Reveling in My Own Celebration & Recreation:
A Discussion of Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen*

What is there to prevent the conclusion that Helen, too, when still young, was carried off by speech just as if constrained by force? Her mind was swept away by persuasion, and persuasion has the same power as necessity, although it may bring shame; for speech, by persuading the soul that it persuaded, constrained her both to obey what was said and to approve what was done. The persuader, as user of force, did wrong; the persuaded, forced by speech, is unreasonably blamed.

_Gorgias 12_

Though Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen* exudes literary finesse and a delightful sense of poetic word play, it also serves to beautifully uphold Pernot’s claim that Gorgias is the sophist “who most devoted himself to rhetoric” (Pernot 15). Fluidly weaving together two of the three species of rhetoric as articulated by Aristotle, the excerpt above clearly brings the strength and inherent domination of language before the eyes of the audience: “for speech . . . constrained her both to obey what was said and to approve what was done.” While embodying two of the three _eidē_ of rhetoric and functioning as an exemplar of civic phantasia, the *Encomium of Helen* also functions as a remarkable model of a sampling of the twenty eight _topoi_ as articulated by Aristotle.

If the _invention_ component of the rhetorical canon is most concerned with discovering the available means of persuasion, it is quite clear Gorgias found himself _inventing_ the elements of the *Encomium* rather than _using_ pre-existing elements and/or facts. Aristotle refers to a piece of rhetoric springing from the well of invention and creation—a piece “‘embodied in art, artistic’”—as “entechnic” (1.2.2). The entechnic nature of Gorgias’s piece is apparent even in the brief excerpt above. If an “atechnic” rhetorical piece pulls its content from such pre-existing elements as witness accounts and testimonies from tortured slaves it seems obvious that the following claim from Gorgias was one of his own creation: “for speech, by persuading the soul that it persuaded,
constrained her both to obey what was said and to approve what was done.” This passage from the *Encomium* is embedded in a delightful exhibition of seamless rhetorical invention, which, according to Pernot, “reveals a profound reflection on the nature and function of language in its relations with persuasion” (p 17).

Gorgias’s attention to invention becomes more fully realized after considering Jeffrey Walker’s articulation that the invention process requires “the writer to include the audience’s thinking . . . rather than merely ‘adapting’ the discourse to an audience considered after the fact” (p 46-47). Gorgias clearly crafts his piece in such a way as to envelope and welcome his audience, providing his hearers with a safe venue in which to reconsider their judgment of Helen’s actions—and thereby reconsider their judgment of humanity as a whole: “Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object should be honored with praise if praiseworthy” (1). His invention of a commitment recognizing the truth, beauty and justice in all aspects of society fosters an impenetrable commonality with his hearers, allowing them to finally accept at the end that Gorgias has, indeed, “removed disgrace from a woman” (20).

The third component of the rhetorical canon, *style*, is perhaps the most overtly crafted and non-traditional aspect in the *Encomium*. Though Gorgias obviously does not heed Aristotle’s admonition that “authors should compose without being noticed and should seem to speak not artificially but naturally” (3.2.4) and “one should use glosses and double words and coinages rarely and in a limited number of situations” (3.2.5) the playful use of language in this piece does not detract from its deliberate intent or brevity; at no point does Gorgias sacrifice the overall logos of the piece for artful play. If anything, the assonance, rhyming, repetition and rhythm in the piece combine to create an accessible and palatable vehicle for some rather intense and provocative assertions. Gorgias must openly wield his wit in language and word play in order to holistically and fully bring the prowess and capability of speech before the eyes of his audience. So the audience
truly comprehends “that persuasion, joining with speech, is wont to stamp the soul as it wishes” (13). Gorgias utilizes examples from astronomers, public debates and philosophers. However, rather than these example providing proof for the audience, it is in fact Gorgias’s own presentation of these instances which move the listener to acceptance. After considering the following quote it seems evident the audience realizes Gorgias’s referential phrases, not the references themselves, are exemplary of the power of the speech: “one must study, first, the words of astronomers who, substituting opinion for opinion, removing one and instilling the another, make incredible and unclear things appear true to the eyes of opinion” (13). He fails to offer actual quotes or excerpts from astronomers, or any other professional; he simply crafts a “truth” in such a way as to allow his audience to understand it as commonly held.

Given that The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines encomium as “a formal or high-flown expression of praise,” it seems Gorgias’s Encomium of Helen falls into the realm of epideictic as defined by Aristotle in his discussion of the three “species” of rhetoric: “In epideictic, there is either praise [ἐπαίνος] or blame [ψωγός]” (1.3.3). Gorgias does, indeed, begin his piece with an explicit appreciation of Helen and all she had to offer the world: “On many did she work the greatest passions of love, and by her one body she brought together many bodies of men greatly minded for great deeds” (4). He pairs this opening praise with a concluding shift of blame away from Helen: “How, then, can blame be thought just . . . . By speech I have removed disgrace from a woman” (20). However, in agreement with Kennerly’s assertion that Gorgias’s piece “might be an encomium by name, but it is a defense by content” here is where the piece ceases to function as an example of epideictic rhetoric. Aristotle directly attributes the distinction of species to the distinction of the “[classes] to which the hearers of speeches belong” (1.3.1) and goes on to assert that hearers function as either spectators or judges of past or future happenings. Because Encomium initially offers praise it is initially seen as demonstrative, allowing the audience to participate only in the role of
passive listener, or spectator. Gorgias makes his shift from epideictic to judicial quite transparent in the following line: “I shall proceed to my intended speech and shall propose the causes for which Helen’s voyage to Troy is likely to have taken place” (5). Encouraging his audience to consider the causes behind this event, which has long since occurred, instantaneously places the hearers into the realm of accusation and defense. Aristotle further articulates differentiation among the species by discussing the “end” of each; in epideictic rhetoric the end can be found in what is “honorable [kalon]” and what is shameful while in judicial rhetoric the result is the articulation of “the just [dikaion] and the unjust” (1.3.5). While Encomium overtly attempts to remove the thorny mantle of shame from Helen’s shoulders and replace it with an ermine one of honor, Gorgias’s enthymemic turns continually solicit hearers to reconsider who, or what, is at fault for her fall from grace.

One of Aristotle’s topoi most delightfully evident in the opening passage o is his seventh topic, that of ex borismou, or definition. Though the definitions are not directly stated by Gorgias, his understanding that the “persuader” was a “user of force” while the “persuaded” was “forced by speech” is made overtly clear. By establishing the wielder of persuasive language as the inevitable victor, the audience cannot help but accept the ways in which Helen was left defenseless at the feet of Paris. Gorgias’s tying together of persuasion and necessity serves to further define persuasion as an inescapable force; a component of action capable of coercing a person, in this case Helen, to “obey what was said and to approve what was done.” The Encomium is laden with topoi of definition. One of the most striking uses of definition occurs in eight, wherein Gorgias defines speech: “Speech is a powerful lord that with the smallest and most invisible body accomplished most godlike works” (p 286). This defining of speech as a powerful lord allows Gorgias to indulge in a swift turn of civic phantasia as he promises to “show” in sections eight and nine that speech can “banish fear and remove grief and instill pleasure and enhance pity.” Gorgias’s defining of speech induces the audience to conclude, in just five brief sections, the ways in which “The power of
speech has the same effect on the condition of the soul as the application of drugs [pharmaka] to the state of bodies” (14).

If Gorgias utilizes the topos of definition with a dash of artful flare and pizzazz, his inclusion of the tenth topos, *ek diareseōs*—division—is used with a distinct sense of deliberation and contemplation. After offering some delightfully turned phrases in praise of Helen, Gorgias succinctly divides the “causes for which Helen’s voyage to Troy is likely” (5) into four distinct possibilities: “[either] by fate’s will and gods’ wishes and necessity’s decrees she did what she did or by force reduced or by words seduced or by love induced” (6). Division seems to be one of the most effective of Aristotle’s topoi; if options and alternatives are not presented, then perhaps they will not have a chance to even be considered by an audience. Gorgias is most assuredly familiar with the values and assumptions of his listeners: the divinity of the gods, the gender norms of women and men and the power of emotion to influence action—particularly where the “weaker sex” is concerned. The division of attainable conclusions into fourths allows for a direct, accessible explication providing readers with enough information to seriously consider without over- or underwhelming them with too much or too little content.

Though Aristotle warns against blatant artifice in 3.2.4, he also contemplates the importance of figurative turns in rhetorical writing. For Aristotle, *urbanites* are essential to the spreading of knowledge: “To learn easily is naturally pleasant to all people, and words signify something, so whatever words create knowledge in us are the pleasantest” (3.10.1). If urbanity truly is the axis of comprehension in an audience, inducing “quick learning in our minds” (3.10.4) and if “[urbanity is achieved] by means of bringing-before-the-eyes” (3.10.6) then Gorgias’s distinct inclusion of repetition and *energia* clearly imbue the piece with an urbanity of style. In the aforementioned quote, he overtly points to the ways in which words—though, seemingly in this instance, not his own—“make incredible and unclear things appear true to the eyes.” Gorgias’s discussion of speech and the
role it played in dictating Helen’s destiny imbue the art of persuasion with an undeniable force and momentum—an energia signifying speech’s engagement with activity and, thus, its inevitable ability to be placed before the eyes of the audience.

Placing before the eyes of the audience, or civic phantasia, plays an enormously important role in the art of rhetoric. In applying Kennerly’s assertion, “a rhetor must appeal to the same mental faculty that enables self-indulgent escapes into fantasy” (p 269), to Encomium it becomes evident that Gorgias’s artfully playful use of language, particularly in his discussion of matters of love, serves to fluidly transport his hearers into the realm of fantastical abandon. As Gorgias describes the ways in which Helen, “pleased by the body of Alexander” (19) could not help but fall victim to the overriding power of love, especially since love “prevails over the divine power of the gods” (19), hearers are compelled to remember and consider the ways in which they too have been swayed and overtaken by the “human disease” of love. Gorgias’s use of skillful use of civic phantasia allows the audience to contentedly concur with his concluding thoughts: “[Helen] went [with Paris] caught by the nets around her soul, not by the wishes in her mind, and by the necessity of love, not by the devices of art” (19), though it is, of course, Gorgias’s devices of art that have brought his audience to this seemingly inevitable conclusion.

This idea of presenting an audience with an argument that is not only succinct, but engaging and accessible seems especially relevant in the contemporary world. Because so much of contemporary communication exchanges are fragmentary in form, common ideology attests to the inability of loquacious or meandering exchanges to hold the receiver’s attention or interest. It almost seems as though viable communication means “byte-able” communication. If today’s world insists on pithy communication, it also demands “pretty” communication. The general consensus seems to be that image-laden media allow audiences to consistently journey out of their known reality and find themselves transported into an “other” world. Because this aspect of visceral transportation has
attached itself to our current cultural psyche, it appears that spoken and written language must work thrice as hard—compared to the pace of society and communication in ancient Greece—to infuse an argument with a sense of *energia*. Paradoxically, though it seems highly unlikely Gorgias or Aristotle could have conceived of the world as it is today, the articulation of an appropriate approach to rhetoric by the latter and the presentation of that approach by the former, fit in quite well with the demands and constructs of modern language use, current modes of communication and aspects of contemporary civic discourse.

Many of the pieces we have read thus far this semester warrant deeper attention and further contemplation; all have been richly insightful and many have been stimulating and thought provoking. However, more than any other piece, I found Gorgias’s *Encomium* worthy of additional consideration. For me the *Encomium*, more than any other piece, is particularly reflective of Kennerly’s assertion that “Words move us, and not always with our permission” (p 274). Gorgias’s piece reflects this claim of Kennerly’s in a variety of ways. Not only does he utilize a beautifully constructed urbanity to argue this very point within the *Encomium* itself: “Speech is a powerful lord that with the smallest and most invisible body accomplished most godlike works” (8), he also adroitly crafts a discussion of the power of love to persuade his hearers: because of love “we see not what we wish but what each of us has experienced: through sight the soul is stamped in diverse ways” (15). Whether his audience intended to accept or deny her blamelessness, Gorgias’s reminder of the very element which defines the human experience—love—has led his hearers to an ultimate celebration, and acquittal, of Helen.
Works Cited


