

The Performative Logos of Gorgias

In his *Encomium to Helen*—a work Charles Segal has called an encomium to logos or language rather than to the daughter of Zeus and Leda (1962, 102)—Gorgias infamously claims that it was language that seduced and overwhelmed the Spartan queen, necessitating her elopement with Paris. I propose that in this late fifth-century epideictic speech, the ancient Greek sophist presents the logos as a superhuman or magical power able to enchant and enthrall the hearer in ways that invite us to apply the modern speech act theory of J. L. Austin—something previous scholarship has not coherently or comprehensively undertaken. In this talk, I discuss how Gorgias' view of language in the *Helen* could be performative and how this interpretation provides us with a framework for understanding not only the power Gorgias attributed to language in modern terms, but also for many seemingly disparate observations about language in the *Helen* by contemporary scholars such as Scott Consigny and Robert Wardy.

In his 1962, *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin famously posits that words do not just describe, but often, in instances of language he dubs speech acts or performative utterances, they act, accomplishing the very thing they say, as when we declare war or take marriage vows. Additionally, utterances that are cogent, moving, and persuasive are also performative, belonging to a specific category of speech act Austin calls perlocutions—that is, acts of speech *through* the saying of which we are emotionally affected or persuaded.

First of all, in the *Helen*, Gorgias defines logos as an intrinsically performative principle: it is the subtlest of bodies but nevertheless is capable of the most godlike of deeds. The dialogues of Plato confirm that at the time persuasive language was thought to be magical with an uncanny power to affect the soul that we could now term performative or perlocutionary. Thus in the *Phaedrus* (261a), rhetoric is dubbed *psychagogia*, a leading away of the soul through words,

while in the *Gorgias* (452e), the clever rhetor can “put” persuasion into the psyche of his listener by means of language. Moreover, as Gorgias explains, language is able to sway our emotions and consequently affect our beliefs—linguistic feats that in an Austinian framework would be perlocutionary—and its power compares with that of magic incantations and drugs.

In the *Helen*, Gorgias attributes the power of the logos to what he calls its *dynamis* or force. Austin likewise describes the performative utterance as having a “force” that constitutes its efficacy. For Gorgias the *dynamis* of the logos is at once quasi-physiological, able to affect the psyche as a drug affects the humors of the body, and quasi-physical, capable of compelling the listener. Thus in *The Birth of Rhetoric* Robert Wardy can posit that in this speech Gorgias is collapsing two important classical binaries seen particularly in Homer and Herodotus—that of word and deed and that of persuasion and force (1996, 38-43). The sophist thereby effectively eliminates the gap between word and deed, or, as Scot Consigny puts it in *Gorgias: Sophist and Artist*, for Gorgias in the *Helen*, “language and action are not only correlative, but coterminus” (2001, 76). Furthermore, persuasion for Gorgias is no longer an alternative to physical force, as in Homer, but as both Consigny (2001, 75) and Segal (1962, 117) have demonstrated, is on par with *bia*. This presentation of the *dynamis* of the logos then allows Consigny to claim that Paris’ rape of Helen must have consisted of speech acts (2001, 75), and James Porter in *The Seductions of Gorgias* to assert that in the *Helen* “language is in effect, moreover, a kind of rape” (1993, 275). This blurring of word and deed and persuasion and force is the essence of both the power of Gorgias’ logos and of performative language.

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