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## Encomium of Helen

**gorgias**

Translated from the Greek by Brian R. Donovan\*

The order proper to a city is being well-manned; to a body, beauty; to a soul, wisdom; to a deed, excellence; and to a discourse, truth--and the opposites of these are disorder. And the praiseworthy man and woman and discourse and work and city-state and deed one must honor with praise, while one must assign blame to the unworthy--for it is equal error and ignorance to blame the praiseworthy and to praise the blameworthy.

It being required of the same man both to speak straight and to refute [crooked speech, one should refute] those blaming Helen, a woman concerning whom the testimony of those who are called poets has become univocal and unanimous--likewise the repute of her name, which has become a byword for calamities. And by bestowing some rationality on the discourse, I myself wish to absolve this ill-reputed woman from responsibility, and to show that those who blame her are lying--and, having shown the truth, to put an end to ignorance.

It is not unclear, not even to a few, that the woman who is the subject of this discourse was the foremost of the foremost men and women, by nature and by birth. For it is clear that her mother was Leda and her father was in fact the god, but said to be mortal, Tyndareus and Zeus--of whom the one, by being, seemed, while the other, by speech, was disproved--and the one was the mightiest of men while the other was tyrant over all.

Born of such parentage, she had godlike beauty, which having received she not inconspicuously retained. She produced the greatest erotic desires in most men. For one body many bodies of men came together, men greatly purposing great things, of whom some possessed great wealth, some the glory of ancient and noble lineage, some the vigor of personal strength, and others the power of acquired cleverness. And they were all there together out of contentious love and unconquerable ambition.

Who it was, then, who fulfilled the love by gaining Helen, and the means and manner of it, I shall not say; for to tell knowing people things they know supplies corroboration but does not convey enjoyment. Having now finished the first section, I shall advance to the beginning of the next section, and I shall set out the causes through which Helen's journey to Troy was likely to come about.

Either by the wishes of Fortune and plans of the gods and decrees of Necessity she did what she did, or abducted by force, or persuaded by speeches, <or conquered by Love>. Now in the first case, the responsible party deserves the responsibility. For the will of a god cannot be hindered by human forethought. For it is not natural for the superior to be hindered by the inferior, but for the inferior to be ruled and led by the superior--for the superior to lead and the inferior to follow. And a god is superior to a human being in force, intelligence, etcetera. Accordingly, if one must attribute responsibility to Fortune and the god, one must acquit Helen of infamy.

But if she was abducted by force, unlawfully constrained and unjustly victimized, it is clear on the one hand that the abductor, as victimizer, committed injustice--and on the other hand that the abductee, as victim, met with mishap. Accordingly the barbarian assailant deserves to meet with barbarous assault, by speech and custom and deed--deserves to be blamed in speech, dishonored by custom, and penalized indeed. She who was forced and bereft of fatherland and orphaned of friends--how is she not to be pitied

rather than reviled? For he did terrible things; she was the victim; it is accordingly fair to pity her and hate him.

And if persuasive discourse deceived her soul, it is not on that account difficult to defend her and absolve her of responsibility, thus: discourse is a great potentate, which by the smallest and most secret body accomplishes the most divine works; for it can stop fear and assuage pain and produce joy and make mercy abound. And I shall show that these things are so: (9) explanation to the audience, by means of opinion, is required. Discourse having meter I suppose and name (in the general sense) to be poetry. Fearful shuddering and tearful pity and sorrowful longing come upon those who hear it, and the soul experiences a peculiar feeling, on account of the words, at the good and bad fortunes of other people's affairs and bodies. But come, let me proceed from one section to another.

By means of words, inspired incantations serve as bringers-on of pleasure and takers-off of pain. For the incantation's power, communicating with the soul's opinion, enchants and persuades and changes it, by trickery. Two distinct methods of trickery and magic are to be found: errors of soul, and deceptions of opinion.

Those who have persuaded and do persuade anyone about anything are shapers of lying discourse. For if all people possessed memory concerning all things past, and awareness of all things present, and foreknowledge of all things to come, discourse would not be similarly similar; hence it is not now easy to remember the past or consider the present or foretell the future; so that most people on most subjects furnish themselves with opinion as advisor to the soul. But opinion, being slippery and unsteady, surrounds those who rely on it with slippery and unsteady successes.

Accordingly what cause hinders Helen ... praise-hymn came ... similarly would ... not being young ... just as if ... means of forcing ... force was abducted. For the mind of Persuasion was able ... and even if necessity ... the form will have ... it has the same power. For discourse was the persuader of the soul, which it persuaded and compelled to believe the things that were said and to agree to the things that were done. He who persuaded (as constringer) did wrong; while she who was persuaded (as one constringed by means of the discourse) is wrongly blamed.

Persuasion belonging to discourse shapes the soul at will: witness, first, the discourses of the astronomers, who by setting aside one opinion and building up another in its stead make incredible and obscure things apparent to the eyes of opinion; second, the necessary debates in which one discourse, artfully written but not truthfully meant, delights and persuades a numerous crowd; and third, the competing arguments of the philosophers, in which speed of thought is shown off, as it renders changeable the credibility of an opinion.

The power of discourse stands in the same relation to the soul's organization as the pharmacopoeia does to the physiology of bodies. For just as different drugs draw off different humors from the body, and some put an end to disease and others to life, so too of discourses: some give pain, others delight, others terrify, others rouse the hearers to courage, and yet others by a certain vile persuasion drug and trick the soul.

It has been said that if she was persuaded by discourse, she did no wrong but rather was unfortunate; I proceed to the fourth cause in a fourth section. If it was love that brought all these things to pass, she escapes without difficulty from the blame for the sin alleged to have taken place. For the things we see do not have whatever nature we will, but rather that which befalls each. The soul receives an impression in its own ways through the sight.

For example, whenever hostile bodies put on their bronze and iron war-gear of ward and defense against enemies, if the visual sense beholds this, it is troubled and it troubles the soul, so that often panic-stricken men flee future danger <as if it were> present. For the strong habitual force of law is banished because of the fear prompted by the sight, which makes one heedless both of what is judged by custom to be admirable, and of the good that comes about by victory.

Some who have seen dreadful things have lost their presence of mind in the present time; thus fear extinguishes and drives out understanding. And many fall into useless troubles and terrible diseases and incurable dementias; thus sight engraves in the mind images of things seen. And the frightening ones, many of them, remain; and those that remain are just like things said.

But truly whenever the painters perfectly complete one body and figure from many colors and bodies, they delight the sight; and the making of statues and production of figurines furnishes a pleasant sight to the eyes. Thus it is in the nature of the visual sense to long for some things and for other things to give it pain. And in many there is produced much love and desire for many things and bodies.

Accordingly, if Helen's eye, taking pleasure in Alexander's body, transmitted to her soul the eagerness and struggle of Love, is it any wonder? If Love, <being> a god, <has> the divine power of gods, how could the weaker being have the power to reject this and to ward it off? But if it is a human disease and an error of the soul, it ought not to be blamed as a sin but ought rather to be accounted a misfortune. For she went, as she started out, in the clutches of fortune, not by plans of the mind; and by the constraints of love, not the preparations of art.

How then is it necessary to regard as just the blame of Helen, who either passionately in love or persuaded by discourse or abducted by force or constrained by divine constraints did the things she did, escaping responsibility every way?

By this discourse I have removed infamy from a woman; I have continued in the mode I established at the beginning. I tried to put an end to the injustice of blame and ignorance of opinion; I wanted to write the discourse, Helen's encomium and my plaything.

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#### **Translator's Note**

The source text is that of H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed., vol. 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1952, rpt. Dublin 1966), as reproduced on the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* CD ROM #D (compilation ©1992 by the Regents of the University of California). Other available translations are those by George Kennedy, in Rosamond Kent Sprague (ed.) *The Older Sophists* (Columbia: U. of South Carolina P., 1972, rpt. 1990), and by Kathleen Freeman in her *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1948).

I have made no attempt here to reproduce or imitate the obtrusively artful and paronomastic style of the original, as Kennedy did; rather, my focus has been on reproducing literal meaning. Where the literal meaning of this translation differs from Kennedy's translation and/or Freeman's, I would suggest that all three versions represent valid optional interpretations.

Notable among my departures from the lead of Kennedy and Freeman are my division of the discourse into five Roman-numbered sections, and my fragmented rendition (in italics) of the first half of Arabic-numbered section 12. All but the last of the Roman-numbered sections are explicitly identified as distinct sections, in my view, by the original's use of the term *logos*, which in these instances I have translated "section"; and the last seems obviously enough a distinct peroration or coda. As to the first half of Arabic-numbered section 12, which Diels/Kranz aptly describes as "heillos verderbt," I have opted for the admittedly peculiar procedure of "translating" the unemended original mess, partly because Freeman and Kennedy had already gone the other way, translating from the emended Greek version suggested in the Diels/Kranz apparatus. This was thus the road less traveled.