

Tantalus and the Greeks: A Symposium, October 30, 2000
Part Two: Backgrounds in Greek Epic and Tragedy
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My contribution to today's symposium has to do with myth. Necessarily, that means I'll be talking about just a few aspects of a subject that could keep us here for a week. I'm glad Deborah Boedeker has laid a solid foundation by talking about the Epic Cycle and some of the large, framing elements of inspiration, creativity, and making the story our own. My approach will be a little different and, I hope, complementary. I'm going to plunge into the particulars of John Barton's use of a few of his sources in ancient Greek epic and tragedy. When I resurface, I'll discuss the common thread by which they're all suspended—which I'll preview briefly by saying that in each case we'll see Barton taking something that was rhetorical or emblematic in its Greek context and working out its potential in human psychology. We'll see him use mythical variants to form characters at the same time as he drives the plot.

My first example is Achilles' knowledge of prophecy, specifically his mother's prophecy that he will either die young and have glory or live long without glory. The motif is found in our *Iliad* where it comes to the fore on three occasions. In Book 1, after Agamemnon has dishonored him, Achilles appeals to his mother with the argument "Since my life is to be short, Zeus ought to honor me." Thetis agrees and takes the appeal successfully to Zeus. Meanwhile, the text makes it clear that Achilles *yearns* for battle while he sulks. In Book 9, the prophecy appears for the only time as a choice. When Achilles, right after revealing the prophecy, tells Odysseus that the Greeks might as well go home because Zeus is protecting the Trojans, the implication is that he has now chosen long life without glory, and clearly it's because he's not getting the honor he deserves. This choice, if it is one, is reversed in Book 18 when Achilles learns of the

death of Patroclus. Here he regrets that his anger has made him choose *neither* glory nor long life but rendered him useless. But now that he is moved to revenge, he embraces his own death, which he knows must follow it.

In *Tantalus* Achilles hears his mother's prophecy onstage and is instantly poisoned for the rest of his life. He pleads (66), "Make me immortal, Mother," but she cannot. There is, we know, more than one reason why Achilles is coarse, but knowledge of his choice seems to intensify his brutality. When he heals Telephus, Achilles looks death in the face—his own death:

The poison that I breathed
Was not his but my mother's,

he says (112), and he means the poison of prophetic knowledge. Twice he says he's tempted to stay home, but in the end he's driven to prove his courage, which he feels some people doubt because they too know the prophecy.

In Homer, then, the narrative arc is from a clear commitment to honor to wavering and back again to honor, and both shifts are motivated by incidents in the plot. Achilles recollects the fate his mother revealed at times when it rhetorically supports his bid for honor. It is notoriously difficult to sustain a psychological interpretation of this in Homer. But Barton, simultaneously creator and interpreter—indeed he wants us to think about whether there's any difference—asks himself how knowledge of his own death would affect the inner life of a man, and the answer is that it poisons his happiness. Knowledge he would rather not have makes Achilles capable of only cowardice or savagery.

My second example concerns Iphigenia and sacrifice. In *Tantalus* as you know, the Nurse tells how a stag appeared on the altar in place of Iphigenia just when she was to be sacrificed. (Actually, Electra gives this report in Barton's text, but never mind.)

Greek tradition knows of the substitution and of Iphigenia's afterlife as a priestess among the savage Taurians, who practice human sacrifice. In his *Iphigenia among the Taurians* Euripides does want us to imagine the feelings of a girl who lives with the memory that her father was ready to kill her. The initial question is not unlike Barton's in the case of Achilles and prophecy: how does it cohere? But the answer is quite different. In Euripides, Iphigenia's one hope is that her brother Orestes is still alive. When a dream convinces her he's not, she says that although kinship made her kind to Greeks in the past, now she is hardened against them. This turns out to be a set-up. When confronted with captive Greeks onstage, Iphigenia instantly melts in pity. The mistrust and hatred she was supposed to feel but didn't she later pretends in order to dupe the barbarian king.

As I turn to *Tantalus* I must first tell you that the production we've seen, *Iphigenia in Denver* if you will, alters Barton's conception beyond recognition. In the amputated Tenth Play, Iphigenia returns and holds herself responsible for all the world's sorrow because her self-chosen sacrifice propelled the Greeks to war. She chose death because her illicit love with Agamemnon, hinted at in the Denver production but nowhere near as clear as it becomes in Barton's Tenth Play, had killed her happiness. Iphigenia, by the way, knew that this union was not incestuous—or at least not as incestuous as it seemed to Agamemnon—because she knew, as he did not, that her real parents were Helen and Theseus. Iphigenia further reveals in Play Ten that although the Taurian rites were loathsome, she enjoyed them because of what the Greeks had done to her. These revelations come as Barton builds an unbearably tense and horrible climax involving Orestes, Iphigenia, Erigone, and the chorus as Furies—a whole generation of Tantalid misery not seen here in Denver. In this context Iphigenia

acknowledges the taint of the pus of Telphus, which begins to look rather like original sin. “None of us are innocent,” she says before her mysterious exit.

In Euripides, then, Iphigenia’s feelings towards Greeks and family turn out to be a foil for innocence that is *not* lost. The drama moves towards an unproblematic reunion with her brother. Barton’s Iphigenia begins with incest and goes downhill from there. Poisoned near the beginning of the cycle, she sinks into corruption and despair. Another crucial contrast concerns religious ritual. In Euripides, not only do the Attic substitutes for human sacrifice have a salvific effect, but the near-sacrifice of Orestes and the partly false, partly true cleansing of the Taurian image of Artemis can be read as transitions to an improved human condition. Barton will have none of this. His Iphigenia has a cynical take on the removal of Taurian Artemis, and sacrificial ritual is merely an advanced stage of her degradation.

My third example concerns Cassandra, sex, and prophecy. In Greek tragedy, as in *Tantalus* Cassandra is defined by her refusal of sexuality. The rejected god Apollo inspires her with prophecy but makes others refuse to believe anything she says. That Agamemnon chose Cassandra for his war-prize is also Greek tradition. In Euripides’ *Trojan Women* the Greek herald states baldly that the king’s motive was erotic and hints that he was aroused by Cassandra’s status as a virgin priestess. Such things, you see, are certainly not unthinkable for Euripides, but again he uses the conceit quite differently. In *Trojan Women* Cassandra makes a famous entrance. Dressed as both a bride and a maenad, she sings an ecstatic song that is simultaneously a wedding-song and a ritual lament. Before leaving the stage a little later, she strips herself of the emblems of her sacred office. This stripping unmistakably figures sexual violation (in contrast to the scene in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* where the same action mainly signifies that Cassandra goes to her death with open eyes). In Euripides, she is Bride of Hades,

sex-toy of Agamemnon, and instrument of Trojan revenge, since jealousy will cause Clytemnestra to kill the proud conqueror of Troy.

Tantalus operates with the same background but shows us, in Play Seven, that Agamemnon's interest in Cassandra was no casual dalliance. Because he believes her prophecy of his death, the two begin to move towards genuine intimacy. First Agamemnon, whose own marriage was founded on rape, refuses to take Cassandra by force. On stage, that is, he refuses to brand her as a slave or to remove her mask against her will. Moments later, when she has removed her cloak and is revealed to be wearing the sexy yellow dress of sacrifice, like Iphigenia among others, the stage direction calls for her to sing, in Greek, the song I referred to from the *Trojan Women* By holding a torch for Agamemnon, literally, she transcends the limit that has defined her and comes into "the Now." The Denver production interprets this as slipping into something more comfortable. Once Cassandra is in the Now, Agamemnon happily joins her there. Barton's text, I have to tell you, has Agamemnon deliver a cold shower in the form of his warm cloak, though what happens later on board ship is textually an open question. Anyway, what is done in bed with bodies, as Hecuba put it earlier in the play (331), is only part of the story. We mustn't miss the singing of the Muses as Agamemnon tells Cassandra

Maybe one day what's lost
Will be found again.

The attempt to recuperate a lost state, the substitution of one body for another in an endless cycle, the creation of a story by finding it written within ourselves—these are all crucial themes that climax here.

In Greek tragedy, then, Cassandra is a prophetic virgin priestess, and violating her and killing her are equally offenses against the god. It's almost unnecessary to add

that personal fulfillment is not in the cards for her. In *Tantalus* Agamemnon refuses to rape her. The god leaves her (perhaps only temporarily), and Cassandra consents to the removal of her mask, tantamount to accepting sexuality and the present while losing her connection to the divine.

I want to return to that song. I didn't mention that one of Barton's stage directions in Play Five calls for Cassandra to sing the same song in Greek while Neoptolemus, disguised as the fetching Pyrrha, speaks it in English. This is while Neoptolemus-as-Pyrrha is seducing Priam. Cassandra, we know, is always misunderstood, and Priam—he of the subtle mind except when it's not his mind he's thinking with—misreads the song as Apollo's will that he should sleep with Pyrrha. Thus the scene anticipates the destructive aspect of the wedding torch and Cassandra's song. When she sings the song for Agamemnon, the marriage aspect comes to the fore, as accepting sexuality makes her for the first time fully human. The destructive aspect does not disappear, however. Agamemnon's violation not only of his vow of abstinence, but especially of the deep, complex love he shared with Clytemnestra, will lead to his murder.

It is to that deep and complex love that I turn now for my fourth and last example, Clytemnestra's first marriage. Euripides is the first author to tell us that Clytemnestra was married to another man before Agamemnon and bore him a son, and that Agamemnon murdered both the husband and the son, raped Clytemnestra, and then received her hand in marriage from Tyndareus as though nothing had happened. He may indeed have invented all this, though no one can swear it didn't occur in the works of Stesichorus or some other archaic poet. Anyway, the story appears suddenly in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* at a moment when Agamemnon is no longer hiding his plan to sacrifice his daughter, and Clytemnestra has squared off to plead for her life.

Clytemnestra tells of her first marriage to impress upon Agamemnon what a model wife she has been since. She doesn't talk of love—only fidelity, industry, and production of children. Her point is that she's had enough. She exchanged her birth family for a first conjugal family, and her first conjugal family for a second, but she will *not* trade Iphigenia for Helen, an innocent girl for a bad woman, her own daughter for Menelaus' adulterous wife. A fair exchange for Helen would be Hermione or a Greek girl chosen at random. If Agamemnon goes through with the sacrifice, he will force her, Clytemnestra, to become evil, as, according to her, he did *not* do in the first round of violence.

Tantalus makes something fascinating and crucially important out of this bizarre material. In the first play, Clytemnestra comes onstage with her first-born and rhapsodizes over him:

Women, look on my first child,
The best and the sweetest
Ever born to a mortal woman.
Men love to search for the First Things
As if they were some mystery,
But a woman as she suckles
Knows what they really are.

After a narrative of Agamemnon's brutal actions, Clytemnestra enters again and impressively curses him. Now contrite, Agamemnon vows to give Clytemnestra a new life and make his own a better one. Although Clytemnestra is in no mood to hear such promises now, she confirms in Play Two that Agamemnon is permanently changed and pronounces herself happier than any living woman:

Women have to learn
Not to let the past torment them,

she says (87). The Denver production makes her unbelievable when she says she is faithful to her lord (86), but I think this is a mistake. She says (87),

When something is lost
That can never be found again
It is best to forget it.

If she didn't mean this, Agamemnon's attempt to recuperate what's lost with Cassandra wouldn't matter as it does.

In the course of Play Two, Clytemnestra's spontaneous and genuine kindness to Telephus brings poison on several of the principals and especially Orestes.

Agamemnon attempts to console her:

If we had not done as we did
We would not have been human

and Clytemnestra replies:

Yes, we have been human;
Perhaps that is the mistake.

In Euripides, then, the shocking revelation of Clytemnestra's first marriage comes late, at a point where it mainly does three things: it tells us that the relationship of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra was founded on violence, it points ahead to future violence, and it exposes the Greek war rhetoric as hypocritical. Those who would punish Trojans for stealing women are led by a stealer of women. In *Tantalus* we learn of these events near the beginning, at their proper place in narrative time. The scene builds to a curse that reverberates through later plays, but it also has more complex effects. Agamemnon's vow to make his life a better one leads to his oath to retrieve Helen and not to sack Troy. Clytemnestra's insistence on this oath, with its deadly consequences, is an ironic manifestation of her curse. At the same time, Plays Two and Three really do show us a Clytemnestra who has learned to accept loss, to love and to forget. So there is a reconciliation, but instead of being merely and unconvincingly asserted as in Euripides, it is enacted and supported by a well-developed cluster of themes, such as being human by virtue of making mistakes, working against odds to

undo mistakes, and finally compounding mistakes by learning lessons from them that only perpetuate the cycle of violence. Thus Agamemnon's refusal to rape again leads to the tenderness which motivates Clytemnestra's murderous jealousy.

All human mistakes, it seems, depend on the original mistake of Tantalus. Barton introduces the myth—with both familiar and unfamiliar elements—in a part of Play Two that has been moved to the Denver production's perfunctory Epilogue. I can give only the briefest account of its connections to my four examples. The sin of Tantalus is to

hope to become god-like
Without first understanding
What it is to be human. (81-2)

We saw Achilles longing to be immortal and finding his life ruined by knowledge of mortality. Cassandra is ruined by divine knowledge in a different way but does learn what it is to be human. The Iphigenia story picks up the theme of a parent's crime against a child. But though the shoulder of Pelops was restored, Iphigenia can never be made whole. As Clytemnestra suckled her first child, she knew better than any man what the First Things are (51), but when she lost him and thought she could replace love of a child with love of a sister or love of a husband, she only caused the cycle of human misery to keep turning.

All of this is well and thoroughly imagined. In all four of my examples—and I believe they are representative—John Barton has gone in deep and completely transformed Greek myth. He has made it more inward-looking, more psychologically coherent in ways familiar to us. Where is it written? “Within us | and in the Muses' songs.” Cassandra's words (364) can serve as an epigraph, and indeed the point is fairly obvious. We are also meant to see that the writing has been in us, as Agamemnon says, since we were children. Barton makes myth formative and organically active as

human motivation in the body of the plays. Achilles' poisonous insight into his mortality, Iphigenia's repulsive yet moving degradation, Cassandra's liberation through acceptance of sexuality, and Clytemnestra's attempt to build a good life on a rotten foundation—these are things memorably enacted before our eyes and interconnected with all the long arcs of meaning in *Tantalus*—

—But they are not very Greek. While a modern audience will embrace the artistic values of human complexity and organic function, it's worth contemplating some values *Tantalus* does not embrace. So far I have spoken only very vaguely of a rhetorical or emblematic function of my examples in their Greek contexts. There is more to be said—much more—but I only have time to throw out questions we may wish to pursue in discussion. I said Achilles uses prophecy as rhetorical support for his claim to honor or glory, Greek *kleos*. Does Barton's text leave room for heroic *kleos*? A big question, but much suggests that it does not. I'll only mention one of the last words on the subject, Andromache's anti-heroic creed spoken at the end of Play Eight to Molossus—who, by the way, is not even Achilles' descendant in *Tantalus*.

What Barton's text chooses not to embrace is equally clear in the case of Iphigenia. It is religion: both the healing power of ritual action, and the purification of theology which some Greeks in Euripides' day felt as an urgent need and in which he takes some part in his *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. It may seem paradoxical to ask, but is God dead in *Tantalus*?

Similarly, taking Cassandra is usually an offense against the gods in Greek sources. In presenting it as an offense against a deep human bond of love, Barton plays down the element of divine outrage. Again, is this a general tendency in *Tantalus* or is it rather a case of two compatible levels of explanation? Can we distinguish between religious metaphor and religion and say that *Tantalus* has one but not the other?

Finally, Clytemnestra. In Euripides, Clytemnestra made a point that perhaps needed to be made in her culture: a woman, for all that she's a counter in the "traffic in women," may choose to regard her child as irreplaceable. In *Tantalus* the wisdom of women often consists of accommodating to unwanted sex, Thetis being the paradigm case. This point has come up before and will come up again in our discussions, as it should. But I'm interested in the fact that Clytemnestra does demand the return of an irreplaceable individual, her sister Helen. My question is whether Barton systematically replaces one bond with another. The unusual importance he gives to Priam's sister Hesione is obvious. I also find many parent-child bonds that are either too strong—Thetis and Achilles, Agamemnon and Iphigenia—or too weak—Tyndareus and Clytemnestra, Clytemnestra and Orestes, Helen and Hermione. Some are both: Agamemnon loves Electra too little just as she loves him too much. Is there a parent-child bond that is just right? Andromache and Molossus seem to me the best candidates, and here the point, I take it, is that neither of them is Greek and neither of them belongs to the House of Tantalus.

But I must stop, after adding a brief word of thanks. Paul Cartledge wondered a little while ago whether I feel like Sisyphus. If you'll allow me another, **bolder** comparison—this is a very Greek game, by the way, both the punning and the comparisons—I'd say you should compare me rather to Odysseus. In organizing this symposium, I've wandered a little, had some adventures and gotten to know the minds of men and women, but in the end I washed up on the sandy beach of an earthly paradise. Like Odysseus among the Phaeacians, I'm being given a chance to tell my part of the story, loaded with treasure, and soon, no doubt, put on a fast ship back to my patient wife and children. Also like Odysseus in some versions, however, I will leave home again if given a chance to work with people as generous and thoroughly

professional as my new friends here at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. To all of you, and especially to Donald Seawell and Debra Pollock, a heartfelt “Thank You.”