

## Gorgias

### Defense of Helen

Translation by Thomas Martin

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; the opposites of these are unbecoming. In regard to man and woman and speech and deed and city and thing, it is necessary to honor with praise that worthy of praise and to place blame on the unworthy, for it is an equal error and mistake to blame the praiseworthy and praise the blameworthy.
2. It is the duty of one and the same man both to speak the needful rightly and to refute those who blame Helen, a woman about whom the testimony of the poets and the reputation of her name, which has become a reminder of misfortunes, have become univocal and unanimous. I wish by introducing some reasoning into my speech to end the blame of her who has a bad reputation and by revealing her critics as liars and by demonstrating the truth to end ignorance.
3. That in nature and in lineage the woman who is the subject of this speech is preeminent among preeminent men and women is not unclear, not even to a few. 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 disproven because he was said to be: the one, most powerful of men, the other, lord of all.
4. Sprung from such parents, she possessed godlike beauty which taking and not mistaking she possessed. In many men, many desires for love did she work, and by her one body many bodies she joined of men thinking great thoughts on great things, of whom some possessed greatness of wealth, others glory of ancient nobility, some vigor of personal strength, others might of acquired wisdom. And they all came on account of passion which loved to conquer and unconquered love of ambition.
5. Why and how and who sailed away taking Helen as his love I will not say. To tell the knowledgeable what they know commands trust, but brings no joy. Having gone beyond the time for the present argument, I will now proceed to the beginning of the next argument and will set forth the causes by which it is likely (*eikos*. that the voyage of Helen to Troy took place.
6. For either by the will of fate and by the decisions of the gods and by resolutions of necessity she did what she did, or by force reduced or by words seduced or by love captured. Now if through the first, it is right for the one who is responsible to be held responsible. For it is impossible to hinder divine predetermination by human premeditation. For it is natural that the stronger is not hindered by the weaker, but the weaker is ruled by the stronger and is drawn along, and that the stronger commands, the weaker follows. A god is stronger than a man in might and wit and in other ways. If then the blame must be placed on Fate and the god, Helen must be freed from disgrace.
7. But if she was seized by force and illegally assaulted and unjustly injured, it is obvious that he who seized did injustice as the offender and she who was seized did the suffering as the offended. It is right that the barbarian, having undertaken a barbarous undertaking in word and law and deed, must meet with blame by word, disenfranchisement by law and punishment by deed. She who was assaulted, deprived of country, and bereft of friends, how would she not be more likely pitied than pilloried? For he did dread things, she suffered. It is just to pity her, to hate him.
8. If it was speech which persuaded and deceived her soul, not even against this is it difficult to make a defense, and thus to banish the blame. Speech is a great lord which with the most invisible and subtlest substance accomplishes the most divine works. For it can end

fear and relieve grief and instill joy and nurture pity. That these matters are thus I will show.

9. It is proper to provide proof of this to the audience's opinion. I deem and define all poetry as speech which possesses rhythm. Hearing it the audience is invaded by a fearful shuddering and tearful pity and grievous longing, and for the well-being and misfortunes of the affairs and bodies of others the soul suffers a suffering of its own through words. But come, I will turn from one argument to another.
10. For the inspired incantations become through words bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain. For accompanying the opinion of the soul, the power of the incantation beguiles and persuades and alters it by witchcraft. Two arts, witchcraft and magic, have been discovered which are mistakes of the soul and misleadings of opinion.
11. So many as persuade so many about so many things, do so by fashioning a false speech. For if all have a recollection of all past events and thought of all present events and forethought for future events, a speech would not be similarly similar for those to whom it is now easy neither to remember the past nor consider the present nor to prophesy the future, with the result that about most subjects most men take opinion as an advisor to their soul. But opinion, being unstable and uncertain, involves those who use it in unstable and uncertain 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 forceful? For it was possible to see how the force of persuasion prevails; persuasion has the form of compulsion, but it does not have the same power. For speech compelled the soul, persuading it which it persuaded, both to believe the things said and to approve the things done. The persuader, like a compeller, does the wrong, and the persuaded, like the compelled, 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 the astronomers who substituting opinion for opinion, taking away one but creating another, make what is incredible and unclear seem true to the eyes of opinion; then, second, the logically necessary debates in which a single speech written with art but not spoken with truth, delights 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 relationship of the power of speech to the condition of the soul is the same as that of the condition of drugs to the nature of bodies. For just as different drugs dispel different secretions from the body and some bring an end to disease, others to life, so also in the case of speeches some distress, others delight, some terrify, others encourage, 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 was not unjust 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 error 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. For when hostile bodies buckle on hostile attire of bronze and steel, some for defense, other for offense, during hostilities, 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. Many have fallen victim to useless labor and dread disease' and hardly curable madnnesses. In this way sight engraves upon the mind the images of things which have been seen. And many frightening impressions are left, and what is left is exactly analogous to what is spoken.
18. Moreover, painters, whenever they perfectly create a single figure and form from many colors and figures, delight the sight, while the creation of statues and the production of sculpture 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 is created in many men.
19. If therefore, pleased by the body of Paris, the eye of Helen passed on to her soul eagerness and struggle for love, what is remarkable about that? If being a god, love has the divine power of the gods, how could a lesser being reject and refuse it? But if it is a human disease and an ignorance of the soul, it must not be blamed as a fault, but considered as a misfortune. She came, as she came, by the snares of fate, not by the plans of judgment, and by the compulsions of love, not by the schemes of skill.
20. How then is it necessary to consider as just the censure of Helen who, whether overcome by love or persuaded by speech or snatched by force or constrained by divine constraint did what she did, is completely acquitted on every charge.
21. I have by means of speech removed disgrace from a woman; I have adhered to the rule which I laid down for myself 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 for Helen an encomion, for myself a diversion.