

*Tantalus from the Perspective of Modern Adaptation and Remaking of Greek Tragedy*  
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As I am sure many of you in this audience know, John Barton's *Tantalus* has emerged in the wake of a renewal of interest during the last 25 years in performing and in adapting, remaking, or recreating Greek drama worldwide--not only in Europe and the US, but in Asia, especially in Japan, in Africa, and in South America. Today I'd like to try to locate *Tantalus* within this larger context and use my examination of the broader phenomenon to raise for discussion some of the issues and questions that may be provoked by Barton's cycle of plays.

To give you some perspective on the range of this revival of interest in Greek tragedy, let me point out that Barton has put himself in the company of some of the most important poets, playwrights, choreographers, composers, and directors of the twentieth century. I don't expect any of you to find the whole of the following list (in alphabetical order) of especially prominent names familiar, but you'll probably recognize enough to get my point: Maxwell Anderson, Jean Anouilh, W. H. Auden, Robert Auletta and Peter Sellars, Steven Berkoff, Lee Breuer, Bertolt Brecht, Caryl Churchill with David Lan, Jean Cocteau, Jules Dassin, H. D., Rita Dove, T. S. Eliot, Dario Fo and Franca Rame, Brian Friel, Athol Fugard, André Gide, Jean Giradoux, Martha Graham, Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney, Hugo von Hofmannsthal (with Richard Strauss), Hans Henny Jahnn, Robert Lowell, Archibald McLeish, Charles Mee, Ariane Mnouchkine, Heiner Müller, Eugene O'Neill, Carl Orff, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Tom Paulin, Ezra Pound, David Rabe, Jack Richardson, Jean Paul Sartre, Richard Schechner, Andrei Serban, Wole Soyinka, Igor Stravinsky, Peter Stein, Suzuki Tadashi, Mikis Theodorakis, Lars van Trier, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Thornton Wilder, W. B. Yeats, and Marguerite Yourcenar.

What have these artists found interesting in Greek drama, especially tragedy? Earlier in the 20th century, I would say that the attraction to Greek tragedy was based largely on several particular opportunities. First, performing Greek tragedy could provide a facade for staging political responses to various current events and issues, including a way around censorship. *Antigones* were particularly attractive from this perspective to playwrights like Jean Anouilh and Bertolt Brecht during WW II; more recently there's been a rash of Irish Antigones responding to the difficulties in Northern Ireland; the composer Mikis Theodorakis used his recent opera version of *Antigone* to look back on the Greek colonels' regime in the late 60s/early 70s, during which his music was banned and he himself was imprisoned or exiled. Non-Western artists such as the Japanese directors Suzuki Tadashi and Yukio Ninagawa have begun to use performances or new versions of Greek tragedy to stage a dialogue between East and West. *Tantalus* retains this political dimension in its exploration of nationalism, imperialism, leadership, or pollution, but in a far less specific, more generalizable form.

Second, Freud's identification of Greek myths such as those relating to Oedipus or Electra as archetypal from the perspective of the development of the human personality has proved irresistible to poets ranging from Eugene O'Neill, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, or T.S. Eliot to the more recent *Greek* of Steven Berkoff. In this last play a working class Eddy (Oedipus), upon discovering his true identity, surprisingly wishes to continue in his happy marriage to his now

middle class mother. Barton only flirts with this approach when, for example, he has Helen's uncertain identity explained in terms of her swan father and her birth from an egg. The psychology of his characters is far more closely tied to a broader set of themes and issues.

Jean-Paul Sartre (*Les Mouches* or *The Flies*) Thornton Wilder (*The Alcestiad*) André Gide (*Philoctetes*) and Archibald McLeish (*Heracles*) adapted Greek tragedy to express various philosophical or spiritual agendas. These playwrights found themselves attracted to the over-determined world of Greek tragedy for its ability to frame, even if in pessimistic terms, a discussion of possible meanings to human action. Barton has much in common with this group and I'll come back to comparing him with Sartre shortly.

Recently other motivations for adapting Greek tragedy have emerged as well. Greek tragedy tends to express larger political, social, and philosophical issues through intrafamilial conflict, and especially through relations or conflict between men and women. The opportunity to adapt tragedy to explore gender issues has proved irresistible to many-- too many to enumerate at this point-- such as recent adapters of *Medea* of plays centered on the troubles of the house of Atreus, and of *Hippolytus* (including the later versions of the myth in Seneca and Racine's *Phaedra*), Barton's *Tantalus* among them.

Similarly, the relation of the chorus to the aristocratic protagonists of tragedy has provided both in the original Greek plays and in modern versions a platform on which to explore issues relating to class and political power. One of the most interesting is Brecht's *Antigone* in which the complicit chorus ends up as guilty as the protagonists for the tragic disaster. Barton's chorus, due to its evolving relation to the action, raises a different set of issues, although it does, like Brecht's chorus, become to some degree responsible for events once it fully enters into them.

Greek plots have stirred interest among 20th century playwrights not only for their archetypal psychological power, but for the kind of economic and organic tragic form identified by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. Indeed, the non-psychological presentation of character in Greek drama, which, as Aristotle argued, ideally serves the action, rather than being explored for itself, has offered a starting point for those interested in resisting the excesses of realistic drama and for representing a less reduced form of dramatic motivation. What I mean by this is that the public, political setting of Greek tragedy locates private familial struggles in a larger social environment and thus permits a political or sociological response to irresolvable extreme situations without being crudely psychological or topical. The American director Peter Sellars described in precisely these terms his motivation for producing a provocative version of Sophocles' *Ajax* (written by Robert Auletta) that met with strong political disapproval in Washington D.C. Barton does not build his action on extant Greek plots, but his approach to characterization puts *Tantalus* in this category as well.

Similarly, many playwrights have wanted to raise modern issues in the context of a literary and cultural frame that represents earlier Western civilization, but in a form like Greek tragedy that is largely devoid of complacency. Thus many recent remakings of tragedy have become a sort of dialogue between past and present in which the skeleton of Greek tragedies lurks behind new texts that fragment and undercut the myths in a modern context. I think here above all of the plays of the German playwright Heiner Müller

(*Medea* and *Landscape with Argonauts*), the American Charles Mee's *Orestes* or *Agamemnon 2*, the British team Caryl Churchill and David Lan's *A Mouthful of Birds* (based on Euripides' *Bacchæ*), or the American Richard Schechner's outrageous *Dionysus in 69* in which a fragmented Euripides' *Bacchæ* was remade and performed differently every night. Again, Barton shares, but more thematically than formally, this post-modern approach to adapting the classics.

The body of myth represented in Greek tragedy has the advantage of belonging to a pagan religious tradition no longer practiced but nevertheless familiar to a greater or lesser degree. This means that it can be radically adapted without causing the same kind of offense as would be the case with many other mythical and religious traditions. Moreover, Greek poets themselves were constantly remaking Greek myths to respond to changing social contexts. As Barton himself has remarked, this vital instability of Greek tradition itself has proved especially opportune for the creation of *Tantalus*.

Finally, aspects relating to performance have made Greek drama attractive to modern playwrights. Ancient Greek is not a spoken language. Thus all performances even of the original tragedies are in themselves adaptations and language has not proved to be the same kind of barrier that it has for adapters of Shakespeare, for example. The spareness of plot and setting that made Greek tragedy so reperformable in many ancient Mediterranean societies over many centuries continues to make it reperformable in diverse modern contexts. Moreover, Greek tragedy is full of powerful parts for women or older people who often have difficulty finding challenging roles in later drama. Above all, because of the central role of masks, music, and dance in Greek tragedy, performances and remakings of the plays have become a meeting ground for world theatrical traditions in which many of the same techniques are traditional. The French director Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* was a noteworthy example. Despite its international group of creators, its use of masks, and the explicit east-west themes in the script, the current performance of *Tantalus* takes considerably less advantage of world theater techniques than many other contemporary efforts.

To sum up then, Barton's *Tantalus* shares with remakings of Greek drama by earlier playwrights an interest in archetypal myths, in gender issues, in political, philosophical, and environmental problems, in the opportunity to stage an East-West dialogue through Greek myth, and in the vital instability of Greek mythical tradition. Barton shares, with a difference, the post-modern interest in the elusiveness of truth or justice and the impossibility of locating causality and blame. Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies* used the Orestes myth as a vehicle for existentialist philosophy and deliberately confronted Christianity, divinity, and human action through employing the outsider's perspective provided by pagan myth and religion. Barton is not making a brief for any one philosophical position, but he is deeply concerned with similar issues.

At the same time, Barton's *Tantalus* departs in certain critical respects from the work of earlier playwrights. These earlier artists have turned largely to a familiar set of myths, above all those relating to the house of Oedipus and the house of Atreus, Medea, Hippolytus, Philoctetes, and Euripides' *Bacchæ*; they have not only largely based their works on extant Greek tragedies but relied in one form or another directly on their plots. Barton turns instead to myths that are not represented in surviving epic and drama, or to the often lesser known and

non-canonical plays of Euripides such as *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, *Iphigeneia Among the Taurians*, *Helen*, *Hecuba*, and *Trojan Women*. Interestingly, Euripides' *Helen* and *Iphigeneia Among the Taurians* whose plots rescue and restore their innocent heroines to Greece, attempt not only a radical reworking of the mythical tradition but hold out and yet simultaneously undercut the possibility of some sort of redemption from the tragic past and of a shifting of blame. Indeed, the final plays in Barton's script (much of this material, including references to *Iphigeneia Among the Taurians* does not appear in the stage version) draw considerably in their tone and spirit on Euripidean "tragicomedies" that deal with the aftermath of the Trojan War.

In the light of the framework I have provided for locating *Tantalus* in 20th century remakings of Greek tragedy, I would like to use my remaining time to throw open some questions about the process of reinventing Greek tragedy. First, let's consider Barton's attempt to raise questions about truth, justice, divinity and mortal action through the lens of pagan stories and ideas. These are compelling and difficult issues. As noted earlier, Sartre's *The Flies* gives us existential philosophy as a place to stand in the face of despair in a godless and meaningless world and Greek myth as a place from which to investigate Christianity. His hero Orestes deliberately and freely chooses his traditional role in Greek myth as mother killer in order to give weight and significance to his otherwise directionless life. Barton's heroes, by contrast, stand helplessly trapped under the rock of Tantalus. Moreover, he raises philosophical questions largely without the embedded reference to contemporary religious or philosophical perspectives such as we find in Sartre. Is Barton implying that we have implicitly returned through post-modernism to a *pagan* perspective on these large questions about human action?

Second, Greek tragedy itself struggled with creating a balance between the setting of the tragedies in a remote largely imaginary, aristocratic world and the anachronistic intrusion of contemporary controversies and behavior. Euripides' plays were especially notorious for their deliberately harsh juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary. Most modern adaptations follow in his footsteps, but there is no question that the process can make an audience puzzled or uneasy, particularly in the area of gender issues. For example, take the debate between Hermione and Andromache in Barton's *Hermione*. A very similar debate in Euripides' *Andromache* also sets up Andromache as the wiser character of the two. Euripides' Andromache has learned how to adapt with dignity and humanity to humiliating slavery, whereas his Hermione throws around her dowry, her heritage, and her father Menelaus' intrusive support in a fashion that has jeopardized her already childless marriage. Euripides raises through Hermione anachronistic issues like the notorious behavior of contemporary Spartan women and the divisiveness that a large dowry creates in a marriage. His epic-style Andromache by contrast advocates an accommodation to the spouse that even an ancient Athenian would not have expected of his wife; she claims that she voluntarily suckled Hector's illegitimate children. Euripides' scene teeters between domestic comedy and an absurd nostalgia for a past world in which women were supposedly, from a male perspective, better behaved.

Barton raises similar tensions by having his Andromache, like some other female characters in *Tantalus* accommodate to a traditional female role in which a woman accepts her man (albeit a to a greater or lesser degree reformed man)

regardless of whether she chose him or was even raped by him. By contrast, his immature, angry and confused Hermione comes up with a set of objections to marriage that might be described as parodied from women's lib. Andromache may be the wiser character, but her wisdom sounds different once Hermione has made our own world intrude so heavily on the mythical one. The discomfort expressed by members of the Denver audience at the round table and symposium over the way that gender issues were presented in the performance seems to me to be in part related to problems perennially produced by the dramatic intrusion of anachronism into a more remote mythical world.

Finally, *Tantalus* again like Greek tragedy, uses Greek myth to open a dialogue about East-West relations. Unlike the stage version of *Tantalus* non-Western adaptations of Greek tragedy have often posed East and West dialogue performatively as well as verbally. The Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi's *Clytemnestra*, *Bacchae* and *Trojan Women* pointedly challenged, undercut, and created ironic bonds with his western texts. For example, Suzuki staged dialogues between characters that were spoken in both English and Japanese yet remain oddly comprehensible nevertheless. Barton's east-west dialogue seems at first almost Homericly neutral, even apolitical. In the view of his Agamemnon Troy is a "city" whereas his own Mycenae is a mere "citadel." King Priam's political aspirations make him Agamemnon's Trojan double. Yet as the plays evolve, the balance between east and west (with the possible exception of the character of Andromache) subtly shifts. Priam emerges as a pedophile; the initially complex Hecuba literally becomes a dog before our eyes in Senecan or Ovidian style, rather than retaining a frightening ambivalent claim to justice, as in Euripides. Although Barton's Greeks remain flawed by their follies and their nationalistic imperialism, they never reach the level of madness displayed in Hecuba's obsession with the Trojan horse, with revenge for her son, or with the rebuilding of Troy on bodies of its women. Yet I think that the problem with the east-west dialogue in *Tantalus* goes beyond delicate questions of political neutrality or correctness. In 20th century theater, Greek myths no longer belong to the west, and it is difficult for any western artist to stage an east west-dialogue through these myths, to say nothing of a dialogue with other world cultures, without explicitly responding to this reality.

In confronting all of these issues that are faced by modern remakers of Greek myth and drama, Barton is in good company. The problems he faced in composing *Tantalus* are as old and as fascinating as Greek tragedy itself. They remain difficult challenges nevertheless, and I shall be interested to see how the audience reacts to them.