“Encomium of Helen”

Gorgias. “Encomium of Helen.” Translated by J. Dillon and T. Gergel

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:

[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, 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,
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>.
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.

[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, 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> 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, 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 (deinais nosois)
and madesses hard to cure (dysia-tois 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.
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 bouleumasis),
and by the constraints of love (erôtos anangkais),
not by the devices of art (tekhnês paraskeuais).
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,

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?

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 (mômou adikian) 
and the ignorance of opinion (doxês amاثian). 
My purpose was to compose a speech as an encomium of Helen and an amusement for myself.