

The Abolition of Helen (and of Man)

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Gorgias abolishes Helen, not praises her, in the "Encomium of Helen." He controls the flow of thought by seizing words and defining them according to his purpose. Further, he amplifies the importance and power of language and says, "Speech is a powerful lord." Later he asserts, "The effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies." Gorgias has shifted the emphasis from Helen and her power of choice to language. Though he bolsters his argument with comments about witchcraft and magic, the crux of the speech is the power of language. He concludes with, "I have by means of speech removed disgrace from a woman." His speech removed disgrace, but disgrace was not really removed from her. For in Gorgias' understanding, no disgrace ever really existed—only the realities created by the talk of various people. The introduction to the "Encomium of Helen" says that Gorgias makes "the strongest possible case for the power of language to change the whole person." Gorgias and the editors understated the importance of what Gorgias attempted, perhaps accomplished, in the speech. Gorgias did not merely remove disgrace or even change the whole person. Much stronger phrasing is called for. Gorgias abolished Helen. The specific person of Helen, or any other person for that matter, is not crucial to Gorgias' argument. Not only is Helen not needed, she simply does not exist in the world created by Gorgias and ruled by language.

The primary issue is a conflict that seems to have been with man since he first began talking and to have plagued every generation since. Is there of a world of reality or only of convention? Philosophers have tended to favor the idea that a real world exists with absolute, perhaps transcendent, truths, and that world exists regardless of the perceptions of man. Rhetoricians have tended to view reality as an agreement by people as to what is true. Reality changes with the perceptions and conventions of men. In the "Encomium of Helen," Gorgias reflects the rhetorical tradition. Socrates, as presented by Plato in *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, reflects the philosophical tradition. By the time of Aristotle, as revealed in *Rhetoric*, terminology began to overlap. Each field, philosophy and rhetoric, had its place. It could seem that the distinctions were minor and might be lost in the annals of history as an issue that once existed. But the distinction has not gone away. Quintilian picks up the issue in the *Institutes of Oratory* when he attempts in Book XII "to define even the orator's moral character." When describing the perfect orator, he uses Cato's definition that a good orator must be "a good man skilled in speaking." Thus the worlds of absolute value and of language are conflated into one person, the perfect orator. The two worlds continue to appear in various fields of thought. The field to be considered now is education.

Quintilian, in Book II, discusses the early education of pupils. He discourses on the appropriate time for pupils to be taught by grammarians and by rhetoricians. His basic complaint is that "grammarians have appropriated what does not belong to them." That is, grammarians are teaching rhetoric to pupils when they should be teaching what they are qualified to teach, "the art of speaking correctly." In essence, Quintilian is arguing that a pupil should be taught by a grammarian who teaches from the perspective of absolutes. For speaking to be correct, there must be some standard with which to compare it. When a pupil is ready, rhetoricians should educate him in the arts of persuasion, the conventions of language that can bend men's minds to their purposes. This issue of grammarians stepping beyond their bounds and qualifications with young students resurfaced in the 1940s with the publication of *The Abolition of Man* by C. S. Lewis.

The book is comprised of three lectures, the Riddell Lectures, delivered in 1943 at the University of Durham in England. Lewis was a professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge who had been schooled in England and exposed to classical studies from an early age, as all English intelligentsia were in that day. He was a founder of the Socratic Club in Oxford in 1941 which included many notables of his day. His involvement in the club indicates the position he takes in the polarity between philosophers and rhetoricians. His lectures were delivered to educators, and like Quintilian, he was disturbed about grammarians overstepping their bounds in educating elementary school children. He chose an elementary text-book on English that he calls *The Green Book* written by two grammarians as an illustration with which to begin.

The grammarians relate a well known story about Samuel Taylor Coleridge in which he and two tourist observe a waterfall. One tourist calls the waterfall sublime and the other calls it pretty. Coleridge agreed with sublime and rejected pretty. The grammarians comment that the first tourist was not making a remark about the waterfall but about his own feelings. Namely, the tourist felt sublime feelings. They explain that the confusion is in our language since we are actually saying something about ourselves when we appear to be ascribing qualities that do not actually exist in an objective world. In short, reality is what we say and is not found in an objective world outside of ourselves.

Lewis says that the grammarians have provided "a philosophical and not a literary position." A student who reads the book has a "work of amateur philosophers where he expected the work of professional grammarians." Lewis does not maintain that students should not be taught such ideas, but he is concerned about the age at which they are taught different subjects and about the confusion that results when they should be grounded in correct grammar but receive weak treatments of philosophy and rhetoric. Lewis uses this illustration from the text-book as a unifying point for the rest of his lectures, or should I say rhetoric? The techniques that he uses to persuade his audience are excellent examples of Aristotle's conception of rhetoric and of Socratic thought as found in Plato.

The first thing Lewis does is to take definitions away from the

two grammarians. Immediately, Lewis asserts and explains that "the man who says 'This is sublime' cannot mean 'I have sublime feelings.' . . . If 'This is sublime' is to be reduced at all to a statement about the speaker's feelings, the proper translation would be 'I have humble feelings.'" Lewis describes the differing effects that the language of the two grammarians will have on different audiences, while apparently tailoring his comments to fit the educators of his day. After taking internal feelings away from the two grammarians, Lewis then shifts the emphasis to external realities. He appeals to history, with examples from many societies, to build a case for objective reality that includes objective values. He compares "good" with "useful" which is reminiscent of Aristotle's discourse on "Goodness and Utility" in *Rhetoric*.

Lewis' arguments conform to Aristotle's ideas about Example, Enthymemes, and Maxims. For past facts he uses many "illustrative parallels" and at least one fable about an Irishman who wishes to heat his house. Lewis' audience was primary school educators who would qualify as a popular audience as described in the *Rhetoric*. Aristotle argues that arguments of Example are most effective with such audiences and Lewis' three lectures certainly emphasize examples. Lewis is not a demigod and is genuinely concerned with truth, not mere persuasion. Like a true philosopher and as Aristotle would approve, he employs Enthymemes that are usually bolstered with Example. But what is the ultimate point of Lewis' arguments? He is not merely arguing that grammarians should be careful to stick to their field in text-books. No, his point is much more comprehensive as he argues that the loss of objective, even transcendent, truth is destructive to man. Shades of Socrates!

Lewis' ultimate point is that if language is allowed to replace objective attributes about a waterfall, then language can be used to replace man. If language is given such power that there is no external reality, then man will be abolished—hence the title of the book and the third lecture. In the "Encomium of Helen," Gorgias abolished Helen, and indeed all women. It is not much of a stretch to abolish men after women are abolished, and without men and women, there is no mankind. In 1943, Lewis explored the danger of an idea that first surfaced at least twenty-four hundred years ago.

The polarity between the philosophical and rhetorical traditions has not lessened over the centuries. Lewis approaches the issue from a Socratic position and employs techniques of an Aristotelian nature. All in all, I find Lewis much more compelling than Gorgias. But then, I am predisposed toward transcendent truth. Am I a fulfilment of Aristotle's observation that "people always think well of speeches adapted to, and reflecting, their own character?"

Works Cited

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