian dramas, jealousies, and passions, projects human psychology onto a cosmic scale. Consequently, a hero like Hercules, despite his divine paternity, is subject to very human tragedies, often amplified by his god-like strength. His failures are not merely physical setbacks but are deeply rooted in a flawed character—his infamous rage, impulsivity, and passions. His murder of his family in a fit of madness sent by Hera is a quintessential example; the failure is internal, a collapse of mind and spirit. As classicist G.S. Kirk argues, Greek heroes are often "tested by their own excesses," and their suffering is a form of education or punishment for these excesses. Hercules' labors are a penance, making his narrative one of atonement and, ultimately, apotheosis—a journey from flawed demigod to purified god.

In stark contrast, Rostam, the consummate champion of Iran, is unambiguously mortal. His power stems not from divine blood but from his *farr*, a kingly glory bestowed by the divine that can be lost through misdeeds or misfortune. Rostam's failures are therefore not typically failures of character but of circumstance,

fate, or tragic irony. His greatest failure—his unwitting killing of his son, Sohrab—is a masterpiece of dramatic tragedy, not a result of a personal flaw like rage, but a catastrophic convergence of secrecy, pride, and the brutal codes of honor that govern his world. As scholar Dick Davis observes, Rostam operates within a “tragic universe” where “the consequences of actions are often irrevocable and disproportionate to the intentions behind them.” Divine aid in the *Shahnameh*, often manifesting through miraculous creatures like the Simurgh, functions not to erase failure but to provide the tools for survival and continued service to the Iranian kingdom. It is pragmatic, not redemptive.

Therefore, comparing Hercules and Rostam through their failures is not just valid but essential. It highlights two distinct models of heroism. Hercules embodies a journey of personal catharsis; his failures are internal stains that must be cleansed through immense effort, reflecting a worldview where the individual’s moral and psychological state is paramount. Rostam, however, embodies a tragic, existential heroism. His failures underscore the fragility of human agency against the wheel of fate (*zamana*) and the heavy price of upholding a social order. He remains a pillar of his civilization, yet is ultimately broken by the very laws he swore to protect.

The dichotomy between Hercules’ divine nature and Rostam’s humanity is the very foundation of a meaningful comparison. Their shared experience of profound failure serves as a lens to examine the Greek preoccupation with the flawed self in a world of capricious gods, against the Persian epic’s concern with the individual’s tragic, yet dignified, role within the immutable cycles of history and destiny. One hero seeks purification from his failures to become a god; the other endures his failures as the price of being, irreducibly, a man.

2-2. Heroic Labors and Symbolism

Applying René Wellek's theory of comparative literature(1963) to the labours of Rostam and Hercules shifts the critical focus from a search for historical influence to an "intrinsic" analysis of their shared literary patterns and distinct cultural perspectives. Wellek argued for a comparative method that treats literature as a global, interconnected system, where juxtaposing different national traditions illuminates

universal human concerns and diverse artistic solutions. The parallel narrative structures of the *Haft Khan-e Rostam* (Seven Labours of Rostam) and the Twelve Labours of Hercules serve as an ideal case study for this approach, revealing a common archetypal core while highlighting profound cultural divergences in the conception of heroism, order, and the hero's relationship with the divine.

From a Wellekian perspective, the most striking feature of this comparison is the shared "intrinsic" narrative pattern, which aligns with Joseph Campbell's monomyth. Both heroes embark on a compulsory quest that takes them into a liminal, supernatural space. Both face a series of monstrous adversaries that symbolize chaos and disorder. Rostam battles a dragon, a sorceress, and the White Demon, while Hercules subdues the Nemean Lion, the Lernean Hydra, and the Erymanthian Boar. This structural parallelism suggests a recurring literary archetype: the hero's journey into the unknown to conquer threatening forces and restore equilibrium. Wellek would see this not as evidence of one culture borrowing from another, but as a testament to the "unity of literature" in its exploration of fundamental human struggles against the chaotic and the unknown.

However, Wellek's framework insists that such universal patterns are only meaningful when understood through their specific cultural and literary manifestations. Here, the labours of Rostam and Hercules diverge sharply, revealing their unique "perspectives." The purpose and context of their labours are fundamentally different. Hercules' labours are a punishment, a penance for his madness-induced filicide. They are imposed by a foreign king, Eurystheus, through the oracle of Apollo, reflecting a Greek worldview where heroism is often intertwined with suffering, divine punishment, and the struggle for individual purification and immortality.

In contrast, Rostam's labours are an act of duty and chivalry (*javanmardi*). He undertakes the *Haft Khan* voluntarily to rescue his sovereign, King Kavus, who has been captured due to his own folly. Rostam's journey is not a punishment but a demonstration of unwavering loyalty to the institution of kingship and the concept of Iran itself, reflecting the Zoroastrian-informed ethos of

the *Shahnameh*, where the hero is the active defender of cosmic order (*asha*) against falsehood and chaos (*druj*). This key difference illustrates Wellek's principle that similar forms can express radically different ideological contents.

Furthermore, the nature of the heroes' power differs significantly. Hercules relies overwhelmingly on his divine, physical strength, a raw force that he must learn to channel. Rostam, while immensely strong, is also a figure of wisdom and strategy. His success often depends on his legendary horse Rakhsh, his royal *farr* (divine glory), and his cunning, as seen when he tricks the demon Akvan. This contrast underscores a cultural divergence: the Greek celebration of innate, god-like power versus the Persian ideal of the *pahlavan*, a champion who combines martial prowess with wisdom, loyalty, and royal mandate. Olga M. Davidson's *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* (1994/2006) – provides a sustained scholarly analysis of the *pahlavan* figure, devoting specific chapters to "King and Hero, Shah and Pahlavan" and "Rostam, Guardian of Sovereignty". Her analysis demonstrates how the *pahlavan* ideal is intrinsically linked to the protection of kingship and national identity, supporting your claim about the Persian champion combining martial prowess with loyalty to the crown.

Through the Wellekian comparative model, the labours of Rostam and Hercules are revealed as two distinct variations on a universal archetypal theme. Their shared narrative structure points to a common grammar of heroic storytelling, a "literary universe" that transcends individual cultures. Yet, their profound differences in motivation, context, and the very nature of heroism illuminate the unique cultural "perspectives" of Greece and Persia. Wellek's theory allows us to appreciate not a hierarchy of heroes, but a dialogue between two great traditions, each using the familiar form of the heroic labour to articulate its own distinct vision of order, duty, and human excellence.

In the Hercules Mythos the Twelve Labors form a cohesive and ordered narrative cycle. Stylistically, they are presented as a direct consequence of a tragic flaw—a fit of madness inflicted by Hera that leads him to kill his family. Ruth Padel (1995) analyzes the theme of madness in Greek literature and connects it to Herakles.

She interprets his infamous fit of madness, in which he kills his family, as a central expression of the Greek understanding of the inner self—a destructive, uncontrollable force that can erupt from within even the greatest of heroes (114). The labors are a structure of penance and purification, imposed by King Eurystheus as a condition for atonement. Their number (twelve) and their defined, episodic nature create a sense of a completed, catalogued curriculum of heroism.

In *Shahnameh* Rostam's Seven Trials (Haft Khān) occur within a single, continuous narrative arc: his journey to rescue the captured King Kay Kavus in Mazandaran (Ferdowsy 221). Stylistically, the Haft Khān functions as a narrative of duty and loyalty (farr). Unlike Hercules's imposed penance, Rostam's trials are active obstacles on a path, testing his worthiness not for forgiveness but for the ultimate goal of saving the kingdom. The number seven holds profound symbolic significance in Persian culture, representing perfection and divine order within the cosmos. Sadullaeva (2024) in "The Sacred Numbers in Firdausi's *Shahnameh*: Symbolism, Meaning, and Mystical Significance" (2024) states that in Iranian culture, "seven reflects the sacred and celestial order" and that Firdausi's use of this number "imbues [the narrative] with layers of divine and cosmic significance".

Campbell notes that the "road of trials" is "a favorite phase of the myth-adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous tests and ordeals" (2008, 89). Both Hercules and Rostam undergo such cycles: Hercules with his Twelve Labors, Rostam with his Seven. Hercules' trials dramatize what Frye calls the mythos of romance, "the hero's victory over the powers of darkness and death" (1957, 187). From slaying the Nemean Lion to descending into Hades for Cerberus, Hercules is both redeemer and atoner. Campbell interprets such feats as symbolic transformations: "The hero... discovers and assimilates his opposite... and is released from the fear of death" (2008, 138). His labors thus represent atonement for crime and the transformation of chaos into order.

His defeat of the White Demon, whose blood heals the blinded Persian king, exemplifies Campbell's point that "the hero is the champion not of things become but of things becoming; the dragon

to be slain by him is precisely the monster of the status quo” (337). Each trial, from desert hunger to dragon-slaying, symbolically asserts order over chaos. Frye’s theory clarifies this epic logic: “The romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream” (*Anatomy*, 186). In Rostam, that dream is not personal glory but the safeguarding of Iran’s sovereignty.

2-3. Monster-Slaying and Supernatural Encounters

For Campbell, “the hero’s adventure is always and everywhere the same: a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (2008, 35). Campbell posits that the monomyth, or the hero’s journey, is a universal narrative pattern. He encapsulates this pattern as: “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return”(37). This tripartite structure is not confined to any single culture or epoch, but resonates across mythological traditions. Examining the legends of the Greek hero Hercules and the Persian champion Rostam reveals a striking conformity to this archetypal adventure, demonstrating how two distinct cultures articulated the same fundamental story of transformation through trial. Combat with monsters is the most dramatic enactment of Rostam and Hercules’s penetration into chaos. Hercules’ enemies—the Nemean Lion, the Hydra, Cerberus—are embodiments of what Campbell calls “the guardians of the threshold” (71), monstrous beings who must be overcome to prove heroic identity. Frye explains that monsters in romance “are analogies of death and chaos... the hero’s fight with them is the triumph of life over the waste” (1957, 187). Hercules’ victory transforms chaos into civic order: the lion’s skin becomes his armor, the stables are cleansed, the underworld is breached.

The first stage, Separation from the World, thrusts the hero from their familiar existence into the unknown realm of adventure. For Hercules, this separation is both brutal and involuntary. Driven mad by the goddess Hera, he murders his own wife and children. Upon regaining his sanity, he is shattered, an outcast from human society. His separation is not a choice for glory but a sentence of atonement; he is compelled to leave his old life behind to serve King Eurystheus and undertake the famous Twelve Labours. He is

physically, emotionally, and spiritually severed from the world he knew, cast into a destiny of unimaginable hardship.

Rostam's separation in the Persian epic *the Shahnameh* is equally definitive, though more deliberate. When his legendary horse, Rakhsh, is stolen, Rostam must venture into the hostile and demon-infested land of Mazandaran. This journey is a conscious choice to cross a threshold, leaving the ordered world of Persia for a chaotic, supernatural frontier. His separation is further emphasized during his quest to rescue King Kay Kavus, where he must traverse a treacherous desert alone. This act of leaving the known for the unknown, whether to reclaim his steed or save his sovereign, marks his decisive departure from the ordinary world, initiating his heroic trials.

The second stage, Penetration to some Source of Power, constitutes the core of the hero's ordeal, where they descend into the abyss to confront ultimate forces. Hercules's labours are a catalogue of such penetrations. He journeys to the ends of the earth, literally and figuratively. He descends to the Underworld to capture Cerberus, confronting the very lord of the dead, Hades. He travels to the Garden of the Hesperides to steal the golden apples, touching the source of divine immortality. Each labour forces him to penetrate a sacred or forbidden space—the Nemean Lion's lair, the Lernean Hydra's swamp, the Erymanthian Boar's mountain—and overcome a primal source of danger. In doing so, he taps into his own immense, semi-divine power, honing his strength and cunning to an unparalleled degree.

Rostam's penetrations are equally profound and symbolic. His most famous adventure, the Seven Labours, is a direct parallel to Hercules's trials, as he overcomes a series of supernatural obstacles in Mazandaran. His battle with the demon-king Div-e Sepid represents a penetration into the heart of darkness itself. By slaying the demon, he not only secures a military victory but also symbolically defeats chaos and evil.

The Life-Enhancing Return sees the hero bring the power, knowledge, or boon won in the adventure back to renew their society. Hercules's return is multifaceted. After completing his labours, he returns to the world of men, but he is now more than a man; he is a saviour and a civilizing force. He uses his power to

found cities, defeat tyrants, and rid the world of monsters that plagued human civilization. The ultimate enhancement of life is symbolized by his apotheosis; upon his mortal death, he is granted immortality and a place among the gods on Olympus. His return is thus absolute, elevating not only his own status but also permanently enriching the cosmic order for humanity.

Rostam's return is similarly life-enhancing, though firmly rooted in the earthly realm. After each quest, he returns to the Persian court, restoring order and securing the sovereignty of the Shah. His victories against the demons of Mazandaran and the Turanian warriors directly preserve the Iranian kingdom from destruction. He is the eternal pillar of Persia, and his returns consistently bring stability, justice, and the continuation of the royal line. Even the tragedy of Sohrab, while a personal catastrophe, serves as a profound, cautionary lesson on fate and recognition, enhancing the cultural and moral life of the epic's audience.

Rostam's adversaries—lion, dragon, White Demon—fulfill the same archetype, though with a Persian moral inflection. His reliance on Rakhsh to defeat the dragon embodies loyalty, a key Persian heroic virtue. The White Demon's blood curing Kay Kāvus literalizes Campbell's dictum that "the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (2008, 30). For Frye, this episode exemplifies the mythos of romance resolving into communal salvation rather than personal apotheosis.

2-4. Tragic Human Flaws

Hercules and Rostam stand as colossi in their respective cultural imaginations, embodying the pinnacle of heroic strength, courage, and virtue. Yet, their narratives are seared not merely by their triumphs but by profound, self-inflicted tragedies. They are saviors ultimately undone by the very attributes that define them. Applying the critical lenses of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to these heroes reveals a deep, universal structure to their tragedies. Their flaws are not simple mistakes but essential components of a mythic pattern where grandeur and catastrophe are inextricably linked, illustrating what Frye terms the "tragic paradox" and what Campbell frames as a necessary, if

harrowing, stage of the monomyth. Hercules' defining attribute is his god-like strength, which is also the source of his greatest suffering. As the G. Karl Galinsky (1972) notes in *The Herakles Theme*, Hercules' "madness and the murder of his family are the direct result of the heroic nature that qualifies him for the labors" (57). His excellence is so immense that it becomes a destructive, uncontrollable force when weaponized by his equally immense passions. The labors themselves, as Emma Stafford (2012) observes in *Herakles*, are a "process of channeling this raw, chaotic power into deeds that serve civilization, yet the underlying chaos always re-emerges" (124). His final agony, dying from the poisoned cloak, is a direct result of his own conquest and desire, fulfilling Frye's paradox that the hero is "caught in the consequences of his own acts" (Frye, 1957, 39).

Frye's schema provides the overarching framework for understanding the heroes' nature. He emphasizes that "tragedy is the imitation of a life which is neither purely heroic nor purely ironic, but both at once." Hercules and Rostam are the ultimate embodiments of this paradox. They operate in the high mimetic mode, possessing powers far exceeding those of ordinary humans, yet they remain subject to the laws of the gods and the machinations of fate. Their heroic stature is what makes their fall so catastrophic and meaningful; we look up to them before we are forced to look down upon their ruin. This duality is the engine of their tragedy. They are not purely ironic figures, mere playthings of the gods, because their actions have immense consequence and their suffering is earned. Conversely, they are not purely heroic because their greatness is fatally compromised by a *hamartia*, a critical error in judgment or a flaw in character.

The nature of their respective flaws, however, places them on different points of Frye's tragic spectrum. Hercules' tragedy is one of passion and madness. Driven into a frenzy by the goddess Hera, he commits the ultimate atrocity: the murder of his wife and children. This act immediately catapults him from the realm of the purely heroic into a state of profound guilt and alienation. Here, Joseph Campbell's theory illuminates the path forward from this catastrophe. Campbell would identify this moment not as an end, but as the brutal commencement of the stage of "Atonement with the Father." The

father-figure that Hercules must confront is not a literal god but the deepest source of his own guilt and the terrifying power he has misused. As Campbell states, “the problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated”(130).

Hercules’ subsequent Twelve Labors are thus transformed from a series of epic adventures into a protracted and agonizing act of penance. Each labor is a confrontation with a monstrous aspect of the world—and, symbolically, with the monstrous act he himself committed. Slaying the Nemean Lion or cleansing the Augean stables are acts of imposing order on chaos, mirroring his internal struggle to impose moral order on the chaos of his own soul. His strength, once the instrument of his greatest sin, becomes the instrument of his purification. This arduous journey through the underworld of his guilt ultimately validates his suffering and makes him “ripe” for understanding. His apotheosis—his ascent to Olympus—is the culmination of this Campbellian journey. He has faced the abyss within himself, atoned for his actions, and been reborn as an immortal. His flaw was a temporary madness, but his heroic journey was the process of overcoming its consequences through immense effort.

Rostam’s tragedy, by contrast, is not one of passionate madness but of tragic ignorance and hubris, aligning him more closely with Frye’s concept of the ironic hero. Frye notes that in irony, “The hero is inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity.” Rostam, for all his superhuman strength, is intellectually and situationally inferior to the reader. We know Sohrab is his son; he does not. This creates an unbearable dramatic irony where the audience watches, powerless, as the hero blindly moves toward his own ruin. His flaw is not a lack of love, but a catastrophic failure of knowledge and a pride that prevents its acquisition. He boasts of his own invincibility, unaware that fate (*qazā*) has engineered the one scenario that could truly destroy him: having his own greatness turned against his bloodline. Homa Katouzian (2003), in *Iranian History and Politics*, describes the ethos of *Shahnameh* as one where “the very virtues of the hero—his loyalty, his courage, his

insistence on his rightful place—contain the seeds of his and the kingdom's misfortunes" (42). This is devastatingly realized in the story of Rostam and Sohrab. As argued by Dick Davis (2006) in his introduction to *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, Rostam's failure to reveal his identity to Sohrab stems from a complex mix of "pride, caution, and a warrior's code that sees any potential advantage as legitimate" (xxiv). His heroic prowess, which allows him to defeat any foe, becomes the instrument that destroys his own lineage, demonstrating that his strength is, in Frye's terms, "misdirected" against his own future.

There is no atonement for Rostam in the Campbellian sense. His confrontation is not with a father-figure but with the horrifying truth of his own action. The moment of recognition—discovering the armband he once gave his son on Sohrab's dying body—is the moment his world collapses. It is an irony of the most devastating kind. His strength, the very core of his heroic identity, has been the instrument of his eternal damnation. Unlike Hercules, whose labors offer a path to redemption, Rostam's tragedy is final and absolute. He returns to his king, but he is a broken man, his greatness forever stained by an unfathomable personal loss. His story illustrates Frye's point that the hero's power is inseparable from his capacity for ruin. The same qualities that make him a national savior—his unwavering loyalty to his king and his prowess in battle—are what lead him to kill his own son, who fights for the opposing army.

2-5. Cultural and Civilizational Roles

Hercules and Rostam as constructs of myth, serve as primary vessels for their culture's deepest values and existential anxieties. While the monomythic pattern identified by Campbell suggests a universal structure to heroic narratives, the specific cultural inflection of these stories reveals profound differences in how societies envision the ideal individual and their relationship to the cosmos and community. Both Hercules and Rostam are paramount heroes, yet their destinies and the cultural roles they embody are radically opposed. Applying Campbell's concept of the hero as the agent of "becoming" and Frye's typology of literary modes illuminates how Hercules embodies a Greek ideal of individual transcendence through struggle, while Rostam represents a Persian

ethos of tragic loyalty to a collective destiny, ultimately sacrificed for its preservation.

Joseph Campbell's assertion that "the hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become" establishes the hero as a dynamic force for change, growth, and cosmic process. However, the destination of this becoming—what the hero ultimately champions—is where cultural specificity emerges. For Hercules, the path of becoming is one of individual *aretē* (excellence or virtue) achieved through immense, almost unimaginable, endurance. His narrative is not merely one of strength but of suffering transformed into merit. The twelve labors are a crucible; each task is a trial that forges his character, purging him of the guilt from his madness-induced filicide and elevating him step-by-step toward a higher state of being. His apotheosis—his ascent to Mount Olympus to join the pantheon as an immortal god—is the ultimate validation of this Greek vision. It confirms that through immense suffering (*pathos*) and relentless labor (*ponos*), an individual human, even one born of divine parentage, can transcend the mortal condition entirely.

Northrop Frye's framework complements this analysis perfectly. Frye would place Hercules firmly within the high mimetic mode, where the hero is superior in kind to other humans but subject to the laws of nature and the gods. Furthermore, Hercules' story arc exemplifies what Frye categorizes as the "myth of deliverance." Frye notes that such heroes embody this myth, which involves the "idealization of the individual elevated to divine status." Hercules' journey is a linear ascent from the depths of tragic flaw and madness to the pinnacle of divine honor. He is delivered from his mortal suffering and granted immortality, becoming a symbol of hope and potential for every Greek: the possibility that human excellence, however hard-won, can be so absolute that it shatters the ultimate barrier between man and god. His role is to model a path to individual salvation and glory, making him a patron of the aspiring human spirit.

Rostam's cultural role, as defined in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, presents a stark and tragic contrast. He, too, is a champion of "becoming," but the object of this becoming is not his own self-actualization but the survival and integrity of his civilization, Iran (223). His entire life is spent in service to the Keyanian dynasty, defending it from both

external threats (like the Turanian Afrāsīāb) and internal decay. Rostam's heroism is defined not by a quest for personal transcendence but by an unwavering, almost foundational, loyalty (*vafādāri*) to the concept of Iranian sovereignty and the cosmic principle of *āšā* (order, truth, righteousness) against the forces of *druj* (falsehood, chaos). He is the bulwark that holds back the night.

This aligns precisely with a different archetype in Frye's system. Rostam is the quintessential "defender of the community," a figure Frye associates with the romance mode. The romance hero's primary function is to protect the social order from existential threats. However, Frye also notes that romance readily shades into tragedy, and Rostam's story is the ultimate embodiment of this transition. Unlike Hercules, Rostam is not elevated but is ultimately betrayed and killed. His death does not come in a final glorious battle against a foreign foe, but through the treachery of his own half-brother, Shaghad. He is lured into a pit filled with poisoned spears, a fate profoundly ignoble for a hero of his stature. This ending is not a failure of his heroism but its final, tragic expression. His greatness and his unwavering loyalty to the Iranian throne make him a threat to the pettiness and jealousy that inevitably infect a court over centuries. He is destroyed not by a superior enemy, but by the very civilization he dedicated his life to defending.

Therefore, his function is collective rather than individual. He embodies the Persian ethos that the individual, no matter how powerful, is subservient to the destiny and preservation of the whole. His tragic death serves as a poignant, melancholic lesson on the fragility of order and the high cost of its defense. He becomes a symbol of the immense sacrifice required to maintain civilization, a sacrifice that is ultimately forgotten or betrayed by the very people it saves. There is no apotheosis for Rostam; his immortality is found not in joining the divine realm but in the eternal memory of his service and sacrifice within the Persian cultural narrative.

2-6. Hercules' Club and Rostam's Gorz (Mace)

The Club and Lion Skin are trophies from Hercules' early trials (the Nemean Lion was his first Labor). They become talismans or supernatural aids for the trials to come. They represent his successful confrontation with the monstrous and chaotic forces of

the world. His journey is about using overwhelming force to subdue and cleanse the world of threats for the benefit of humanity (his penance). The power is externalized and brutal.

Rostam's Seven Labors (Haft Khan) also perfectly fit the "Road of Trials." However, the nature of the trials and his approach are different. Rakhsh, the Horse: Rakhsh is far more than a vehicle; he is a supernatural aid and a ally. He actively saves Rostam on multiple occasions (e.g., fighting a lion himself). This highlights a key difference: Rostam's heroism is often complemented by his loyal companion. His power is not solely his own; it is relational. The Gorz (Mace): This is Rostam's named weapon, a symbol of his identity and lineage. It represents the application of force within a cultural and honorable framework. He doesn't just conquer; he does so as Rostam, the champion of Persia, wielding a weapon that carries the weight of his station and duty.

Based on Campbell both heroes undergo the monomyth. However, Hercules's symbols represent a hero who subdues the natural world through isolated, divine strength. His tools are extensions of his own body and power. Rostam's symbols represent a hero who navigates a moral and magical world with the aid of loyal companions and culturally significant artifacts. His tools represent his identity and his place in a social order.

3. Conclusion

This study has thus addressed its central research question: to what extent do the narrative patterns and cultural meanings of these two epic heroes converge and diverge? The answer, as demonstrated, lies in the dynamic interplay between universal archetypal structures and culturally specific ideologies of heroism, duty, and tragedy. Through the complementary theoretical lenses of Joseph Campbell's monomyth and Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, the figures of Hercules and Rostam emerge as homologous yet culturally distinct expressions of the universal heroic archetype. Both heroes are defined by a shared narrative structure that transcends their specific cultural origins. They share the miraculous birth, marked by divine or supernatural ancestry that sets them apart from ordinary humanity. Their lives are structured by the "road of trials," a series of seemingly impossible

challenges—Hercules’s Twelve Labors, Rostam’s Seven Quests (Haft Khān)—that test their strength, cunning, and virtue. Central to both narratives is the archetypal monster-slaying confrontation, whether it is the Nemean Lion or the White Demon, symbolizing the eternal struggle between order and chaos. Furthermore, both are tragically human, possessing a fatal flaw: Hercules’s uncontrollable rage and Rostam’s unwitting ignorance, which lead to their greatest personal tragedies.

Campbell’s insight that “the hero is the one who comes to know” illuminates the core of their transformative journeys. Their quests are not merely physical but deeply psychological and spiritual. Hercules, through his penance, comes to know the weight of his own power and the necessity of channeling it for atonement and order. Rostam, through his endless service, comes to know the immutable dictates of fate (qazā) and the heartbreaking cost of duty. Frye’s framework provides the structural blueprint for these journeys, reminding us that “the fundamental form of the quest-romance is the perilous journey and the crucial struggle, which is a descent into a lower world followed by a return.” This pattern is vividly enacted in Hercules’s descent to capture Cerberus from the Underworld and his subsequent return, and in Rostam’s perilous journeys into the demon-infested borderlands of Mazandaran, from which he must always return to save his king and country. This cycle of departure, initiation, and return forms the universal narrative grammar of their stories.

Yet their profound divergences are equally telling, revealing how a shared structure is inflected by distinct civilizational values. Hercules’s narrative dramatizes the classical Greek quest for individual transcendence through immense suffering (pathos). His labors are a path to purification and ultimate glory, culminating in his apotheosis—his ascension to Mount Olympus as a god. His story is one of successful divinization, a testament to the human potential to overcome mortality through supreme excellence (aretē). In stark contrast, Rostam embodies the Persian ethos of unwavering loyalty (vafādāri) to the shah and the defense of Iranian sovereignty (īrān-zamīn). His greatness is inseparable from his tragic mortality and subservience to a higher collective destiny.

There is no apotheosis for Rostam; instead, he is betrayed and killed, his mortality underscoring a worldview where the individual hero is a sacrificial pillar for the community, not a candidate for godhood.

Together, these twin pillars of heroism reveal what Frye calls “the grammar of literary archetypes”: a shared, deep structure of myth that nonetheless bears the unique accent of its cultural context. Hercules becomes a god; Rostam dies a mortal. One achieves individual transcendence, the other fulfills a collective duty. Despite these opposing destinies, both remain, in Campbell’s famous formulation, “the hero with a thousand faces.” They serve as eternal mirrors reflecting humanity’s most profound and perpetual struggle: the effort to reconcile our immense strength with our inherent vulnerability, to impose order upon the relentless forces of chaos, and to find meaning in the face of our own mortality, whether through the promise of transcendence or the dignity of sacrifice.

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