

Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*
 in *The Greek Sophists*
 translated by J. Dillon and T. Gergel
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The Encomium of Helen

We may turn now, however, to something completely different, and much more characteristic of Gorgias: his two surviving display-speeches, *The Encomium of Helen* and *The Defence of Palamedes*. Though they are obviously very different in style from *On Not-Being*, yet it could be argued that their purpose is not dissimilar, being, as it is, to demonstrate the all-conquering power of persuasive speech. In the case of the *Helen*, the purpose is not to mount a serious defence of Helen, but rather to hymn the power of persuasion; in that of the *Palamedes*, which has a much more explicitly forensic format, it seems to be to present a model for argument from probability. As we have said above, we have chosen to present the *Helen* in quasi-poetic form, distinguishing the cola, in an attempt to convey something of the impression it must have made on its hearers; we have also included in brackets a selection of the more striking alliterative flourishes of the Greek. In the case of the *Palamedes*, such extreme measures are not necessary. Firstly, the *Helen*:

31. [1] The adornment (*kosmos*) of a city is manpower,
 of a body beauty,
 of a soul, wisdom,
 of an action, virtue,
 of a speech, truth;
 and the opposites of these make for disarray (*akosmia*).

Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object
 should be honoured, if praiseworthy, with praise
 and incur, if unworthy, blame,

for it is an equal error and mistake
 to blame the praiseable and to praise the blameable.

[2] It is the part of one and the same man
 both to speak the needful rightly
 and to refute <what is said not rightly;
 it is fitting, then,>⁹¹ to refute those who rebuke Helen,
 a woman about whom univocal and unanimous
 has been the testimony of inspired poets,
 as has the ill omen of her name,
 which has become a memorial of misfortunes.

For my part, by introducing some reasoning into my
 speech,

I wish to free the accused from blame (*pausai tês aitias*),
 and, by revealing her detractors as liars and showing forth
 the truth,
 to free her from ignorance (*pausai tês amathias*).

[3] So then, that in nature and in ancestry
 the woman who is subject of this speech
 is pre-eminent among pre-eminent men and women
 is not unclear, even to a few.

For it is clear that her mother was Leda,
 and her father was in fact (*genomenou*) a god, Zeus,
 but said to be (*legomenou*) a mortal, Tyndareus,
 of whom the one was shown to be her father

because he was (*dia to einai*),
 and the latter was disproved,
 because he was said to be (*dia to phanai*),
 and the latter was the most powerful of men,
 while the former was lord of all things.

[4] Born of such stock, she had godlike beauty,
 which, taking and not mistaking (*labousa kai ou lathousa*),
 she kept;

In many did she work much desire for her love,

and with her one body she brought together many bodies
of men
 thinking great thoughts for great goals,
of whom some had greatness of wealth
 some the glory of ancient nobility,
 some the vigour of personal agility,
 some command of acquired knowledge;
and all came
 because of a passion which loved to conquer
(*philonikou*)
 and a love of honour which was unconquered (*anikêtou*).

[5] Who it was, and why and how he sailed away,
 taking Helen as his love, I shall not say.
To tell the knowing what they know already
 shows the right but brings no delight.
Having passed over the time then in my speech now,⁹²
I shall go on to the beginning of my future speech,
and I shall set forth the causes which made it likely
 that Helen's voyage to Troy should take place.

[6] For either it was by the will of Fate
 and the wishes of the Gods
 and the votes of Necessity
that she did what she did,
 or by force reduced
 or by words seduced
 <or by love possessed>.⁹³

Now if through the first,
 it is right for the responsible to be held responsible;
for God's predetermination (*prothymian*) cannot be
hindered

 by human premeditation (*promêthiâi*).

For it is the nature of things,
not for the stronger to be hindered by the weaker,
but for the weaker to be ruled and drawn by the
stronger,
and for the stronger to lead and the weaker to
follow.

God is a stronger force than man
 in might and in wit and in other ways.
If then on Fate and on God one must place blame
(*anatheteon*)

 Helen from disgrace one must free (*apolyteon*).

[7] But if she was by violence raped
 and lawlessly forced
 and unjustly outraged
it is plain that the rapist, as the outrager, did the wronging,
 and the raped, as the outraged, did the suffering.
It is right, then,
 for the barbarian who undertook a barbaric undertaking
 in word and law and deed
 to meet with blame in word,
 exclusion in law,
 and punishment in deed.

And how would it not be reasonable for a woman
 raped and robbed of her country and deprived of her
friends

 to be pitied rather than pilloried?
He did the dread deeds; she suffered them.
It is just, therefore,

 to pity her, but to hate him.

[8] But if it was speech which persuaded her
 and deceived her soul,
not even to this is it difficult to make an answer
 and to banish blame,

as follows:

Speech is a powerful lord, who
 with the finest and most invisible body
 achieves the most divine works:
 it can stop fear and banish grief
 and create joy and nurture pity.

I shall show how this is the case,
 for I must offer proof to the opinions (*doxêi deixai*) of
my hearers.

I both deem and define all poetry

as speech possessing metre.

[9] There come upon its hearers
 fearful shuddering (*phrikê periphobos*)
 and tearful pity (*eleos polydakrys*)
 and grievous longing (*pothos philopenthês*),
 and at the good fortunes and evil actions
 of others' affairs and bodies
 through the agency of words
 the soul experiences suffering of its own.
 But come, I shall turn from one argument to another.⁹⁴

[10] Inspired incantations conveyed through words
 become bearers of pleasure (*epagôgoi hêdonês*)
 and banishers of pain (*apagôgoi lypês*);
 for, merging with opinion in the soul,
 the power of the incantation beguiles it
 and persuades it
 and alters it by witchcraft.
 Of witchcraft and magic twin arts have been discovered,⁹⁵
 which are errors of the soul (*psychês*
 hamartêmata)
 and deceptions of opinion (*doxês*
 apatêmata).

[11] All who have and do persuade people of things
 do so by moulding a false argument.
 For if all men on all subjects
 had both memory of things past
 and <awareness>⁹⁶ of things present
 and foreknowledge of the future,
 speech would not be similarly similar,
 since, as things are now, it is not easy for them
 to recall the past
 nor to consider the present
 nor to divine the future;
 so that on most subjects most men
 take opinion as counsellor to their soul.
 But opinion, being slippery and insecure,

casts those employing it into slippery and insecure
 successes.

[12] What cause, then,⁹⁷ prevents the conclusion
 that Helen similarly, against her will,
 might have come under the influence of speech,
 just as if ravished by the force of pirates?
 For the mode of persuasion is in no way like that of necessity,
 but its power is the same.

For the speech which persuades the soul
 constrains that soul which it persuades
 both to obey its utterances
 and to approve its doings.

The persuader, as constrainer, does the wrong,
 and the persuaded, as constrained, is wrongly blamed.

[13] That persuasion, when added to speech,
 can impress the soul as it wishes,
 one may learn

 first from the utterances of the astronomers
 who, substituting opinion for opinion,
 taking away one but creating another,
 make what is incredible and unclear
 seem true to the eyes of opinion;
 and second, compelling contests in words,
 in which a single speech,
 written with art, but not spoken with truth,
 may charm and persuade a large multitude;
 and third, the struggles of philosophic arguments,
 in which swiftness of thought is also shown
 making belief in an opinion easily changed.

[14] The effect of speech upon the structure of soul
 is as the structure of drugs over the nature of bodies;
 for just as different drugs dispel different secretions from
 the body,
 and some bring an end to disease, and others to life,
 so also in the case of speeches
 some distress, others delight,

some cause fear, others embolden their hearers,
and some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil
persuasion.

[15] It has been stated, then, that, if she was persuaded by
speech,

she did not do wrong (*êdikêsen*), but was unfortunate
(*êtykhêsen*).

The fourth cause I shall discuss in a fourth section.

For if it was love which did these things,

no difficulty will she have in escaping the charge
of the sin which is alleged to have taken place.

For the things we see

do not have the nature which we wish them to have,
but the nature which each happens to have;
through sight the soul is impressed even to its core.

[16] For example,

when enemy bodies fit themselves out against enemies,
with warlike gear of bronze and iron,
some for defence, some for offence,
if the sight sees this, it is alarmed, and alarms the soul,
so that often men flee in terror
from future danger as if it were present.

For strong as is the habit of obedience to the law,

it is driven out by fear resulting from sight
which, coming to a man, causes him to set at naught
both the noble that is adjudged through law,
and the good that comes about through victory.

[17] It has happened that people, having seen frightening
sights,

have lost presence of mind for the present moment;
even thus does fear extinguish and expel thought.
And many have fallen victim to

useless labour (*mataiois ponois*)
and dread diseases (*deinai nosois*)
and madnesses hard to cure (*dysiatois maniais*).

In this way the sight engraves upon the mind
images of things seen.

And many frightening impressions linger,
and what lingers is very similar to what is said.

[18] Moreover, whenever pictures from many colours and
figures

perfectly create a single figure and form,
they delight the sight;
while the crafting of statues and the production of
art-works
provide a pleasant vision to the eyes.
So it is natural for the sight

to be grieved by some things and to long for
others;
and much love and desire for many things and bodies
is wrought in many people.

[19] If, therefore, the eye of Helen,
pleased by the body of Alexander,
presented to her soul eager desire and contest of
love,

what is wonderful in that?
If, being a god, love has the divine power of the gods,
how could a lesser being reject and refuse it?

But if it is a disease (*nosêma*) of human origin
and a blind-spot (*agnoêma*) in the soul,
it should not be condemned as a sin (*hamartêma*),
but considered a misfortune (*atykhêma*);

for she came – as she did come –

by the snares of fate (*tykhês agreumasin*)
not by the counsels of reason (*gnômês bouleumasin*),
and by the constraints of love (*erôtos anangkais*),
not by the devices of art (*tekhnês paraskeuais*).

[20] How then can one regard the blame of Helen as just,
seeing as, whether she did what she did,
by love o'ermastered
or by speech persuaded

or by force ravished
 or by divine constraint compelled,
 she is utterly acquitted of all charge?

[21] I have through speech removed ill fame from a
 woman.

I have stayed true to the procedure that I set up
 at the outset of my speech.

I have tried to end the injustice of blame (*mô mou adikian*)
 and the ignorance of opinion (*doxês amathian*).

My purpose was to compose a speech as an encomium of
 Helen
 and an amusement for
 myself.⁹⁸

91. Lacuna filled thus, very plausibly, by Diels.

92. The reference here is quite unclear, but it seems to be an empty rhetorical flourish.

93. Added, plausibly, by Diels on the basis of §15 below.

94. Here Gorgias turns to what is the central point of this display-speech, a celebration of the power of rhetoric, presented as a quasi-magical force.

95. What follows here makes possible sense, but sounds a little abrupt. There may well be a lacuna in the text, as suggested by Max Pohlenz, *Aus Platos Werdezeit*, Berlin, 1913, p. 40, who fills it plausibly, as follows: '<of which the one with drugs produces changes, which are illnesses of the body and diseases of the flesh, while the other with words engenders new ideas>, which are ...' Cf. [14] below.

96. *ennoian* supplied here reasonably by Blass, to balance *pronoian* in the next column. Note that Gorgias, in speaking of mental capacities, speaks always of 'opinion' (*doxa*), never of 'knowledge' (*epistêmê*). Plato would agree with him that rhetoric may hold sway over *doxa*.

97. The text here is unfortunately seriously corrupt. We adopt a blend of the conjectures of Blass (1887-98) and Radermacher (1951), as giving an acceptable sense and balance.

98. A very significant final remark!