In the chorus’ description of the fall of Capaneus\(^2\), the meaning of \(\text{τανταλωθείς}\) is a notorious difficulty\(^3\). The aim of this note is to show in some detail that, despite the contrary opinion of most recent commentators, the interpretation favoured by Kamerbeek—that the word ‘expresses the moment of ‘staggering’, ‘tottering’ before his fall’—is the most likely explanation\(^4\).

\(^*\) I am most grateful to both G. J. Dunn and more especially J. M. Bremer for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

1) The following abbreviations are used for editions and works of reference:


2) E. Ph. 1172-86 features a similar description of Capaneus’ fall but is of doubtful value as a tool in the interpretation of the Sophoclean passage.

3) The possibility of MSS corruption cannot be entirely overlooked. Blaydes, for example, notes Musgrave’s conjectures ταρταρωθείς or αἰθαλωθείς and Wakefield’s αὐθρακωθείς. Dr Bremer floats τυθαλωθείς, comparing Aristoph. *Vesp.* 328-9 ἣ με κεραυνῷ/διατυθαλέῳ σπόδισεν ταξείς.

4) Cf. also the Loeb translation’s ‘tottered’.
The verb τανταλώω, -όμαι, of which the Sophoclean participle is presumably part, is not found elsewhere, although there are examples of the similar τανταλίζω, -μαι. These verb forms, along with the noun Τάνταλος to which they may be supposed to be related, have been reasonably explained as dissimilated from *ταλ-ταλ-ιζω and *ταλ-ταλ-ος which themselves show intensifying reduplication of a ταλ/ταλ stem). A semantic connection between Τάνταλος and the related verb forms, however, is much more difficult to establish).

At first sight, it may appear tempting to link the meaning of τανταλώθεις directly with the name of the mythical figure Tantalus, a link reflected, for example, in Masqueray’s translation ‘nouveau Tantale’. The formation of a verb utilizing a mythological name in this way is certainly not without parallel). In this case, however, there is a serious difficulty because it is virtually impossible to pinpoint in what sense Capaneus has ‘become like Tantalus, as it were’.

S. E. Bassett, noting the possible connection between the names Atlas and Tantalus), tries to see in τανταλώθεις a general reference to the overthrow of the Titans. However, even if Tantalus was at some stage simply an hybristic Titan demolished by Zeus’ superior fire-power, it is unlikely that Sophocles could have used him without elaboration as representative of the Titan race and their overthrow, and that τανταλώθεις could accordingly mean in general terms ‘overthrown like Tantalus in his capacity as Titan’.

5) See e.g. Schwyzter I 2137 (also 259 and 647) and Frisk. This is, of course, assuming that the word is Greek and therefore of Indo-European origin in the first place. Chantraine in particular is highly dubious about this.

6) Chantraine is perhaps rash to state that both τανταλίζω and τανταλώ “font allusion au supplice de Tantale, soit parce qu’il est secoué, soit à cause de la pierre suspendue sur sa tête”. See further below.

7) Cf. πριμάδαμα ‘become like Priam’ (Com. Aesp. 1123) i.e. ‘have one’s head shaven’ since, as the lexicographers already explain, το τραγικόν του Πριάμου πρόσωπον ξυρίζει εστίν. Related to this, though somewhat different, are verbs built on the βαχχι stem, such as βαχχευω, βαχχιάζω and βαχχιώω, all of which occur in the tragedians. Cf. also e.g. ἔχεχριστικο used by Pherecrates (Fr. 95).

8) TANTAΛΩΘΕΙΣ in Sophocles’ Antigone 134, CP 8 (1913), 479-80.

9) Frisk, Roscher (col. 82) and RE (col. 2224) associate the names as having the significance ‘Träger des Himmelsgewölbes’. Chantraine is dubious about this, as he is, in fact, about suggested etymologies for Tantalus in general.