GREEK AND ROMAN AESTHETICS

GORGIAS

Encomium of Helen*

8–14

If, however, it was speech that persuaded her and deceived her soul, it is not difficult to defend her against this too and acquit her of the charge, in the following way. Speech is a powerful master, which accomplishes most divine deeds in the most diminutive and imperceptible body. For it can put an end to fear, take away sorrow, incite joy and augment pity. I will demonstrate that this is so. 8

Indeed, a demonstration for the listeners that would form their opinion is in order. I consider and call every sort of poetry 'speech with metre'. Those who listen to it shudder with great fear, and are seized by tearful pity and mournful longing; the soul experiences something personal, through these words, on account of the good or ill fortunes that befall the affairs and bodies of others. But it is time to turn from one point to another. 9

Through words, inspired incantations bring pleasure and drive away pain. For the power of the incantation, working together with the soul's power of judgement, enchants, persuades and converts it by witchcraft. We know of twin arts, witchcraft and magic, that mislead the soul and deceive the judgement. 10

So many people have persuaded or do persuade so many others on so many subjects by composing false discourse! Now if everybody had 11

* In this speech Gorgias defends the behaviour of Helen of Troy as having been forced in some way. One such forceful factor, according to him, is persuasive speech by Paris.

the memory of all past things, awareness of all present things, and foreknowledge of all future things, the same words would not have the same power. However, the way things are now, people do not easily remember the past, or discern the present, or divine the future: hence in most cases most people employ opinion as their soul's counsellor. However, opinion, being slippery and uncertain, subjects those who use it to slippery and uncertain fortunes.[1]

12 … For what would also prevent Helen, in the same way, from going unwillingly under the influence of speech, as if she were dragged by force? Indeed, although the essence of persuasion is not the same as that of constraint, it has exactly the same power. For the speech that has persuaded the soul that it targeted forces it both to believe what is said and to go along with what is done. And he who persuades, like the one who forces, is guilty of a crime – just as she who is persuaded, like the one who is forced by the power of speech, is wrongly accused.

13 In order to see that persuasion, when it is added to speech, shapes the soul as it wishes, one must look at the following types of discourse: first, at the discourse of astronomers, who, pitting opinions against each other and removing one while instilling another, make the incredible and unclear clear to the eyes of opinion. Second, at the contests which have to take place using the spoken word,[2] where one speech delights and convinces a large portion of the crowd by being skilfully written, not by being honestly spoken. Third, at the philosophical debates, where the exhibited swiftness of thought shows how malleable is the formation of opinion.

14 Now the power of speech has the same effect on the constitution of the soul as the mixture of drugs on the nature of the body. For just as different kinds of drugs purge the body of different humours, and some put an end to disease and others to life, in the same way some kinds of speech distress those who listen to them, while others delight them, some frighten them, others inspire courage, and yet others drug and bewitch the soul by some evil persuasion.

[1] Some text is missing at this point and there is a serious textual problem with the next line. We followed the general sense, upon which most commentators agree, not any particular conjecture.
[2] Gorgias means contests that take place in the lawcourts.

PLATO

Ion

533d–536d[1]

SOCRATES: This ability of yours to talk well about Homer, which I spoke of just now, is not a skill but a divine force which moves you. It is like the force in the stone which Euripides called Magnesian, but which most people call Heraclean.[2] For indeed this stone not only attracts iron rings themselves but also passes its force on to the rings so that they in their turn can do the same as the stone and attract other rings. Sometimes there is a very long chain of rings and bits of iron, all attached to each other; the force which links them all together comes from that stone. In just this way the Muse herself makes people inspired, and they in turn inspire others, forming a chain of inspiration. For all the good epic poets recite all these fine poems not through skill but because they are inspired. The same goes for the good lyric poets: just as those who celebrate the Corybantic rites[3] are not in their right minds when they dance, so too the lyric poets are not in their right minds when they compose these fine poems; whenever they embark on harmony and rhythm, they act like Bacchants[4] and are possessed. Just as Bacchants, when possessed, draw **533d** **533e** **534a**

[1] In this extract Socrates is in discussion with Ion, a rhapsode. Rhapsodes gave dramatic recitations of Homeric poetry. Socrates is trying to show Ion that his ability to recite Homer and to talk about his work is not due to knowledge.
[2] I.e., the magnet.
[3] The Corybantic rites, in honour of the goddess Cybele, involved frenzied dancing, believed to be therapeutic in treating some kinds of madness.
[4] Worshippers of the god Bacchus, also known as Dionysus.

honey and milk from rivers and are not in their right minds, so the lyric poets' soul does this too, as they themselves say.

534b To be sure the poets tell us that they bring us their poems like bees, gathering them from springs flowing with honey in groves and gardens of the Muses, and they claim that they are winged, like bees; and they tell the truth. For a poet is a light, winged, holy thing, unable to compose until he is inspired and out of his mind, his reason no longer in him; no one can compose poetry or give oracles as long as they have their reason. So each poet can compose fine poems only in the genre to which the Muse has urged him – one dithyrambs, another encomia, another dance-songs, another epic, another poems in iambics.[5] Each of them is bad at all the other genres. This is because it is by divine dispensation, not by skill, that they compose and **534c** utter many fine things about the world, just as you do about Homer. They do this not by skill but through a divine force, since, if it were by skill that they knew how to speak well about one subject, they would also know how to do so about all other subjects. That is why the god takes away these people's **534d** reason and uses them as ministers and givers of oracles and divine prophets so that we who hear them may know that it is not these people, whose reason is not in them, who are saying these things which are so valuable; rather the god himself is the speaker and is addressing us through them.

The best evidence for what I am saying is Tynnichus of Chalcis who never composed any poem worth mentioning, other than the paean which everyone sings. This is almost the finest of all poems and, as he himself **534e** says, simply 'an invention of the Muses'.[6] For in this way the god seems to me to show us, most clearly, so that we are in no doubt, that these fine poems are not human, nor produced by human beings, but are divine and produced by gods, and the poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods, each one possessed by the appropriate deity. As a way of showing this, **535a** the god deliberately sang the finest song through the worst poet. Do you not think what I am saying is true, Ion?

ION: Yes, indeed I do. For your words touch my soul, so to speak, Socrates, and I agree that good poets interpret these messages from the gods for us by divine dispensation.

[5] Dithyrambs were lyric poems sung by a chorus. Encomia were songs of praise. The iambic metre was used for poems of invective. Socrates assumes, both here and later, that a different Muse presides over each of the poetic genres which he lists.

[6] The words quoted here are all that survives of the paean, or song in praise of the god Apollo, by Tynnichus, who is known only as its author.

SOCRATES: Then do you rhapsodes in your turn interpret the words of the poets?
ION: That is also true.
SOCRATES: So you are interpreters of interpreters?
ION: Absolutely.
SOCRATES: Come then, Ion, tell me this and do not conceal the answer, **535b**
whatever I ask you. When you recite epic verses well and most amaze your audience – whether you are singing about Odysseus leaping on the threshold, making himself known to the suitors and pouring arrows out at his feet, or about Achilles rushing to attack Hector, or singing some sad passage about Andromache or Hecuba or Priam[7] – are you then in your right mind? Or are you beside yourself and, under the influence of **535c**
inspiration, do you imagine you are present at the events you are describing, whether in Ithaca or at Troy or wherever the story of the epic is actually set?
ION: How clearly you have made this point, Socrates! I shall tell you, without concealing anything. When I recite a sad passage, my eyes fill with tears; when it is something frightening or terrifying, my hair stands on end with fear and my heart jumps.
SOCRATES: What? Suppose a man weeps at sacrifices and festivals, **535d**
wearing embroidered robes and golden garlands, without having lost any of these things, or is afraid when standing among more than 20,000 friendly people, when no one is stripping him of his clothes or doing him any harm. Should we say, Ion, that such a man is in his right mind?
ION: No indeed, Socrates, certainly not, to tell you the truth.
SOCRATES: Then do you realize that you rhapsodes have exactly this effect on most of your audience too?
ION: I am very well aware of it. Every time I perform I look down at **535e**
them from the stage and see them weeping and looking terrified and marvelling at what is being said. For I have to pay close attention to them; if I make them weep, I shall be laughing myself as I take my

[7] Socrates here alludes to some very well-known parts of the Homeric poems: the opening of *Odyssey* 22, where Odysseus arrives home after his wanderings following the end of the Trojan War and reveals himself to the suitors who have been paying court to his wife Penelope on the assumption that he is dead; *Iliad* 22.312 ff., where Achilles attacks Hector and eventually kills him; and passages such as *Iliad* 6.390–502, where Hector bids farewell to his wife Andromache before going into battle, *Iliad* 22.405–515, describing the grief of Andromache and of Hector's parents, Priam and Hecuba, when they see Achilles maltreating Hector's body, and *Iliad* 24.710–59, the lamentations of Hecuba and Andromache over Hector's body.

money but if I make them laugh, I shall be weeping myself because I will lose money.

SOCRATES: Then do you realize that the members of your audience are the last of the iron rings which I said pick up the force from the Heraclean stone? You the rhapsode and actor are the middle ring, and the poet himself is the first ring; by means of all these rings the god pulls the souls of men whichever way he wants, passing on the force from one link in the chain to the next. Just as with the stone, there is a very long chain of dancers and producers and under-producers, hanging sideways from the rings which hang down from the Muse. One poet is attached to one Muse, another to another – we use the word 'possessed', which is close in meaning; for the poet is held fast. Others are attached to one or another of these primary rings and are inspired by a particular poet: some are possessed and held fast by Orpheus, some by Musaeus,[8] but most by Homer. You, Ion, are one of these; you are possessed by Homer and when anyone performs poems by anyone else, you fall asleep and have nothing to say but when anyone utters a song by this poet, you wake up at once and your soul dances and you have plenty to say. For you say what you say about Homer not by skill, nor by knowledge, but by divine dispensation and possession. Those who celebrate the Corybantic rites[9] hear clearly only the tune which belongs to the god by whom they are inspired; they dance and sing freely to that tune but do not care about the others. In just the same way, Ion, whenever anyone mentions Homer, you have plenty to say, but you have nothing to say about the other poets. You asked me why you have plenty to say about Homer but nothing about the other poets; the reason is that your ability to praise Homer is not due to skill but to divine dispensation.

536a **536b** **536c** **536d**

[8] Orpheus was a mythical musician, famous for the power of his song to charm animals, trees and even rocks. Musaeus was another mythical singer, often associated with Orpheus.

[9] Cf. n. 3 above.

Hippias Major

287e–298a[1]

HIPPIAS: I understand, my good friend, and I will tell him[2] in reply what the fine is. I will never be refuted. You can be sure, Socrates, to tell the truth, that a fine girl is something fine. **287e**

SOCRATES: A fine and noble answer, Hippias, by the Dog![3] If I give that answer, will I have answered the question quite correctly? Will I never be refuted? **288a**

HIPPIAS: How could you be refuted, Socrates, about something everyone is agreed on? Everyone who hears you will confirm that what you are saying is correct.

SOCRATES: Well, certainly. Come, Hippias, let me go over what you are saying for myself. He will ask me a question something like this, 'Go on, Socrates, answer: consider all the things which you say are fine. What is the fine itself that explains why these things would be fine?' Will I then say that if a fine girl is something fine, that explains why these things would be fine?

[1] In the *Hippias Major* Socrates is trying to find a definition of 'the fine' (τὸ καλόν) in discussion with the sophist Hippias of Elis. Shortly before our extract begins, at 286c, Socrates has introduced an imaginary disputant whose questions about 'the fine' he could not answer. For most of the rest of the dialogue he presents himself as engaged in trying to answer the questions which this disputant would put to him.

[2] I.e., the imaginary disputant.

[3] Plato regularly presents Socrates as swearing 'by the Dog', perhaps a way of avoiding a more serious oath.

288b HIPPIAS: Do you think he will still try to refute you on the grounds that what you say is not fine? Will it not be ridiculous if he does try?

SOCRATES: I am sure he will try, my excellent friend; the outcome will show whether he will be ridiculous if he does try. But I want to tell you what he will say.

HIPPIAS: Tell me then.

SOCRATES: 'How sweet you are, Socrates,' he will say. 'Is not a fine mare **288c** something fine? Even the god praised mares in the oracle.'[4] What shall we say, Hippias? Would we not have to say that the mare is something fine, the fine mare, at least? How could we dare to deny that the fine is something fine?

HIPPIAS: That is true, Socrates. The god put it quite correctly, for our mares are very fine.

SOCRATES: 'Well,' he will say, 'what about a fine lyre? Is it not something fine?' Should we agree, Hippias?

HIPPIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So after this I am pretty sure, judging from what he is like, that he will say, 'My good man, what about a fine pot? Is it not something fine?'

288d HIPPIAS: Socrates, who is this man? How ill-educated he is! He dares to use such vulgar words about a solemn subject.

SOCRATES: He is like that, Hippias. He is not refined but rude; he only cares about the truth. Nevertheless, we must try to answer the man and my own view is as follows: if the pot has been made smooth and round and finely fired, by a good potter, as some fine two-handled pots have, the very fine ones which hold six *choes*[5] – if he is asking about **288e** a pot like that, it must be agreed to be fine. How could we say it is not fine when it is?

HIPPIAS: We could not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: 'So,' he will say, 'a fine pot too is something fine? Answer!'

HIPPIAS: I think this is correct, Socrates. Even this utensil is fine if it has been finely made, but as a whole it does not deserve to be judged fine, compared to a mare and a girl, and everything else that is fine.

289a SOCRATES: Well, I understand, Hippias, that when he asks these questions, we should then respond as follows: 'My man, do you not know that

[4] This may refer to a Delphic oracle in which horses are praised but not called fine.
[5] A *choe* (χοή) is a measure of liquid.

the saying of Heraclitus[6] is correct, that "the finest of monkeys is base compared to the class of men", and the finest of pots is base compared to the class of girls, as Hippias the sophist says.' Is that not right, Hippias?

HIPPIAS: You have answered absolutely correctly, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Listen then. After this, I am sure that he will say, 'What, Socrates? If someone compares the class of girls with the class of gods, will he not have the same experience as when the class of pots was compared to the class of girls? Will not the finest girl be seen to be base?[7] Does not even Heraclitus, whom you cite, say exactly this, that "the wisest of men will appear to be a monkey in wisdom and fineness and everything else compared to a god"?' Should we agree, Hippias, that the finest girl is base compared to the class of gods? **289b**

HIPPIAS: Who could disagree with that, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Then if we agree to that, he will laugh and say, 'Socrates, do you remember the question you were asked?' 'I do,' I will say. 'I was asked what the fine itself is.' 'Then,' he will say, 'although you were asked about the fine, are you answering, as you yourself admit, with something which happens to be no more fine than base?' So it seems, I will say. Or what do you advise me to say, my friend? **289c**

HIPPIAS: I advise you to say this. For it is true that the class of men is not fine compared to gods.

SOCRATES: 'Moreover,' he will say, 'if I asked you from the beginning what is fine and what is base, if you answered as you did just now, you would not have answered correctly, would you? Do you really still think that the fine itself, that by which everything else is adorned and seen to be fine, when that form is added to it, is a girl or a mare or a lyre?' **289d**

HIPPIAS: But if this is what he is looking for, Socrates, it is the easiest thing in the world to reply by telling him what the fine is, by the addition of which everything else is adorned and seen to be fine. So the man is very foolish and has no understanding of fine things. For if you reply by telling him that the fine which he is asking about is nothing other than gold, he will be at a loss and will not try to refute you. For we all know, I suppose, that anything to which this is added, even **289e**

[6] Heraclitus of Ephesus was a philosopher of the sixth century BC. Socrates here quotes fr. 82 Diels–Kranz and, shortly afterwards, fr. 83.

[7] I follow P. Woodruff, *Plato. Hippias Major* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) in using 'be seen to be' here and in the rest of this extract to capture the ambiguity of the Greek verb φαίνεσθαι which can mean either 'to appear F' or 'to be clearly F'.