
A Classical Soap Opera for the Cultural Elite: *Tantalus* in Denver

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I.

IT WAS THE BEST OF FUNDING and the worst of plays.* As I left the theatre I thought, this is a far, far better thing that I do now than I did by entering in the first place. Peter Hall's latest classical folly cost eight to ten million depending on what report you read: the *L.A. Times* refers to the "\$10-million-and-counting price tag."¹ This is living proof that salesmanship is alive and well, but also that the classics are being murdered by cultural assassins. Keeping the enormous budget in mind (as well as the title), I quote Pindar on Tantalus: "If the gods of Olympus honored any man, Tantalus was that one. But he could not digest his mighty wealth, and through excess, he found utter ruin," (*Olympian* 1.55–56). Excess is the word that best describes this production.

Shouldn't an audience leave a theatrical performance renewed, rather than exhausted? Where is Aristotelian *katharsis*? Shouldn't one remember at least some story that was moving, or a character with whom one could identify? What about that ethical side of Greek tragedy? What lesson was learned here? The only thing I remember from the epilogue to the performance was that the world is chaotic and the gods more arbitrary than men. This was one of Euripides' messages. But he added redemptive factors like *philia*, the bond that one human being can forge with another, a friendship or love that gives meaning to life. Where is the friendship or love in this mish-mash? Where is there an idea that one is responsible for what one does, and that there will be consequences? In *Tantalus*, there is simply one story after another, arbitrarily linked to what had preceded. There is too much

**Tantalus* by John Barton, directed by Peter Hall, at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Fall 2000.

information and too much narration. We are told what we should think at every point. What made Greek tragedy great is absent here.

Greek tragedy was one of the ways a citizen of Athens became a better citizen. It contributed information that could help a person live a life that is worth living, a life of quality that comes from utilizing one's skill and excellence as a compassionate human being. Where is that transformative quality that comes from good drama, the new knowledge or experience that comes from good stories being told? *Tantalus* rambles on to an arbitrary ending. It does not even have the excitement of epic. It is full of sound and bluster and signifies less than nothing.

This production at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts was funded by a philanthropic gift from Donald R. Seawell, the chairman of the Center. The production is also going on to regional theatres in England and performances at the Barbican in London.

A Stage for Dionysus, a major exhibition on Classical Greek theatre organized by Spyros Mercouris (Melina's brother), was shown in the basement of the theatre. This impressive display included pictures of various actors and actresses in various roles, showed their costumes, with invaluable film clips of famous performances done in Greece from Ninagawa Yukio to Theodoros Terzopoulos and Peter Stein. Sites were given for the various theatres and maps, besides virtual reality reconstructions. Peter Hall's *Oresteia* and *Oedipus Plays* featured prominently.

This exhibit made the trip to Denver worth it in itself; it contains essential information for anyone interested in the revival of the classics. I had seen the exhibit previously in Bulgaria and London, and there are many new, interesting additions. Congratulations are due Mercouris who has the same passion his sister had for preserving the cultural contributions of ancient Greece for the modern world.

But to return to *Tantalus*, nine dramatic segments about the Trojan War are presented—Barton's published tenth play was eliminated. Each play lasts about an hour. Three segments

comprise one part of a group of three. This marathon can be run in one day (from 10:00 AM to 10:30 PM), or one can spread it over two or three days. One way or another an audience faces the exhaustion of Pheidippides, that first marathon runner.

Peter Hall in his program notes says that “The story of epic is the key element. Some ten short plays are needed to embody it, since it is cumulatively different in kind from the single plays or even trilogies which handle part of it. It is not so far removed from the modern form we call soap opera.”² Thou sayest it! John Barton is said to be the author, but Peter Hall has freely altered the text for his production.³

The Poet in the prologue claims these plays are “lost bits,” which leads to several nonstarters such as the introduction of Electra and Aegisthus with hardly any explanation of Electra’s hatred for her mother or for Clytemnestra’s taking up with Aegisthus. Reviewers have bemoaned the omission of key moments, like Agamemnon’s murder. The answer is to be found in John Barton’s *The Greeks* (1980) where he handled all the story of the house of Atreus. Thus the “lost bits” are not for Homer’s epic about the Trojan war, but to fill in the gaps of John Barton’s former collaboration with Kenneth Cavender, another marathon of ten plays which had limited success at the Royal Shakespeare Company (who are listed as associate producers of *Tantalus*). Barton also reworked for the RSC three of Shakespeare’s history plays and called this all day stint *The Wars of the Roses*. He believes in audience patience.

The stories in *Tantalus* are mainly taken from the Epic Cycle, covering from the beginning of the world until the end of the age of heroes, poems with various authors from roughly the seventh and sixth centuries BC. In Hall’s production not much time is given to the creation of the world and less to Oedipus. But epic is only one source for *Tantalus*; hardly one mythological source for all these stories is left out, including Homer, all of Greek tragedy, Pindar, other Greek poets, and Latin poets including Virgil and Ovid, to say nothing of Herodotus, Apollodorus, and Hyginus. Barton is not above

taking clues from previous modern versions of the classics, like Tony Harrison's *Oresteia*, when he uses compounds like "doom-girl," "god-game," "man-law," "god-law," "god-trick," "god-gift," "god-time," "god-cast," "rape-seed," "womb-fruit," and "butcher-boy" (is the last a nod to Neil Jordan's version of Patrick McCabe's novel?).⁴

Lévi-Strauss said a myth consists of all its versions. Here, not only are many of the versions included, but much is added (as we shall see) that is not part of the tradition. There seems not to have been an eye that went over everything at the end to see that what was presented was, if not logical, at least remotely coherent. And then stories are freely rewritten. Also, Barton gives various versions without making a choice: for example, was Helen at Troy, following Homer? Or in Egypt, following Euripides? We get both versions.

Masks are used and, as usual with Peter Hall, the result is disastrous. The addition of masks was a late one and there was obviously not enough rehearsal time. In Hall's *Oresteia*, by Tony Harrison, and in Hall's *Oedipus Plays* masks muffle the sound. In *Tantalus*, they also give the illusion of moustaches for both males and females; and they prevent the audience from seeing human expressions. I do not quarrel with masks in a mask tradition, such as the ancient Greek one where they probably facilitated the identification of characters from a distance in their enormous outdoor theatres that seated thousands. Another great tradition of drama that used and uses masks is Japanese Noh. But there actors are trained very early in the use of these masks, and some of these actors are rightly called National Treasures. You cannot expect actors and actresses to be given masks and know how to deliver a skilled performance in six weeks or even six months. It just is not possible and Peter Hall has proven it again and again. Michael Phillips got it right: "Hall's decision to play *Tantalus* almost entirely in masks was a major misjudgment . . . An hour or two into *Tantalus*, you wish the actors at least had mouths and jaws to call their own. No matter how determined the actors get with their final consonants, a line referring to 'a thousand ships as backup' comes out sounding like

‘a shoushand shidds ash beggup.’” Later Phillips pithily refers to the “walkie-talkie vocal quality enforced by the masks.”⁵

2.

The stories are said to fill in the gaps of the main narrative about the Trojan War and the subsequent homecomings—or as the Poet says, “I have made it cohere” (179). Part one is titled *The Outbreak of War: Prologue, Telephus, and Iphigenia*. The scene opens on a circular beach, which will be part of the set throughout. It is a place for sunning, and a war arena. This beach features several underground passages, including one submerged pool of water which we are to believe is the ocean, from which Thetis the sea nymph appears. Girls are sunbathing, obviously tourists and presumably in Greece, when a hawker appears offering them statues of the gods and stories. The girls ask him to tell what happened during the Trojan War—their first mistake. The prologue tells how Apollo and Poseidon built Troy, but not being paid by king Laomedon, they sent a sea-monster to attack the city; the king’s daughter Hesione was chained to a rock as a sacrifice to it. Heracles came in response to Laomedon’s plea, rescued Hesione, and rebuilt the city. He too was not paid by Laomedon as promised, so he, Peleus, and Telamon sacked the city—quite expeditiously as is pointed out by Peleus.

Leda is raped by Zeus in the form of a swan and becomes the mother of Helen and Clytemnestra. Menelaus and Agamemnon grew up with Helen and Clytemnestra in Sparta, and Tyndareus, the king, their father, is ultimately persuaded to give them to the two brothers (Clytemnestra was first married to her uncle; Agamemnon killed both her husband and her child to “win” her). Helen is also raped by Theseus, and Hall shows the nurse giving her child by Theseus to Clytemnestra to raise—to “keep it in the family.” (This is from the play Hall omitted, *Erigone*). If we know our mythology, we know this child is Iphigenia (which makes Agamemnon’s subsequent love for her not incestuous, just adulterous). Interesting how many of the men in power are idealistic and

drawn to young women.

Helen's many suitors are made to swear that they would help recover her if the need arose; Helen is stolen and the war begins. Barton's twist is to tell us that Helen is kidnapped, along with Aethra, Theseus' mother, with the ultimate purpose of regaining Hesione (Priam's sister), stolen so many years before by Heracles when he sacked Troy.

We meet Thetis who is raped by Peleus, the result being the child Achilles. (She shows herself attracted more by the female chorus than by Peleus.) She tells Achilles he has the choice of a long life of obscurity or a short life with fame; Achilles blames her for destroying his life by presenting him with this dilemma.

Play two begins. Achilles is put in charge of the fleet. They land by mistake at Mysia, kill many of the locals, sack what they can, then return to Greece. Telephus, king of Mysia, appears; Clytemnestra gives him Orestes so he can get Agamemnon and Achilles' attention and cooperation. According to a prophecy, his wound, delivered by Achilles, must be healed by Achilles. Telephus becomes the navigator to Troy (maybe this time they will miss Mysia). Iphigenia, although she wants to be a priestess, becomes engaged to Achilles. He rapes her. Clytemnestra, aware of her relationship with Agamemnon, tells Agamemnon to "let him [Achilles] have her." He objects, "No, I love her best of all my children." She answers, "Yes, I know it. Let him have her." This line gets a laugh.

Agamemnon imports Aegisthus, the old family enemy who is responsible for his father Atreus' death. He wants to make peace in the family, over Clytemnestra's objections: Aegisthus is to rule in his absence and Clytemnestra is to take care of the children, a typical Greek (English?) solution. Clytemnestra gets him to swear that he will take no other woman and will not sack Troy; the second one he calls an easy oath (98). Later Agamemnon gets Odysseus and Neoptolemus also to swear that "No violence will be used against any Trojan woman or any of their children" (200).

Play three shows us the army stalled at Aulis. The stage is dominated by a huge stag with a spear through it. For wind,

they must sacrifice Iphigenia. (This is taken in part from the *Cypria*, one of the epic cycle that describes events before the war, in part from Euripides' play on the subject, and in part from imagination.) Preparations are being made for Iphigenia's marriage (only an excuse in Euripides' play). To obtain favorable winds, Artemis demands Iphigenia's sacrifice after Agamemnon has killed a deer sacred to her. Clytemnestra is aware of Agamemnon's relationship with Iphigenia, so she encourages Agamemnon to sacrifice her. (Earlier she was happy that Electra was to be offered as a bride to Achilles. She finds both her daughters obnoxious.) Iphigenia is sacrificed, but we are told of her being saved by Artemis and becoming her priestess for the Taurians.

The first segment is over, and now begins the war (*Neoptolemus*). The young girls, the sunbathers of the prologue, decide they will enter the war, and they become active characters in the story—the Trojan women. It is the tenth year. Now Neoptolemus is summoned; along with Philoctetes and his bow, he must be present for Troy to be taken. Both Achilles and his slayer Paris are dead. Neoptolemus is as bloodthirsty and clueless as his father. Odysseus comes up with the plan of the Trojan horse and also Neoptolemus' new role: Neoptolemus ("Pyrrha") is disguised as a girl and left with Sinon on the beach to give a story to Priam about how the horse must be drawn within the walls of Troy to protect the city. In the section called *Priam*, the king comes out on stilts, resembling a large praying mantis and endowed with a voracious paedophilic sexual appetite. He is encouraged by both Hecuba and "Pyrrha," the latter also telling him about Hesi-one (he is dressed in her sacrificial dress and wears her jewels). "Pyrrha" delivers these tokens and quotes her message as a plea for peace, and finally Priam, in spite of manifold doubts, gives the order to bring in the Trojan horse. He leaves and we hear later that in the process of raping "Pyrrha" he is slain by Neoptolemus. Two idealistic clever paedophiles (Priam and Agamemnon) in one production, hmmm . . .

The horse is drawn into the city. Agamemnon, who had been trying to make peace all along with Priam, is marginalized.

He does not want the horse to enter the city nor the city to be sacked. It is. In the final segment of part two (*Odysseus*), the beach is littered with war debris. The dead are impaled on pikes, a visual reminiscence of the stag that was earlier impaled. Iphigenia's sacrifice in that play likewise is symbolic of all the war dead to come.

Odysseus is in charge and claims that the soldiers ran amok and that he could not restrain them. Hecuba appears with her women. She was told, she says, that they would have special treatment as members of the royal family. Odysseus says they should be treated as slaves, and they are stripped and branded. Hecuba still hopes that Odysseus will save Polyxena, but Neoptolemus holds her responsible for his father's death. He had discovered that she was the last to meet with Achilles and that their tryst was interrupted by Paris who ambushed Achilles. Neoptolemus insists she be sacrificed on the grave of Achilles.

In the first play of part three, *Cassandra*, we flip to the story of Hecuba and see the king of Thrace Polymestor's betrayal: he murdered Hecuba's son Polydorus who had been entrusted to him.

(*Cassandra* was a play that Barton included in his section on the war, but Peter Hall has included it in *Homecomings*. The local Thracians are tortured to determine where their treasure, or Troy's gold, is. Here is another one of the Barton/Hall lapses. Cassandra says "The war made Thrace rich" [320]; then on page 324, Ilione, the queen of Thrace and Hecuba's daughter, tells her mother, "But we have no gold, you know that." And her mother answers, "Of course I know." What's the logic here? Would there be a distinction in anyone's mind whether the gold the Greeks sought was brought from Troy or whether it was the Thracian treasure? It is said explicitly that the Greeks sacked Thrace before they left and found nothing.)

Hecuba discovers that Ilione condoned her husband's action in killing Polydorus, and gets her vengeance on Polymestor (and Ilione) by having her women kill his child by Ilione and blind him. (The women refer to "children" [337, as

was the case in Euripides' *Hecuba*], but Odysseus refers to the slain Thracian child [338]. Another Bartonian lapse in proofreading?) Odysseus asks what happened and the women give the same excuse the men did when questioned about the massacre at Troy: "We didn't plan to do it [no period] It just happened" (338).

As Hecuba buries her child she literally barks, an anticipation of her final transformation into a dog; the place will be named for her, Cynosema, or the Dog's tomb. Agamemnon rescues Ilione from Odysseus' clutches.

We are not told the tale from the *Oresteia* (Sir Peter already did that), but we see Cassandra's love affair with Agamemnon before she leaves Troy. More of the "lost bits." She, the virgin priestess of Apollo who rejected the god, willingly mates with the man who attacked her city and has enslaved her. She and Agamemnon remove their masks and all their clothing. We see them embracing. (Agamemnon still likes young girls.)

Barton's *Homecomings* begins with the story of Hermione, Helen's daughter, and follows much of Euripides' *Andromache*; she returns home to terrorize Andromache who has borne her husband, Neoptolemus, a son. Neoptolemus goes off to Delphi and his death at the hands of Apollo and the Delphians. Hermione goes off with Orestes. Thetis, the Lesbian man-hater, comes to console Peleus and tell him she loves him and invites him to join her and their son Achilles (whom she at first abandoned to be raised by a bear and who constantly accuses her of ruining his life). When she speaks to Agamemnon and hears Peleus, she says, "That is the voice of the man most hateful to me. Time to change my shape again" (218). Later, though, she says, "... I still love you" (414). Did Barton simply forget what he said earlier? Is this "making it [the story] cohere" as the Poet claimed?

The last story in Hall's production is based on Euripides' alternative version that Helen never went to Troy, but was kept safe in Egypt, although the king wanted her for his wife. Helen returns with Menelaus and is put on trial in Delphi. Aethra, Theseus' mother, gives ambiguous testimony (and is a totally irrelevant figure but she adds to the overall "every-

thing in excess”). Finally Helen is whisked up to heaven. (Barton had her go into the Delphic cave.) Her figure is heavily masked all the time: a golden mask, of course. When the “jury” of old women, war widows, and mothers who lost their children at Troy are frustrated because Helen escapes retribution, they murder Calchas. They turn violent and this, we are told, is an addition to the myths. It is really Hall going one worse than Barton, this demonizing of the women yet again, for there is a different account in *Erigone* of Calchas’ death.

The epilogue returns us to the story of Tantalus. We are told that we are all under Tantalus’ rock and it can fall at any time, so we should make the most of the present. To quote Buffy the Vampire Slayer, “Well duh! Heeeeelllloo!” We survived ten hours for this? One feels like a person who has come out of an EST seminar, those psychological marathons where people (having paid a high fee) were confined to a room for hours and not allowed to leave. The reason for this, we are told, is simply to let us know that we are human or something like that.

3.

The costumes were exemplary, from the opening modern ones to the “classical” ones. Dionysus Fotopoulos is a great theatrical designer and he delivered for this production. If the masked figures could have been displayed like statues rather than having to speak, they too would have been perfect

The set was also exciting, with video insets on both sides. The entrances and exits from and into the sand, or the water in the sand, were effective. Fotopoulos used some of his former ideas and I like the reminiscence, as it adds new meaning. For instance, Fotopoulos used the crown and essentially the same costume for Iphigenia as in Cacoyannis’ 1974 film: she was a ritual victim to be sacrificed and wore what seemed to be a wheat-spray crown of branches, something reminiscent of Christ’s crown of thorns.

Cassandra speaks from the top of a huge fallen head, a

commentary on the devastation to come.⁶ The Trojan Horse's giant wheels rolling across the stage in the background, as the scene between Neoptolemus and Priam proceeds to its deadly outcome, shows graphically how the war machine crushes individuals. Flames, bombs, and myriad soldiers are created by film clips on the screens at both sides of the stage. The Myrmidons, referred to as former ants, do look like insects with their spiky black helmets.

The music derived a lot from Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides*. It included Modern Greek folk tunes and dances, besides Noh drama and other eclectic sources. Mick Sands and Yukio Tsuji's music in most cases did not overly distract from the action. Mick Sands also confesses more to us when he says in the program, "The attunement you do as a therapist [with autistic children] is very similar to underscoring character in the theatre . . . very similar."⁷ I would like to think I am more than an autistic child, but I must confess at times the music did make me feel like I was being told what to think, and I resented it. I agree with Phillips again: "Composer Mick Sands' work is disappointingly routine, the ambient sounds created live primarily by himself and percussionist Yukio Tsuji gliding in and out of various encounters without much dramatic edge."⁸

The lighting by Sumio Yoshii showed the touch of a master. His use of chiaroscuro added poetry to the set. Donald McKayle's choreography is also quite effective.

All of the actors took several roles, something facilitated by the use of masks. Bruce Weber in his review in the *New York Times* tells us that "During rehearsals, a principal actor resigned in a dispute over Sir Peter's choice to have the actors perform largely in masks, and a third director, Mick Gordon abruptly quit as well. Most dramatically, Mr. Barton and Sir Peter quarreled furiously over the latter's editing and rewriting of the script, and the playwright left Denver during rehearsals as well."⁹ (This reviewer spells "Euripides" as "Euripedes" but redeems himself by coming to the conclusion shared by other critics: "Their struggle is over in an agony of ecstasy [referring to Cassandra and Agamemnon's mating

scene], yet another way *Tantalus* illustrates that enough is also too much.”)

British actors are alongside American actors. There were some Peter Hall pros, like Greg Hicks, who starred in his *Oresteia* and his *Oedipus Plays*. David Ryall was outstanding as the salesman who first enters the stage and who becomes the Poet. He is quite effective in some of the older roles, Tyndareus, Peleus, Telephus, Palamedes, and Polymestor. Alyssa Brenahan also shone as Cassandra, Thetis, and the Pythoness: she was able to convey well what it is to be a goddess, or divinely possessed, or mad. There was an interesting decision to suggest a Scottish accent for Odysseus, the mastermind behind the action who runs everything while keeping Agamemnon as the figurehead. This is not unlike the role the Scots play in England: the bureaucracy runs as well as it does because of its Scottish officials. The violent, drinking, irrational Achilles and his equally violent son were played by Robert Petkoff with the hint of an Irish accent and more than a hint of a stereotype. He was the only American actor among the male leads, but I can't imagine this bullying boorish soldier could have anything to do with an American Stereotype. No, he's Irish. Besides Achilles and his son, Petkoff played two other butchers, Aegisthus and Orestes. Type-casting?

The idealistic leader Agamemnon, whose only defect is a bit of incest (a Hall addition), has an upper-class English accent—another stereotype. As for the taste for young girls (when young boys aren't available) see the headlines in British “rags” about some members of the House of Lords. Otherwise Barton made Agamemnon flawless: his Agamemnon respects Cassandra and hardly embraces her as she is trying to entice him at the end of part two. He sheds tears easily over the atrocities committed at Troy and when he's to be separated from his brother. He is a caring family man who tries to make peace, and is appalled at the army sacrificing his daughter, with his wife's encouragement. He believes in no reprisals. “What more can kings hope for? As in time I believe that in all human dealings there can also be healing. It does not take long for burned fields and vine-

yards to grow green and bear fruit again and so with homes and cities" (349). Ask the Vietnamese about that.

Paris also, it turns out, was always in love with Oenone, a mountain-nymph he met while he was a shepherd on Ida. In this version, he only helped Helen at her weaving when he was in Sparta, while Menelaus went to Crete to secure oil-rights from Minos. Such modern allusions are frequent, like Calchas saying, "Prophets know the minds and words of their prophets through the sacred web and net of priestly transmissions" (423). Such a "timely" text.

The killing at Troy and army madness are blamed conveniently on Pyrrhus/Neoptolemus who was on a bloody rampage after he was raped by the thirty men (including Calchas) in the Trojan Horse (373). Asked if he liked it, "Of course he didn't like it. But if he would have uttered a sound he would have betrayed his comrades." All this for the sake of a laugh. It is hardly possible to think that when soldiers in the Trojan Horse are released by a boy opening the hatch, they would all risk their ten-year siege to take that particular moment for what Barton wittily calls *Hipposodomos*, or, I gather, "sodomy in the horse."

Barton loves to give what he thinks are the (mostly false) etymologies of names as keys to understanding character; for example, he claims Pyrrhus means "rage" (212 and 277). Obviously Barton has never heard of Pierre Chantraine.¹⁰ Other false etymologies: Cassandra, "defence against men" or "entangler of men" (331), and Persephone, "bringer of death" (485).¹¹ A particularly ridiculous etymology is proposed for Achilles: "Since his mother will not offer her teat to his lips he shall be called A-chilles" (31). This mistakes chi for theta and iota for eta, yielding the word *thēlē* which means "teat." (Or is this a reference to *cheilos*, Greek for lip? This also would add an epsilon that simply isn't there.) Chantraine says the origin is unknown and the name prehellenic.¹² There are more modern interpretations that link the name with *achos*, the word for suffering.¹³ Is Barton really this ignorant or is he imitating Greek guides who are notorious for false etymologies? In any case, like his pop psychology (see be-

low), this gets tedious when he does it for most of the characters. The names are also “consistently mispronounced, even allowing for Latinate or English pronunciations.”¹⁴

The chorus, appropriately ten, one for each year of the war, do not fall into the trap of speaking together and becoming unintelligible. In this they were well directed. Their groupie, valley-girl attitude seems a bit overdone at times. At the end of *Neoptolemus*, when they decide to enter into the drama, one leads the way, pointing rather obviously towards Troy. The Poet rather slyly says, “if you tell the truth to Priam, you may yet save the city” (221). He does not give them a clue about what is in store for them as the captured Trojan Women.

The torture and nudity seemed a bit too calculated to please an audience who grew up on *Friday the Thirteenth* and clones. Sex and violence are served up with no attempt at sophistication. For instance, when the sacred serpents licked the cheeks of Helenus and Cassandra, Barton says instead “the two sacred serpents were licking our genitals: That is how we became prophets” (224). The audience feasts on the sight of nude bodies, branding irons heated in the flames, and the screams when they sizzle on the flesh. In fact, in ancient Greece, slaves were not branded unless they tried to escape, and then only as a punishment and to secure instant recognition (they were branded on their foreheads).¹⁵ So this violence is historically inaccurate but provides a cheap dramatic titillation for those in the audience so inclined.

The nudity in the sex scene between Agamemnon and Cassandra was rather beautiful. Two lovely bodies and two people having consensual sex. The gusto, however, which these particular two bring to this encounter is quite improbable from what we have been told. Cassandra would hardly be Agamemnon’s willing sexual partner if she refused Apollo. We remember Agamemnon’s promise to Clytemnestra, and Barton has him keep it, at least in that his text does not give us the sex scene that Hall’s version does.

The women in this play are mainly demonized—and those are mainly American actresses. This is a common Hall maneu-

ver and John Barton was a good ally. Thetis is a man- and child-hating lesbian. Thetis is likewise out for vengeance. She dresses to kill: she puts the wedding dress on “Pyrrha” for him to seduce Priam. The violence of the women in this play matches, and usually surpasses, the violence of the men.

Clytemnestra is all too willing to get rid of or sacrifice her children. Agamemnon says about Iphigenia, “Maybe you do not love her as a mother should.” She answers, “I love her, but not as I love you, nor as I think you love her” (157). Hecuba is responsible for Paris treacherously killing Achilles (246) and also convinces Priam that it is fine to bring the Trojan horse into the city (250). She even urges Priam to add “Pyrrha” (Neoptolemus) to his wives: “Do what you always do: take her in as your wife” (261). The men here seem always to be blameless, unless they are Irish or American thugs like Achilles and his son, or suffer a lapse, like the Scot Odysseus, about to brand Ilione to find out where the gold is (again something we are to imagine Scots doing to collect taxes more efficiently in the service of the English).

Hermione is a self-centered cowardly bitch, an appropriate offspring for the self-absorbed Helen. Helen herself is presented as some abstract beauty symbol, hardly emotive, swaddled in silks and masks, so all her beauty is left to the imagination—until her mask is removed and she is shown to have aged. Menelaus says he loves her still (once again the noble man, in contrast to the chorus who make snide remarks about her appearance). Helen is finally deprived even of the weapon of beauty. She is passive, says little, does not defend herself. She is the opposite of Euripides’ Helen in either his *Trojan Women* or the *Helen*, or even the *Orestes*. In my version of the *Trojan Women* (performed in San Diego at the same time as *Tantalus*) I made her even feistier than Euripides did and she flaunts her sexuality. By contrast, Hall’s and Barton’s “ideal” women are like Stepford wives, and freely exchanged like tokens. Maybe that is why they have to be branded, so the men can always identify their property. Odysseus claims Hecuba will be safer if she is branded, the sign of ownership offering protection: “A brand’s purpose is not to humiliate

but to protect whoever bears it. Our soldiers are rough men but they are taught from childhood to treat brands with respect. It prevents them stealing cattle" (305). Very Lévi-Straussian.

Where is a sympathetic woman to be found? The silly chorus, about whom we learn nothing except that they are tourists who make the wrong choice? No, no one can simply be an observer, with impunity; we are all involved in what we witness: when the chorus, who help Hecuba punish Polyestor for killing her son, are caught by Odysseus and are to be punished for what they did, they turn on Hecuba and tell Odysseus, "Whip her first and feed her afterwards . . . She began it" (340). At the trial of Helen in Delphi, this chorus also becomes a group of witch-like crones, screaming for vengeance. So much for female compassion. That's reserved for the men in *Tantalus*.

Love? It appears in the unlikely location between Cassandra the holy virgin and the supposedly incestuous, albeit idealistic, Agamemnon who really didn't want to sacrifice his daughter, and really didn't want to sack Troy. "We didn't plan to do it. It just happened"—rather good satire on many a political leader.

Most of the characters have their obnoxious moments, including the Poet who blandly invites the Greek tourists to become Trojan women, knowing fully what will happen to them. These characters are more from Greek comedy than from tragedy, and fit the description given by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. Rather than those we look up to, they are below us, at least on any moral level. The language is also from Greek comedy; many lines are there only for the sake of a laugh.

Barton's original text is riddled with classical bloopers: Odysseus spent *three* years with Circe (440)? The usual sources say from a month to a year. Idomeneus dead a few years after the fall of Troy (455)? He not only returned home, but was banished for his cruelty, and settled in Italy (Salentinum); some sources say he died years later in Asia Minor. Or are Barton's claims poetic license? The artist at work? Yet shouldn't any 'license' go hand in hand with artistic responsibility?

4.

Barton has his Poet claim that some sense is to be made out of this story. Yet Edward Hall defends the lack of logic: “The Greek tradition is ambiguity and John has taken that. Brilliantly. So you find yourself talking about it in the same paradoxical way that John has written it. Every time you pin something down it jumps up, does the opposite thing, and slips through your fingers. When you do a scene one way, you can do it the opposite way. Any time you think Odysseus is cruel to brand the women of Troy or that Neoptolemus was cruel to them, someone pops up and says no, it wasn’t cruel, it was justified. None of it’s news.”¹⁶ Oh, I see. And what is the audience to think? Branding the women at Troy is justified because a character says so? That character is “ambiguity” and that is the “Greek tradition?” I wonder what Plato would have said about that. And where does this branding come from? Not Greek epic or the plays. Odysseus orders the women to be flogged when they help Hecuba take vengeance on Polymestor; I’m surprised we didn’t see it.

Most of the reviews, both in the states and in London newspapers, have been favorable, but even the most supportive have negative reservations. I suspect many were in awe of the budget. One thinks of the joke about a girl bringing an antique she purchased to her father who immediately asks how much it cost. She names some impressive price and he replies, “Well, it must be beautiful then.”

John Lahr’s review, “Shaggy Gods Story” in the *New Yorker*, spends a lot of time praising Fotopoulos’ set.¹⁷ He liked the huge Trojan Horse represented by giant wheels, in contrast to the small prop signifying Troy: “The Storyteller opens a pop-up book that shows Troy’s parapets, then sets the book on fire” (177). Does the set, like the Storyteller, put things in perspective for us?

I found the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer (cited above) particularly acute. He calls the treatment of the epic material,

“cautious, steady, essentially conservative.” And adds, “There are more preferable adjectives when it comes to any treatment of such durable bloody provocative myths.”

Mike Pearson of the *Rocky Mountain News* (October 23, 2000) says of *Tantalus*: “Too much information over too long a time to too little advantage.” He illustrates this point by saying, “Greg Hicks mesmerizes as both the conflicted Agamemnon (the kidnapping of his wife starts the war, after all) and Troy’s King Priam.” He got the latter right. But it was Menelaus’s wife that was stolen, not Agamemnon’s; Sir Peter gives too much information for this reviewer to absorb at one sitting.

Michael Billington in the *Guardian* (Oct. 24, 2000) finds this “less stirring than *The Greeks*” where the plays mostly came from Euripides, whereas *Tantalus* is mainly Barton’s invention. Billington rightly says of Barton: “He is not a genius on the Euripidean scale.” Understatement of the year. Benedict Nightingale (*The Times*, Oct. 24, 2000) concurs by saying that the segment following the war is “very close but sadly inferior to Euripides’ *Trojan Women*.”

As noted earlier, the text has been changed in many places for performance. The beginning has the substitution of the salesman/poet for the drunken poet of Barton’s version. The latter is more dangerous and under the influence of Dionysus; Hall’s hawker appeals more to the tourist girls than does the drunken poet. And they seem more scantily clad and less informed than Barton had intended. In Barton’s text they give much of the information about the creation of the world; but whenever there is something to appeal to an audience’s desire for sex or violence, Hall obliges. When Peleus talks about the easy taking of Troy on his expedition with Heracles, we hear bombs, see fire, and the stage is filled with smoke.

Barton eclectically selects theories or invents, as it pleases him, and in his version it is *Eris* rather than *Eros* that came out of chaos.¹⁸ He rewrites the original myths, for instance, having Agamemnon import Aegisthus because he wants peace in the family. And Clytemnestra urges Agamemnon to kill Iphigenia. When the chorus object, “if I lost a child I could never

forget it," she answers, "When something is lost that can never be found again it is best to forget it." She goes on to say that Agamemnon has reformed: "Agamemnon has sworn to make good; that is why he has gone to rescue my sister" (87). Why does she kill Agamemnon then?

Besides jokes about rape, there are also lots of gay jokes. For instance, the contrast between Cassandra and Helenus is made clear: she refused Apollo so no one believes her though she prophesies the truth. Helenus is believed and tells the chorus why: "Closed my eyes and did what he wanted and became a sound prophet at once."

It is interesting how each of the reviewers sees a different guiding theme. Mike Pearson (*Rocky Mountain News*) claims that "Blood is the glue that binds these characters. Buckets of it." Bruce Weber (*New York Times*) says that the grand metaphor of the play cycle is "The condemnation of Tantalus, a favorite of the Olympian gods who incurred their wrath by stealing their secrets and disseminating them on earth. Zeus sentences Tantalus, a progenitor of the Greek general Agamemnon, to an eternity of hunger and thirst and a life perpetually threatened by a precariously balanced great boulder." Michael Phillips (*Los Angeles Times*) follows up on this: "The rock hangs heavy over this production."

John Barton's banalities, particularly when he philosophizes, can be quite tedious. Many are cut by Hall, but not the long one about Tantalus with its crude pun at the end. It is worth quoting to let the reader understand part of the audience's torment. This narration features change of speakers, but that hardly helps the tedium. The eclectic punctuation and grammar is intact. I quote it without a break:

Listen with reverence Children of Tantalus, Earth-girls and clay-stuff . . . I will tell you what he said. You all have sipped my nectar so in part you are immortal; you hope to become god-like without first understanding what it is to be human. That is dangerous, so I must bind you like Prometheus before you; I shall set a rock above you tied with ropes to the sky and you will never know the season, year or day when I or some other may unloose the bonds of heaven. Yet if you are lucky and if there is time you may learn many things

that you do not know, perhaps about the gods or the ocean and the sky or even about yourselves. Of course you may learn wrongly or

even discover things you do not want to know. Sometimes you will feel that you have become wiser and sometimes you will get the sense of making sense of something strange and deep, but when you wake up in the morning it will make sense no longer nor fit as well as you thought it did. Sometimes you will feel you have left something out and will wonder if it's lost or whether yet to find . . . This work will make you thirsty so I'll set you in a pool of fresh refreshful water but when you try to drink it will ebb and shrink and dry. This work will make you hungry, so I will set a fruit-tree by the pool with golden branches, luscious, thick and loaded with all the fruits of the world; when you grope to reach them you may feel the bloom of a peach with the tip of your finger, but the Four Winds will be watching and when you grunt and grasp they will swing it from your clutch. Yet take heart, one night of nectar lasts long in human bellies. But since the truth that's told the morning after a drinking is apt to be garbled your children may be tantalised and you will not know why.

The chorus ask if the rock will fall on them, but the nurse tells them, "Not unless you're underneath it." The Poet adds, "We are all underneath it" (81-83). My, my, we're all going to die. But are we really all continually tempted by water we cannot drink and food we cannot eat? Obviously there is no room for the Dalai Lama here.

And what about the mortal who yearns to become godlike before mastering the art of being human? That's an elliptical phrase if ever there was one. What is the art of being human? And if being godlike means being like any of the gods mentioned in this play, forget it. I'll take my chances as a human any day.

Barton makes much of Agamemnon wiping away Cassandra's face paint; Hall has used masks, so both remove their masks. This does away with the allusion that Cassandra made in her final words in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* to man's happiness being erased by one swipe of a sponge (*Ag.* 1327-29).

At times also the characters recite Greek and what they are

saying is translated. Hall eliminated much of this, keeping simply the English. “Pyrrha” [Neoptolemus] takes over some of Cassandra’s lines when she is boasting about her fatal marriage in Euripides’ *Trojan Women* (308–13). Barton cleverly quotes from the *Odyssey*, citing lines 431–40, but forgetting to mention what book they are in. Neither I, nor I’m sure the audience, have a clue what lines these are. One might speculate they are from book 11, where Agamemnon in the underworld is telling Odysseus how he was slain by Clytemnestra, and how he should never trust a woman, not even his wife. But these lines begin at 430. Another Bartonian lapse? He also says that Cassandra speaks lines 1125 and 1226–32 (354). Lines 1226–32 are fine, referring to the danger Agamemnon will face when he sees his wife on his return, but 1125 by itself is meaningless. He presumably meant 1125–29 which likewise depict Clytemnestra’s murderous intentions. Proofreading again?

Although Billington tells us it was written over some twenty years, Barton’s whole work shows the signs of something written in haste and delivered to the publisher prematurely. Whether a sentence has a period at the end or not is quite arbitrary. Barton said in his introduction, “This book goes to press some three months before Peter Hall’s production of *Tantalus* opens. There is inevitably a difference between any written text and the playing one, and in this case it is very considerable.” He asks which is more important: “The author’s text or the director who takes it over?” One understands from remarks like this that the conflicts by this time (September 2000) must have been profound. Barton might have done us all a favor by waiting and revising after the play went through the crucible of rehearsal. There might have been fewer lapses. At least some more proofreading would have been in order.

Barton indulges much too much in pop psychology, and this leads to psychoanalytic allusions like Achilles’ being “poisoned” for the rest of his life by what his mother tells him about his choice between life and fame (65). Jung’s Electra complex is expressed by Clytemnestra: “O Electra, everyone

knows that a daughter loves her father too much, and her mother too little" (101). The ultimate banality is reached when the chorus try to urge Agamemnon to express his sorrow over the loss of Iphigenia. Chorus: "Let it out Agamemnon." Agamemnon: "I must not." Chorus: "He cannot [no punctuation] that is bad, he'll suffer more" (160-61). Hecuba has the same banal advice for Andromache, whose husband has been killed, her child slaughtered, and she left standing, shivering, debating whether to put her slave-dress on. Hecuba: "Let it out now, my darling, and when you go to Pyrrhus [the son of her husband's murderer, who in fact killed her child, although Odysseus claims he did] you will be strong again" (294). Not bloody likely. But this is a myth, and in Euripides' sequel (*Andromache*) she did reach an accommodation with Neoptolemus. According to Barton, who likes to add sentimental touches, in Troy she is pregnant with Hector's child, whom she will pass off to Neoptolemus as his own.

Erigone, the play omitted by Hall, begins by explaining that Calchas was impaled on a tripod in an earthquake. Erigone and Aletes, her brother, were the children of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. In Barton's version, Orestes kills Aletes, but marries Erigone. Barton has the nurse say "In our world, marriage customs have not yet been blurred by perverse genetic taboos. If the gods had been so narrow-minded there would have been no Olympians and no human-race" (483-84). This ends the cycle with a marriage, just as comedies ended with marriages, the *hieros gamos*, suggesting that in fact this rambling epic has been a long comic adventure. There certainly was no tragedy in the Aristotelian sense, since one was not allowed time to engage with the characters who are the subjects of these mythical sound-bytes.

The absence of the final play is a serious lack because it makes several of the earlier obscurities plain. Making the incest between Agamemnon and Iphigenia explicit explains much of her and her mother's actions (Iphigenia speaks of her happiness, "Mine died at the very moment my father undid the clasp on the shoulder of my dress" [475]). We are also told that Neoptolemus is Iphigenia's son by Achilles, a

rather needless variation of the accepted myth, but it adds to Orestes' crimes since in murdering Neoptolemus, he has murdered his sister's child. When Orestes reacts to his sister's revelation by seeing the furies, there is a buzzing in the air, making the obvious allusion to Sartre's *Les Mouches*, something that Katie Mitchell did in her rendition of Ted Hughes' *Oresteia*.

If Hall had kept *Erigone*, the audience would have met Tantalus. But the illogic would have continued nonetheless, since the Poet says he has just been dining with the gods and has brought back a mixture of nectar and wine for all assembled—he is hardly punished the way Tantalus was for a comparable act (487).

Yet if one has to sit through this marathon, then why was the last play cut? There are parts that meander, but this was hardly absent from the other plays. Events are clarified and the appearance of Tantalus is a type of climax. The *Erigone* had some of the few positive comments about women: “A woman's courage is greater than a man's” and she [the tragic muse Melpomene] will “end this mad male cycle of bloodshed and revenge” (482). Of course she was about to kill Orestes, so she hardly lives up to her noble sentiments.

The writing and the direction both contribute to some wasted hours. If only that budget could have supported some schools to include Homer in their reading list or helped stage some Greek tragedies or comedies by the original masters, the world would have been better off. This is a monument to the vanity of an untalented few and to the chutzpah of entrepreneurship. Barton and Hall can be truly called the Andrew Lloyd Webbers of the classical world.

Throughout the plays, ropes fray with threatening noises and the rock of Tantalus hangs ever more menacingly. In the epilogue the rock over the stage drops even more, with ponderous symbolism. But this is a *Phantom of Troy*, and the rock that slips is Hall's chandelier. I'm surprised he didn't hang Tantalus' rock over the audience, though at the end, I felt more like Sisyphus than Tantalus, more exhausted than tantalized.

NOTES

1. *Theatre Review* by Michael Phillips in *Los Angeles Times, Calendar: Arts and Entertainment* (October 23, 2000), F1.

2. *Applause: Tantalus*, Denver Center for the Performing Arts (September–December 2000), 6.

3. *Tantalus: Ten New Plays on Greek Myths* (London 2000). From this point on all page references in the text will refer to this book. I shall not capitalize each line as Barton does, since this will impede the flow of my quotations.

4. Incidentally, in the basement exhibit, *A Stage for Dionysus*, the section on Peter Hall's *Oresteia* lacks any mention that Tony Harrison is the translator/author. Is Sir Peter taking a little extra credit here?

5. *Los Angeles Times, Calendar: Arts and Entertainment* (October 23, 2000), F14.

6. Fallen heads seem to be popular on sets now. The scenic designer (Ralph Funicello) for the *Trojan Women* (my adaptation of Euripides) just performed at the Old Globe in San Diego, directed by Seret Scott (Sept. 3–Oct. 14, 2000), featured just such a head. *Zeitgeist*?

7. *Applause* (note 2), 18.

8. *L.A. Times Review, Calendar*, 1.

9. *Arts' Section* (Oct. 23, 2000), 5.

10. For Pyrrhos, the derivation “red” is given, and that derives probably from fire, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la langue Grecque*, III (Paris 1974), 960.

11. Both are ancient names of obscure origin. See Chantraine, 2.502, and 3.889.

12. 1.150.

13. See Johannes Haubold, *Homer's People: Epic Poetry and Social Transformation* (Cambridge 2000), 2, 65, *et passim*. He quotes Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore 1979), 69–72: “The Name of Achilles.”

14. M. D. Usher, “The Barton/Hall Production of Tantalus,” *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (10.28). He would have preferred Ilione pronounced (correctly) I-lye-o-nee, rather than with a long “i” on the first syllable as it was in this production.

15. E. Solimonik, “Le marquage du bétail et des esclaves dans l'Antiquité” (in Russian), *Gesellschaft und Recht im griechischen-roemischen Altertum*, 2 (1969): 219–33. See also P. Perdrizet, “La marque dans l'Antiquité,” *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 14 (1911), 54–129. My thanks go to Marcel Detienne for these references.

16. *Applause* (note 2), 8.

17. (Nov. 13, 2000), 176–77.

18. *Tantalus: Ten New Plays on Greek* (note 3), 10: “Eris began it: She rose naked out of Chaos.” See *Hesiod's Theogony, Works and Days*, trans.

M. L. West (Oxford 1988): "First came the Chasm [chaos] . . . and Eros," (6) with an explanatory note "Eros, the god of sexual love is placed at the beginning of things, being presupposed by all the following generative unions of divine powers" (64). Later *Eris* plays a distinct role in the case of the golden apple, but hardly in the creation of the universe according to any account I know, unless it is the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles' theory where love (*philia*) and strife (*neikos*) are the forces which combine and separate earth, air, fire, and water. But the Greek words are different: *eros* is not *philia*, nor *eris*, *neikos*. This may be a misprint because there are several, e.g., page 118: "and try to your mistake" should read "and try to undo your mistake." Perhaps *Eris* is indeed *Eros*.