On the Threshold of Rhetoric: 
Gorgias’ Encomium of Helen

The Helen of Gorgias is designed to provoke the aspiring speaker to consider his relationship with society as a whole. The speech’s extreme claims regarding the power of logos reflect simplistic ideas about speaker-audience relations current among Gorgias’ target audience, ideas reflected in an interpretive stance towards model speeches that privileges method over truth. The Helen pretends to encourage this conception of logos and interpretive stance in order to expose the intense desire and naïve credulity that drive a coolly technical appraisal of model speeches. The Helen thus manifests, with a playfulness suited to its liminal position, a concern for the ethical and social formation of those who might accept the invitation to study logos.

In his Encomium of Helen Gorgias of Leontini makes extraordinary claims regarding the power of speech (logos). How seriously did he intend these claims? On the one hand, they seem to provide a theoretical basis for, and a protreptic to, the emerging discipline of rhetoric. On the other hand, they are made in the course of a demonstration speech that the author himself calls a plaything (paignion, 21). Some critics have maintained that the resulting divergence of possible interpretations is intended to provoke a dilemma regarding the nature of persuasive power, or even to embroil the audience in a firsthand experience of rhetoric’s seductions. Here I attempt to ground this general approach to the Helen in the speech’s educational context by focusing on the likely responses of the Helen’s primary target audience, the aspiring speaker. I argue that Gorgias subverts the expectation—encouraged by nascent conventions attending display speeches (epideixeis) and even by Gorgias himself—that his speech will bracket

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truth to highlight method. His goal is instead to show that the “sophisticated” inclination to see through an argument’s truth claims is merely a symptom of a deeper credulity regarding the powers of rhetoric itself. Exposure of the contradictory stance into which the aspiring speaker’s desire for power may lead him is, I suggest, appropriate to the liminal position of the Helen vis-à-vis the study of persuasion. The Gorgias that emerges from my analysis is an educator far more attuned to the social and ethical implications of his own pedagogy than is often supposed.

A question that hovers in the background of my reading of the Helen is whether rhetoric is actually what Gorgias taught. The conventional view that it is has come under heavy fire in recent years. It has been argued that the term “rhetoric” (rhētorikē, sc. technē), together with the sense of disciplinary boundaries it entails, was a fourth-century development (Schiappa 1990, 1999, 2003; Schiappa and Timmerman 2010); that prior to the interventions of Plato and Aristotle instruction in speaking took place outside of a systematic, theoretical framework (Cole 1991); that in any case fifth-century teachers like Gorgias would have eschewed the label “rhetoric,” since they were concerned with producing gentlemen and citizens rather than pleaders (Ford 2001). It will become clear that I am especially sympathetic to the last of these concerns, though I think it important to recognize from the outset that what a teacher like Gorgias taught, and what others thought he taught or hoped that he would teach, are different things. Indeed, I shall attempt to show that much of what makes the Helen interesting lies in the way Gorgias bridges the gap between a conception of his education that others harbor and the one he wishes to project.

As for the theoretical and historical questions, it is not my goal to determine the content of what Gorgias taught; I merely observe that on this score the evidence furnished by speeches like Gorgias’ Helen and Defense of Palamedes is inconclusive. On the one hand, they appear to vindicate the view that early rhetorical instruction was based largely on examples (whole or partial speeches) rather than theoretical precepts of the sort we find in Aristotle’s Rhetoric or even the more practical Rhetoric to Alexander. Gorgias is actually singled out by Aristotle as providing model speeches to his students without guidance as to how to adapt their lessons to new circumstances (Soph. el. 34, 183b36–184a8; cf. Pl. Phdr. 268a-269c). So far as we can tell from any surviving Gorgianic text, the process (if any) by which he led the student from one particular speech (the model) to another (the application) is not aided by reference to the general form (i.e. the topos) these concrete particulars share. On the other hand, it

2. See also Wilcox 1942 (early rhetorical teaching was geared towards producing statesmen); Marrou 1956: 46–57 (the sophists were concerned broadly with civic aretē and harbored the humanist’s suspicion of overspecialization); Gagarin 2001; Tell 2011.


4. Solmsen 1941: 41. Gorgias is credited with a work entitled Peri kairou, but its contents are unknown except for Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ remark that they are of no value (Comp. 12
is difficult to read the *Palamedes* and *Helen* without concluding that they are meant to illustrate specific persuasive techniques and the types of circumstances in which these should be applied. The *Helen*, for example, features arguments suitable for what later theory would call a *status qualitativus*, a forensic case where the nature, rather than the commission, of the deeds of the accused is in dispute; in similar fashion the *Palamedes* illustrates a *status coniecturalis*, wherein the actual commission of the deeds is at issue. Such works indicate that Gorgias had a clear typology of cases in mind, even if he never furnished them with labels. Would he have classified such cases and given them names in subsequent oral discussion? Would he have provided guidance, theoretical or practical, in applying the relevant argumentative strategies to new circumstances? Model speeches naturally provoke such questions, but we cannot have definitive answers without knowing more about what went on in the private, exclusive, oral discussions led by those who composed them.

Much the same quandary gripped Gorgias’ contemporaries, as was probably his intention. Model speeches were designed not just to instruct but also to attract students, so it is to be expected that they would partially veil whatever lessons lay in store. If they do not in themselves provide the theoretical guidance necessary to reproduce the abilities they display, this is not necessarily because fifth-century teaching terminated in rote memorization. Model speeches issued a series of provocations: first of the target audience, who might be impressed enough to wish to associate with someone like Gorgias in the hope that they would acquire the ability to use the techniques on display in the speech; next of the fourth-century teachers who, out of dissatisfaction with the example-based and piecemeal nature of earlier texts, sought to make good on their unfulfilled promises via a systematic theory of persuasive technique; finally of the modern scholar, who is prompted to wonder whether the tantalizing hints of the-

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5. As noted by Cole himself (1991: 76).
6. One gets a similar impression from Antiphon’s roughly contemporary *Tetralogies*; see further Gagarin 2002: 106–109. For other recurring features of fifth-century speeches suggesting underlying doctrine see Usher 1999: 1–26, together with the criticisms of Schiappa and Timmerman 2010: 137–70 (with W. E. Major). For explicit, proto-theoretical discussions of rhetorical strategy in the fifth century see Gondos 1996; O’Sullivan 1992 argues that technical terminology was already forming in this period, particularly in the area of style. On Gorgias’ theoretical acumen more generally see Wardy 1996.
7. The possibility is summarily rejected by Cole 1991: 93.
8. That teachers of this era held their best material in reserve is taken for granted in Aristotle’s remark that Prodicus used to enliven his cheaper lectures with material from his fifty-drachma lecture if ever audience attention flagged (Rh. 3.14, 1415b15–17; cf. Pl. *Cra*. 384b2–c1; *Hp. Mai.* 282b–d). I make no assumptions here about alleged sophistic venality, on which see Blank 1985; Tell 2011: 39–59.
oretical depth in the earliest model speeches are illusory or not. In multiple senses, then, the model speeches of Gorgias reside on the threshold of a more fully developed rhetoric. It is the institutional threshold, seen from the perspective of the potential student, rather than the disciplinary threshold, seen from the perspective of the historian of rhetoric, that is of primary concern to me here. How does Gorgias provoke, shape, or even subvert his audience’s desire for more?

THE HELEN AS GAME

In the Helen Gorgias mounts a brief, multipronged defense against the charge that Helen was complicit in going to Troy with Paris. He maintains that Helen is innocent because she was compelled by one of four irresistible impulses: some necessity (anagkē) imposed by divine will or chance (6), the brute force of her abductor (7), persuasive speech (8–14), or erōs (15–19). Gorgias’ explanation of the third cause, persuasive speech, is the most elaborate and has attracted the most scholarly attention. Its essence is distilled in the political and pharmacological analogies with which it begins and ends:

εἰ δὲ λόγος ὁ πείσας καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπατήσας, οὐδὲ πρὸς τοῦτο γιαλετόν ἀπολογηθεῖσθαι καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἀπολύσασθαι ὡδὲ. λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, ὡς σμικροτάτῳ σώματι καὶ ἀφανεστάτῳ θειώτατα ἔργα ἀποτελεῖ.... τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ λόγον ἐχεῖ ἢ τε τοῦ λόγου δύναμις πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς τάξιν ἢ τε τῶν φαρμάκων τάξιν πρὸς τὴν τῶν σωμάτων φύσιν. ὡστε γὰρ τῶν φαρμάκων ἄλλους ἄλλα χυμοὺς ἐκ τῶν σώματος ἐξάγει, καὶ τὰ μὲν νόσου τὰ δὲ βίου παύει, οὕτω καὶ τῶν λόγων οἱ μὲν ἔλυσαν, οἱ δὲ ἔτερψαν, οἱ δὲ ἔφόβησαν, οἱ δὲ εἰς θάρσος κατέστησαν τοὺς ἀκούοντας, οἱ δὲ πειθοὺ τίνι κακὸν ἡ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐφαρμάκευσαν καὶ ἐξεγοήτευσαν.

(Gorg. Hel. 8, 14)

But if it was speech (logos) that persuaded and deceived her soul, against this too it will not be difficult to defend her and dismiss the charge as follows: logos is a powerful ruler, who with the tiniest and least visible body brings the divinest works to pass.... The power of logos is to the order (taxis) of the soul as the order (taxis) of drugs is to the constitution (physis) of bodies: just as different drugs cause the body to secrete different humors, and some drugs make it cease from illness, while others make it cease from life, in like manner some logoi cause pain, others delight, others fear, while still others make their hearers bold, and others by some malign persuasion drug and bewitch the soul.9

9. All quotations of Gorgias’ Helen are from the text of Buchheim 1989. All translations are my own.
Readers of the *Helen* have often accepted these remarks as a Gorgianic doctrine of *logos*.\(^{10}\) This straightforward interpretation is grounded in certain facts. Gorgias’ reduction of persuasion, a subjective psychological process, to an objective train of quasi-material cause and effect coincides with materialist and rationalist trends in fifth-century thought.\(^{11}\) Gorgias expresses similarly radical views concerning language in *On the Non-Existent*, the fragments of which suggest that he regarded the power of *logos* as fundamentally efficacious (in influencing people’s thoughts and beliefs) rather than referential.\(^{12}\) Moreover, if Gorgias taught skills of persuasion, he had a professional interest in trumpeting the powers of speech. The *Helen* appears designed for this purpose, resembling as it does an *epideixis* or display speech of the sort intended to attract students and admirers by showcasing the speaker’s ability.\(^{13}\) One could even regard Gorgias’ remarks about the power of *logos* as providing an explicit theoretical grounding for the speech’s implicit message, since, no matter what the orator of an *epideixis* praises, he is always implicitly praising *logos*.

At the same time the epideictic character of the *Helen* indicates that its account of *logos* may not reflect Gorgias’ own views.\(^{14}\) It is usually assumed that the overriding goal of an *epideixis* is not to persuade of the soundness of the thesis itself but rather of the speaker’s ability (*dynamis*) to defend a real-world thesis should need arise.\(^{15}\) As it happens, this purpose is spelled out most clearly in the *Helen* of Isocrates, a fourth-century work billed as a response to Gorgias (Isoc. *Hel.* 14–15). In criticizing then-popular demonstration speeches in praise of salt,

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10. Segal 1962 (“The speech itself, in fact, is as much an encomium on the power of *logos* as on *Helen* herself,” 102); Guthrie 1971: 50–51; de Romilly 1975 (“[Gorgias’] theory is too complete and too eloquently put forward not to have represented, more or less exactly, its author’s view about speech and speeches,” 21–22); Enos 1976; Kerferd 1981: 78–82; Verdenius 1981; MacDowell 1982: 12–17; Poulakos 1983; Mourelatos 1985; Connors 1986: 44–49; Worman 1997: 171–80. This approach to the *Helen* has gained impetus from the desire to reinscribe Gorgias and other fifth-century “sophists” into the history of philosophy, although, as Robinson 1973 observes, such a move does not necessarily serve Gorgias’ reputation.


13. Here and below I use the terms *epideixis* and epideictic to refer to self-promotional speeches of any formal description—the sort widely associated with sophists and rhetoricians in the fifth and fourth centuries—rather than to Aristotle’s *genos epideiktikon*, a form-based category encompassing all (and only) speeches of praise and blame (Arist. *Rh.* 1.3, 1358b12–13). See further Pratt 2012.

14. This perspective is most fully developed by Gomperz 1912: 1–35, who describes the goal of the *Helen* as “rein epideiktische” (18); more recent examples are catalogued by Schiappa 1999: 130. While Schiappa rejects this approach, his own emphasis on the *Helen*’s advances in argumentative method (1999: 114–32; cf. Adkins 1983) also sidelines a straightforward doctrinal reading. Others see the *Helen*’s account of *logos* primarily as a provocation to further reflection (below, n.21), or find within the *Helen* a subtext at odds with its account of *logos* (Porter 1993; Karadimas 2008: 3–25); still others see the Helen episode as highlighting the *misuses* of rhetoric (Gagarin 2001: 289; McComiskey 2002: 38–47).

bumble-bees, and the like (12). Isocrates ascribes to their authors the premise that a position opposed to common sense (\textit{hypothesin atopon kai paradoxon}) is more difficult to defend than a conventional one (1, 4), thereby allowing a clearer demonstration of ability (89). On this reasoning, what is needed is to speak better than others on a hopeless topic; conviction, to say nothing of truth, is superfluous. If this sort of game was in vogue when Gorgias composed his \textit{Helen} (see below), then he gives every sign of intending to play it. By way of opening he pits his defense of Helen squarely against prevailing opinion, as if the latter were unanimous. His one-against-all stance, not to mention his confidence in Helen’s innocence, appears all the more theatrical when we recall that Helen’s motivations and degree of complicity had been repeatedly contested from the \textit{Iliad} onward (Blondell 2013). Gorgias also ignores the version of the myth in which only Helen’s phantom eloped with Paris, doubtless because it would make Helen’s defense too simple. Such is his showmanship that by the time Gorgias declares the defense of Helen to have been a \textit{paignion} or “plaything” (21) it is scarcely news.

This epideictic posturing encompasses the supporting arguments as well as the overall thesis that Helen is innocent. The account of \textit{logos}, in particular, is flagrantly tendentious, at least in the extreme form in which Gorgias presents it. True, it has some basis in traditional Greek views of human psychology and speech, but Gorgias subjects such archaic perspectives to the totalizing and reductive tendencies of fifth-century rationalism and presses them in the manner of an advocate determined to win at any cost. The cost would be high. If the notion that persuasion is reducible to compulsion were to gain wide currency, it would not only obliterate an entrenched opposition within Greek thought (Verdenius 1981: 121; Wardy 1996: 42–44), but would also pull the rug out from under any consensual or egalitarian political regime. So extreme is the view offered in the \textit{Helen} that even Gorgias did not stand by it, if we can trust the testimony of Plato’s \textit{Philebus}.


17. Gorg. \textit{Hel.} 2: Helen is a woman “concerning whom both the belief of those who have listened to poets and the reputation of her name have been of one voice and soul” (περὶ τῆς ὁμόφωνος καὶ ὁμόψυχος γέγονεν ἡ τοῦ ποιητῶν ἀκουσάντων πίστις ἡ τοῦ ὀνόματος φήμη).

18. As in the sixth century “palinode” of Stesichorus (fr.192–93 Davies) and the \textit{Helen} of Euripides (dated to 412, possibly before Gorgias’ \textit{Helen}). For an overview of the Helen myth down to the fifth century see Allan 2008: 10–28.

19. Gorg. \textit{Hel.} 21: “I have removed with my speech a woman’s ill-repute, I have abided by the law I established for myself in the beginning of my speech: I have attempted to dispel injustice of blame and ignorance of opinion; I determined to write a speech that would be an encomium of Helen and a plaything for myself (ἐβουλήθη γράψαι τὸν λόγον Ἐλένης μὲν ἐγκώμιον, ἐμὸν δὲ παίγνιον).”

The *Helen* thus pulls its audience in opposite directions. It advances a psychology of persuasion that would seem the perfect advertisement for an art of rhetoric, but at the same time it directly and indirectly casts doubt upon the seriousness of the speech in which that psychology is presented. The resulting *aporia* would only be deepened by the audience’s experience of the *Helen* itself as a persuasive *logos*. Wardy offers one account of that experience: Gorgias initially prompts his audience to think of his speech as exemplifying truthfulness (1–2), but then, if they have not already discerned it from an intervening series of clues, reveals them to have been dupes with his closing declaration that the whole speech has been a *paignion* (Wardy 1996: 25–51); by the end it may seem that *all* acts of persuasion, including the one the audience has just experienced, resemble the compelling deception said to have been suffered by Helen. This would not mean that Gorgias’ account of *logos* is to be dismissed. On the contrary, the auditor’s firsthand experience of being suckered would provide a reason to think that that account has some truth in it after all. But in that case was he really duped? The reflexivity of the argument about *logos* is such that, no matter which way the auditor turns, he faces a dilemma: he can view the power of speech objectively, as exercising *force majeure* over the will of the listener, or experience the power of speech subjectively, as a force that can be rationally resisted and therefore allows space for meaningful assent. The *Helen* thus appears calculated to provoke the audience to further reflection concerning the nature of *logos*—and their own relationship to it—rather than to settle the matter once and for all.  

Whatever we make of the *Helen*’s reflexivity, it ensures that the speech transcends the standard or zero-degree model of *epideixis* later articulated by Isocrates. Gorgias’ *Helen*, far from being straightforward *pseudologia*, somehow weaves together truth and falsehood, gravity and playfulness. This shouldn’t surprise, especially given the limitations of the standard model of *epideixis*. There is no reason why positions defended and arguments sketched in a paradoxical *epideixis* might not be taken quite seriously in other contexts. The reducibility of virtue to knowledge (Isoc. *Hel.* 1) is elsewhere presented as a philosophical proposition (Plato’s *Protagoras*), and praise of poverty (*Hel.* 8) would be in earnest if it came from the mouth of a cynic philosopher, while praise of death might be called for where one’s audience is terminally ill (Pl. [*Ax.*] 366c). Isocrates shoehorns all paradoxical discourse into a single category, *to pseudologein*, thus...


23. See especially Pease 1926.

24. An encomium of poverty is ascribed to the Cynic Proteus by Men. Rhet. *Peri epideiktikôn* (Spengel 1853–1856: 3.346). If the Cynics’ praise of poverty is rooted in traditional Greek ethics (so Desmond 2006) then the passage provides another example of “conventional wisdom” being first (re)shaped in order to be attacked (by the Cynics) or defended (by Isocrates).
confining to a limited range of purposes speeches that could more fruitfully be seen as intellectual experiments, protests against convention, or attempts to address the demands of unusual situations; from this narrow perspective, “older sophists” such as Zeno and Melissus, not to mention newer ones like Socrates and Plato, are simply precursors and abettors of today’s bargain-basement rhetoricians (Plato. 3).25 Understood for what it is, Isocrates’ partiality warns us against assuming that his predecessor’s Helen is a paradoxical epideixis of the sort he criticizes.26

In fact the two Helens may have had similar objectives. Isocrates’ overriding concern in his discussion of display speeches is to draw a sharp line between the “coarse jesting” (sköptein, paizein) of paradoxical discourse and the dignified comportment (semnunesthai, spoudazein) he associates with his own speeches (11), between the “petty subjects” (ta mikra) of the former and the “lofty aspirations” (to megethos) of the latter, and between the completely different frames of mind (gnōmai) that nourish each (13). His goal, in other words, is to display a gentlemanly disdain for the narrowly technical education in speech that he associates with his educational rivals and above all with lawcourt pleaders.27 As for Gorgias, Ford argues that he uses paignion to strike a note of leisured sophistication as opposed to technical earnestness; that the ethos the word evokes is that of elite social gatherings such as the symposium rather than of a formal school or professionalized training.28 If this is correct, then a single purpose underlies the speeches’ opposite valuations of “play.” This state of affairs may owe something to authorial idiosyncrasy, but it is also a sign of the times. It would seem that the associations of pagnion and similar words are shifting together with the educational institutions that give them meaning, a change more familiar from words like scholē and diatribe, which would eventually come to refer to “school” and the sort of “exercise” that takes place there, while still at times

25. Isocrates’ view anticipates Aristotle’s tendency, better known thanks to the efforts of Cole and Schiappa, to view his predisciplinary predecessors through postdisciplinary lenses. But Aristotle at least acknowledges (Arist. R. h. 1.9, 1366a 28–30) that praise of a seemingly unimportant object (to tuchon) is sometimes in earnest (meta spoudēs).

26. Isocrates’ own view on this point is difficult to discern. On the one hand, he lists Gorgias among the practitioners of paradoxical discourse, with particular reference to On Not Being (Hel. 3; cf. Antid. 268). On the other hand, he approves of Gorgias’ choice to praise Helen, as if it were not paradoxical (14).

27. Discussions of Isocrates’ complex attitude toward technē include Cahn 1989; Ford 1993; Too 1995: 151–99; Rootechnik 1996: 283–88; Walker 2011: 68–75; Wareh 2012: 13–54. Briefly, Isocrates objects to treating education in speech as a tetagmenē technē or set of “cookbook” procedures on analogy with learning the alphabet (C. soph. 12); he too teaches such procedures, but subordinates them to the student’s larger ethical and intellectual development. In the sphere of writing speeches, this higher development amounts to a sensitivity to kairos (C. soph. 13, 16; Hel. 11), which, though it may also be described as “technical” (C. soph. 12; cf. Antid. 205–206), pertains to thought and action in general (cf. Antid. 277), including their social ramifications (see especially Steidle 1952: 268–70). Consequently, claims Isocrates (C. soph. 21), his students learn epieikeia (“gentleness,” a social virtue shading into “gentility” or even “civility”) more than rhētoreia (ability in public speaking).

pointing back to their older meanings, “leisure” and “pastime,” and more generally to the ideal of *paideia* through informal association (*synousia*) with peers and elders.  

As a manifestation of play, paradox has a similarly divergent range of possible associations. In the late fifth and early fourth centuries, a speaker’s choice of an outlandish thesis might be understood either as a departure from workmanlike model speeches such as Antiphon’s *Tetralogies* and their narrowly instrumental purposes, or as carrying those narrow purposes to their logical conclusion through *a reductio ad absurdum*. I propose that Gorgias engages in the first of these uses of paradox through the appearance of engaging in the second; that his goal is to expose the shallowness of *epideixis* as mere technical display, and that to this end he lures his audience—above all the aspiring speaker—into what appears (at first) to be a display of just this kind. The conclusion to draw is not that Gorgias’ defense of Helen is serious after all; his embrace of play is too thoroughgoing for that. Here the contrast with Isocrates’ *Helen* is at its sharpest. Isocrates, too, appropriates paradoxical discourse in order to expose its shortcomings, but in the process he ends up reaffirming his conventionality: after articulating the principles of *epideixis* discussed above and repudiating them as educationally futile (8–13), he goes on to use the paradoxical encomium as a vehicle for his usual ethical and political platform, a procedure he repeats in the *Busiris*. Whereas Isocrates uses a narrow understanding of paradoxical *epideixis* as a mere foil, Gorgias, I will now argue, uses it as bait.

THE *HELEN* AND THE ASPIRING SPEAKER

The question to ask is not how the *Helen* would be experienced by a naïve audience—that is, one that took it as a *bona fide* defense—but rather how it might be experienced by an audience who thought of it from the beginning as an illustration of how to speak effectively. In light of the preceding discussion, I am not suggesting that the “standard” view of *epideixis* formulated by Isocrates could be taken for granted in the fifth century, much less that it amounted to a generic rule. I agree with Schiappa (1999: 114–32) that we should be wary of categorizing the *Helen* in terms of rigid categories not articulated before the fourth century. On the other hand, the evidence suggests that something like

29. These shifts in terms are briefly noted by Havelock 1940, whose ideas are developed by Robb 1994: 183–213 under the heading of *synousia*. The development of “terms of art” investigated by Schiappa and Timmerman 2010 is a related phenomenon; see especially their discussion of the shift in meaning of *dialegesthai* from “conversation” to “dialectic” (2010: 17–41).

30. Blondell 2013: 180 asks the same question but maintains that audience convention ends up affirming the superior rationality of Gorgias’ (male) audience. On the “informed” or “fit” audience and its peculiar vulnerability to manipulation see Fish 1998: 22–37.

31. Schiappa’s more specific concerns about treating Gorgias’ *Helen* as an example of the epideictic oratory codified by Aristotle are not relevant to my argument, for reasons noted above (n.13).
Isocrates’ conception of *epideixis* was a live interpretive option by the later fifth century, and one that would have appealed to a key segment of Gorgias’ audience. It is entirely possible that his audience was already familiar with paradoxical display speeches. We cannot be certain about this, since the date of the *Helen* is unknown, and no other obviously paradoxical display speeches survive from this era. Nevertheless as well-informed an observer as Thucydides thought that *epideixis* of this sort was widespread enough by 427/6—only a few months after Gorgias’ famous visit to Athens—to support innuendo closely resembling that of Isocrates (Thuc. 3.37–38, 3.42.3).

Such evidence raises the possibility that the *Helen* is less a pioneering attempt at paradoxical *epideixis* than a second-order engagement with an already operative (if not fully codified) set of expectations surrounding this practice. In any case a similar, if more rudimentary, sensibility would have arisen in conjunction with model speeches that were not paradoxical. The practice and demonstration speeches that appear to have been the stock-in-trade of teachers of speaking during the second half of the fifth century (Cole 1991: 71–112) would have fostered a certain caution about treating any assertions they included as made in good faith. The prevalence of antilogy (the pairing of opposed speeches) would have further encouraged this interpretive tendency. So would the habits of dramatic spectatorship. Much as the tragic spectator, on Gorgias’ understanding, shows his wisdom in submitting to the deception (*apatê*) of fiction without ever fully

32. That the *Helen* is written in Attic suggests a terminus post quem of 427 (the year of Gorgias’ famous visit to Athens). But even this is uncertain (Buchheim 1989: ix). Usher (1999: 5) proposes as late a date as 393.

33. The Old Oligarch’s *Constitution of the Athenians* comes close (Cole 1991: 102–104), although the ease with which the speech may be taken in earnest makes it a poor example. If anything it demonstrates that *epideixis* could be used to communicate serious and important ideas.

34. Gorgias’ visit to Athens in 427: Diod. Sic. 12.53. It is possible, of course, that Gorgias himself ignited the fad to which we find Cleon responding.

35. The demagogue Cleon treats as a sophistic *epideixis* (a word used at 3.42.3) the proposal that the assembly reconsider its decision regarding Mytilene. The proposal contravenes a settled judgment (*para doxan*, 3.37.5; cf. 3.38.2, *to panu dokoun antapophenai*), and in entertaining it the assembly resembles spectators of sophists (*sophistôn theatais*, 3.38.7). If sophistic display makes inroads into public discourse, Cleon warns, judgment of speeches will become severed from real-world consequences (3.38.6–7), *logos* will be severed from *ergon* (3.38.4), and speakers will offer frivolous proposals on ever more important questions—to the point of undermining the city’s laws—as they compete to showcase their ingenuity (3.37.4, where *dêlosantes tên gnêmên* is the equivalent of *epideixamenoi tê̂n dynamin*).

36. On the relationship between display speeches and antilogy see Gagarin 2001: 281–86. Antiphon’s *Tetralogies* provide the most obvious example of antilogical speeches (Gagarin 2002: 30–31, 103–34), but antilogical presentation of arguments suitable to the courts may go back to Corax and Tisias (Pl. *Phdr.* 273b–c; Arist. *Rh.* 2.24, 1402a17–20) and is firmly attested for Protagoras (Diog. Laert. 3.37, 57; 9.51, 55; Cic. *Brut.* 46–47). Other antilogical texts, such as the *Dissoi Logoi* and the paired speeches in Thucydides, may be later than the *Helen* but attest to the pervasiveness of the practice in the late fifth century, as do the *agônes* in Aristophanic and Euripidean drama. Especially noteworthy is the debate between Helen and Hecuba at Eur. *Tro.* 914–1032 (Griffith 1990, Lloyd 1992: 101–102).
forgetting that it is fiction,37 the competent auditor of a model speech would imaginatively enter the persuasive scenario placed before him, but only just so far as to sense vicariously the persuasive force of the speaker’s words.

One way or another we should reject the assumption that the audience of the Helen was a tabula rasa, its interaction with the speech’s deviousness unmediated by any conventional expectations.38 When a model speech signaled that it was pushing the envelope, as the Helen clearly did, all but the greenest auditor would have quickly discounted the author’s investment in the speech’s claims. The author’s opening declaration that truth (alētheia) is the kosmos of speech (1), far from reassuring an informed audience that the Helen is going to be in earnest, may simply have reminded them that truth is something of which a model speech has no need. Gorgias’ flattery of his audience as connoisseurs of novelty (5) would have pointed in the same direction. Such comments, combined with those discussed earlier, would have drawn attention to the illustrative character of the speech and so warned the audience to maintain a certain critical distance even as they enjoyed and learned from the performance.

The speech’s portrayal of Helen as a helpless object of persuasion is a powerful incitement to adopt such a critical stance, though one that also complicates and undermines that stance. It dangles before the audience the prospect that they, like Paris, can be omnipotent in the use of verbal persuasion, while their audience, like Helen, will be completely abject. This description of their relationship presents in its starkest form a dimension of epideixis that ordinarily remains latent, namely its invitation to imagine persuasion inflicted on a third party. For a picture of how a model speech might foster such an attitude, consider the following portrayal, drawn from a fourth-century lawcourt speech, of what will happen if the jury sides with the speaker’s opponent:

μηδενὶ δὴ τρόπω/iotasubomegaκαθ/quotesnglright ὑμ/omegaperispomeneν αὐτ/omegaperispomeneν γέλωτα τ/omegaperispomene/iotasubomegaσοφιστ/etaperispomene/iotasubetaκαὶ διατριβὴν

παράσχητε, ἀλλ/quotesnglright ὑπολάβετε ὁρ/alphaperispomeneν εἰσεληλυθότα ἀπὸ το/upsilonperispomene δικαστηρίου

οἴκαδε καὶ σεμνυνόμενον ἐν τ/etaperispomene/iotasubetaτ/omegaperispomeneν μειρακίων διατριβ/etaperispomene/iotasubetaκαὶ διε/ksiιόντα

ὡς ε/upsilonlenisperispomene τὸ πρ/alphaperispomeneγμα ὑφείλετο τ/omegaperispomeneν δικαστ/omegaperispomeneν

Aeschin. In Tim. 175

By no means offer yourselves as a laughingstock for the sophist and as fodder for his school exercises! Instead imagine you are seeing him, when he has returned home from the court, putting on airs in his exercises with young men, recounting step by step how adeptly he stole the case from under the jurors’ noses.

37. Plutarch De glor. Ath. 5.348c (= Diels-Kranz 82 B 23), with Bons 2004. Verdenius 1981: 124–25 sees something like Brecht’s notion of Verfremdung (“critical distance”) at work in the paignion-coda of the Helen, without observing that such distance was part of epideictic performance.

38. Pace Wardy 1996: 37: “In particular, what of the Encomium itself? Might it not be a piece of fiction? If it is, recognition of its fictitious character will be seriously impeded by Gorgias’ commitment...to truth-telling, since realising that a denial of pretense is actually a sort of second-order pretense demands quite a sophisticated response from the reader or auditor.”
In treating a successful public speech as an exercise (diatribē) in persuasion, Aeschines’ opponent, Demosthenes, would be reducing the audience that had believed it to a prop in his lesson and an object of ridicule (gelōta). Although Aeschines is concerned with the recycling of a publicly delivered speech rather than with a properly paradoxical epideixis, we find similar attacks made with the label epideixis attached.39 What makes such attacks so potentially damaging is the implication that, from the speaker’s perspective, the arguments that the jury finds persuasive are in principal no different from those used to exonerate Helen or to praise flies. What matters is that they are effective, not true, and the more patently absurd they are (at least in retrospect), the more it will be to the speaker’s credit that he induced the public to believe them. Obviously this is a malicious interpretation of how orators like Demosthenes operate, but it alerts us to an underlying tendency of all model speeches: they encourage the primary audience, as a corollary to their critical distance from the arguments presented, to imagine a secondary audience that would actually be taken in by it.40 This imagined audience is essentially a construct, even if it happens originally to have been a real audience, as in the passage above. Its objectification is well captured in an offhand remark in Plato’s Phaedrus: after listening to an epideixis composed by the logographer Lysias, Socrates dismisses as semi-human (anthrōpiskous, Phdr. 243a1) any audience that would actually be taken in by it.41 Both Socrates and Aeschines regard as a standard part of epideixis that the speaker’s air of superiority (semnunesthai) depends on winning over a contemptibly pliable audience. For this very reason both critics, like Isocrates, dismiss conventional epideixis as a sham, reserving special disdain for the speaker who would pride himself on having persuaded a gullible audience and, by extension, those who would admire him: the “young lads” (meirakia) in Demosthenes’ school and those who, like Phaedrus, are tempted to regard Lysias’ speech as anything more than sophisticated twaddle (euthētheia asteia, 242e5).

I propose that the aspiring orator at whom Gorgias directs the Helen is in a position not unlike that of Phaedrus in Plato’s dialogue: liable to the very contempt in which he holds a hypothetical audience, yet susceptible to self-

40. Porter 1993 comes close to identifying this convention: “[The Helen] seduces—to the extent that it does—by surrendering the illusion of its mastery over us, or of its persuasiveness, in exchange for the real powers of seduction. Such is the banality of belief: one can afford not to believe in an illusion because one knows that others do believe in it, in which case belief is merely displaced; it is enjoyed from a distance” (295). Porter also regards Gorgias’ claims about logos as a trap and a warning “that the tyrant is in every man, because tyranny lies in the seductive illusion of power, an illusion that, in the case of rhetoric, is nourished and sustained by the hearer” (295). But Porter actively denies the relevance of epideictic convention to the Helen (292).
41. Plato’s attention to epideictic convention is a necessary part of his effort to demarcate philosophy from rhetoric, since Socratic irony (which involves mock praise) gives the appearance of a quasi-epideictic contempt for non-philosophers (Nightingale 1995: 93–132 on the Symposium).
recognition, should the hollowness of his epideictic pretensions be exposed. As in the *Phaedrus*, the power dynamics involved are framed in terms of *erōs*, Helen at once embodying the supine audience of epideictic fantasy and exposing that audience as an object of desire. If the persuasion of Helen is an example of “psychic rape” (Wardy 1996: 43), then the speech as a whole amounts to rhetorical pornography, in that it offers to those who are so inclined the vicarious pleasure of imagining themselves as Paris to Helen. This fantasy of power depends for its effect on the auditor’s imagining himself in a position precisely the opposite of Helen’s in relation to persuasive speech: if she (the imagined audience) is wholly susceptible to persuasion, then he (the prospective speaker) is wholly immune. By treating Helen as the aspiring speaker’s “other,” both antithetical and integral to his identity, the *Helen* exposes the erotic underpinnings of his coolly instrumental stance toward model speeches, and indeed toward persuasive speech in general.

The underlying myth provides a script for the aspiring speaker’s fall. If persuasive omnipotence dooms Paris and his city in the long run, in the short run his power over Helen is an illusion. That Paris is Helen’s subordinate as much as her master is established near the beginning of the speech, when Gorgias remarks that Helen “brought together with her one body many bodies of men who took great pride in their greatness,” who “came under the influence of a love that is eager to conquer and an eagerness for honor that is unconquerable” (4). Helen’s power, too, is simply part of a deeper bondage. Gorgias follows poetic precedent in using Helen, the person who arouses the greatest *erōs* in others, to exemplify human susceptibility to *erōs,* and doubles down on this traditional power reversal by showing both Helen and Paris caught in its web. But his boldest move is to transfer this reversal from the erotics of the flesh to the erotics of rhetorical display; from the myth described in his speech to the responses of the aspiring orators listening to that speech.

The mechanism of the reversal is simply this: if the aspiring orator is lured into believing that persuasive speech is an irresistible force, as Gorgias has primed him to do, he will have violated the principle whose observance is central to his identity as a cultured epideictic spectator, that of withholding credence in the speaker’s arguments. The speech thus entraps the “informed” audience not in a general conundrum about the nature of *logos*, but in a reversal quite specific

42. On the erotic dimension of admiration for excellent speakers in this period see especially Wohl 2002: 30–72.

43. Wardy’s remark (1996: 50) that “we tend unreflectively to share the conviction that good *logos* addressed to our active, discriminating minds is altogether different from bad or at any rate disingenuous *logos* shaping our passive emotions, that rhetorical language can be isolated, analysed, understood as such, and so robbed of much of its menacing appeal,” points in the same direction, although its implications are limited by the naïveté Wardy ascribes to the reader.

to the erotic dynamics of rhetorical *epideixis*. The claim that *logos* is a great *dynastēs* acts as a custom-made lure for the aspiring speaker because it enshrines his own most cherished desire. Even if he is clever enough to resist the bait, he is bound to ask whether his skepticism is driven by a desire for the very thing whose existence his skepticism should deny, namely the omnipotence ascribed to the master of *logos*. In either case, the *Helen* draws out and exposes the contradictory identity that the performance of model speeches offers the aspiring speaker, in that it shows the latter’s epistemic detachment and resistance to credence to be the product of an erotically charged fantasy concerning rhetorical power. The *Helen* is meant to unsettle the aspiring orator’s sense of himself as distinct in kind from the audiences he will one day persuade; what it brings out is that he is like them precisely by virtue of wishing to be above them.

**THE HELEN ON THE THRESHOLD OF RHETORIC**

Like any audience-response interpretation, mine runs the risk of idiosyncrasy. I have sought to mitigate this risk by proceeding from interpretive conventions prevalent by the final third of the fifth century. The resulting picture of Gorgianic pedagogy can likewise be situated in the educational landscape of the period and in wider sociologies of education. On the latter score, Gorgias’ subjection of prospective students to a temporary reversal of status is a move familiar from “rites of passage” of the sort analyzed by van Gennep, in particular their marginal or liminal phase, during which ordinary rules and social positions are often suspended or reversed (van Gennep 1960). For those poised on the threshold of advanced study of *logos*, the (dis)orientation provided by the *Helen* would act as a suitable prelude to the fully liminal period of instruction in persuasive speech, during which—or so it is reasonable to suppose—full play might be given to theses contrary to conventional opinion (*para doxan*), and the student’s ability to discern truth from falsehood would be pushed to its limit. Of course the reception and interpretation of a performed text such as the *Helen*, following no script and free of supervision by the wider community, would not amount to a ritual in the conventional sense. Nevertheless Gorgias’ treatment of the aspiring

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45. Also lacking is a specific model, since evidence for Greek practices corresponding to van Gennep’s tripartite scheme (*séparation, marge, agrégation*) remains sketchy. Important studies include (among many others) Jeanmaire 1939, Brelich 1969, Vidal-Naquet 1986, and Calame 1997. For recent assessments and further bibliography see Calame 1999, Griffith 2001, Dodd and Faraone 2003, Ducat 2006: 179–222.

46. Not that an explicit association between ritual and higher education would have been odd in this period, where we find, for example, entrance into a “sophist’s” school preceded by ritual (Ar. *Nub.* 140–433, 254–74, with Dover 1968) and initiation used as a metaphor for philosophical discussion (Adkins 1970 on Plato) together with the hazing this involved (Pl. *Euthd.* 277d–278c). We also catch glimpses of the possible initiatory functions of interpretation of a text (Obbink 1997 on the Derveni papyrus) and of manipulation of the truth-falsehood opposition (West 1983: 17–19 on the Olbia bone plates).
speaker bears such a striking formal resemblance to rites that often surround education and social advancement in traditional societies that it may be useful to think in such terms when describing the Helen’s social function. At issue in the Helen, as in the analogous rites, is the fraught relationship between insiders and outsiders, in particular between those who possess skills and sensibilities acquired through training in persuasive speech, and the citizen-amateurs they will one day persuade. As to what attitude a momentary reduction to Helen-like abjectness may have fostered, speculation can run the usual gamut: the aspiring speaker’s ordeal may simply have ended up hardening the line he drew between insiders and outsiders to training in speech, or it may have prepared him to use his eventual powers with greater awareness of his place within the community at large. In any case the resemblance of the Helen to a rite of passage, and the social logic of the audience responses I have reconstructed, have a firm basis in the author’s need to finesse this type of insider-outsider relationship.

The speech’s opening and closing words hint at its educational task. Paignion indicates something to be left behind when childhood ceases, like so many toys dedicated to Artemis. In this way the speech’s end marks its reductive conception of persuasive power as more suited to the grammatis tēs and his “prison of elementary instruction” (Ford 1993: 46) than to the wider and fully adult life of the polis. Paignion turns out to be a complex label: the Helen is a “toy” whose conceptual horizon is to be broadened through the interpretive “play” that the speech initiates. The former sense of paignion pertains to the very structure of educational progression; the latter sense stems from the particular need to make a more advanced stage of education appear to thicken social bonds among teacher, student, and society.

Concern for a young man’s passage to maturity and for his shifting sense of his relationship to society is already signaled in the Helen’s opening clause, κόσμος πόλει μὲν εὐανδρία. These words focus attention on the need to produce male citizens; they also harbor an ambiguity, critical to that project, between the elite individual and the city graced with his virtues. To be an “adornment” to the city (the primary sense of kosmos here) implies that one is simultaneously exceptional and representative of the citizenry, while “order” (a further sense of kosmos) must characterize both the city (as well ordered in its institutions)

47. In the archaic period, too, this type of concern had been of central importance to Greek “rites of institution” (to use a more encompassing term). See further Griffith 2001.
49. Turner 1969: 97: “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low.”
50. The author of Daphnis and Chloe makes a similar move, ending his novel with the remark that, upon consummation of her marriage with Daphnis, Chloe realized that all their prior frolicking had been “mere shepherds’ games” (poimenon paignia, Longus Daphnis and Chloe 4.40).
and its individuals (as orderly in their conduct) if it is to characterize either. \(^{51}\) 

Euandria likewise can denote a city’s “abundance of (good) men” or the individual “physical fitness” that makes such abundance possible. \(^{52}\) The ideological potency of such ambiguities is underscored by the fact that euandria was also the name of a contest held at the Panathenaia, in which the city as a whole was clearly supposed to gain esteem through competition among its individual citizens. \(^{53}\) Gorgias thus begins his display speech with a reminder of how public ends may be served by agonistic display comparable to that in which Gorgias himself is engaged. At least one of his admirers forged the same link: a statue of Gorgias erected at Olympia by his nephew Eumolpus describes his teaching as a “technē for training the soul for contests of virtue.” \(^{54}\) As in the Helen, a technē-based teaching is ennobled by association with sanctioned forms of public competition.

The inscription also serves as a reminder that, from the perspective of Gorgias and his circle, no contradiction is involved in claiming both that he teaches a technē and that his teaching transcends the technical. Gorgias was probably too savvy a publicist simply to turn away students who aspired to the powers of speech necessary for a public career and who (as yet) harbored simplistic, grammar-school ideas about the art of persuasion; for that matter those narrowly interested in achieving success in the lawcourts or assembly would doubtless have found much in Gorgias’ teaching that was useful. If my interpretation of the Helen is correct, Gorgias exploited such attitudes but sought to lead his students beyond them by transforming the raw desire to persuade (and to have a “cookbook” way to accomplish this) into a socially productive force. It fell to another of his admirers to spell this strategy out. With characteristic explicitness, Isocrates later made lust for the power to persuade (\textit{tou peithein dynasthai... erastheien}) and desire to have more than others (\textit{pleonexia}) impulses essential to the ethical growth of his students (\textit{Antid. 275}). In this Gorgias may have been his model.

Gorgias’ reputation would have fared better had he simply explained his educational program rather than concealing it, tightly coiled, inside an interpretive jack-in-the-box. As things turned out, his apparent position on the power of logos provided ammunition for his fiercest critic. Plato has the Gorgias of his dialogue claim that rhetoric is what enables a man to rule over others in his city (\textit{Grg. 452d6–8}) and that whoever masters rhetoric will be able to make other professionals into his slaves (\textit{Grg. 452e4–8}). Gorgias’ students in the dialogue are correspondingly

\(^{51}\) Athens would eventually term the supervisor of its ephebes a \textit{kosmētēs} (\textit{Arist. Ath. Pol. 42.2}); orderly behavior as an educational ideal is already subject to nostalgia in the time of Gorgias (\textit{Ar. Nub. 961–1023}).

\(^{52}\) LSJ s.v. \textit{euandria}.

\(^{53}\) For views on what the \textit{euandria} involved see Boegehold 1996: 97–103, who raises the possibility that Gorgias here refers to the actual contest (99).

\(^{54}\) Diels-Kranz 82 A 7–8: Γοργίου ἄσκησις ψυχήν ἄρετῆς ἐς ἄγωνας ἰ οὐδὲς τῷ θνητῶν καλλίον’ ἐφε τέχνην.
power hungry, apparently having missed the Helen’s implicit lesson that the desire to persuade is treacherous. To judge from the trajectory of the dialogue, Plato alone seems to have to have absorbed that lesson. A reversal similar to the one I have detected in the Helen is the goal of Socrates’ claim that those able to commit injustice with impunity have no real power, since they do not thereby obtain what is good for them (466b–468e), and also of his characterization of the politician striving for power through rhetoric as a subservient erastēs of the demos (conceived as erômenos, 481c–482a; 513c7) and a subservient friend of the demos (conceived as tyrant, 509c–513c).55 In outline, if not in its peculiar epistemology and ethics, Socrates’ handling of Gorgias’ students follows the same pattern as the Helen does: he lures them, via their bold claims and beliefs regarding rhetorical power, towards the recognition that such power produces only bondage. Such are the ironies of the Helen’s reception that Plato not only erects a Gorgias whose conception of persuasive power is drained of all nuance, but also attacks this straw man following a strategy employed by, and perhaps even borrowed from, Gorgias himself.56

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