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Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*: A Rhetorical Warning

Through describing the powers and dangers of persuasion in a speech meant to persuade, Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen* constructs a meta-narrative in which he argues for the importance of persuasion from two angles. But why does he choose the case in which speech leads to disaster, that being the Trojan War, to advertise the power of persuasion to his listeners? And what sort of tactics does he use to do this? This paper will attempt to prove the claim that Gorgias both incentivizes and cautions his future students of rhetoric into making just speeches, and will examine this claim through the rhetorical devices he chooses to achieve these aims.

But before analyzing Gorgias' *Helen*, we will first want to take a broader look at accounts of Gorgias and establish the nature of his speech through his other works. We know very little of Gorgias the person. In his Rhetoric to Alexander, Aristotle describes Gorgias as "providing model speeches to his students without guidance as to how to adapt their lessons to new circumstances." (Pratt 164) This claim is supported in Plato's Gorgias, where Gorgias is shown to have no formal definition of rhetoric until Socrates leads him to the definition of "knowledge about words." (Timmerman and Schiappa 36) Gorgias probably led by example, then, using speeches to give examples to his students of Good practice in rhetoric.

From here we may turn to Gorgias' surviving works, mainly *The Defense of Palamedes*, *On not Being*, and *The Encomium of Helen*. Each of these provides valuable insight into Gorgias as a teacher, as well as some of Gorgias' views on Rhetoric. For while Gorgias may have no formal definition of Rhetoric, he certainly has opinions on the power of words. All three speeches are Epideictic, meant to get the audience to think in a certain way. In these speeches, Gorgias demonstrates four species of argumentation: (1) probability arguments, (2) arguments from antinomy, (3) theorisation through examples, and (4) apagogic and 'Russian doll arguments.' (Spatharas 394) Presumably the differences in the types of argumentation are intentional on Gorgias' part to introduce his students to various forms of speech through example. Similarly, the speeches are all sprinkled (some even drowned) in ornaments of speech. Aristotle uses the speeches of Gorgias as an example of "language of oratorical prose [that] at first took a poetical colour." (Aristotle) While it is not the "speech having meter" (Gorgias 254)

that Gorgias would consider poetry, it is littered with the homeoteleuton, metaphor, alliteration, and other ornaments of speech we would typically associate with poetic language.

But hidden within Gorgias' speech, especially in *On not Being* and *Helen*, are subtle and not-so-subtle commentaries on the nature of language and rhetoric. *On not Being*, as Rowett and Osborne note, "demonstrated the totally overpowering way of words." (Rowett and Osborne 130) Gorgias chooses an impossible philosophical claim to defend: that (a) nothing exists, that (b) even if something exists, it cannot be known, and that (c) even if something is known, it cannot be expressed. Employing verbal trickery, Gorgias 'proves' this claim to his audience, but not as an attempt to produce a serious piece of Philosophy. Not only are the arguments pedantic, addressing and refuting positions that do not need it, but his belief that nothing exists would not be compatible with his beliefs held in *Helen* which we will discuss later in this paper: beliefs in ethical, 'good' speech, and beliefs in the power of words. If he truly believed nothing existed, why would Gorgias ever try to persuade the public of anything? If he truly believed we could not express what is known, why would he dedicate his life to teaching a means of expression? While the Sophists may appear to be skeptics in their denial of objective truth, Gorgias does hold one: language can persuade. Gorgias demonstrates the power of words through the subject matter of the speech *and* the speech itself, something he will do again in *Helen* to an even greater effect.

Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* is an epideictic speech that intends to free Helen of Troy of all blame for her actions leading up to the Trojan War. It presents four hypotheses for Helen's succumbing to Paris: (1) physical force, (2) necessity/will of the gods, (3) speech or *Logos*, or (4) love. At a glance, *Encomium* appears to be a piece of apagogic reasoning, in which the four hypotheses are argued independent of one another, in no apparent order. (Spatharas 406) But upon closer examination, Gorgias builds into his third and fourth arguments by means of his first two. Once Gorgias establishes that a woman taken control of by force or by the will of the Gods cannot be blamed, arguments which Gorgias does not linger on for very long, he can set up a new, easier argument for himself in the second part of the proof: he now merely needs to prove that *Logos* and love are either Gods or physical forces. It is for this reason that I classify Gorgias' *Helen* as a 'Russian Doll' argument, one in which the arguments build and depend on each other, in two parts. But we will not remain on this argument any further, for I would like to examine Gorgias' discussion of Logos in this speech, the most frequently academically examined section.

Gorgias' section on Logos is the longest part of his proof in *Helen*. As such, he goes into great detail on various types of persuasive speech. He first describes speech in general as "a powerful lord that with the smallest and most invisible body accomplishes most godlike works." (Gorgias 253) With this metaphor, Gorgias can allude to how an individual under the influence of a god's predetermination should not be blamed. Gorgias then moves into various categories of speeches: poetry, incantations, and the persuasive speeches of astronomers, public debaters, and philosophers. Poetry, which he describes as "speech having meter," (Gorgias 254) is the only example that he posits in isolation of persuasion. Using a hyperbolic polysyndetic tricolon to emphasize his point, he claims poetry can cause "fearful shuddering and tearful pity and grievous longing." (Gorgias 254) In each of these cases, he shows how poetry can cause emotional effects but does not claim that these emotional effects aim to convince. (Valiavitcharska 150) Compare this to his line about incantations, where he says "how many speakers on how many subjects have persuaded others and continue to persuade by molding false speech," (Gorgias 254) or to his introduction of the speeches of astronomers, debaters, and philosophers where he says "persuasion, joining with speech, is wont to stamp the soul as it wishes." (Gorgias 254)

Gorgias supplements his ideas of persuasive speech with an antithesis-laden account of the goodness and evil that Logos can cause, saying "some speeches cause pain, some pleasure, some fear; some instill courage, some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion." (Gorgias 254) But while Gorgias sights the goodness that speech can cause, one must remember that he does so in the context of speech that leads to disaster. Thus, his final example of "evil persuasion" is not antithesized; in this case, there is no balance between just and unjust speech. But to examine this danger more acutely, we must back up and examine the topic of the speech.

Why did Gorgias choose the story of Helen and the Trojan War as the subject of his speech? Certainly, the story of Helen being common knowledge among his listeners was a factor. Gorgias did not need to linger on non-artistic forms of invention for too long, helpful considering non-artistic forms of invention would change from case to case, and so speeches relying on them too much would be unhelpful for his students. Gorgias also wanted to argue something difficult. At the beginning of the speech, he claims Helen is "a woman whom there is univocal and unanimous testimony among those who have believed the poets." (Gorgias 252) But as Pratt notes, "Helen's motivations and degree of complicity had been repeatedly contested from the

Iliad onward." (Pratt 168)[1] Compare this with his argument in *On not Being*, and we find that his choice of Helen is more nuanced than simply being difficult to defend and well-known. I will dedicate the next section to demonstrating how the choosing Helen of Troy is part of a larger purpose of *Encomium of Helen*: to serve as a warning to orators to use just speech.

In his prooemion, Gorgias describes Helen's name as "ill-omened," likening it to a "memorial of disasters." (Gorgias 252) His hyperbole and metaphor, nearing the realm of catachresis, at first seem to be characterizing the "unanimous" argument of poets. But along with this, Gorgias is also calling attention to the fatalistic disasters Helen's persuasion ends up causing. If Gorgias is using this speech to demonstrate the power of language, why would he choose an instance in which language leads to disaster? In his Narration, a section frequently ignored by academics, Gorgias says that Helen "by her one body…brought together many bodies of men greatly minded for great deeds." (Gorgias 252) Gorgias calls attention to the fact that Helen is a persuader as much as the persuaded. The fourth potential persuader of Helen is love, and Gorgias notes "on many, did she work the greatest passions of love." (Gorgias 252) Gorgias seems to be planting the seeds for something like the golden rule here, that orators should persuade others in the way they would like to be persuaded.

The ethical nature of the speech does not end here. Gorgias opens the speech by claiming: "Fairest ornament to a city is a goodly army and to a body beauty and to a soul wisdom and to an action virtue and to a speech truth." (Gorgias 252) In a speech with persuasion at its heart, Gorgias chooses to open it with a praise of true speech, wisdom, and civic-military duty. Gorgias doesn't seem to be solely advertising rhetoric here. In stating his intentions as "giving some logic to language…and to demonstrate the truth and to put an end to ignorance," (Gorgias 252) Gorgias emphasizes the importance of true and just speech. Contrast this with the intentions of the persuaders in his Logos section of the proof: "Opinion, being slippery and insecure, casts those relying on it into slippery and insecure fortune." (Gorgias 254) Gorgias sets up a hidden antithesis between his own, truth-focused and logical speech, with that of the opinion-based and manipulative persuaders. He even appears to be arguing that being emotionally detached from a

[1] As he also notes, Gorgias ignores the alternate interpretation of the myth where Helen's phantom elopes with Paris for the same reason.

speech will make the argument more just since one has no true incentive to persuade and manipulate.

It is perhaps for this reason that Gorgias inserts so much poetic language and imagery into his speeches. Poetry is given as the only example of non-persuasive speech in *Helen*, and so by emulating poetry in his speeches, he can give them the divine and opinion-free nature of true speech. There is no denying that the ornaments of speech in *Encomium of Helen* are used to teach his students, but perhaps they have a double meaning in also illustrating *why* ornaments of speech are so useful. Polysyndeton is used both in the opening, "goodly army *and to* a body beauty *and to* a soul wisdom *and to* an action virtue *and to* a speech truth," and ending, "to free the accused of blame *and to* show that her critics are lying *and to* demonstrate the truth *and to* put an end to ignorance," (Gorgias 252) of the Prooemion to both add a semi-artificial poetic nature to the opening lines, and to give the impression that Gorgias has a lot to say. He opens the narration with heavy pleonasm, saying "Now that by nature and birth the woman who is the subject of this speech was preeminent among preeminent men and women, this is not unclear, not even to a few," (Gorgias 252) when "Helen's birth was preeminent," would have sufficed, to infuse his statements of fact with carefree poetry. In the first part of his proof, he uses antithesis in "the stronger leads, the weaker follows," (Gorgias 253) to represent great poetic dualities. But in speaking of the persuaders in the latter portion of the proof, the Gorgianic figures take a pause. Granted, there's a personification and metaphor in "the eyes of opinion," (Gorgias 254) but it is not nearly as drowned as other sections of the speech. Gorgias seems to be imitating the less poetic, more matter-of-fact manner of speech of the persuasion that he discusses here.

One of the obvious uses of poetic speech, and one often analyzed, is the ending: "I wished to write a speech that would be Helen's encomion and my own *paignion*." (256) The homeoteleuton here is obvious, as if Gorgias is ending his speech with a nursery rhyme. Gorgias' rhyming end has many uses. Firstly, he uses it to signpost the end of the speech similarly to his saying "listen as I turn from one argument to another." (Gorgias 254) His rhyme also seems to purposely devalue the speech itself. In calling it a plaything, Gorgias admits that if his audience has listened to him, they've been successfully hoodwinked by his language. But wasn't Gorgias speaking truthfully? Why would he devalue his speech, one meant to educate his listeners, right at the end? Ford notes that Gorgias uses *paignion* "to strike a note of leisured sophistication as

opposed to technical earnestness." (Pratt 170) Under this reading, *paignon* appears not as a "plaything" in the sense that the speech was meaningless, but rather that the speech brought him pleasure. And since his speech is not regarding opinion, but was rather constructed as a leisurely activity, he once again separates himself from the persuaders.

In Plato's *Gorgias*, Gorgias informs Socrates "if he [one of my students of rhetoric] happens not to know these things [justice] he will also learn them from me." (Plato 257) If Plato, one of Gorgias' greatest opponents, can attribute to Gorgias a sense of justice and a desire to teach it, we have good reason to believe it is true. *The Encomium of Helen* is a living example of these teachings. Through his praise of "true speech," exemplified in his very own oratory, and his warnings that everyone is susceptible to persuasion and opinion, Gorgias warns future orators to act as he leads, perhaps in hopes that oratory will shed its ill-omened name as morally gray spin doctoring.

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