

How to Praise a Woman: The Rhetoric of Silence in Isocrates' *Encomium of Helen*

One of the most puzzling features of Isocrates' *Helen* is how little the titular figure features in her encomium. She is described in reference to her male relations and admirers—but when it comes to a portrayal of Helen *qua* agent or subjective individual, Isocrates falls deafeningly silent. Even the logographer himself acknowledges the centrifugal force of his peripheral praise piece: αἰσθάνομαι δ' ἑμαυτὸν ἔξω φερόμενον τῶν καιρῶν καὶ δέδοικα μή τισι δόξω περὶ τούτου μᾶλλον σπουδάζειν ἢ περὶ ἧς τὴν ἀρχὴν ὑπεθέμην. (“I see that I am being carried beyond the proper limits of my theme and I fear that some may think that I am more concerned with Theseus than with the subject with which I began,” 10.29-30).

Contemporary scholarship has focused on the unity of the speech and its proemium and its merit as an epideictic showpiece (Kennedy 1958, Heilbrunn 1977, Poulakos 1986, Papillon 1996). I hope to offer a fresh perspective on the speech that marries the ellipsis of Helen with Isocrates' rhetorical aims.

I argue that Isocrates' rhetoric of silence is demonstrative of the proper way to praise a woman in Greek antiquity. To find external evidence of this cultural stance, we need look no further than Isocrates' contemporary, Thucydides. In his funeral oration, Pericles' that a woman shrouded in silence is deserving of the greatest praise:

εἰ δέ με δεῖ καὶ γυναικείας τι ἀρετῆς, ὅσαι νῦν ἐν χηρείᾳ ἔσσονται, μνησθῆναι, βραχεία παραινέσει ἅπαν σημανῶ. τῆς τε γὰρ ὑπαρχούσης φύσεως μὴ χείροσι γενέσθαι ὑμῖν μεγάλη ἢ δόξα καὶ ἧς ἂν ἐπ' ἐλάχιστον ἀρετῆς πέρι ἢ ψόγου ἐν τοῖς ἄρσεσι κλέος ἦ. (2.45.2)

If it is necessary to make mention of female excellence to those of you who are now widowed, I will enumerate it all in a brief exhortation. Your reputation will be great, not falling short of your natural character; and whomever is least mentioned among men in praise or blame has claim to *kleos*.

So too, Isocrates engages in deft *praeteritio* when it comes to Helen, speaking *around* his subject in praising her by proxy. That a rhetoric of silence is at the core of his oratorical pièce de résistance poses an obvious paradox. Negotiating this paradox—praising Helen without talking about her—is an illustration of rhetorical prowess, and precisely constitutes its merit as epideictic showpiece. The reading I posit in this paper thus offers a solution to the ubiquitous point of scholarly contention: the vexed question of intratextual unity.

I first consider the ways in which Isocrates' encomium invites us to view Helen panoptically. Helen is praised in the terms of patriarchy: by her relation and service to her father and brothers. She is likewise praised through the proxy of her suitors, which permits Isocrates to invoke paradigms of masculine (militaristic) virtue—as if no terms for female virtue exist. He writes: δοκεῖ δέ μοι πρέπειν περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ διὰ μακροτέρων εἰπεῖν: ἡγοῦμαι γὰρ ταύτην μεγίστην εἶναι πίστιν τοῖς βουλομένοις Ἑλένην ἐπαινεῖν, ἣν ἐπιδείξωμεν τοὺς ἀγαπήσαντας καὶ θαυμάσαντας ἐκείνην αὐτοὺς τῶν ἄλλων θαυμαστοτέρους ὄντας. (“And it seems to me appropriate to speak of [Theseus] at still greater length; for I think this will be the strongest credibility to those who wish to praise Helen, if we can show that those men who loved and admired her were themselves more deserving of admiration than others,” 10.22). Even Isocrates' philosophical excursus on beauty distances Helen from her own valuation, and represents her as a commodity in a patriarchal economy of brides. She is focalized almost exclusively through the subjective lens of the male gaze, and our own spectatorship is constructed accordingly.

Secondly, I consider how Isocrates' depiction of Helen differs markedly from her portrayal in other sources (Stesichorus, Gorgias, Euripides, and Homer). For instance, in the Homeric tradition, Helen is an active spectator instead of the object of the male erotic gaze (teichoscopy, *Iliad* 3.121-244). She is imbued with an authorial voice as she enumerates the qualities of prominent Greek heroes (Pantelia 2002). Even in the prior encomiastic tradition, Helen is given greater prominence: Gorgias' interior focalization of Helen highlights her experience as a subjective being, smitten by love, and the role of responsibility in her behavior. These sources underscore the gendering of voice that takes place in Isocrates' *Encomium*.

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