

Supporting the Stone: The 10-Year Itch  
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I feel it would be best if I talked about my role. I first contacted John Barton in 1989, and first met him in 1990. By that time John was chewing gum, not razor blades. He may have gone back to razor blades more recently - I don't know. You will see me mentioned lavishly in the program as John Barton's Dramaturg. That is John's rather generous interpretation of what admittedly has been a strange role. I was rather more inclined to describe myself, over the years, as a research advisor, with some justice, because that brings in my first and most important point, which is that John was his own researcher throughout this project. I fulfilled the part of echo, or the wall to which one goes to talk, or the stream that babbles back at you and often babbles nonsense. When John talks or writes about the sources, these are sources that he himself has read and in which he found his inspiration for composition and variants. *Tantalus* is not just a labour of authorship as well as production; it has also been a massive labour of discovery, research, and sifting. Throughout the project John has had a succession of immensely dedicated and skilled personal assistants who have also either known Greek or known of Greek culture, and in many instances all three of us were involved in chasing problems. You will have to forgive me if I go into detail at some points in this paper; but the sources and even dramaturgy are about detail.

The last thing I did on this project was to prepare a list of the Greek passages in *Tantalus* and a transliteration of the Greek for use by directors and actors. I also, typically, made some suggestions about the speaking of Greek names throughout the cycle, perhaps the most significant of which was to avoid a modern Greek rendering of certain names if a modern Greek rendering was not going to be used throughout. But that was the last thing, and you can see that it begins to slide into production issues and pragmatics. My own records are relatively good from about 1994, and certainly the middle years of the decade were the engine-house of writing and re-writing. I don't know how many versions of the script there are, but it is worth noting that the performance script is merely the last gesture here. John himself re-designed and re-wrote regularly and repetitively. My first substantial record, which dates from 1992, is a long response I wrote to the first major synopsis of *Tantalus* that John put together, which came to me in September 1992. At this point John was thinking as much about television for the cycle of plays as about theatre. You may be interested to know that in September 1992 eighteen plays were envisaged. John was working to the hypothesis, accordingly, that they should be about 75 minutes long, with the possibility that they might be paired in an evening - so nine evenings. Theatrically, John made the points at that time that:

"The project needed to be done in some 'warehouse' context, as a piece of rough theatre, not a main-house event."

Each evening would be a three-hour show, and the evenings could be grouped accordingly in three sections called the outbreak of war, the fall of Troy, and the returns. The plays at that time were, by title and in the order of those three groupings, *Zeus, Thetis, Telephus, Agamemnon* (in the Outbreak of War); *Achilles, Polyxena, Neoptolemus, Priam, Hecuba, Ilium* (in the Fall of Troy); and *Cassandra, Clytemnestra, Menelaus, Helen,*

*Hermione, Orestes, Erigone and Hestia (or Apollo)* in the Returns. Eighteen plays, as follows:

Table of plays from the 1992 synopsis (unpublished)

Part One: Troy

The Outbreak of War

Evening I	1.	Zeus	The Beginning of All
	2.	Thetis	The Outbreak of War
Evening II	3.	Telephus	The Fleet lands in the wrong place
	4.	Agamemnon	Iphigenia is sacrificed

The Fall of Troy

Evening III	5.	Achilles	How to end the war (picks up where Homer finishes)
	6.	Polyxena	The death of Achilles
Evening IV	7.	Neoptolemus	The invaders debate whether to use the Wooden Horse
	8.	Priam	The Trojans debate whether to take it in
Evening V	9.	Hecuba	These plays are reworkings of the Epic as covered in Euripides' <i>Trojan Women</i> and <i>Hecuba</i>
	10.	Ilione	

Part Two: The Returns

Evening VI	11.	Cassandra	These three plays are very different versions of <i>Agamemnon</i> , the three <i>Electras</i> and Euripides' <i>Helen</i>
	12.	Clytemnestra	
Evening VII	13.	Menelaus	The trial of Helen at Delphi
	14.	Helen	
Evening VIII	15.	Hermione	These plays re-handle the story covered by Euripides' <i>Andromachē</i> and <i>Iphigenia in Tauris</i>
	16.	Orestes	
Evening IX	17.	Erigone	The marriage of Orestes
	18.	Hestia (or Apollo)	The End of it All

How much was written at this time? John noted at the close of the 1992 synopsis that "I have not worked on the last two plays for a couple of years," and at the beginning of the synopsis that "Many of the plays are still in an exploratory stage." If we wish to mark the relationship between then and the published script of this year, we would note that the three part structure remains:

Table of plays in published version of *Tantalus*

Prologue: Zeus

Part One: The Outbreak of War

Apollo  
Telephus  
Iphigenia

#### Part Two: The War

Neoptolemus  
Priam  
Odysseus  
Cassandra

#### Part Three: The Homecomings

Hermione  
Helen  
Erigone  
Epilogue: Zeus

The substance of the first part, in four plays, is very close, with the plays *Thetis* now *Apollo* and *Agamemnon* now *Iphigenia*. The plays *Achilles* and *Polyxena* of the synopsis dealt with the proposed marriage of Achilles to Polyxena, which was returned to retrospective narrative in the final version. The play *Hecuba* is renamed *Odysseus* in the final version, and *Ilioneis* renamed *Cassandra*. The two plays *Cassandra* and *Clytemnestra* of the 1992 synopsis dealt respectively with the planning and execution of the murder of Agamemnon, and with an elaborate version of the return of Orestes. These were effectively removed. In the final version the play *Hermione* was placed at the head of the final part of the cycle, followed by *Helen*. Two plays in the synopsis which rehandled material from plays by Euripides, *Menelaus* (based on Euripides' *Helen*) and *Orestes* (based on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* in fact), were effectively removed. The ending itself went through many, many changes.

At the time of this synopsis in 1992 John Barton was already quite clear about what he saw as the primary source for this cycle of plays, which was "the whole saga of Troy and the House of Agamemnon," as he put it, which had been covered in the lost Epic Cycle of Greece. "It is this lost cycle which *Tantalus* attempts to present in a modern form," he declared then, noting that what the Epic Cycle had covered was substantially known from summaries of one kind or another. For John it was "the whole great story" that mattered, and he listed as additional sources "Hesiod and Apollodorus and even some of the surviving fragments from the lost plays of the great classical dramatists themselves." I shall return briefly to those sources later. But the other major source, as he plainly acknowledged, was his own existing, performed cycle called *The Greeks*. "*Tantalus* derives from the cycle of plays called *The Greeks* which was presented by the RSC in 1980," the synopsis states on its second page. That relationship is important.

In my own work on dramaturgy and adaptation I tend to distinguish, usefully I feel, between primary and secondary adaptation, and disarm students and not just students by remarking that the theatre - or rather dramatic theatre - is a derivative form historically. I call primary adaptation that taken from non-theatrical material, secondary

that taken from theatrical material. So Greek tragedies, for example, are and were in many cases primary adaptations from, ironically, parts of the Epic Cycle, with the Homeric epics largely avoided: Aeschylus' tantalising, deeply lost Achilles trilogy is probably an exception in Homeric material. Many surviving tragedies are also secondary adaptations, at least in some part, revisitings of earlier tragedies on the same subject. So, we might characterise Barton and Cavander's cycle *The Greeks* as secondary adaptation, from existing Greek tragedies, while *Tantalus* in its major ambition, is an act of primary adaptation. We could say, if we choose, that John's activity over twenty years has been to move from secondary to primary adaptation in relation to a Greek drama, or a drama of Greek myth, and this is why we hear so much of the sources. It is also why John became obsessed with the move from story-telling to enactment, and with the dynamics of representation that he saw as characterising *Tantalus* throughout.

This offers some interpretative framework for the 1992 synopsis and the earlier plan to which I have referred. What John has removed from that are, by and large, major remnants of secondary adaptation, plays he had drafted which were dependent on surviving tragedies, notably in the last section. The murders of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, the meeting of Helen and Menelaus in Egypt, the *Iphigenia in Tauris* have all gone, apart from narrative references. But John is nonetheless caught, interestingly, in the web of what we can with absolute confidence call intertextuality. *Telephus* a lost play by Euripides whose plot is known to us in outline. *Iphigenia* (at Aulis), *The Trojan Women*, *Hecuba*, *Andromache* all power *Tantalus* into existence; Polyxena was the subject of tragedies. The sources that attract John are also the sources that enable Greek tragedy. The move from secondary to primary adaptation, from *The Greeks* to *Tantalus* is distinctive and purposeful, but it can by its nature never be absolute.

*The Greeks* unquestionably has the germ of *Tantalus* in it. Like *Tantalus* it was in three parts, organised as The War, The Murders, and The Gods; like *Tantalus* it had ten plays.

### Table of plays from *The Greeks*

#### Part One: The War

Prologue	Euripides
Iphigenia in Aulis	Euripides
Achilles	Homer
The Trojan Women	Euripides

#### Part Two: The Murders

Hecuba	Euripides
Agamemnon	Aeschylus
Electra	Sophocles

#### Part Three: The Gods

Helen	Euripides
Orestes	Euripides

Andromache  
Iphigenia in Tauris

Euripides  
Euripides

Critics applauded the fact that Barton was attempting to “tell the complete story.” Barton and Cavander in *The Greeks* aimed at accessibility, hammered out a two- and three-stress line, and believed strongly in the idea that the complete story would provide the context that for modern audiences was lacking for the production of individual Greek tragedies: narrative and narrative power was essential. Other themes echo over the years in between. “Who is to blame for unhappiness?,” John asks in his note to the actors that prefaces the published script of *The Greeks* and bluntly states that “in the world of *The Greeks* it seems almost impossible to choose rightly.” The opening of the Prologue to the script of *The Greeks* lies between Eurynome and a chorus of women, and the first words are; “Who is to blame?” “Tell us.” “Tell us the story.” And so there are remnants, the germ of passages or characters that find their way through the labyrinth to *Tantalus* the story of Peleus and Thetis and the little silver fish that lies eventually in Peleus’ hands, and the character of Peleus himself, so prominent, coarse and vital a connective in *Tantalus* who develops from the cameo of a sardonic Euripidean ancient of days in Barton and Cavander’s version of *Andromache* of *The Greeks* was substantially Euripidean, as John acknowledged and because, I suspect, the diversity of Euripidean drama was as then less well-known, then *Tantalus* is post-Euripidean, in its doubts, metaphysical and human, its variants, its uncertain ironies, and its curious tastes of of a bitter comedy. But the guiding philosophy of *The Greeks* was linear, and this was John’s interpretation at that time of the concept of narrative and the chronology that went with the complete story. “The movement of the ten plays of which *The Greeks* is composed is from something idealistic and romantic to something disillusioned and uncertain”, he stated unequivocally, and he also saw quite clearly a shift from a pattern of belief to a “doubting age and even to an agnostic and atheistic age. Towards the end we get something close to modern man’s attitude towards the gods or god.” “Greece is at first a happy place, or so it seems in Aulis”, he wrote, and referred directly to the “decay of civilisation”. There is nothing quite so linear about the narrative of *Tantalus* nothing so decisively clear in its outlines, unless we are inclined to believe the ideologically-charged nostalgia of Peleus.

I shall return to one other germ in *The Greeks* later on, because it is a vital part of John’s script of *Tantalus* But I spoke earlier of the record of inquiries from John and my responses. I recall very well a searching and exemplary set of questions about the use of sources which came from Barbara Mackay (I think) at the Denver Center earlier this year, and the panic that ensued in Emily, John’s assistant, John, and myself. I was unable at that time to work over and through the text, and I think it would in any case be a massive endeavour. The truth is that John himself drank equally, during the course of this vast undertaking, from the streams of Memory and Forgetfulness, and I must have inhaled some of the vapour myself. John often found that he was sure he had come across a variant somewhere in the mythical tradition, but could not remember where, and he worried like a Trojan over things like this. John liked to know whether he was adapting and incorporating, or inventing, and wanted to keep personal invention to a minimum, functioning only as a last resort to bridge a gap, as I think he would put it.

In summary on the question of these sources, I found myself consulting Homer quite often, Hesiod greatly, the Homeric Hymns from time to time, and referring repeatedly to the fragmentary lyric poet Stesichoros, who I felt came in a crucial period for John's work between epic and tragedy. But later sources included Pausanias and Plutarch, with their tendency to reflect variants and refer to earlier authors, and stretched to the Romans Virgil and Ovid. John himself had absorbed the mythographers Hyginus and Apollodorus very early on, and the Epic Cycle (or its reflections and summaries) were common to both of us. A shortlist of topics visited in the research exchanges between us includes the number, names, attributes and properties of the Muses; the myth of Clytemnestra and its shadowy outlines of development; the myths of Helen; investigations into dowries and into cult-images, and so into the meaning(s) of the Greek word *agalma* appropriate lines for the Furies to speak, and whether they might be associated with Amazons by a crazed Orestes (John's idea: I thought they might, to good effect); and the even more shadowy influence of a poet such as the seventh-century Xanthos on Stesichoros, which is a good instance of a shadow haunting a shadow.

One particular example that might be interesting in its detail concerns the myth that Iphigenia was the child of Helen from a rape by Theseus, and was given as a baby to Clytemnestra. The path here leads from the travelogue-writer and antiquarian Pausanias writing on a sanctuary of Eileithuia (the presiding daimon of childbirth) in the city of Argos, and refers to Stesichoros and to the later authors Euphorion and Alexander of Pleuron. Here is the passage from Pausanias:

“Near the Dioskouroi is a sanctuary of Childbirth [Eileithuia], dedicated by Helen ... They say that she [Helen] was pregnant and that after giving birth in Argos and founding the sanctuary of Childbirth she gave her baby daughter to Clytemnestra, who was already the wife of Agamemnon, and that later on she married Menelaus. Euphorion of Chalcis [3rd century BC, librarian at Antioch] and Alexander of Pleuron [3rd century BC, tragic poet, Alexandria and elsewhere], who wrote poetry on this subject, and even earlier Stesichoros of Himera all agree with the Argives that Iphigenia was the daughter of Theseus.” (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 22.6)

A connection can then be made with the note of an ancient commentator on line 249 of Euripides' tragedy *Orestes* who links Stesichoros with this idea and then provides a short quotation from that poet:

“because Tyndareus when sacrificing one day to all the gods forgot only Aphrodite, kindly in her giving; and she became angry and made the daughters of Tyndareus twice-wed and thrice-wed and husband deserters.”

John worried considerably over all this, because he had not seen the Pausanias passage or known of the Stesichoros connection for this variant tradition, but he still had it in his head from somewhere. So we went further into it, as John says, and worked from Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* which includes a reference to Aithra, the mother of Theseus, noting that in the Epic Cycle the poem known as the *Cypria* had the seizing of Helen by Theseus, and the *Sack of Troy* (another poem in the Cycle) the rescue of Aithra by the sons of Theseus. Aithra at *Iliad* 3.144 appeared as a servant of Helen at Troy, and it

seems that the historian/mythographer Hellanikos in the fifth century implied that Theseus seized Helen when he was older. Now whether any of this finally satisfied John's primal anxieties I shall never know. But I do know that it is there in *Tantalus* and I am amused by the fact that authors have always worried about telling tales of Helen. There can be little doubt that this particular variant (of Iphigenia as the child of Helen and Theseus) appeared in Stesichoros' lost song *Helen* and the story goes that Stesichoros was so frightened by having slandered the cult figure that Helen was that he wrote a recantation (or palinode). This itself is delightfully relevant, of course, because that recantation is probably an influential source for Euripides' play *Helen* and the contention that Helen never went to Troy, which is also firmly embedded in *Tantalus*

It is probably important to mention that as a research assistant I also strayed into the potential territory of the dramaturg, not with much confidence granted my imposing correspondent, and often to give John the sense of a potential reaction to his specific proposals. It must be remembered that the writing of *Tantalus* was a staggeringly lonely endeavour, one whose immensity and extent over time might depress and daunt anyone. For me, to offer that companionship was a vital issue, and, as I have said, to echo the worries and the doubts of composition was something I wished to do as energetically as possible. I was committed to this project because I felt John had the right to see it through, and because I also felt he was right to wish to do so. My belief was that the audience was ready to have its assumptions that it knew Greek drama thrown into question, to be faced by a play that was a Greek play and yet was not a Greek play. This would plunge the audience, at a sensitive stage of the increasing reception of Greek tragedy in the contemporary repertoire, into the position of the Athenians themselves, who - as John rightly and repeatedly emphasises - would never know which version or variant of a myth any tragedian might choose to place or to create in front of them. The characters of Greek tragedy are mobile, and *this* is never the same Clytemnestra as in the last tragedy we saw, never the same Helen, not the same Odysseus, nor even the same Oedipus, despite Freud and despite the popular, modern creation of a "Theban trilogy" out of three disparate plays, originally produced over a period of about forty years. There is an inherent paradox in the promotion and revival of classics: if we sell Greek tragedy strongly, we may eventually risk selling it short, and creating sterility rather than stimulus.

Dramaturgically, I engaged at different moments with different issues. I remember advocating strongly that, in the end, it would be highly appropriate for Orestes to wrestle with the problem of ending his own myth, with the different variants of his story that he might embrace. This would, I feel, have matched well with Helen's apparent interest in her own story. I also recall mentioning, at the time of the synopsis of 1992 with which I began this talk, playing devil's advocate and suggesting that a likely producer might want John to shorten and amalgamate the first two plays he had then. In particular, I made a very strong bid for John to be definitely vague about the initial setting for *Tantalus* as opposed to creatively unsure, as he was for a very long time. In January 1995 I argued a strong case for placing the setting, in terms of era and of location, clearly between the Homeric and the classical periods. I picked on the reforms of the tyrant Kleisthenes at Sikyon, in the northern Peloponnese and the region known as Achaia, in the sixth century BC as a background. The women seen at the beginning of the cycle were people in transit, in fear and suffering dislocation, between

one world and another, and this formed their need to recount and ultimately enact the myths they knew to try to give a meaning to their own trauma. I saw them as refugees from the racial reforms of Kleisthenes in Sikyon, on their way to the new colonies in South Italy that were established by the Achaians. Kleisthenes was also associated with performances like tragic choruses at Sikyon, well before the tragedies we have from Athens. So this historical and disturbed setting had seemed ideal to me, suggestive and full of potential, but John remained convinced that he wished to leave the disaster more open, to allow associations that might be from any time. By some irony, the period and the setting for the opening has become more precisely defined in the production.

The beginning of *Tantalus* and to some extent the ending, which caused John a great deal of pain and trial, I believe, were a consistent theme of discussion. The theme of impersonation and enactment was an inheritance from *The Greeks*, when in the Prologue to that earlier cycle of plays members of the chorus take on the roles of the three goddesses involved in the judgement of Paris. This passage from story-telling to enactment was a presiding obsession in the creation of *Tantalus* and in early versions it stretched far into the cycle, and it is still there, hovering in a number of places. Over the first years of our acquaintance I set to work to write two studies of central problems which John and I had discussed, which were those of the chorus - what is the essential nature of a chorus? - and of the actor. Why do we have an actor at all? Waiting contentedly for the actor to be invented by Thespis or Aeschylus, in the conventional accounts of what we understand as the conveniently logical development of dramatic theatre, is a classic case of hindsight. Those academic papers were eventually published, and in their detailed argument diverge a long way from our immediate subject today, but John in his final version of the script still played extensively with theatrical and metatheatrical worlds and possibilities, in both parts of the frame to the central narrative, and in many moments within it.

What is theoretically interesting to me still in the published script of *Tantalus* is how initially (and to some extent throughout) the chorus tends to demand a response from the performer-as-character, and how we then move to exchanges between characters and finally to a remarkable stichomythia (line-by-line exchange) between Hecuba and Helenus in the first play, *Apollo* (pp.61-2 of the published script). John's sense of the word-play in Greek *stichomythia* is sharp and sensitive, almost a parody of a style and a genre - that of tragedy - which he has not as yet directly invoked in his own drama. In the published script, the women themselves do not have the confidence to become the semblance for us of a tragic chorus until well into *Telephus* (pp.102-3 of the published script), where "Music begins in the house" and they embark on an extended meditation on what it means to have a country, conveying a sense of dislocation and national non-entity that fits ideally with John's belief in a marriage of the preclassical with the postmodern. For me, this first incidence of the equivalent of a choral ode is vital to the audience's sense of the nature of *Tantalus* as a Greek play, which asks to be defined as theatre in contrast to more conventional productions of Greek tragedy. *Tantalus* is a fascinating accompaniment to a culture that has begun to know its Greek tragedy in performance, and it is this that should make it a complex and satisfying work of theatrical innovation, one that should nourish and sustain the audience's sense of drama that is Greek. That is admittedly a partial and partisan view, but there again you might expect me to have one.



## References

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