

Creating "TANTALUS"

By John Barton

TANTALUS is a modern re-handling of a body of fragmentary but authentic mythical material which developed centuries before, during and after fifth-century BC Greek drama flourished. Most of this material has not normally been treated either by modern dramatists or in the few surviving plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and other ancient playwrights. But the whole great story deserves to be more widely known because its overall architecture offers a useful metaphor for our own questions and dilemmas.

The cycle focuses on the Trojan War, its beginning, its climax and its aftermath. There exists little-known summaries of what is known as the "Epic Cycle." The cycle itself is long since lost, but the summaries show it covered the whole saga of Troy and the house of Agamemnon. It was written some hundred years before the flowering of the great Classical dramatists, and was clearly intended to encompass the whole story, apart from that which was already handled by Homer. It is this lost cycle which TANTALUS attempts to reinvent in modern form.

The story or 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.

The gaps in this story are filled from many ancient sources, not merely the surviving early summaries of the Epic Cycle, but also Hesiod, Apollodorus and even some of the surviving or reconstructed fragments from the lost plays of the great classical dramatists themselves.

I wanted to tell as much of the whole story as I could for a number of reasons. Even in Greece today it is largely unknown by most people excited by Greek tragedy. Its scale and importance is on a par with that other great saga of family revenge, "The Mahabharata." Above all I believe the whole straggling and fragmentary epic does comprise an organic coherent whole, and that to experience the *whole* story would qualify and enrich an

audience's feelings and some of its assumptions about its more famous parts. The result is a text which does not use any of the lines in the classical plays we have, except at times when they are quoted in the background in the original Greek in the form of prophecies.

The disparate source material itself is of course full of variants and contradictions. I want to embrace these and let them come up in the course of the cycle, either through questioning and argument by the chorus or through the characters themselves. I am much influenced by the fact that many of the fifth-century plays are themselves highly innovative and freely adapt and add to the source material that existed at the time.

Today these famous classics inevitably provide us with an accepted *norm*, but to their original audience they were much more the kind of work that we would call "experimental." To counter-balance my own innovations I have set myself the rule of keeping rigorously to the plot of the cycle and all the main events or "facts" within it, only inventing where there are obvious gaps in the sources. I have treated the material freely in some places and kept very closely to it in others.

My main device has been to show the characters trying to change or prevent the series of deaths and disasters which the epic unfolds. They try, but the fatal outcomes are always the same as in the original myths. Their motivation and character, however, may be very different from those with which we are familiar. This accords with the fifth-century practice of presenting characters in a completely different light in different plays (e.g. Odysseus and Helen). My intention is not perversely to rewrite the old masterpiece but to use the material as a metaphor for today.

TANTALUS has much contemporary relevance, though I would prefer to use the phrase with the stress on the second word rather than the first. Any production of a great myth can bring out its modern resonances easily enough. Sometimes too easily. It is the eternal relevance of a myth that most interests me: it is *contemporary* because it is *timeless* and transcends centuries. TANTALUS is full of immediately recognizable themes embedded in its sources, but to begin to compile a list of them would, I think, labor the

obvious. These themes are there in the myths themselves and I hope the text itself need not stress them too heavily.

The cycle unfolds within the conventions of story telling. It gradually progresses from exchanging stories to enacting them and becoming the characters in the myths themselves -- a theatrical myth about the birth of drama, how it began with a storyteller and chorus, and how characters only gradually developed.

They serve as a Prologue, intended to relax and amuse the audience, and to set up vital information which is developed later. Three basic questions are raised: *Who is to blame? What is the truth of it? Could it have been otherwise?*

But since the whole story pre-exists, the handling of it in this way inevitably involves the question raised by the prophecies of Calchas, Cassandra and the rest. How much of it is pre-ordained by the gods? Are men and women free to change things or is everything fated? The possible solution of this paradox is always contradictory. We are indeed fated but, within the rules set by the gods and the story itself, we are free to change the details of how we act or strive within situations that press so upon us.

I see the whole thing as a metaphor about myth and history, but also about how a great myth helps us to understand history. The boundary lines between myth, history and truth are hazy. This blurring is something we understand well today. And if we don't, we should.

It is important to stress that throughout the cycle the Roman words "Greece" and "Greek" are never mentioned. My image is of something both pre-Homeric and long past it. The situation is that Agamemnon leads a group of war-kings from "The West" whom he would like to unite into a nation. His army is simply called "The War Kings" or "The Men from the West."

The title TANTALUS relates to this approach. Death is certain but doom is postponed. The fruits of the earth are ours for the taking, but most people never quite get a real taste of them. Tantalus, the friend of Zeus and the ancestor of Agamemnon and Menelaus, learned the gods' secrets. When he betrayed them to men, he was given the eternal punishment of living forever

under a great rock which was always about to fall, but never fell, close to a tree of delicious fruit which the wind swept away whenever he clutched at it. The Rock, roped up to Heaven, overhangs the whole cycle. When key decisions are made, it stirs and drifts of dust and detritus crumble from it. The ropes are frayed and from time to time, when some major catastrophe strikes, one of them loosens or drops and dangles. But the rock never quite falls.

I think more and more and more of the cycle as a metaphor for a single age in human history, squeezed in between Floods, Ice Ages, man's general self-destructiveness or some other human catastrophe. Or perhaps yet another cosmic disaster of an unknown nature.

The main bridge between storytelling and enacting is the oracle at Trophonios, where the streams of Lethe and Memory flowed from a cave or hole in the ground. The Greek historian Pausanias tells that "when a man comes out from Trophonios he is still possessed with terror and hardly knows himself or anything around him. Later he comes to his senses no worse than before, and can laugh again."

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