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**Son Slaying Heroes: A Comparative Study of Filicide in Celtic and  
Iranian Literatures**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts (M.A.) in English Language and Literature**

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## Abstract

The present research is a comparative study of two filicides in the Irish epic narrative *Aided Óenfhir Aife* from Irish manuscripts and the Persian epic piece *Rostam and Sohrab* from Abol-Qasem Ferdowsi's epic narrative *Shahname* in the light of George Dumézil's comparative study of Indo-European myths. Dumézil's theories on the triplicity in the cosmic and social functions in Indo-European religions and mythologies are addressed. There it is discussed that how the relations between the functions define each function's role in the pantheon or the society and how the warrior gods and epic heroes in Indo-European cultures are bound to commit sins. The study argues that in both filicide stories the courses of events and their significance follow the same pattern of warriors' triple sins proposed by Dumézil. Then the consistencies and inconsistencies of the two texts are discussed in the light of the Zoroastrian reforms in the proto-Indo-Iranian religion in Iran, the Celtic mythology, and the oral narrative tradition in Ireland. The study concludes that the two narratives contain the three sins against the three functions as Dumézil attributes to warriors; therefore, they follow the same pattern and represent the same ideology in their respective societies.

**Keywords:** myths, epic narrative, filicide, Indo-European societies, the triple cosmic and social functions, *Shahname*, Irish sagas, George Dumézil

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**Gaelic, Indian, and Persian**

Hárbarðsljóð

/harbarðslijoð/

**Names with Pronunciation**

Haurvatat

/haorevətət/

Aided Óenfhir Aífe /'eɪdɪd 'oʊənfɪr 'i:fə/

Indra

/ɪndrə/

Aífe /'i:fə/

Kauui Usan

/kaʊi: usən/

Ameretat /æməɾətət/

Kavya Ushanas

/kavja uʃənəs/

Arjuna /ærdʒuna/

Kay Kavus

/keɪ kavus/

Aži Dahāka /aʒi: dæhaka/

khvarenahs

/xvarenæ/

Bhima /bɦɪmə/

Marut

/mærut/

Bó Airig /bɔ aɪrɪg/

Mithra

/miθrə/

Conchobar /kɔnkɔbər/

mithrōdrug

/miθrodrug/

Conlaoch (Connla) /kɔnlə/

Mitra

/mitrə/

Cú Chulainn /ku:'xʊlʲɪnɪ/ /kə'hʊlɪn/

mitradruh

/mitrædruh/

Flaith /flaɪθ/

Muirthemne

/muɪrɦɪmni/

Gáe Bulg /ge bulg/

Nakula

/nækula/

Gandharva /gændærva/

Nasatya

/nasətjə/

geasa /'geɪʃ/

Nechta

/nekta/

Gordafarid /gɔrdafærɪd/

Pandava

/pandava/

Pandu	/pandu/	Varuna	/værunæ/
Rostam	/rostæm/	Verethragna	/vərəθraɣnæ/
Sahadeva	/sahadivə/	Vohu Manah	/voɦu mænæ/
Sām	/sam/	Vrtra	/vrɪtrə/
Scáthach	/skaha/	Vrtrahan	/vrətræhan/
Sohrab	/sohrab/	Xshathra	/xʃæθræ/
Starkaðr	/starkaðər/	Yima	/jimə/
Tiwaz	/tiwaz/	Yudhisthira	/judɪstɪrə/
Tochmarc Emire	/'toɦmark ɛ'mɪr/	Zahak	/zæɦak/
Tritá	/trɪtæ/	Zāl	/zæl/
Ulaid	/u:laid/	Ziu	/ziu/



# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1. General Overview**

Man has perpetrated many harsh murders through time; and an explanation for their reasons has been sought through ages. The span between homicides to genocide is what could be attributed to men. However, a very specific genre of homicide, filicide, may attract attention on account of being unjustifiable in any system of thought, yet being quite common in all societies. Throughout our whole civilization, one can observe how men and women have deprived their own offspring of their fundamental right to live, whether in fiction or in its very literal sense. Literature has been a pioneer in being concerned with the motives of filicide and in attempting to define filicide.

In most of the civil codes prior to the modern era, filicide was never counted as crime; it was even not always reproached. Certain cases of filicide such as Abraham sacrificing Isaac have

been even praised. It was little by little towards the modern age that filicide entered codes as a crime prone to be punished. In addition, in the modern age, the reduction in the brutality of our physical world in day-to-day life has made filicide much rarer and more repugnant to the eye of men.

Yet, our rich collection of filicides in literature points out to the necessity of a thorough study of its significance in classical works. Within the framework of mythologies and classical literatures, many cases of filicide could be seen, from Greek gods and heroes eating or killing their own offspring to Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac to Gudrun's killing of her sons in Snorri Sturluson's "*Edda*". Surprisingly, with but a few exceptions, scholars have consistently overlooked these killed victims, from infants to fully grown humans; and the focus has always been on the fate and deeds of gods, kings, or heroes who kill off their own children.

The motif of a single combat between a father and his young son who for some reason do not recognize one another is common in many Indo-European literatures (Yeats 9-10). The stories of Hildebrand and his son Hudabrand in German, and the Russian Ilya Muromets and his son Podsokolnik narrate single combats between a father and an adult son ending in the sons' death. In the stories of Cú Chulainn and his son Conlaoch in Irish literature, and Rostam and Sohrab in Persian, the single combats take place between a father and his son who is but a child, ten and seven years old respectively. Even though it has always been pointed out that the various similarities in the plot and the cultural environment, especially in the two latter narratives, must be indicating a common source and interpretation of the stories, a more thorough comparative study seems in order.

On the other hand, any bodies of ancient mythology, epic, and legends present in the societies speaking one of the Indo-European languages have been issues of interest to men in the modern age. The racial and lingual ties between these societies have evoked theses to line out a pattern common to all of them in different disciplines. The search for ties and a unitary system to define the framework of all Indo-European peoples was pushed as far as, under the name Aryan race, leading to one of the ugliest faces of racism in the twentieth century. However, the cultural study of the peoples, which had started earlier, shed light on aspects of their ways of lives that had become hidden in the course of time through the specific requirements each environment forced its inhabiting people to adapt to.

The comparative study of mythology is a field that answered many questions about the sources of social life and common understanding of social life as was perceived by the proto-Indo-European people. Amazingly, the residue of mythical legends, and epic literature, which has always borrowed heavily from the myths' world, from the ancient world led the mythologists to a fuller understanding of the role myths played in societies to explain the ways of the world to their members. Of course, this is the case for the schools of mythological studies that relate the myths to justification of the world by means of common sense, not for scholars such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl who considered myths as manifestations of a pre-logical thinking present in humankind in the earlier stages of his civilization (Lévy-Bruhl).

In the interpretation of the myths as a fruit of common sense, there have been different views such as James G. Frazer's theory of myths originating from the rituals for magic and sacrifice to the forces of nature surrounding people, or such as Örjan Wikander and George Dumézil's theories implying that any body of myths is a systematic approach for explaining the life of people and their encounters with natural phenomena surrounding them.

The correspondence of the three gods/couples of gods and the three social classes in the form of three social functions in the Indo-European world was an insight Wikander and Dumézil shared. Contrary to some myth studies that consider magic, as an early form of religion, and the seasonal rituals as the central parts forming a mythological world, Dumézil rejects the idea of myths being products of mere fancy, and sees myths as repository of traditional wisdom clarifying the *raison d'être* of a society and its manners (Dumézil *The Destiny of the Warrior* 48-49). In Dumézil's point of view, every detail and every aspect of ancient myths and epic narratives in the societies he studies are more or less corresponding to the tripartite system. Either they are figures of the three functions or somehow symbolically representing a feature of one of the functions that would be meaningful in its relation to other figures.

In various parts of the Persian epic narrative, religious texts of Zoroastrianism, which were the sources for epic narratives even in the post-Islamic Shahname, and political documents of the ancient civilizations of the Indo-Iranian and Anatolian world, Dumézil seeks traces of such an interpretation; one such example is the Hittite-Mitanian treaty from 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.. One main source of dispute in his work is the reform done by the Zoroastrian clergy in order to adapt the basic system of the proto-Indo-Iranian religion with the new standards, ideals, and moral code of the new religion. He even dedicated a whole work to how the Iranian legendary king Kay Kavus, the king who ruled Iran at the time of the battle of Rostam and Sohrab, seems to be a transfiguration of the Indian mythical figure Kavya Ushanas.

Although Dumézil's work on Celtic world is much thinner than the Iranian, Roman, and Indian world, he sees the basic elements of the tripartite in that society as well as the above-mentioned ones. In his work *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, along with the Scandinavian and Germanic formula and instances of congruence of the myths and legends with his theoretical

system Dumézil worked on the Celtic world. More accordance was observed when discussing the hero Cú Chulainn.

In his other work *Mitra-Varuna*, Dumézil addressed the relations of the two first functions of the hierarchy, i.e. sovereignty and warrior power. He explored the relation in terms of power struggle as both functions exert power in different, yet overlapping from time to time, planes and also described how in Iranian, Indian, and Roman worlds the moralities of warrior function differs from those of others. In *The Destiny of the Warrior*, he explained how warriors are bound to committing sin through the necessities of their function. In the narratives dealt with in the present research one of the sins seems to be that of filicide.

The characters of Sohrab and Conlaoch are mainly flat in both epic narratives. They are born and killed only by games of fate; the only seeming reason of their existence is to add an adventure to their fathers' lives. However, as Dumézil put it, myths are not mere flights of fancy. The killed young warriors must have had a role in the system of thought behind the myths.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

The relation between the older and the younger generations is of interest in the modern era; in classical literature however, intergenerational conflict was not considered of such importance as much. While legends, epics, and myths are abundant of both patricidal and filicidal instances, patricides have evoked ardent debates, but filicides have been neglected. Patricide was addressed by Sigmund Freud and the psychoanalytical criticism in literature (Freud); yet filicide has been left out of study.

The comparative study of mythology as was done by Dumézil puts forward a method of explaining the phenomena in Indo-European cultures (Dumézil *The Destiny of the Warrior*; Dumézil *Mitra-Varuna*). Here too, because the focus was mainly on the prototypes of each function in the studied cultures, the filicides present on the epic level were not addressed as a subject of study. However, the part of Dumézil's theory concerning the warrior function as essentially sinful may provide an explanation of the reasons or ideas operating behind the single combat filicides in Persian and Irish epics. Dumézil himself discussed two fratricide cases in Roman mythical history and the same seems possible to do in Irish and Persian filicides in *Aided Óenfhir Aífe* and *Rostam and Sohrab*.

The present study seeks to examine the compatibility of the Irish and Iranian filicides in Abol-Qasem Ferdowsi's *Rostam and Sohrab* and the anonymous *Aided Óenfhir Aífe* with the triple unity of cosmic and social orders by George Dumézil. Moreover, the probable inconsistencies of Dumézil's theory with the narratives have been explored to see if in any way the compatibility is under question.

### 1.3. Research Questions

The present thesis tries to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do the epic narratives *Aided Óenfhir Aífe* and *Rostam and Sohrab* follow the same pattern as that of the warriors' triple sins according to Dumézil's theoretical framework? If so, how are the two pieces different from other filicides within other filicides in *Shahname* or the Irish myths?

2. What are Rostam and Cú Chulainn's three sins; and how do they follow one another to the filicide itself?
3. How are Rostam and Cú Chulainn punished? If they are not punished, why are they not punished?

## 1.4. Methodology

Through a library method, the two narrative pieces of Aided Óenfhir Aífe and Rostam and Sohrab are studied separately to examine the validity of Dumézil's theoretical framework in providing a reading of the pieces. The two narratives are then compared to see if the plots and their twists contribute to a fuller understanding of the myth system Dumézil proposes in the Indo-European literatures.

While Rostam and Sohrab is a long part of Shahname with elaborate details of the event and dramatic effects in the tragedy, Aided Óenfhir Aífe is but a very short piece that does not exceed one or at most two pages in different versions. It seems that the filicide Cú Chulainn commits was not an important part of his adventures to the bards that narrated his saga. Due to its shortness, Aided Óenfhir Aífe refuses to yield to investigation as deep as done on Rostam and Sohrab. Nevertheless, this shortcoming is counterbalanced by another feature of the texts.

Contrary to almost every other part of Shahname, an earlier narration of Rostam and Sohrab is not available presently. This makes the study of the mythical roots of the narrative in Zoroastrian religious texts impossible; hence, Dumézil's own guidelines in tracing a history of transfiguration of mythical legends in Zoroastrian texts were followed. That is considering the general transfiguration of religious ideas from proto-Indo-Iranian religion towards the



Zoroastrian beliefs as a probable line of systematic transfiguration in the ideas operating within the later versions, here the filicide narrative of Rostam. In the case of Aided Óenfhir Aífe however, the existence of a few different versions in the manuscripts recording the Cú Chulainn saga offers a vaster possibility of a better investigation for finding the consistencies and inconsistencies between the two filicide narratives.

It is necessary to mention that the names of the personae in both narratives and George Dumézil's samples for elaborating the system are in Persian, Gaelic, Sanskrit, or Old Norse. This causes a problem in transcribing the names. In all cases, the original forms of the names are given along with the modern English spelling. Yet, in English transcription of the names, the problem of different spellings occurs; a unitary method of spelling closer to the original pronunciation is chosen.

## **1.5. Review of Literature**

The Cú Chulainn saga has always been a very important part of classical literature in Ireland; however, along with other Irish texts, the saga was mainly looked over in oblivion until the rise of Irish renaissance in the nineteenth century when Irish authors and scholars started to revisit their literary heritage and study Old and Middle Irish literature. Ever since, the Cú Chulainn saga has been of main interest because he was the national hero of the Irish. However, even after the Irish revival started, the filicide of Cú Chulainn attracted less attention than the rest of his encounters and deeds. This could be due to a general neglecting of filicide as a subject of study. Even though William Butler Yeats created a play narrating the death of Conlaoch on Baile's strand (Yeats) and Kuno Meyers (Meyers), Augusta Gregory (Gregory) and Eleanor Hull

(Hull et al.; Hull) in their translations and recreations of Cú Chulainn saga dedicated a few pages to the filicide narrative, the absence of this story from scholarly writing and collections of Irish epics indicate a lack of research on this text. Recently Margaret McKenzie has addressed the texts in her exhaustive study of Filicide narratives in the medieval ages (McKenzie).

The story of Rostam and Sohrab on the other hand, has been subject of study to many scholars, mainly in Persian. Mohamadali Eslami Nodooshan's work on the fates of warriors in Shahname (Eslami Nodooshan *Life and Death*) and Bahram Beyzayi's theatrical rewriting of the story (Beyzayi) are two major texts among many others addressing the filicide story; yet usually Rostam's stance has been the issue of the studies. The significance of filicide as an independent act has been neglected here similar to that of Cú Chulainn's case.

Except for Margaret McKenzie's work on filicide, which has taken Rostam and Sohrab and Aided Óenfhir Aife into account from the point of view of filicide as a crime against one's own offspring, no other probing on the issue was found. Interestingly, McKenzie studied filicide from the point of view Dumézil's myth studies along with other theoretical perspectives. To the best of our knowledge, Dumézil's theories, which have been source of insight and research for many, have not been tested on filicides in classical epics in any other work. Just as well, to the best of our knowledge, the two narratives have not been addressed in a comparative style finding a similar root for the filicides in them.

## **1.6. Significance of the Study**

The significance of the present study lies in its attempt to offer a new reading of two classical texts in a way they have not been studied before. The story of Rostam and Sohrab is one

of great interest in Persian speaking cultures. Aided Óenfhir Aífe too is an important text in that it offers a tragic part of Cú Chulainn's life; and he is the national hero of Ireland as Rostam is of Iran. Still, despite their numerous similarities down to the details in the plot, they have not been studied comparatively. Furthermore, the text offers an interdisciplinary reading of the texts through cultural anthropology and the study of religions. In addition, the issue of filicide is one of major importance and has been put aside by the scholars who tend to focus on the protagonists and neglect the minor characters on the whole; in both stories, the killed son is but a twist in the life of the heroes.

# **Chapter 2**

**Dumézil's**

**Comparative Study of**

**Indo-European Mythologies**