

Drinking from the Sources: *Tantalos*, Epic and Myth

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I would like to express warm thanks to Donald Seawell and the DCPA, and to the Department of Classics at the University of Colorado, especially the organizer of this panel, Professor John Gibert, for bringing all of us to this remarkable theatrical event, as well as for their generous hospitality. Let me add that as a classicist, I find it quite unusual to venture my thoughts about a text in the presence of its living author; while obviously a great opportunity to have some difficult questions answered, it also produces some anxiety: Homer or Euripides could never tell me that I got it all wrong!

John Barton has said that *Tantalus* is many things. On one level, of course, it is an imaginative and provocative recreation of the story of the Trojan War and its aftermath; on another level, in my reading, it is a grand play on story-making itself. This aspect is considerably more prominent in Barton's longer text of *Tantalus* than it is in Sir Peter Hall and Colin Teevan's adaptation for performance; and so I will often refer to the *published* version of the work, or compare it with the *performed* version.

I have three aims in this paper. First, to give a birds-eye view of *Tantalus*' ancient literary sources, especially the so-called Epic Cycle, which is mentioned several times in the plays. Second, to point out that the text brings these sources to our attention in some strikingly self-conscious ways, producing an effect on the audience that is quite different from other modes of presenting myths. And third, to consider how all this self-consciousness about sources affects the internal audience, the nine girls on the beach, which I think is a key to what each version of *Tantalus* is up to.

First, then, the sources. While *Tantalus* is unquestionably both new and innovative, John Barton has based almost every turn of plot on ancient Greek literary sources. Several of Barton's plays, especially *Iphigenia*, *Priam*, *Odysseus*, and *Hermione*, are based largely on four Euripidean tragedies that dramatize the fates of women before and after the Trojan War: *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Trojan Women*, *Hecuba*, and *Andromache*. (The sources being used here are somewhat eerily alluded to, when we hear characters intermittently speaking lines in the original Greek.)

Barton's adaptations are loose, of course: the originals are cut, pasted, twisted, interleaved with each other and with other ancient sources, and otherwise freely varied, in order to bring out issues most relevant to this production and to our time and sensibility. For example, in Hall's production of *Tantalus* the horrors of war are dramatized especially in the prolonged scene where the Trojan Women are stripped and branded; in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, the chorus focus much more on leaving their homeland and going to foreign parts. Adaptations of this sort are very familiar in modern theater—we might think of O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* or Anouilh's *Antigone*—and we hear much more about this phenomenon in Helene Foley's paper at this symposium.

But *Tantalus* does not draw only on fifth-century Athenian dramas like these, and even less from the earlier Homeric epics about Trojan War heroes, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Rather, like his character the Poet, who has a reduced role as the Story-Teller and sometimes the Nurse in the performance version, Barton draws from a whole gamut of ancient sources. For example, he makes much of a famous fragment by the archaic poet Stesichorus, who claims that the real

Helen never went to Troy—a famous twist to the dominant story that was later dramatized by Euripides in his tragicomic *Helen*.

But especially prominent among Barton's sources are the fragmentary remains, the "leftovers" of the so-called Epic Cycle—*leipsana epikou kuklou* in Greek, as we hear the source named several times during the drama. The Epic Cycle refers to a set of shorter epics, over a dozen of them, that were at some unknown point collected and put in "chronological" order, giving accounts of events from the marriage of Earth and Sky all the way to the end of the Heroic Age. Attributed to a number of poets, the poems of the Epic Cycle were composed in the same poetic language and meter as the Homeric poems, but are considered to have taken shape later than the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*.

The Cyclic Epics deal with various mythical and heroic stories, including the cosmic Battle of the Titans, the fates of that unfortunate (though close-knit) family of Oedipus, and the adventures of Odysseus after his return home to Ithaca. Five of these mini-epics are immediately concerned with the Trojan War saga, filling in parts of the story that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* leave out, and in these five Cyclic Epics we find our earliest versions of many of the myths dramatized in *Tantalus*. Here is a summary of their contents:

Cypria. What happened before the war and in its early stages: the judgement of Paris, the Paris and Helen story, how the Greek kings were collected to fight at Troy (including the stories of the reluctant Odysseus and of Achilles hidden with the women on Scyros), and the story of Telephus' wound and its cure.

Aethiopis. Events that happened right after the story of the *Iliad*: Achilles' defeat of the Amazons' leader Penthesileia, then of Memnon king of the Aethiopians, followed by the death of Achilles himself. (These are the tales the Story-Teller is recounting to the women on the beach when they ask him to move on to the story of the Trojan Horse.)

Little Iliad. Neoptolemus is brought to Troy and given the arms of his father Achilles. The Greeks make the Wooden Horse and pretend to leave Troy in defeat. The Trojans take in the Horse and celebrate.

Sack of Ilium. The Trojans debate about whether to take in the wooden horse; when they do so, their city is destroyed. Events include Neoptolemus' slaughter of Priam (though Neoptolemus' role here is quite different from his cross-dressing seduction of Priam in *Tantalus!*), the murder of little Astyanax, the sacrifice of Polyxena at Achilles' tomb. Neoptolemus takes Hector's wife Andromache as his war prize.

Homecomings. What happened to the Greek kings on the way back from Troy, or after they got home, including the murders of Agamemnon and Cassandra back in Mycenae. Menelaus and Helen's stay in Egypt is also recounted, and their return to Sparta. Not least important for our purposes, this epic also included the story of Tantalus and his punishment.

I wish I could tell you that translations of these lesser-known Trojan War epics were readily available. In fact, what remains of them now are short summaries by the Late Antique philosopher and scholar Proclus (5th century AD), supplemented by a few short poetic passages

that happened to be quoted by later ancient authors. All told, less than 20 pages of fragments and summary for the five epics.

In Barton's drama, the phrase "Epic Cycle" develops a significance deeper than the title of a collection of lost mini-epics. It comes to mean the ever-repeating "cycle" of wars, vengeance, suffering, betrayal—the cycle human history can't seem to escape. When Agamemnon tells Cassandra of his belief that Zeus rules and is just, she tells him there is no justice; Zeus himself stole power from his father, who stole it from his:

"What has happened already / Will happen again. / That is god-law, Agamemnon, / And it's man-law on earth. / Epikou Kuklou Leipsana." In this view, history is *not* a story of development, but a circle inscribed by unchanging human nature. Throughout *Tantalus* characters talk about doing what is "natural" or "only human:" raping, looting, destroying in war, making major mistakes in political, military, or private life. Thus "epic cycle" becomes a way to suggest that such things will repeat themselves endlessly.

Now we are already on to my second point, how *Tantalus* highlights its use of ancient sources. Barton does not only draw from many sources to provide the subject matter for *Tantalus*. He also thematizes the fact that there are multiple versions of "what happened." In fact, I found this to be one of the dominant issues of his text, and one of the major ways in which the performance version differs from the published version of *Tantalus*.

In the prologue of Barton's play cycle, the poet tells the beach girls that there are two streams, two sources of song to drink from—Memory (Mnemosyne) and forgetfulness (Lete). The problem, if it is a problem, is that you can't tell which is which, and both are delicious. It is impossible to tell truth from fiction; each can become a good story. The women on the beach, like the Poet himself, help themselves to both sources. The published version of *Tantalus* is full of such references, including a number of visual and verbal jokes about swigging from the sources, which are reflected in the wine bottles often seen in the performance version, as well as with the little Castalian Spring from which witnesses must drink at Helen's trial in Delphi.

Speaking of Delphi, the prophet Calchas, in line with his quest to separate truth from fiction about Helen, is very particular about which version of a story to cite. In the published text of *Tantalus*, Calchas insists on using only the "best sources" – the Perriers or Evians, as it were, of story.

But *Tantalus* itself, like Barton's Poet, is much more democratic. As we have seen, the stories presented here are most certainly not based on a single or consistent source, let alone a canonical one. The Poet or Story-teller expressly tells the nine girls that he is trying to fit together bits and pieces of the story, or to work out certain problems where the sources don't fit together. This allows the freedom to make up a motive, for example, to explain how young Neoptolemus became enraged enough to kill Priam and many others.

This is a creative process, to be sure. But talking about it (which again happens even more often in John Barton's text than in Colin Teevan's performance script) has a strong and strange effect for the audience. Recognizing that variants exist not only leads to creativity, but also undercuts the idea of authority, finality, or truth, in the stories dramatized here. *Tantalus* sometimes tantalizes us with uncertainties, explicitly mentioning that the stories will be told in different ways: Did Clytemnestra really murder Agamemnon, or did Aegisthus do it alone? Was Iphigenia really the daughter of Helen and not Clytemnestra? And most of all, did Helen go willingly with Paris, or did she even go to Troy at all?

This uncertainty is very different from the effect of Homeric epic, which can rely on the Muses for its authority. "You are goddesses, you are present, you know everything," says the

poet when asking for their aid. “We only hear what is said, and know nothing” (*Iliad* 2.485-6). The Muses can transmit their first-hand knowledge of events to the poet, who then makes the past deeds and heroes present before the mind’s eye of his audience.

Plato’s little dialogue *Ion* gives us insight into this relationship from the perspective of a professional performer of Homeric epic in the classical period, the rhapsode Ion. In response to his interlocutor Socrates, Ion explains how vividly he presents the poems to his audiences: “Whenever I tell a pitiful tale, my eyes fill with tears; and when I tell something frightening or amazing, my hair bristles with fear, and my heart leaps... I see them [my audience] from my platform every time, crying or looking amazed, astounded by what I am saying” (*Ion* 535c-e).

We even have a picture of the ideal performer-audience relationship from the epic poet himself. In the *Odyssey*, after Odysseus tells his great tale of wanderings to his hosts the Phaeacians, there is a pause in the action: “Thus he spoke, and all grew silent; they were held in thrall through the shadowy halls” (*Odyssey* 13.1-2). Homeric epic is spoken by a convincing, authoritative voice, then, very different from Barton’s (and his Poet’s) emphasis on inconsistencies and gaps in the sources. Most Athenian tragedies (though not all) likewise present a seamless tale that does not raise questions about other ways to tell the story.

Evaluating and criticizing sources, recognizing that a story can be told in different ways, as happens so often in *Tantalus*—most of all in the trial of Helen (one of Barton’s novel twists to the plot)—this kind of question-raising is present already in some ancient sources. I have already mentioned the archaic poet Stesichorus, who said that Helen did *not* go to Troy. In a much more sweeping statement, we hear in the epic *Theogony* (“Birth of the Gods”) how the poet Hesiod encountered the Muses—his sources for this poem of how the gods came to be—who boasted that they could tell either the truth or lies like the truth (not unlike the two streams/two sources of poetry in Barton’s prologue). And then the poet goes on to tell the story whose basis has just been deconstructed; postmodernism is not so new in the world.

Almost too appropriately, one famous ancient example of source criticism concerns Tantalus himself. The 5th-century BC poet Pindar, celebrating a winner in the Olympics, protests that a particular myth is too brutal and blasphemous to be true: the gods cannot have acted as they were said to. Tantalus was supposed to have fed his son Pelops to the gods, to test their gastronomic I.Q.: would they know they were being served human flesh? According to the sources, Demeter absentmindedly took a bite of the mortal flesh. Not so, says Pindar: what really happened is a tale of divine love, rather than filicide, fooled gods, and forbidden food. Poseidon, says Pindar, had fallen in love with Pelops and carried him off to Olympus. Tantalus’ jealous neighbors simply made up the story that the boy had disappeared because his father cooked him up for the gods. This is perhaps Pindar’s gentler way of saying “To Hell with the sources,” as the Chorus / Women of the West will do at the end of the performance version.

All this play with variant versions, important on many levels in Barton’s work, has an especially important bearing on the large questions of truth that are raised by *Tantalus*, as a work that recognizes equally possible variants rather than a true and consistent “original.” In the absence of narrative authority, what can story provide? If not historical truth, then perhaps another sort of understanding? And this brings me to my third and final point, the effect of *Tantalus*’ self-conscious variants on the young women of the beach.

At the end of the *Neoptolemus* play in both versions, the nine young women decide they want to enter into the story; in Peter Hall’s version, this is the arresting scene where they mask themselves in full view of the audience, and are transformed from outside observers to full participants. In Barton’s text, it is suggested that the nine do this in order to make their own

version of events. Disgusted with the Greeks' planned deception of the Trojans at the end of play 4 (Neoptolemus), they want to get into the play themselves instead of sitting quietly away from the dangerous action. As they say to the Poet: "If we went in / we would soon learn the truth of it. / We could change the whole story / Just as you have!"

But rather than putting on masks, they once again "drink from the sources" before entering the world of Troy. They are optimistic about what they will accomplish, "We are going in! / We shall make our own story." But evidently it is more difficult to change the story than they thought: when we see them next, at the beginning of Play 5 (*Priam*), they have already adapted to the story as the sources tell it. Instead of warning the Trojans, they have now become the Trojan women, a vociferous group that ends up dancing the treacherous Horse into the city. The girls' change of direction is a comment on the compelling enchantment, or narrative logic, of the traditional story.

The power of the story is a theme repeated often in *Tantalus*, in contrast to its interest in variant versions. Things sometimes happen as they do "because that is the story!" And this idea is reflected clearly in the magnetic power of dramatic illusion that keeps pulling us, the audience, into the plays, despite the fact that they are so explicitly marked as plots, even fictions, manipulated by the Poet for, or with, his audience on the beach! We know they are "just" stories, which could be, and have been, told otherwise, yet they engage us nonetheless. As I read the script, I was curious about how this would play out on stage, and was surprised to find how strong the pull was on me and, I think, on the rest of the audience—until the illusion was broken again.

Back now to the end of the performance version. After observing and then suffering through the dismal events of the drama, the Chorus, now playing the Women of the West, are certainly *not* held in thrall by what the sources say. They look for a better solution: their own. Helen has just been acquitted in the Delphic court of the prophet Calchas, but they refuse to accept the verdict. Convinced that Helen is guilty of running off with Paris to start the war that has caused so much suffering, they start to rip apart the oracle and attack Calchas, Apollo's spokesman. Throughout the production, Calchas has spoken authoritatively about what the gods have decreed and how things must be: Iphigenia must be sacrificed, Neoptolemus must be brought to Troy to end the war, Orestes must marry Hermione. Now, at the point of being toppled from his Delphic seat, Calchas desperately warns the Chorus that what they are doing is "not in the sources"—meaning that they are going too far, transgressing the inherited story, not acting as it "must be." But the Chorus want what they call justice, which is the death of Helen, and are not interested in following any traditional version of the story. Crying "To Hell with the sources!" they attack and overthrow both Calchas and Delphi itself.

In this last action of the performance version, the "Epic Cycle" of vengeance and destruction continues, but within a larger framework than before. The Women of the West oppose the gods, do violence to the story (the "sources"), and—as the Story-teller puts it—end the Golden Age. When they get out of the story and become nine girls again in the final scene, they realize that something has been lost; they want the stories to return, but the Story-teller and his little entourage are leaving. Is it possible that something dimly optimistic for humankind remains here, in the young women's declaration of independence from the way things "really happened" or "have to be"? I am still pondering this possibility after seeing the performance.

I conclude with a look at the end of John Barton's *Tantalus*. In his published version, the framing device of the Poet and the young women is considerably more developed and complex than in the production version. At the end of Barton's drama, when the judgment of Helen has been reached and Delphi has been destroyed by an earthquake (not by the angry Women of the

West), the girls on the beach / Chorus take on the names and attributes of the nine Muses. For a while they enjoy a burst of Dionysian revelry and freedom. But then a Boatman, Charon-like, comes to take them back, and they leave the sandy beach, returning (I take it) to mortal life after a prolonged “time-out” on the island of myth. At the very end of Barton’s drama, the audience hears multifarious birdsong and clanking of metal, noises of nature and culture (especially warfare) in which, we are told, the mind of Zeus may perhaps be discerned. And finally all the Muses too—the new Muses?—are heard singing.

To me Barton’s polyphonic ending suggests that drinking deeply of many sources, as the nine women have done and obviously as the playwright and dramaturge have done, provides the educated freedom that allows for a robust re-visioning of the old stories. As with the performance ending, so too in Barton’s text, there is no triumph of reason over blind tradition. But here perhaps we find a little hope for humankind, especially for our creative potential: the possibility to celebrate, question, update, re-imagine, improve, laugh at, the given patterns of human hi/story. Whether those “all too human” patterns can ultimately be changed remains to be seen. At least, Barton’s multi-sourced *Tantalus* does what it promised to do at the beginning: asks us to consider how we can know what is true in a world of conflicting voices, and to imagine how things might have been, or might be, otherwise.

Finally, a brief epilogue. The celebrated differences between the Hall / Teevan version and the Barton version of *Tantalus* demonstrate as vividly as do the ancient sources how Greek myths develop and renew themselves as different narrative twists, different motives, different emphases are given to recognizably “the same” stories. The ancient stories and their meanings are infinitely adaptable, it seems, and we are privileged indeed to be able to see, and read, two new versions of the story of the house of Tantalus.