

Gorgias

ca. 480–ca. 380 B.C.E.

Gorgias was born in Leontini in Sicily, which is considered by many scholars to be the birthplace of the formal study of rhetoric. He may have studied philosophy with Empedocles, a Pre-Socratic philosopher, and may have known the early rhetoricians Corax and Tisias. Gorgias became one of the best known of the Sophists. In 427 he brought Sicilian rhetoric to mainland Greece when he was sent by his native city on an embassy to Athens, perhaps with Tisias. Gorgias received such acclaim for his speaking that he remained in Greece, demonstrating and teaching rhetoric. He specialized in ceremonial oratory and, according to one tradition, could produce it extemporaneously on subjects suggested by the audience at his public performances. He was also a noted advocate of pan-Hellenism. Like other Sophists, Gorgias traveled from city to city; he died in Thessaly.

Gorgias was awarded many honors not usually given to foreigners in Greece, such as invitations to speak at the festivals. That Gorgias's performances were eagerly anticipated is suggested by Socrates at the beginning of Plato's *Gorgias*, when he compares listening to the orator to consuming a banquet (an image, of course, with ironic repercussions when the dialogue later relates Gorgianic rhetoric to cookery). Several chroniclers describe a solid gold statue of Gorgias, set up—perhaps by himself—at Delphi. Isocrates, who had been his student, claims (in the *Antidosis*) that, although not exactly wealthy, Gorgias amassed more than any other Sophist because he lived long, lacked a wife and children to support, and wandered too much to become liable for taxes in any city.

Gorgias's style has often been characterized as overly antithetical and symmetrical in structure and overly alliterative and assonant in sound. How could the Greek audience have valued so highly a style that jingles unpleasantly to modern ears? One possible answer is that the Greek audience was conditioned by its oral culture to respond to such auditory spellbinding. Listening to Gorgias apparently aroused not only intense sensual pleasure but also a shared sense of participation in a kind of wisdom available no other way. The power of his words was akin to magic, conjuring up conviction where no knowledge had existed before. At the same time that Gorgias's rhetoric provided this magical experience, however, which was like the power of poetry, its very artificiality called attention to its manipulative effects. In other words, Gorgianic rhetoric pointed up the fact that language can be crafted to suit particular purposes; powerful speech is not simply the result of the speaker's inspiration or the audience's transport.

Recent scholarship has begun to treat Gorgias more seriously as a philosopher. Following Empedocles, Gorgias believed that provisional knowledge is the only knowledge we can attain. He denied the existence of transcendent essences. Therefore, he thought, if we are to believe anything, we must be distracted from the limitations of provisional knowledge. Provisional knowledge must be presented to us with the aid of rhetoric that appeals ethically and pathetically as well as logically—

it must appeal to our whole person. Like King Oedipus, we achieve confidence in our own wisdom only through deception, not knowing that we do not know. But without this confidence, we cannot act, cannot govern wisely.

These views are expressed in the few texts by Gorgias that have survived. In his philosophical treatise "On Nature" (probably written before he came to Greece, ca. 444 B.C.E.), Gorgias poses a series of paradoxes: Nothing exists; or if it does exist, we cannot know it; or if we can know it, we cannot communicate our knowledge to another person. These paradoxes seem so counter to ordinary experience, and indeed so nihilistic, as to invite interpretation as parody. They are often read, however, as pointing to the nonexistence of transcendent essences and the impossibility of describing any such thing. Hence, human encounters with the world and the exchange of knowledge about it are necessarily limited, provisional, and shared experiences that rely upon a shared deception effected by language.

The "Encomium of Helen" (ca. 414; included here) argues for the totalizing power of language. Gorgias excuses Helen for succumbing to Paris if he persuaded her, for "speech is a powerful lord." Gorgias compares the power of language to magic and drugs, and even characterizes it as deceitful, a damning admission to many scholars and one that has led some to see the "Encomium" as an ironic *jeu d'esprit*. But other scholars assert that Gorgias is making the strongest possible case for the power of language to change the whole person. Indeed, he seems to regard Helen as more intimately, thoroughly violated by persuasion than she would have been by forcible rape. And this power holds even in "the verbal disputes of the philosophers." Language creates and changes the opinions that are our only available knowledge.

Selected Bibliography

Collected here are general references on the Sophistic Movement, as well as sources on Gorgias. Few writings of the Sophists remain, and scholars have pieced together their ideas in part by relying on references to them in other classical sources. For example, the long speech attributed to Protagoras in Plato's dialogue by that name is generally taken to be a trustworthy picture of the Sophist's thought. Fragments of Sophistic texts do exist, however. The principal translations of them are Rosamond Kent Sprague's *The Older Sophists* (1972), the source of George A. Kennedy's version of the "Encomium of Helen" included here; Kathleen Freeman's *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Companion to Diels-Kranz, "Fragments der Vorsokratiker"* (1966); and Freeman's *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (1971). Both of Freeman's works include much helpful commentary. Kennedy has also published a new translation of Gorgias's "Encomium of Helen" in an appendix to his translation of Aristotle, *Aristotle, On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* (1991). Another translation of the "Encomium," though an incomplete one, illustrates Gorgias's alliterative style more vividly than the version in Sprague: LaRue Van Hook, "The Encomium on Helen, by Gorgias" (*The Classical Weekly* 6 [1913]: 122-23). *Contrasting Arguments* (1979), T. L. Robinson's translation of a lengthy anonymous Sophistic text, the *Dissoi Logoi* (p. 48), contains excellent commentary on that text.

Gorgias and the Sophists generally were often slighted in histories of rhetoric, but this situation is changing. A good introductory survey is Everett Lee Hunt's "On the Sophists" (in

number, to live in private concord." For it seems that Gorgias had a passion for the little maid and his wife was jealous. Cf., however, A 20.

SPEECH AT THE PYTHIAN GAMES

9. PHILOSTRATUS *Lives of the Sophists* I 9, 4 [See A I (4).]

ENCOMIUM FOR THE PEOPLE OF ELIS

10. ARISTOTLE *Rhetoric* III 14, 1416a1 Gorgias' *Encomium for the People of Elis* is of this sort. For without any preliminary skirmishing or prelude he begins immediately, "Elis, happy city."

GORGIAS' ENCOMIUM OF HELEN

11. (1) What is becoming to a city is manpower, to a body beauty, to a soul wisdom, to an action virtue, to a speech truth, and the opposites of these are unbecoming. Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object should be honored with praise if praiseworthy and incur blame if unworthy, for it is an equal error and mistake to blame the praisable and to praise the blamable. (2) It is the duty of one and the same man both to speak the needful rightly and to refute <the unrightfully spoken. Thus it is right to refute>⁴ those who rebuke Helen, a woman about whom the testimony of inspired poets has become univocal and unanimous as had the ill omen of her name, which has become a reminder of misfortunes. For my part, by introducing some reasoning into my speech, I wish to free the accused of blame and, having reprov'd her detractors as prevaricators and proved the truth, to free her from their ignorance.

(3) Now it is not unclear, not even to a few, that in nature and in blood the woman who is the subject of this speech is preeminent

⁴ Accepting Diels's "sense" as given in the *apparatus criticus*.

among preeminent men and women. For it is clear that her mother was Leda, and her father was in fact a god, Zeus, but allegedly a mortal, Tyndareus, of whom the former was shown to be her father because he was and the latter was disproved because he was said to be, and the one was the most powerful of men and the other the lord of all.

(4) Born from such stock, she had godlike beauty, which taking and not mistaking, she kept. In many did she work much desire for her love, and her one body was the cause of bringing 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 vigor of personal agility, some command of acquired knowledge. And all came because of a passion which loved to conquer and a love of honor which was unconquered. (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 shows it is right but brings no delight. Having now gone beyond the time once set for my speech, I shall go on to the beginning of my future speech, and I shall set forth the causes through which it was likely that Helen's voyage to Troy should take place.

(6) For either by will of Fate and decision of the gods and vote of Necessity did she do 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 one to be held responsible; for god's predetermination cannot be hindered by human premeditation. For it is the nature of things, not for the strong to be hindered by the weak, 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 one must place blame on Fate and on a god, one must free Helen from disgrace.

(7) But if she was raped by violence and illegally assaulted and unjustly insulted, it is clear that the raper, as the insulter, did the wronging, and the raped, as the insulted, 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 surely it is proper 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 heart, not even to this is it difficult to make an answer and to banish blame as follows. Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity. I shall show how this is the case, since (9) it is necessary to offer proof to the opinion of my hearers: I both deem and define all poetry as speech with meter. Fearful shuddering and tearful pity and grievous longing come upon its hearers, and at the actions and physical sufferings of others in good fortunes and in evil fortunes, through the agency of words, the soul is wont to experience a suffering of its own. But come, I shall turn from one argument to another. (10) Sacred incantations sung with words are bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain, for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power of the incantation is wont to beguile it and persuade it and alter it by witchcraft. There have been discovered two arts of witchcraft and magic: one consists of errors of soul and the other of deceptions of opinion. (11) All who have and do persuade people of things do so by molding 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 predict the future. So that on most subjects most men take opinion as counselor to their soul, but since opinion is slippery and insecure it 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 the mighty? For it was possible to see how the force of persuasion prevails; persuasion has the form of necessity, but it does not have the same power.⁵ For speech constrained the soul, persuading

⁵ Accepting Diels's "sense" as given in the *apparatus criticus*.

it which it persuaded, both to believe the things said and to approve the things done. The persuader, like a constringer, does the wrong and the persuaded, like the constringed, in speech is wrongly charged. (13) To understand that persuasion, when added to speech, is wont also to impress the soul as it wishes, one must study: first, the words of 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; then, second, logically necessary debates in which a single speech, written with art but not spoken with truth, bends a great crowd and persuades; <and> third, the verbal disputes of philosophers in which the swiftness of thought is also shown making the belief in an opinion subject to easy change. (14) The effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power 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 make the hearers bold, and some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion.

(15) It has been explained that if she was persuaded by speech she did not do wrong but was unfortunate. I shall discuss the fourth cause in a fourth passage. For if it was love which did all these things, there will be no difficulty 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 actually has. Through sight the soul receives an impression even in its inner features. (16) When belligerents in war buckle on their warlike accouterments of bronze and steel, some designed for defense, others for offense, if the sight sees this, immediately it is alarmed and it alarms the soul, so that often men flee, panic-stricken, from future danger <as though it were> present. For strong as is the habit of obedience to the law, it is ejected by fear resulting from sight, which coming to a man causes him to be indifferent both to what is judged honorable because of the law and to the advantage to be derived from victory. (17) It has happened that people, after having seen frightening sights, have also lost presence of mind for the present moment;

in this way fear extinguishes and excludes thought. And many have fallen victim to useless labor and dread diseases and hardly curable madresses. In this way the sight engraves upon the mind images of things which have been seen. And many frightening impressions linger, and what lingers is exactly analogous to <what is> spoken. (18) Moreover, whenever pictures perfectly create a single figure and form from many colors and figures, they delight the sight, while the creation of statues and the production of works of art furnish a pleasant sight to the eyes. Thus it is natural for the sight to grieve for some things and to long for others, and much love and desire for many objects and figures is engraved in many men. (19) If, therefore, the eye of Helen, pleased by the figure of Alexander, presented to her soul eager desire and contest of love, what wonder? 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 of human origin and a fault of the soul, it should not be blamed as a sin, but regarded as an affliction. For she came, as she did come, caught in the net of Fate, not by the plans of the mind, and by the constraints of love, not by the devices of art.

(20) How then can one regard blame of Helen as just, since she is utterly acquitted of all charge, whether she did what she did through falling in love or persuaded by speech or ravished by force or constrained by divine constraint?

(21) I have by means of speech removed disgrace from a woman; I have observed the procedure which I set up at the beginning of the speech; I have tried to end the injustice of blame and the ignorance of opinion; I wished to write a speech which would be a praise of Helen and a diversion to myself.

A DEFENSE ON BEHALF OF PALAMEDES BY THE SAME AUTHOR

11a. (1) Prosecution and defense are not a means of judging about death; for Nature, with a vote which is clear, casts a vote of death against every mortal on the day on which he is born. The danger