

## Gorgias: Encomium to Helen

(*Proemion*) 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 speech truth, but their opposites are unbecoming. Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object should be honored with praise if praiseworthy, but on the unworthy blame should be laid; for it is equal error and ignorance to blame the praiseworthy and to praise the blameworthy. It is the function of a single speaker both to prove the needful rightly and to disprove the wrongly spoken. Thus I shall refute those who rebuke Helen, a woman about whom there is univocal and unanimous testimony among those who have believed the poet, and whose ill-omened name has become a memorial of disasters. I wish by giving some logic to language 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.

[*Narration*] 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. For it is clear that Leda was her mother, the latter Tyndareus, the former Zeus; and of these the one seemed her father because he was and the other was disproved because he was only *said* to be; and one was the greatest of men, the other the lord of all. Born from such parents she possessed god-like beauty, which getting and not forgetting she preserved. On many did she work the greatest passions of love, and by her one body she brought together many bodies of men greatly minded for great deeds. Some had the greatness of wealth, some the glory of ancient noblesse, some the vigor of personal prowess, some the power of acquired knowledge. And all came because of a passion that loved conquest and a love of honor that was unconquered. who he was and why and how he (Paris) sailed away taking Helen as his love, I shall not say; for to tell the knowing what they know is believable but not enjoyable. Having now exceeded the time already allotted for my introduction, I shall now proceed to my intended speech and shall propose the causes for which Helen's voyage to Troy was likely to have taken place.

[*Proposition*] For by Fate's will and gods wishes and Necessity's decrees she did what she did, or by force reduced, or by words seduced, or by love induced.

[*Proof*] Now if for the first reason (the gods), the responsible

one should rightly be held responsible: it is impossible to prevent a god's predetermination by human premeditation, since by nature the stronger force is not prevented by the weaker but the weaker is ruled and driven by the stronger; the stronger leads, the weaker follows. But god is stronger than man in force and in wisdom and in other ways. If, therefore, by fate and god the cause had been decreed, Helen must of all disgrace be freed.

But if she was seized by force and illegally assaulted and unjustly insulted, it is clear that the assailant as insulter did the wrong and the assailed as insulted suffered wrongly. It is right for the barbarian who laid barbarous hands on her by word and deed to meet with blame in word, disenfranchisement in law, and punishment in deed, while she who was seized and deprived of her country and bereft of her friends,—how should she not be pitied rather than pilloried? He did dread deeds; she suffered them. Her it is just to pity; him to hate.

But if speech 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 that with the smallest and most invisible body accomplishes god-like works. It can banish fear and remove grief and instill pleasure and enhance pity. I shall show how this is so. It is necessary for it to seem so as well in the opinion of my hearers. All poetry I regard and name as speech having metre. On those who hear it come fearful shuddering and tearful pity and grievous longing as the soul, through words, experiences some experience of its own and others' good fortune and ill fortune. Listen as I turn from one argument to another.

Divine sweetness transmitted through words is inductive of pleasure, reductive of pain. Thus by entering into the opinion of the soul the force of incantation is wont to beguile and persuade and alter it by witchcraft, and the two arts of witchcraft and magic are errors of the soul and deceivers of opinion. How many speakers on how many subject have persuaded others and continue to persuade by molding false speech? If everyone, on every subject, had memory of the past and knowledge of the present and foresight of the future, speech would not do what it does, but as things are it is easy neither to remember the past nor consider the present nor predict the future; so that on most subjects most people take opinion as counselor to the soul. But opinion, being slippery and insecure, casts those relying on it into slippery and insecure fortune. What is there to prevent the

conclusion that Helen too, when still young, was carried off by speech just as if constrained by force? Her mind was swept away by persuasion, and persuasion has the same power as necessity, although it may bring shame. For speech, by persuading the soul it persuaded, constrained her body to obey what was said and to approve what was done. The persuader, as user of force, did wrong; the persuaded, forced by speech, is unreasonably blamed. To understand that persuasion, joining with speech, is wont to stamp the soul as it wishes one must study, first, the words of astronomers who, substituting opinion for opinion, removing one and instilling another, make incredible and unclear things appear true to the eyes of opinion [e.g.; by demonstrating that the world is round]; second, forceful speeches in public debate, where one side of an argument pleases a large crowd and persuades by being written with art even though not spoken with the truth; third, the verbal wrangling of philosophers in which too a swiftness of thought is exhibited, making confidence in opinion easily changed. The power of speech has the same effect on the condition of the soul as the application of drugs to the state of bodies, for just as different drugs dispel different fluids from the body, and some bring an end to disease but other end life, so also some speeches cause pain, some pleasure, some fear; some instill courage, some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion.

Thus it has been explained that if she was persuaded by speech she did no wrong but was unfortunate. I shall now go on to the fourth cause in a fourth discourse. If it was love that did these things it will not be difficult to escape the charge of error that is alleged. For we see not what we wish but what each of us has experienced: through sight the soul is stamped in diverse ways. Whenever men at war, enemy against enemy, buckle up in the armaments of bronze and iron, whether in defense or offense, when their sight beholds the scene it is alarmed and causes alarm in the soul, so that often they flee in terror from future danger as though it were present. Obedience to law is strongly brought home by fear derived from sight which, coming upon people, made them desire both what is judged seemly by law and thought good by the mind, but as soon as they have seen terrible sights they abandon the thought of the moment. Thus discipline is extinguished and fear drives out the concept. Many fall victim to imaginary diseases and dreadful pains and hard-to-cure mental aberrations; thus does sight engrave on the images of things seen. Many many terrors remain, and those that

remain are very like things that have been said. Moreover, whenever pictures of many colors and figures create a perfect image of a single figure and form they delight the sight. How much does the production of statues and the workmanship of artifacts furnish pleasurable sight to the eyes! Thus it is natural for the sight sometimes to grieve, sometimes to delight. Much love and desire for many objects is created in many minds. If then the eye of Helen, pleased by the body of Alexander (Paris), gave to her soul an eagerness and response in love, what wonder? If love, a god, prevails over the divine power of the gods, how could a lesser one be able to reject and refuse it? But if love is a human disease and an ignorance of the soul it should not be blamed as a mistake but regarded as a misfortune. For she (Helen) went (with Paris) caught by the nets around her soul, not by the wishes of her mind, and by the necessity of love, not by the devices of art.

[*Epilogue*] How then can blame of Helen be thought just? Whether she did what she did by falling in love or persuaded by speech or seized by violence or forced by divine necessity, she is completely acquitted. By speech I have removed disgrace from a woman. I have abided by the principle I posed at the start of my speech: I have tried to refute the injustice of defamation and the ignorance of allegation. I wished to write a speech that would be Helen's celebration and my own recreation.