

David Evans

AGAMEMNON
AND THE
INDO-EUROPEAN
THREEFOLD DEATH
PATTERN

Georges Dumézil's discovery of a tripartite Indo-European ideology has provided an extraordinarily useful analytical tool for students of comparative mythology and folklore.¹ Briefly stated, this ideology serves to organize various aspects of culture into three levels or "functions" (to use Dumézil's own term), the first concerned with magico-religious and juridical sovereignty, the second with armed might, and the third with wealth and fecundity. In recent years an Indo-European pattern of threefold death has been identified and discussed in terms of this tripartite ideology by a number of followers of Dumézil, most notably by Donald

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¹ Dumézil summarizes the evidence for this ideology in *L'Idéologie tripartite des Indo-Européens*, Collection Latomus, vol. 31 (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1958). The development of Dumézil's ideas on comparative Indo-European mythology is discussed in C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

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Ward.² The pattern is found in myths and legends of various Indo-European peoples in two main forms. The first of these is a series or grouping of three deaths, each by a different means. The second is a single death by three different means simultaneously. Ward believes that the pattern stems essentially from an Indo-European form of ritual sacrifice. I propose first to summarize the evidence for the two forms of this pattern, then to relate the pattern to the death of Agamemnon as described by the Greek tragedian Aeschylus. This ancient Greek evidence should serve as an important link with a number of more modern examples of the pattern and should help to establish more firmly this pattern as a significant embodiment of the Indo-European tripartite ideology.

One of the most important early pieces of evidence for the pattern of three associated deaths is found in the *Commenta* to the Roman poet Lucan's *Pharsalia*, 1.445–46, where it is reported that human sacrifices were made to the Gaulish deity Esus by hanging, to Taranis by burning the victims alive in a large wicker basket, and to Teutates by drowning them in a vat.³ The weight of evidence suggests that Esus is associated with the first or sovereign function, Taranis with the second or warrior function, and Teutates with the third or fertility function. Thus among the ancient continental Celts we have a pattern of hanging associated with sovereignty, burning with war, and drowning with fertility.

Yoshida has identified a similar pattern of three deaths in an ancient Greek legend.⁴ There, however, the deaths consist of two murders and a suicide rather than the ritual sacrifice of the Celts. The first murder is that of Piasus by his daughter Larissa, who drowns him in a vat of wine in revenge for his having raped her. The next murder is of Cyzicus, king of the Pelasgians, to whom Larissa was either married or engaged. He is killed by the Argonauts in a fight caused by a misunderstanding, after he had entertained the Argonauts hospitably when they were driven to his city by a storm. Finally Cleite, who is also described as married or engaged to Cyzicus, hangs herself from a tree out of grief at his death. Yoshida connects all three deaths with the third function, or perhaps we might simply say that the tripartite ideology did not clearly impose itself upon this series of legends.

² Donald Ward, "The Threefold Death: An Indo-European Trifunctional Sacrifice?" in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, ed. Jaan Puhvel, Publications of the UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, no. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), pp. 123–42.

³ Ibid., pp. 134–35.

⁴ Atsuhiko Yoshida, "Piasos noyé, Cléité pendue et le moulin de Cyzique: Essai de mythologie comparée," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 168 (1965): 155–64.

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The richest evidence for this pattern in ancient times comes from Germanic-speaking peoples. Ward has surveyed a great deal of material which suggests that the ancient continental and Scandinavian Germanic peoples had three methods of human sacrifice and criminal execution.⁵ These were by hanging, by drowning, and by a weapon. Hanging is in all cases associated with the god Odin, whom Dumézil sees as a representative of the magico-religious portion of the first or sovereign function in the tripartite system. Drowning or its equivalent, burial alive, on the other hand, is shown by Ward to be associated with the third function. The evidence for execution or sacrifice by a weapon is much less extensive among the Germanic peoples than for the other two means, but what evidence there is suggests that this type of death was associated with the war god and hence with the second (warrior) function. There is also some evidence that these three forms of death could occur within the same ritual context. In Adam of Bremen's eleventh-century description of the Swedish pagan temple at Uppsala he mentions both blood sacrifices and hangings of human and animal victims. A scholion to this description adds that there was also at this temple a spring into which live human sacrificial victims were plunged. Adam states that the temple was a cult center for Odin, Thor, and Freyr, deities whom Dumézil and his followers have identified with the first, second, and third functions, respectively. It is thus quite possible that we are dealing here with trifunctional methods of sacrifice.⁶

The pattern of multiple related deaths occurs not only in Germanic ritual and legal practices but also in legend. In a legend complex studied by Dumézil two close friends or kinsmen suffer linked deaths.⁷ There are four versions of the legend. In one, reported by Saxo (1.8.27), Hundingus, king of the Swedes, accidentally drowns after falling into a jar full of ale. His friend Hadingus hangs himself in grief. Two other versions are concerned with the deaths of Fjölfnir and Sveigdir, as told in the *Ynglingatal* (strophes 1–2) and *Ynglingasaga* (chaps. 11–12). In them Fjölfnir, the Swedish king, gets up from a drunken sleep in order to urinate, falls through a hole in the floor into a vat of mead, and drowns.

⁵ Ward, pp. 123–34.

⁶ James L. Sauvé, "The Divine Victim: Aspects of Human Sacrifice in Viking Scandinavia and Vedic India," in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, pp. 176–77; Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. and trans. Einar Haugen, Publications of the UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, no. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

⁷ Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The Saga of Hadingus*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 127–53.

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His son Sveigdir then makes a vow to search for the home of Odin and fulfills this by hurling himself into a giant rock which closes around him. Finally, in a nineteenth-century Faroese ballad *Veraldur*, Odin's son, dies by falling through a hole in the floor into a brewing vat. His father ascends to heaven and remains a king there. Dumézil shows convincingly that the drowned party has clear third-function connections and that the party who is hanged, enclosed in a rock, or ascends to heaven is connected with Odin, a first-function deity. We might add that in the story of Hundingus and Hadingus there is a third death that immediately precedes and partly motivates these other two. This is the murder by Hadingus's men of his son-in-law, who had treacherously tried to kill Hadingus at a banquet (Saxo 1.8.26). This violent death by a weapon would seem to be connected with the second function and would thus complement Hundingus's third-function drowning and Hadingus's first-function hanging.

The other occurrence of linked deaths in Germanic tradition is in the legend of Starkad, also studied by Dumézil in connection with the Indo-European pattern of the three sins of the warrior.⁸ The first and third of Starkad's sins are murders, the second being cowardice in battle. The first sin is his killing of King Vikar in a mock sacrifice to Odin when Vikar's ships are delayed by a storm. Vikar is chosen by lot to be a sacrificial victim, but to prevent his death Starkad places a noose of withies around his neck and touches him with a reed. At this point the withies magically become a real noose tightening around Vikar's neck, and the reed becomes a sword. The murder is clearly connected with Odin and the first function. The other sin of Starkad was the treacherous murder of King Olo in his bath, for which Starkad received a reward of gold. His venality connects his act in this case with the third function.

This Germanic pattern of three linked deaths evidently also made its way into Finnish folk tradition through Germany or Sweden. Talley has pointed out a Finnish ballad in which Christ names the three sins of Magdalen, who murdered her children by fire, drowning, and live burial.⁹ Christ adds that the children might have grown up to be a knight, a burgher, and a priest, respectively, an evident borrowing of the Indo-European trifunctional pattern expressed in the order of second, third, and first functions. Live

⁸ Georges Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior*, trans. Alf Hiltebeitel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 82–95.

⁹ Jeannine E. Talley, "The Threefold Death in Finnish Lore," in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, pp. 143–46.

burial here replaces the usual hanging as a first-function mode of death.

Evidence for a series of three murders has also been discovered in Slavic tradition by Fisher.¹⁰ One account from the *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* simply tells us how the Finnic Livonians plotted to kill Bishop Berthold either by burning him in his church, slaying him with a weapon, or drowning him. The other account from the Nestor Chronicle deals with Olga's triple revenge on the Derevlians for the murder of her husband Igor. This may actually represent a Scandinavian intrusion in Slavic tradition, as Olga and Igor are Varangian names. Olga had the first Derevlian contingent buried alive, the second group locked in a bathhouse and burned, and the third group put to the sword at a banquet. These groups of Derevlians are shown by Fisher to be representatives, respectively, of the warriors, nobles, and commoners, or in Dumézil's terms the second, first, and third functions. Their social standing in the Indo-European tripartite scheme is thus not correlated with their manner of death in the usual sense, though there is at least a threefold pattern. Since these are simply historical or pseudo-historical accounts of attempted or real murders, it would seem that any ceremonial or legalistic connections with these deaths had been lost by the time our traditions crystallized around the figures of Berthold and the Derevlians. Hence these traditions do not preserve the relationship of the manner of death to a particular Indo-European functional level as the older Germanic and Celtic material does.

Up to this point we have surveyed evidence for a grouping or series of three different types of death in various Indo-European traditions. There is another Indo-European pattern of myth and folk legend, that of a single death by three different means simultaneously. We have already noted partial examples of this pattern in the story of Starkad, who killed King Vikar by simultaneously hanging and stabbing him and killed King Olo with a weapon in his bath, thus in effect also drowning him. The Germanic prototype for these kinds of multiple death would seem to be the god Odin himself. The *Hávamál* (lines 138–45) clearly states that Odin hung on a windswept tree for nine nights pierced with a spear as a sacrifice to himself for the purpose of obtaining the runes of poetry. In addition to this torture the text states that Odin was “sprinkled with mead” (*ausinn Óðreri*), using as the

¹⁰ Robert L. Fisher, Jr., “Indo-European Elements in Baltic and Slavic Chronicles,” in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, pp. 157–58. I am indebted to Jaan Puhvel for further explication of this material.

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word for “mead” the name of one of the three vessels, Óðroerir, in which the original mead of poetry was brewed. Thus Odin appears to undergo a symbolic immersion in addition to hanging and spearing, in essence dying a triple death only to be reborn with the wisdom of poetry.

Versions of the motif of a single threefold death found in medieval Irish and Latin literature and a modern European folk-tale have been surveyed by Ward,¹¹ and to these we can add a medieval Welsh source. In almost all of the versions the death is the fulfillment of a prophecy. In fact, Starkad's murders of Vikar and Olo are also fulfillments of a prophecy made by Odin himself when Odin gave Starkad three spans of mortal life, in each of which he was to commit a great sin. Odin's own triple death is not said to be the result of a prophecy, but it is obviously a deliberate act on his part whereas all the other deaths in this pattern are unexpected by those who suffer them. Odin could thus be considered to be his own prophet.

The Welsh source for this motif is the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi, the story of Math son of Mathonwy.¹² As in the case of Odin, the threefold death is not actually prophesied, but instead the victim reveals the unusual manner in which he can be killed. Lleu Llaw Gyffes is the victim, and he tells his treacherous wife Blodeuedd that he can be killed only by a spear that has been fashioned for a whole year during the hours of Sunday mass. He must be struck with the spear while in a bath on a river bank with a thatched frame over the tub and while standing with one foot on the edge of the tub and the other on the back of a he-goat. Blodeuedd conspires with her lover Gronw Bebyr to have him make the spear, and at the end of a year she persuades Lleu to demonstrate to her the manner in which he might be killed. Just as he steps out of the bath onto the he-goat's back, Gronw emerges from hiding and pierces him with the spear. Lleu immediately is transformed into an eagle and flies off screaming. Later he is brought back to good health and human form and wreaks his vengeance upon Blodeuedd and Gronw. While Lleu's “death” may appear on the surface to be only an elaborate form of murder by a weapon, its status as a version of the threefold death motif becomes clear from the evidence adduced below.

The earliest Irish version comes from the seventh-century account of the life of Saint Columba. The saint predicts that Aedh

¹¹ Ward, pp. 135–42.

¹² I am indebted to Patrick Ford for supplying this reference to me.

the Black will be wounded in the neck with a spear, fall from a tree into the water, and drown. The prophecy comes true, except that the tree from which Aedh falls becomes a boat. In two twelfth-century poems by Bishop Hildebert of Le Mans a boy learns from Venus that he will die by a noose, from Mars that he will die by a weapon, and from Neptune that he will die by water. In a fall from a tree the boy's sword pierces his breast, and his head is submerged in the river below. Ward interprets the fall from a tree as a metaphorical substitution for the noose. The motif of the threefold death is also associated with the Irish Saint Moling. The saint tells Grag, who has killed Suibhne Geilt, that he will die by a weapon, fire, and drowning. Grag does not believe him, but one day he climbs a tree, is wounded by his spear, falls into a fire below and then into the water where he drowns. In an eleventh-century account of King Diarmaid it is predicted that the king will die by a weapon, burning, and drowning. During a festival he is wounded by a spear, the house is burned over him, and he drowns in a vat of beer where he had sought protection from the flames. Essentially the same story is told of Aidheda Muirchertaig mac Erca.

The modern European folktale incorporating this motif is classified by Thompson as tale type 934A¹³. Variants from eight ethnic traditions stretching from Ireland to Iran have been studied by Brednich as part of a larger study of *Schicksalsfrauen*.¹⁴ In all cases the death is the fulfillment of a prophecy. Typically the victim is bitten by a snake while climbing a tree; he falls and drowns in the water below. Brednich concludes that this tale must have originated in northwestern Europe and migrated from there to the Baltic as well as to the Balkans and Asia.

Ward agrees with Brednich's explanation for most of the variants but points out connections of the medieval legend and modern folktale pattern of the threefold death with older accounts of three related forms of sacrifice or punishment.¹⁵ Ward proposes that we consider the threefold death pattern essentially Indo-European, related to the tripartite ideology, and ultimately derived

¹³ Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, FF Communications no. 184 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1964), p. 329. Actually there are three relevant motifs listed in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–58), 3:233; 5:55. (1) F901.1 Extraordinary threefold death: falling from rock and tree, drowning; (2) F901.1.1 Extraordinary threefold death: wounding, burning, drowning; and (3) M341.2.4 Prophecy: threefold death.

¹⁴ Rolf Wilh. Brednich, *Volkserzählungen und Volksglaube von den Schicksalsfrauen*, FF Communications no. 193 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1964), pp. 138–45.

¹⁵ Ward, pp. 139–42.

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from a type of sacrificial practice. He believes that the fall from a tree represents a form of hanging and shows that the element of death by fire is a distinctly Celtic one, going back as far as Lucan's description of the sacrifices to the god Taranis. We might add here that the threefold death seems related not only to the Indo-European tripartite ideology of sovereign, warrior, and fertility functions, but that it also seems to express a conception of the natural world as constructed of three essential elements or levels; air, land, and water (or underworld). At the first level the victim hangs in the air, falls through the air, or ascends to heaven. At the second level he dies on the earth, pierced by a weapon. At the third level, he drowns in water or is buried alive under the earth. The Celtic substitution of death by fire, which was also encountered in Baltic and Slavic chronicles, might be viewed simply as an attempt to reconcile a threefold pattern of death with a fourfold view of the natural world as made up of air, earth, fire, and water. It would appear, then, that the essential meaning of the motif of multiple death is that the victim or victims express the idea of death in the most complete manner possible both in the social domain by dying in conformity to the tripartite ideology and in the natural domain by dying in all levels of existence. Such a view would accord well with Ward's contention that the threefold death is ultimately derived from a type of sacrifice.

Evidence from the ancient Greek tradition of the death of Agamemnon helps to confirm Ward's view of the threefold death's Indo-European nature, its relation to the tripartite ideology, and its derivation from a sacrificial practice. The death of Agamemnon also helps to fill several gaps in Ward's chain of evidence.

Agamemnon's death is described in the *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* [Libation bearers], which were part of the *Oresteia* trilogy composed by the Athenian dramatist Aeschylus and first performed in 458 B.C. Agamemnon, after returning from an absence of ten years at Troy, is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra in his palace. She kills him in his bath with the sword of her lover Aegistheus after entangling him in a cloth or garment. (Her collusion with a lover to murder her husband is reminiscent of the Welsh story of Lleu's "death.") Aeschylus is the earliest author to attribute clearly such a death to Agamemnon. Homer gives us a much simpler description. In the *Odyssey* 4.534–35, Menelaus tells Telemachus that Agamemnon was killed at a homecoming banquet by Aegistheus. This same story is repeated to Odysseus by the ghost of Agamemnon himself in *Odyssey* 11.405–34. Much later the

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Roman dramatist Seneca in his *Agamemnon* 867–909 has Cassandra tell how Agamemnon was killed at a banquet with a sword and ax wielded by Aegistheus and Clytemnestra after Agamemnon became entangled in a mantle made for him by Clytemnestra. Seneca does not mention the bath in connection with Agamemnon's death.

Aeschylus, then, is our main source for the threefold-death motif used in connection with Agamemnon. He first describes the death in lines 1125–29 of the *Agamemnon*. Here Cassandra, the blind prophetess whom Agamemnon took captive at Troy, has a vision of Agamemnon entangled in a garment, struck with a weapon by Clytemnestra, and falling into water. Although this water is later described as in a bathtub, Aeschylus here uses words that actually signify a vessel or cauldron (ἐνύδρῳ τεύχει, line 1128; λέβητος, line 1129). Later in lines 1380–92 Clytemnestra herself describes how she struck Agamemnon with three blows after entangling him with robes. She uses the simile of a fisherman casting an encircling net to describe her strategy. She does not mention the bath in this passage, although the fishnet simile perhaps implies one. The final description in the first play of the trilogy occurs in lines 1529 and 1539–40, where Clytemnestra states that Agamemnon died by the sword and the chorus say that they have seen Agamemnon lying on his funeral bed in a silver-sided bathtub (ἀργυροτοίχου δροίτης). In the second play, the *Choephoroi*, Orestes and Electra, Agamemnon's children, build up their courage to kill Clytemnestra and Aegistheus by describing the death of their father. In line 491 Orestes calls to mind the bath (λουτρῶν) in which he was slain. In lines 492 and 494 Electra describes the robe in which he was entangled, in each case calling it metaphorically a fishnet (ἀμφιβληστρον; καλύμμασιν). The final description comes in lines 973–1006 of the *Choephoroi*. Here Orestes stands over the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegistheus, whom he has just slain, and displays the garment in which his mother had entangled his father, describing her as a poisonous eel or serpent (lines 994–96). Then in a remarkable series of lines (997–1004) he describes the garment, likening it to an animal trap, a shroud for a corpse, a bath curtain, and a snare used by a highway robber.

It is clear that we are dealing in these plays with more than an ordinary murder, if any murder can be called ordinary. In fact, this is much more like the kinds of human sacrifices that we have seen in other Indo-European traditions. The entangling robe or garment can be viewed as the equivalent of the noose. Its description frequently contains the metaphor or simile of a fishnet, and

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some passages even indicate that it might actually be some kind of netted garment or cloth. At any rate, it serves the purpose of binding the victim just as the noose does. The bathtub too is no ordinary one but is much more like a sacrificial vessel, being described as silver sided and in one passage even being called by the name of a basin for holding purifying water (*Agamemnon* 1129: λέβητος). Even the image of Clytemnestra as a serpent, which occurs throughout the trilogy,¹⁶ may be related to the snakebite element that is found in modern European folktale versions of the threefold death. Orestes, in fact, in *Choephoroi* 246–51, uses a simile to compare himself and his sister Electra to the orphaned children of an eagle father, helpless in the coils of a deadly viper. In many of the modern folktale versions of the threefold death the victim is bitten by a snake while seeking bird nests in a tree. We might also note here the fact that in the medieval Welsh version Lleu is transformed into an eagle upon receiving the blow from Gronw's spear as he emerges from his bath.

There can be no doubt that Clytemnestra considers her murder of Agamemnon to be a sacrifice.¹⁷ After she has killed him she states that her deed was done in revenge for the sacrifice of Thyestes' children by his brother Atreus, Agamemnon's father (*Agamemnon* 1497–1504), and for Agamemnon's sacrifice of his own daughter Iphigeneia (*Agamemnon* 1521–29). Before Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon, she invites Cassandra to enter the palace and stand at the altar to partake of the ceremony (*Agamemnon* 1036–38). When Cassandra refuses, Clytemnestra states that she will waste no further time with her, as the sheep are standing at the altar (*Agamemnon* 1055–58). Later she tells the chorus that when she struck the third and final blow, she gave thanks to Hades, Lord of the Dead (*Agamemnon* 1385–87). A few lines later (1432–33) she states that she sacrificed (ἑσφάξῃ) Agamemnon to her daughter Iphigeneia's Justice, Wrath, and Fury (Δίκην, Ἄρην Ἐρινύν θ'). These passages strikingly recall the character of the god Odin, who also underwent a threefold sacrifice (to himself) and was lord of the dead warriors and associated with wrath and fury.¹⁸ There is little doubt, then, that Agamemnon's death must be viewed as a sacrifice. It is furthermore an Indo-European tripartite sacrifice, involving symbols for each of the three functions. The bath is

¹⁶ Anne Lebeck, *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 1971), pp. 13–16.

¹⁷ On this point see *ibid.*, pp. 60–63.

¹⁸ E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), pp. 35–74.

clearly connected with a ritual object, the sacrificial vessel, and hence with the priestly aspect of the first or sovereign function. In fact, as Yoshida has shown,¹⁹ cups and vessels in general tend to be associated with the first function in Greek tradition. The sword that kills Agamemnon is obviously connected with the second or warrior function. The entangling robe, as a symbol of wealth and luxury, a product of feminine handicraft, and metaphorically related to the subsistence activity of fishing, must be connected with the third or fertility function. Hanging as such was rare in Greek tradition, but when it did occur it was generally as a means of suicide used by women. Examples would be the suicide of Cleite, discussed earlier as a third-function death, the suicide of Oedipus's mother Iocasta in remorse for having committed incest, and the attempted suicide of Clytemnestra herself (*Agamemnon* 874–76) after despairing of ever seeing Agamemnon return alive from Troy. All of these instances show that hanging generally has a third function character in Greek tradition. Thus the symbols of drowning and hanging (entanglement) have a meaning in the story of Agamemnon's death that is the reverse of their usual meaning in Germanic and Celtic tradition, where they are connected with the third and first functions, respectively. Until we have more evidence for the threefold death pattern in ancient Greece and other Indo-European peoples, we cannot say whether the Celtic and Germanic pattern of ascribed values for each type of death is typical of all the Indo-Europeans or not.

If Agamemnon's death is related to the Indo-European threefold death pattern, it should be the fulfillment of a prophecy. Evidence for such a prophecy is abundant. First, in a general sense the murder is a partial fulfillment of the curse of Thyestes on the house of Agamemnon's father Atreus, who served up a sacrificial feast to Thyestes of his own children.²⁰ Thyestes' curse does not specify the manner of Agamemnon's death. It is specified, however, in the vision of Cassandra, a genuine prophetess, who says in *Agamemnon* 1125–29:

See there, see there! Keep from his mate the bull.
Caught in the folded web's
entanglement she pinions him and with the black horn
strikes. And he crumples in the watered bath.
Guile, I tell you, and death there in the cauldron wrought.²¹

¹⁹ Atsuhiko Yoshida, "Sur quelques coupes de la fable grecque," *Revue des études anciennes* 67 (1965): 31–36.

²⁰ Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "The Guilt of Agamemnon," *Classical Quarterly*, n. s. 12 (1962): 187–99.

²¹ This and the following translation are taken from Richmond Lattimore, trans., *Aeschylus I: Oresteia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

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There is also an ironic premonition of the manner of Agamemnon's death in an earlier passage (lines 866–72) where Clytemnestra tells how the many rumors of Agamemnon's death kept her in a state of continual worry for the last ten years. She states:

Had Agamemnon taken all
the wounds whereof the tale was carried home to me,
he had been cut full of gashes like a fishing net.
If he had died each time that rumor told of his death,
he must have been some triple-bodied Geryon
back from the dead with threefold cloak of earth upon
his body, and killed once for every shape assumed.

Not only does a fishnet simile occur here as it does elsewhere in the play in connection with the entangling robe, but we also have here an indication that Clytemnestra has a threefold death in mind for her husband. As if to heighten the irony of the fishnet simile, she follows this passage immediately with a statement that she tried many times to commit suicide by hanging but was always saved by her attendants (lines 874–76).

If Agamemnon's death is a ritual sacrifice, it can also be seen as a criminal execution. We have already noticed how in Germanic tradition executions were similar to human sacrifices and how the punishment was often made to fit the crime. It should be no surprise, then, that Agamemnon's triple execution is connected with a threefold crime involving sins against each of the three Indo-European functions. These three crimes or sins are incorporated into the structure of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* by being described, respectively, in each of the first three choruses that occur in the play before Agamemnon's arrival home. The first chorus (lines 40–257) describes Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigeneia at Aulis in order to obtain wind for the Greek ships sailing to Troy. The chorus calls him sacrilegious (line 220: *ἀναγνόν, ἀνέπον*), an indication that this is a crime against the religious aspect of the first or sovereign function. The second chorus (lines 355–488), after condemning Paris's abduction of Helen, tells how Agamemnon caused so many young Greek warriors to be killed over an unfaithful woman and describes the anger of the citizens over the loss of their loved ones. It would appear that Agamemnon is accused here of a crime against the second function by carrying the warrior role to an extreme. The third chorus (lines 681–809) begins with a denunciation of the adulterous Helen and all the grief she caused to both the Greeks and Trojans. Then, after associating Helen with wealth and beauty (lines 741–43), the chorus proceeds to denounce wealth and those who seek to

accumulate it. The implication here seems to be that Agamemnon has been immoderate in pursuing wealth (i.e., sacking Troy) and seeking to recover the beautiful Helen. The last part of the third chorus is a welcoming speech to the returned Agamemnon. In it the chorus admits that it had been angry with him for marshalling the army "for Helen's sake" (line 800: 'Ελένης ἔνεκ'). Hence Agamemnon has sinned against the third function, which is concerned with wealth and fecundity. The three choruses, then, depict Agamemnon as a trifunctional sinner and prepare us for his tripartite punishment.²²

It is highly unlikely that Aeschylus was the inventor of the motif of the threefold death as fulfillment of a prophecy, for it occurs elsewhere in Indo-European tradition and in forms which are so different that they could not possibly be derived from Aeschylus's version. Instead, the traditions of Odin, Agamemnon, and the complex of Celtic legendary and later European folktale versions must go back to a common original Indo-European form of the motif. Aeschylus or his source must have been familiar with a version of this motif and adapted it to the death of Agamemnon. That Aeschylus should have used an Indo-European theme in this manner should not be at all surprising, for, as Strutynski has suggested,²³ Aeschylus used another important Indo-European theme, the conflict between the forces of the third function and those of the first and second combined, elsewhere in this same dramatic trilogy, in the *Eumenides*. As an adaptation of this sort Aeschylus's use of the threefold death motif is extraordinarily successful. The motif has a central organizing role in the play *Agamemnon*, shaping not only the manner of Agamemnon's death but also the prophecies leading up to it, the motivation for Clytemnestra's act as punishment for the three sins of her husband,

²² Although Agamemnon is not treated here as an Indo-European "warrior" figure, his sins have a striking resemblance to the pattern of the three sins of the warrior, particularly the example of Starkad who killed his king in a mock sacrifice conducted for the purpose of gaining wind for the fleet of ships, failed to act like a proper warrior by displaying cowardice in battle, and committed murder in an excessive pursuit of wealth (see Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior*). David J. Cohen has recently added the Irish Suibhne Geilt to the list of Indo-European thrice-sinners in "Suibhne Geilt," *Celtica* 12 (1977): 113–24. Suibhne's murderer Grag, as noted earlier, suffers a threefold death. This link between the careers of Suibhne and Grag seems to offer further evidence for a relationship between the patterns of threefold sin and threefold death. D. A. Miller makes a less convincing attempt to view Agamemnon's murderer Aegistheus as a triple sinner in "A Note on Aegisthus as 'Hero,'" *Arethusa* 10 (1977): 259–68.

²³ Udo Strutynski, "The Three Functions of Indo-European Tradition in the 'Eumenides' of Aeschylus," in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, pp. 211–28.

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and the imagery of the eagle, the serpent, and the fishnet, which pervades the entire trilogy.²⁴ A knowledge of Aeschylus's use of the threefold death motif, then, is a great aid in our understanding of the structure and meaning of his play. His use of this motif is also a great aid for our understanding of the threefold death in general. Not only does it help to confirm the fact that this motif is Indo-European, but it makes clear the relationship of the threefold death to human sacrifice and the Indo-European tripartite ideology. To a great extent all of the other Indo-European traditions of threefold death are brought closer together by Aeschylus's account of the death of Agamemnon.

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²⁴ Lebeck, pp. 8–16, 33–34, 63–68. It is perhaps worth pointing out that these three images correspond to the natural domains of air, earth, and water discussed earlier in connection with hanging, death by a weapon, and drowning.