IX. Isocrates' *Encomium of Helen*: a Panhellenic Document

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While discussing the parts of an oration in the third book of the *Rhetoric* (3.14.1414B, 27), Aristotle observes that in epideictic the speaker begins wherever he wishes, gives the keynote of the speech (*endounai*) and joins on the main body. As an example of this, Aristotle cites the proemium of Isocrates' *Encomium of Helen* where, he says, the eristics have nothing in common with Helen. What he means is that the introduction is a criticism of Isocrates' principal educational competitors and does not mention Helen, while the body of the speech, the praise of Helen, does not have any apparent connection with the education theory of the proemium, though the sequence of ideas is linked from the educators and their rhetorical writings to encomia in general and encomia of Helen in particular. Other examples of Aristotle's rule can be found, Isocrates' *Busiris*, for example. But in the *Busiris* Isocrates tries to prepare Polycrates to receive a criticism of the latter's defense of Busiris and then illustrates how such a speech ought to have been written. The point of the introduction is thus to offer Isocrates an excuse for the composition of the speech. The body of the *Helen*, like that of the *Busiris*, illustrates a point at the end of the introduction, namely, that an encomium should be a work of praise, not of defense; but the rest, and much greater, part of the proportionally long introduction seems to be an attack on the writing of such trivial speeches at all. The cleavage between introduction and body is, therefore, considerably more marked in the case of the *Helen* than in that of the *Busiris* or indeed other epideictic speeches. On the basis of the introduction to the *Helen* it would seem that logically the right form of composition could thus have been illustrated only by a serious, significant speech. The proemium cannot be taken as a justification of the composition of a *paignion*.

Look for a minute at what this proemium says. Three groups of educators are first of all attacked (section 1): those who say that it is impossible to speak on both sides of the same question, presumably Antisthenes and his followers; those supposed to be

Plato and the Academy who insist on the identity of virtues and the unity of knowledge; and finally a group of dialecticians who waste their time in useless disputes, presumably the Megarian school.[1] This might, says Isocrates (2), all be understandable if it were a new fad; but it was carried on by Protagoras and Gorgias and Zeno and Melissus years ago. It ought all to be abandoned. Teachers ought to pursue the truth, to train their students in matters of government, and to give them practice therein. There follows (5) the Isocratean premise, "keeping in mind that it is much better to make likely conjectures about the useful than to attain exact knowledge of the useless and to be a little superior in important things rather than very outstanding in matters insignificant and having little value for life."

Unless Isocrates has taken leave of his senses, the speech which follows would have to be serious at least; and one might expect it to be political, since that seems to be the main area of concern. A fanciful mythological exercise would be a fine example of what Isocrates regarded as a waste of time; and though the imaginative Plato might compose the *Menexenus* or the speech of Lysias in the *Phaedrus* to outdo the rhetoricians at their own game, the sober Isocrates can hardly be imagined as humorist or parodist.

In section six Isocrates resumes the attack on his opponents: those who are students may perhaps be excused, but not the teachers. Most ridiculous, he thinks, are the pretensions of the latter to a knowledge of politics while they choose the topics of their actual speeches out of inability to deal with more important subjects. "Topics of general applicability," Isocrates says, "and reliability and all similar ones are devised and delivered by means of a variety of forms and occasions which are hard to learn, and their composition is more difficult in the same degree as it is more difficult to be dignified than to scoff and to be serious than to joke." This is the statement of the Isocratean brand of oratory and resembles the accounts found in other speeches.[2] Certainly no excuse is suggested for failing to compose such a speech when one can, and it would seem reasonable to expect such a speech to follow.

[1] On the identification of the schools, a problem irrelevant to this paper, cf. R. C. Jebb, *The Attic Orators* 2 (London 1876) 103, K. Muenscher, "Isokratous Helenês enkômion" *RhM* 54 (1899) 248–76, Emile Brémond, *Isocrate, Discours* 1 (Paris 1928) 154–9, and LaRue Van Hook, *Isocrates* 3 (Cambridge 1945) *ad loc.*

[2] Cf. e.g. *Adv. Soph.* 16–17, *Antid.* 46–50, *Paneg.* 7–14.

Finally, Isocrates criticizes (12) writers of encomia of bumblebees or salt. These are trivial subjects for those incapable of loftier flights. Of those who wished to speak eloquently on some subject Isocrates praises (14) the one, whether it was Gorgias or Anaximenes or Alcidamas or someone else, who chose to speak of Helen "because he recalled to memory such a remarkable woman." The encomium of Helen is, therefore—and Isocrates as always seems quite serious—a worthy theme, not to be compared with trivialities; one might have expected salt to be almost as good, and later writers have seen moral lessons in bumblebees. In *Busiris* (9) Isocrates admits that that subject is lacking in seriousness and in dignity of style. In the *Helen* he makes no such admission, nor does he use of the *Helen* the word so often applied by modern critics: *paignion.*

The impression which I get from reading this proemium is that the speech to follow is a serious and responsible one which, in the author's own words, "invented and expressed by means of a variety of forms," is presumably somehow related to politics or the science of government, in which case the *Helen* is, like the *Busiris*, an attempt to show the correct way of doing something, that is, of writing an encomium which is proper in rhetorical form and yet serious and significant in content. There is nothing extraordinary in the fact that the speech is concerned with politics—most of Isocrates' speeches are—nor that Helen is regarded as a serious subject for literary creation. Euripides so regarded her and Stesichorus found her more serious than he had imagined. The extant *Defense of Helen*, which I suppose to be by Gorgias, is at least a serious exposition of logical method.[3] Isocrates' remarks at the end of the proemium might then be interpreted to mean that he, like Gorgias, will make serious use of Helen, but not for charge and defense, that is, not to illustrate logic, but for praise and probably praise of something political.

If the speech really is a serious political effort, one would expect that fact to be made clear at the end of the speech, if anywhere. The speech concludes with the following words:

We might justly believe that Helen is the cause of our not being slaves to the barbarians. For we shall find that it was because of her that

[3] For a discussion of the uses of the Helen motif cf. Jose Alsina Clota, "Helena de Troya. Historia de un Mito," *Helmantica* 8 (1957) 373–94.

the Greeks agreed together and made a joint expedition against the barbarians and then for the first time made Europe victor over Asia. As a result, we experienced such a great change that, although in the past any among the barbarians who fell upon evil times thought it right to rule the Greek cities . . . after that war our race progressed so much that it took both great cities and much territory from the barbarians. If, therefore, any speakers wish to develop this material and amplify it, they will not be at a loss for a starting point from which, without repeating what I have said, they will be able to praise Helen, but will meet with many new topics concerning her.

Professor Jaeger has pointed out[4] that this is in fact a clear statement of Isocrates' program of Panhellenism. Isocrates no doubt remembers how Herodotus (1.3) included the Trojan war in the series of incidents between east and west. The *Panegyricus*, too, refers to the Trojan war as an example of Panhellenic activity against Persia. There (159) Isocrates says that the place of honor given to the Homeric poems is a result of the praise of those who fought the barbarian and an encouragement to later Greeks to strive after such deeds (cf. also 181 and 186). If he can claim that the *Iliad* is actually a Panhellenic political document, surely we must suspect the same of his own speech for Helen.

But a solitary reference to Panhellenism at the end hardly justifies the claim of the proemium that the speech will be a serious political effort. It merely rounds it out. I should like to apply the hypothesis that the work is to be regarded as a praise of Hellenism rather than Helen throughout. And I think this hypothesis has the virtue not only of giving the speech some significance and likelihood in terms of Isocrates' own views, but of explaining the long discussion of Theseus which has always had to be justified in only half-satisfactory terms. Best, perhaps, was the comment of Jebb, who said[5] that "Isocrates conceived that dignity and gravity might be added to encomia of the conventional type by connecting with mythical subject matter some topic of practical interest, political or moral; and he was willing to allow such topic a greater prominence than its bearing on the special subject could deserve. This purpose is served . . . in the Helen by the devotion of a large space to the reforms of Theseus."

[4] Werner Jaeger, *Paideia* 3 (New York 1944) 67. Cf. also *RE* 9. 2184.
[5] Jebb (above, note 1) 106.

The first part of Jebb's statement is, I think, quite true, but he did not carry it to its full extent by viewing the speech as a unity and as a part of Isocrates' thought as a whole.

The thought of the body of the speech proceeds somewhat as follows: Helen is the favorite child of Zeus (16). Theseus thought life was not worth living unless he could possess her (18), so he took her from Lacedaemon to Athens (19). There follows praise of Theseus (21–37) which occupies about a quarter of the work, a considerable portion of which is in turn devoted to a comparison of Theseus and Heracles. If now, according to my hypothesis, we regard the speech as concerned somehow with Panhellenism, it seems significant that the principal Athenian hero is compared to the principal hero of the Peloponnese, to the advantage of the former. Theseus' greatest advantage is that he undertook labors which were useful to mankind (24). He wished to be the benefactor of all Greeks (25). Similarly in the *Panegyricus* (26 ff.) the benefits conferred by Athens support its right over Sparta's to the hegemony. Furthermore, Theseus was great because of the government which he instituted (32); he united Attica, and he began the democracy (35–6). Isocrates regarded Theseus as the last Athenian king and democracy as the logical sequel to his enlightened rule.[6] Theseus is here a figure whose glorification glorifies Athens. Similarly in the *Panegyricus* (39) there is allusion to the good influence of the synoecism of Attica and (80 ff.) the responsible conduct of Athens. In the *Helen* Theseus is worthy of Helen, whom he took from Lacedaemon, just as in the *Panegyricus* (21 ff.) Athens is worthy of the hegemony which it should take from Sparta.

Helen was always an ideal of some sort to the Greeks. That she stands here for excellence and the right to the leadership of Greece is, I think, clear from what follows in the speech: all states strove, Isocrates says (39), to possess her and it became evident that armed conflict would result (40). Out of fear of strife the states all swore to unite on behalf of the one who won her. That is, Panhellenism was achieved for the first time under the leadership of the one who possessed Helen. Similarly in the *Panegyricus* (174) domestic contention can issue into an advantage against the barbarian. But Paris from Asia, which in classical

[6] Cf. Jebb (above, note 1) 119.

times meant Persia, coveted Helen (42). It is not surprising that he should want her (45 ff.), for even the deities themselves contend for the prize of beauty; and thus Paris could not scorn it (48). (From my hypothesis this may mean that all men and all states naturally desire to be the leader.) Yet the Trojan or the Greek, by abandoning his claim, might have lived in peace for all time. Without this contention, natural as it was, no wars between east and west could have arisen (50). The Trojans were upholding the cause of Asia, the Greeks of Europe (51). All thought that it was more honorable to die than not to take part in the struggle.

Helen is esteemed because of beauty, which is the most venerated of all things (54); and virtue, the most beautiful way of living, is associated with it (55). There follows an account of the power of beauty which is the literary high-point of the speech. Helen has raised with herself to immortality both her brothers (61) and Menelaus (62). Sparta is a witness which worships her as a goddess (63). She has also inspired poetry as in the case of Stesichorus and Homer (64–5). Philosophers should appreciate her merits (66). It is due to Helen that we are not the slaves of the barbarian, and so to the end which I quoted.

Now I have no doubt missed some of the fine points; Isocrates is after all the most painstaking of the Greek prose writers, but the general motif of Athens and Sparta and Persia and their desire for dominance seems pervasive and is the source of the unity of the speech. Perhaps some of the detail is mere adornment. Theseus and Heracles both reappear in the *Philippus* (144) as symbols of exertion to assume the hegemony; and Heracles is mentioned by Isocrates on numerous occasions, in connection with Spartan as well as with Macedonian claims to leadership. The artistry with which the motif of Helen is developed need occasion no surprise. We have learned in the last few years to look carefully at dominant images running through works of poetry. Isocrates' speeches are of all Greek prose the closest to poetry, and the use of Helen here is only a particularly striking instance of his extension of a single image. Another example, I think, would be the motif of the athlete which I see running through the *Panegyricus*.

In conclusion, then, the *Helen* is in fact a fanciful counterpart to the *Panegyricus*,[7] designed to show that rhetorical exercises

[7] And is thus probably its approximate contemporary.

taught and practised by educators need not be trivial but may "by means of a variety of forms" contain serious political thought. The student is thus to be trained in technique and political philosophy coincidentally. The pedagogical principle is similar to that of the Roman rhetoricians whose declamations dressed out the conventions and forms of legal oratory with the doings of pirates and ravished maidens.