Did the Sophists Aim to Persuade?

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Abstract: Ever since Plato, the Sophists have been seen as teaching “the art of persuasion”, particularly the art (or skill) of persuasive speaking in the lawcourts and the assembly on which success in life depended. I argue that this view is mistaken. Although Gorgias describes logos as working to persuade Helen, he does not present persuasion as the goal of his own work, nor does any other Sophist see persuasion as the primary aim of his logoi. Most sophistic discourse was composed in the form of antilogies (pairs of opposed logoi), in which category I include works like Helen where the other side—the poetic tradition Gorgias explicitly cites as his opponent—is implicitly present. The purpose of these works is primarily to display skill in intellectual argument, as well as to give pleasure. Persuasion may be a goal of some sophistic works, but it is not their primary goal; and teaching the art of persuasion was not a major concern of the Sophists.

We all know that for the Greeks rhetoric was the art of persuasion. Indeed, this is so well known that George Kennedy’s standard handbook is entitled not “Rhetoric in Greece”, but The Art of Persuasion in Greece.1 We can trace the idea back to Aristotle’s Rhetoric, where at the beginning of 1.2 we read (in Kennedy’s translation) “Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion”,2 and we can also find it in the earlier analysis of rhetoric in Plato’s Gorgias, where Gorgias identifies his techne—his “craft” or “art”—as hē rhētōrikē technē (“the rhetorical art”) and defines it as follows: “I say it is the power to persuade by speech (peithein tois logois) jurors in the

jury-court, councilors in the council, assemblymen in the assembly, and in every other gathering” (452e). From this Socrates concludes that rhetoric is a “craftsman of persuasion” (*peithous démiourgos*) and that its power is “to produce persuasion in the mind (*psychê*) of the audience” (453a). Thus, for Aristotle and Plato, and even (it appears) for Gorgias, and by extension for the Sophists in general, rhetoric is the art of persuading others, especially large groups of people in the law courts or political forums.

On the other hand, given Plato’s well known hostility to the Sophists and to rhetoric in general, we may legitimately wonder whether he is accurately representing Gorgias’s views. So we must also examine what Gorgias says in his own words. He does not use the word “rhetoric” (*rhêtorikê*)—indeed, no one does before the fourth century (or, to be more precise, the word *rhêtorikê* does not occur in any surviving text before the fourth century and most likely was not coined until then). But Gorgias does include a famous discussion of *logos* (“word, speech, argument”) in his *Encomium to Helen*. Here we find that the power of *logos*, which overwhelmed any personal will Helen may have had, comes directly from its association with persuasion, which is added to *logos* (13). The persuasiveness of *logos* is also linked to magic, which enchants and persuades (10), to falsehood (11), to compulsion (12), to pleasure which is achieved through skill (*techne*), not through truth (13), to belief (13), and finally to drugs (14). In other words, Gorgias portrays *logos* as using an array of tools to persuade others to do its bidding, and the view that rhetoric, or at least *logos*, is the art of persuasion seems to be confirmed even by Gorgias’s own words.

Since this is the only sophistic discussion of *logos* that survives, it is common to infer from it that for the Sophists in general, as for Plato and Aristotle, rhetoric was primarily concerned with persuasion. If further confirmation is needed, it can be found in the widely accepted tradition that rhetoric was invented by Corax and Tisias after the overthrow of the tyranny in Syracuse in 467, when the rise of democratic institutions including the assembly and especially the law courts made it important to be able to speak well—that is, to be able to persuade jurors and assemblymen to accept one’s arguments. To meet this need Corax and Tisias invented the art of rhetoric, wrote the first handbook or *techne* on the subject, and

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had successful careers teaching rhetoric to those seeking justice in court or aspiring to political careers. And following their example the Sophists became rich and famous by teaching others how to speak persuasively. In other words, not only was rhetoric the art of persuasion from its very beginning but it came into existence in response to the need to speak persuasively, and the Sophists, teachers of rhetoric, continued to serve this need.

This account of sophistic rhetoric as the art of persuasion is accepted, as Schiappa has recently noted, by virtually all scholars since Blass, more than a century ago.\(^4\) And even recent scholars like Cole, Poulakos and Swearingen, who approach sophistic rhetoric from new perspectives that downplay its connection to persuasion, have not directly questioned the connection between rhetoric and persuasion.\(^5\) Explicitly or implicitly most scholars agree that for the Sophists, to speak well meant to speak persuasively and to teach rhetoric was to teach the art of persuasion. Scholarly consensus is always comforting, but (as the reader may suspect) my aim in this paper is not to reaffirm the consensus but rather to reconsider the whole issue and ask, did the Sophists really aim to persuade? The answer, I will suggest, is that persuasion was only one goal of sophistic \textit{logoi}, and not the most important. I will begin by considering Gorgias’s \textit{Helen}; I will then set this work in the context of sophistic \textit{Antilogiai}, and will conclude with a brief look at what other Sophists say about persuasion.

\textit{Helen} has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, especially since Charles Segal’s groundbreaking study almost forty years ago.\(^6\) According to Segal, “the \textit{Helen} expresses a view of literature and oratory which touches closely Gorgias’ own practice and probably his own beliefs. Hence the speech may even have


served as a kind of formal profession of the aims and methods of his art” (Segal, p. 102). Segal’s conclusion, that the description of logos in Helen represents Gorgias’s own view of logos, is now widely accepted. But is it correct?

Gorgias states that his overall goal is to praise Helen and defend her against the poetic tradition which blames her for running off with Paris and causing the Trojan War. She is not to blame for this act, he argues, because she was compelled to act by someone or something she could not resist. The first point to note is that this entire line of defense is a novelty. Gorgias was not the first to defend Helen; she has defenders at least as early as the sixth-century lyric poet Stesichorus, whose famous palinode maintained that Helen never even went to Troy but stayed in Egypt throughout the war. But Gorgias sets himself the more difficult task of defending Helen while still accepting the traditional story that she did go to Troy with Paris. Even if the roughly similar position taken by Helen herself in Euripides’s Trojan Women (914–65) is earlier (as seems unlikely), Gorgias’s argument is far more elaborate and innovative than anything in Euripides.

Gorgias begins by asserting that Helen probably did what she did because of one of four possible agents—the gods (or other superhuman forces), physical force, logos, or erōs. He then argues that whichever of these agents was involved, it, not Helen, would be responsible for her actions. Thus, he needs to show that each of these potential agents is so powerful as to be irresistible. Since the first two, the gods and physical force, were traditionally regarded as all-powerful, he spends little time on them and devotes the bulk of the work (8–19) to the other two, logos and erōs. For logos (8–14) this is a particularly difficult challenge, since there was a long-established tradition that logos and persuasion are alternatives to force, but Gorgias argues that logos in fact is a powerful force that can compel people to act. He makes a similar argument with regard to erōs, which ironically was traditionally a tool by which women exerted control over men, not vice versa, as here.

7 The palinode is first reported in Plato’s Phaedrus 243a-b. Variations of this account can be found in Herodotus 2.113–20 and Euripides’s Helen.
8 Trojan Women was produced in 415 B.C. There are no good grounds for dating Gorgias’s work (cf. Buccheim 1989: VII-XI), but since he was born c. 490, it seems likely that he composed Helen before 415, when he would have been around 75.
Much has been written about Gorgias’s fascinating analysis of *logos*, but this is not my concern in this paper. Rather, I want to try to determine whether there is any reason to take this analysis as Gorgias’s own view of *logos*, as it is generally assumed to be. Consider first what Gorgias himself tells us about *logos* in the rest of *Helen* (outside 8–14). He begins by asserting that the *kosmos* or “adornment” of *logos* is truth (1). Whatever the precise meaning of *kosmos*,¹⁰ this claim implies a connection between *logos* and truth such that even if truth is only an external feature of *logos*, a *logos* can and should in Gorgias’s view contain the truth. His second sentence supports the claim that a *logos* should accurately represent reality, though it also problematizes this claim: “it is necessary to honor with praise what is praiseworthy and place blame on what is blameworthy”. The problem, of course, is that although Gorgias writes as if “praiseworthy” were a quality that could be determined separately, he is certainly aware that it is actually a judgment that presupposes the argument that Helen ought to be praised. Thus Gorgias’ second claim is a tautology; but it seems to affirm, nonetheless, his initial postulate that a goal of his *logos* is truth. In Helen’s case, Gorgias continues, someone who speaks correctly (*orthōs*) should refute (*elenxai*) those who blame her (2). And this is precisely Gorgias’s intention, to add some reasoning (*logismon*) to his *logos* in order to demonstrate that those who blame Helen are lying, to reveal the truth, and to put a stop to ignorance. Gorgias thus begins his work with the strong assertion that by using reason he will express the truth about Helen, however problematic that might be, and he identifies truth as the proper goal of *logos* in general.

In the brief narrative that follows (3–4), Gorgias proceeds to relate facts about Helen that his audience would have accepted as true because they are consistent with the traditional account of Helen in Homer and elsewhere. Indeed, he quickly stops his account because these facts are so well known (5). Up to this point, then, his account of what Helen did would have been perceived as true even by those who did not accept his argument for her innocence. By giving a factually true account Gorgias does fulfill his claim that his *logos* will tell the truth, but his claim that he will praise what is praiseworthy remains more problematic and difficult to assess.

Gorgias also indicates another aim for his *logos* in addition to telling the truth when he declines to narrate the well-known facts about Helen because “to tell those who know what they know carries conviction (*pistis*) but brings no pleasure (*terpsis*)” (5). To tell

¹⁰ Buccheim translates *kosmos* by Zier (“adornment”); MacDowell has “grace”.
people what they know is to speak the truth, and this, he implies, is in itself persuasive.¹¹ But despite its persuasiveness, Gorgias aban-
dons this simple factual truth because it brings no pleasure. Thus
another goal of his logos is to bring pleasure, which is something sep-
parate from truth and persuasion. We should note that this complex
structure of relationships—persuasion is linked to truth but sepa-
rate from pleasure—is reversed in the later description of the effect
of logos on Helen, where Gorgias first connects the power of logos
with ignorance rather than truth (11): if everyone in the audience
had knowledge, “logos would not have the same effect” (that is, it
would not be so powerful or so persuasive).¹² Later he links plea-
sure and persuasion and again separates both from truth (13): a logos
“pleases and persuades because it is skillfully written not because
it is truthfully spoken”. These discrepancies between Gorgias’ own
logos and the logos that (as he describes it) persuaded Helen are but
one indication that the analysis of logos in 8–14 may not represent
Gorgias’s own view of logos and its effect.

The four arguments about Helen’s innocence occupy most of the
rest of Helen, but at the end (21) Gorgias reminds his audience of the
dual aims of his logos, truth and pleasure: “I have tried to eliminate
the injustice of blame and the ignorance of opinion. I wanted to write
this logos as an encomium for Helen and for myself an amusement
(paı̈nion)”. Leaving aside questions about the final word paı̈nion,¹³
we may note that the two goals, truth and pleasure, can coexist, for
Gorgias has told the truth about Helen and has also brought pleasure,
certainly to himself and presumably to others as well. In short, the
stated goals of Gorgias’s own logos are truth and pleasure; persuasion
is only posited as a goal of logos in the course of his discussion of the
effect of logos on Helen, where his argument requires him to present
logos as persuasive force.

¹¹Gorgias may have taken this idea from Parmenides, for whom “the one [route]—
that [it] is, and that [it] cannot not be, is the path of Persuasion, for it attends upon truth”
ή μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καθ’ ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν μὴ εἴδωλον, / Πεθοῦχ ἐστιν κέλευσιν: Πληθεῖ,
γὰρ ὄπισθεν), trans. David Gallop, Parmenides of Elea: Fragments (Toronto: University

¹²The text is corrupt here, but most scholars understand it to mean that the
effectiveness (i.e. the persuasive power) of logos depends on a certain degree
of ignorance in the audience.

¹³Some scholars feel that this conclusion turns the entire work into nothing but
“a game” (MacDowell), but most continue to see a serious point to Gorgias’s work,
even if it is also, in some respects, an amusement.
We may, of course, question Gorgias’s claim that truth is a goal of his *logos*. Speakers always claim to speak the truth and rarely say explicitly that their aim is to persuade, let alone that their persuasion will utilize falsehood, deception, and magic. Only a fool would take Gorgias’s truth-telling claim at face value. This objection is quite valid: Gorgias’s assertions certainly do not prove that his goal is truth rather than persuasion. But the discrepancy between his analysis of the effect of *logos* on *Helen* and his claim about the aims of his own *logos* is at least suggestive, and encourages us to look further.

The next step is to consider the work as a whole. If Gorgias’s goal is to persuade, does he succeed? Or if not, can we at least say that he is trying to make his *logos* persuasive? The answer to both questions is no. Not only are audiences not persuaded by Gorgias’s *logos*, but far from trying to persuade, he seems to go out of his way not to make his *logos* persuasive. Of the four causes he proposes for Helen’s conduct, the first two—the gods and human force—are traditional. He could have made a reasonably persuasive case on these two grounds alone: he could ignore *logos* as a possible cause and could incorporate *erōs* into his argument that the gods are responsible; in the same way Jason denies Medea any credit for helping him in the past by arguing that the responsibility was Aphrodite’s alone (Euripides, *Medea* 527–28). Gorgias, however, treats the first two causes only briefly, almost perfunctorily (6–7), and dwells instead on the other two possibilities, *logos* and *erōs*, neither of which would be likely to provide a persuasive justification for Helen’s behavior. The picture he gives of *logos*, moreover, emphasizes its sinister association with deception, drugs and magic, which would make many listeners even less sympathetic to Helen. And *erōs* was traditionally the cause of many atrocious crimes committed by women. Hardly anyone in Gorgias’s largely male audience would be receptive to these arguments, and yet he dwells at length on these and virtually ignores his potentially stronger points. It thus seems that his goal must be something other than persuasion.

To understand Gorgias’s strategy in *Helen* it will help if we put his work in the broader context of sophistic *logoi*. The oldest and most influential Sophist, Protagoras, is associated with two important statements about *logos*: that “there are two *logoi* on every subject opposed to one another”, and that he taught how to “make the

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14 The argument that the gods are to blame can be traced back to Penelope in the *Odyssey*, who says that Helen would not have slept with Paris if she had known the consequences, “but a god induced her to do the shameful deed” (*Od*. 23.222).
weaker logos stronger”. These views led him to compose pairs of speeches presenting different sides of the same issue, a form of composition called Antilogiai (“Opposing Logoi”), or (as I shall term it) “antilogy”. Protagoras was undoubtedly influenced by the tradition of political and legal debate which was embodied in the agôn, or contest between two sides, and most sophisticated logoi reflect this concept of an agôn and the antilogy form. Examples of full antilogies are Antiphon’s Tetralogies—hypothetical court cases with two speeches on each side—and the Dissoi Logoi (“Double Arguments”), where the author marshals arguments for and against several propositions (for example, “good and bad are the same thing” and “good and bad are not the same”). Another example from perhaps the beginning of the fourth century is Antisthenes’s Ajax and Odysseus—opposing speeches from the famous contest over the arms of Achilles.

Less obvious as an antilogy, perhaps, is a logos attributed to the supposed inventors of rhetoric, Corax and Tisias (who were mentioned briefly above), the only logos of theirs that is likely to be authentic. In Aristotle’s version (Rhetoric 2.24.11, 1402a17–28), which he attributes to Corax, after a fight between a weak man and a strong man, the weak man gives a probability argument to the effect that it is not likely that he, a weak man, assaulted a strong man; the other replies with a reverse probability argument, that he is not likely to have assaulted a weak man, since he, a strong man, would immediately be suspected of the crime. In other words, because he was likely to do it, he was therefore unlikely to do it.

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17 Plato attributes a slightly different version of the argument to Tisias, but it is clearly the same logos. I have argued that Aristotle’s version is probably closer to the original; see Michael Gagarin, “Probability and Persuasion: Plato and Early Greek Rhetoric”, in Ian Worthington ed., Persuasion: Greek Rhetoric in Action (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 46–68 (p. 51).
Scholars rarely recognize that Corax’s *logos* is, in fact, an antilogy, a pair of opposed arguments. So too is another *logos* that is attributed to Corax and Tisias by a late source and is probably not authentic but may be derived from a fifth-century sophistic original, since the same story is told about Protagoras and a pupil. The story is that Tisias was Corax’s pupil, but after his lessons ended he refused to pay for his instruction. Corax took him to court, where Tisias argued that if he won the case, then according to the verdict he would not have to pay; but if he lost, he should not be made to pay because it would be clear that Corax’s teaching was worthless. Corax answered with exactly the opposite *logos*: if he won, Tisias should pay according to the verdict, and if Tisias won, then clearly he had learned a valuable lesson and should pay for it. This antilogy has the special twist that the two *logoi* are exactly the same, only reversed.

Strictly speaking, an antilogy consists of a pair of *logoi*, but some sophistic *logoi* that are not composed in pairs may best be understood in the context of this agonistic form of composition as implicit parts of an antilogy. Alcidamas’s *Odysseus*, for instance, which is Odysseus’s prosecution speech at the trial of Palamedes, is clearly intended to be read as a response to Gorgias’s *Palamedes*, a version of Palamedes’s speech from the same trial. Alcidamas’s speech presupposes Gorgias’s and forms an antilogy together with it. Similarly Gorgias’s single speeches, *Helen* and *Palamedes*, are also implicit antilogies. In the former Gorgias explicitly refers to the familiar *logos* of the poets that Helen was to blame, and he poses his own *logos* as a counter to theirs. Similarly the defense of *Palamedes* presupposes and in a sense incorporates the prosecution’s case, which was familiar from the poetic tradition. Each work thus presupposes the opposing *logos* as it exists in the poetic tradition, and each can be seen as an antilogy in which one of the two opposed *logoi* is present only implicitly.

Now, in most cases an antilogy, taken as a whole, does not point to any specific conclusion or give any indication which *logos* wins. When it does, as in Aristophanes’s *Clouds*, the verdict is usually problematic and the audience is left wondering whether the winning argument

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19 Cf. Sextus Empiricus’s version of the story (*Adversus Mathematicos* 2.96–99), where he notes that the pupil “used the same argument, altering nothing.”

20 We may also include in this category Gorgias’s *On Not-Being*, which argues to begin with that nothing exists, since Gorgias quite probably wrote this work as in some sense a response to Parmenides’ famous argument that only Being exists.
really deserved to win. Thus, the purpose of an antilogy cannot normally be to persuade the audience of a specific conclusion. This is one difference between an antilogy and the actual logoi delivered in the courts or the assembly: the latter are almost always intended to persuade their audience, though even here there may be exceptions: the intent of Socrates’s defense speech, for example, at least in Plato’s version, does not seem to be primarily to persuade the jurors. But the authors of antilogies are not trying to persuade their audience of a specific conclusion.

On the other hand, they may perhaps be trying to make each individual logos of an antilogy as persuasive as possible. But often even the individual logoi do not appear intended to persuade. In the case of the strong man and weak man, for example, the author’s main interest is certainly the strong man’s logos: because I was likely to start the fight, therefore I was unlikely to start the fight. This is a novel and ingenious argument, but it hardly seems persuasive or even intended to persuade. To be sure, persuasiveness is a subjective judgment, but it is significant that although this type of reverse-probability argument is also used in Antiphon’s First Tetralogy, which is another antilogy, we never find it in an actual court speech, whereas the ordinary type of probability argument, of which the weak man’s logos is an example, is found throughout forensic oratory. Litigants in court, where persuasiveness was important, would use traditional probability arguments, which were likely to succeed, but they avoided the reverse-probability argument invented by Corax. Much as it may have appealed to the intellectual interests of the Sophists, it was not likely to persuade real jurors.

Two features of antilogies are relevant here. First, they are composed for hypothetical situations, often drawn from traditional myths. Because of this the author has no stake in any decision or verdict in favor of one of the two logoi. There may be much at stake, however, in terms of reputation or career, depending on how the audience assesses the antilogy as a whole, but this assessment cannot depend primarily on the criterion of persuasiveness. Second, most sophistic antilogies are like Corax’s in that one of their logoi presents an obvious or traditionally authorized position, whereas the other is novel and often appears implausible—Protagoras’s “stronger” and “weaker” logoi. For Corax, the weak man’s argument that being weak

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21 A speaker may argue, as in Lysias 7.12–19, that he did not commit the crime because he could not have hoped to do so and get away with it, but this is not the same as arguing that he did not commit the crime precisely because he was likely to do so.
he would not have attacked the strong man first is traditional and unremarkable; it surely required little effort or ingenuity to compose. But the opposing *logos* is quite untraditional and even implausible. This presents a challenge to the author: how can one make an argument that the strong man was not the aggressor? Corax’s solution was the clever reverse-probability argument: the fact that I was likely to do it in itself made me unlikely to do it. This novel argument is especially ingenious in turning the weak man’s probability argument right back at him, and, not surprisingly, it made Corax famous.

Clearly a Sophist’s reputation depended not on his success in presenting a traditional argument, but on his skill at finding a novel and clever way to argue an untraditional view that might at first seem implausible or even absurd. It would have been easy for Gorgias to present the traditional argument that Helen was to blame for the Trojan War and only slightly more difficult to argue, as others had, that she was not to blame because she never went to Troy. The position he argues, however, that she was not to blame despite the fact that she went to Troy, is not only novel, but would have struck most of his audience as implausible. And the arguments about *logos* and *erôs* that he chooses to rely on make the case even more novel and less plausible. If Gorgias were really trying to persuade his audience of Helen’s innocence, he could have chosen a different strategy with a much greater chance of success. But if his purpose was rather to enhance his reputation and demonstrate his intellectual virtuosity, then he may have felt that the more implausible the case appears initially, the more chance he has to show his skill in arguing for it, as well as to develop novel perspectives on the issues involved, such as causation and responsibility.

To take other examples, the author of the *Dissoi Logoi* (written c. 400 B.C.) cannot really be trying to persuade his audience that good and bad are the same thing, for his case is in one sense obvious but in another patently fallacious: he argues, for instance, that in an athletic contest victory is good for the winner and bad for the loser, or that war is bad for those who die in it but good for the undertaker. He cannot expect his audience simply to accept the conclusion that good and bad are the same. What his purpose is, is disputed: perhaps he is trying to demonstrate his ingenuity in devising some argument for this position, however implausible; perhaps he is trying to clarify

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ways of thinking or speaking about such paradoxes. But in any case, he is not primarily trying to persuade. Similarly, even scholars who think Gorgias’s *On Not-Being* is a serious work do not think he is really trying to persuade his audience that nothing exists. Gorgias may have a serious purpose, just as Zeno certainly does in his famous paradoxes. But Gorgias did not persuade anyone that in fact nothing exists, nor did any of Zeno’s colleagues believe that a real Achilles would never be able to catch up to a real tortoise. Still, these arguments have intrigued and enlightened thinkers down to our own day.

The same is true of *Helen*. Gorgias could have concentrated on the traditional arguments about force and the gods, which could relatively easily be made persuasive, and then omitted the arguments on *logos* and *éroś*. But whereas the first two arguments are of little or no interest, the last two still interest scholars today and surely interested Gorgias’s contemporaries, for it is in these that Gorgias forces people to think about speech and emotion in new ways. It does not matter whether anyone is persuaded of Helen’s innocence; the important thing is that Gorgias’s arguments open up new ways in which to think about language, emotion, causation, and responsibility. His case may be shocking, even perverse; it may be completely unconvincing; but his *logos* remains one of the most interesting and intellectually stimulating works of the sophistic period.

Much the same is true of Gorgias’s style. In a well-known passage Diodorus Siculus reports that in 427 Gorgias “amazed the Athenians by the strangeness of his style”.23 Whether the *logos* in question was *Helen* or some other work, amazement is an understandable reaction to Gorgias’s style, and I imagine he probably expected and perhaps even hoped for this reaction. Modern critics generally condemn the style,24 and some of Gorgias’s more traditionally-minded contemporaries may have felt the same way. But Gorgias was a popular and successful public speaker, and even if his audiences did not enjoy his style, many of them must have appreciated its virtuosity. And as with the content of his works, Gorgias’s style was probably not intended to make his argument more persuasive but rather to demonstrate

23Diodorus Siculus 12.53.3: τῷ ξενίκαὶ τὰς λέξεως εξεδιήττε τούς Ἀθηναίους; see Buccheim, cit. in n. 6 above, p. 110.
24See, for example, J. D. Denniston, *Greek Prose Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952) p. 12: “Starting with the initial advantage of having nothing in particular to say, he was able to concentrate all his energies upon saying it.” Denniston wonders how Gorgias “was able to get away with it”.

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the Sophist’s skill in creating a novel, outrageous, and even perverse style, but one that continues to attract attention today.

Even when a sophistic *logos* presents the more plausible or “stronger” argument, we may question whether the goal is really persuasion. The case presented in Gorgias’s *Palamedes*, for example, should probably be taken as the stronger *logos*, because it was traditionally the just case (though it could be the weaker *logos* because it lost), but even here, where the aim is not to shock his listeners, Gorgias may have other goals in mind. The speech presents a sample of common arguments, including a proem (1–5) on the importance of his reputation, his opponent’s wickedness, and his uncertainty how to proceed; then (6–12) a point-by-point demonstration of the improbability of the accuser’s scenario of betrayal; next (13–21) a catalogue of his possible motives with probability arguments refuting each possibility; then (22–27) a list of specific weaknesses in the prosecution’s case; then (28–32) a description of his own accomplishments and character; and finally an epilogue (33–37) with generalizations about justice and injustice. Of course, persuasion is in a sense a goal of the speech: the mythical character Palamedes is presumed to be trying to persuade the hypothetical jurors hearing the case. But the primary aim of Gorgias’s *logos* is not necessarily to persuade his own audience that Palamedes is innocent (which everyone already knew), but rather to display for them every possible argument for the defense in one speech. A real forensic speech would concentrate on those few arguments that were most persuasive, but *Palamedes*, despite its forensic setting, is in essence an epideictic speech. Its primary aim is not to persuade but to demonstrate Gorgias’s skill to the audience, who are not jurors in court at Palamedes’ trial but intellectuals, students and others.

Quite similar in this regard is the speech of Lysias in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, in which the non-lover tries to persuade a boy to yield to him. Within its hypothetical context of seduction, the assumed goal of the speech is to persuade the beloved to yield to the non-lover; Lysias’s (or Plato’s) true goal, however, is to impress his own audience of intellectuals with his skill in defending a most implausible case. To be sure, the success of this sort of speech may depend in part on the degree of persuasiveness the author imparts to it, but this does

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25Up through the fifth century the tradition was unanimous in agreeing that Palamedes was unjustly accused of treason by Odysseus and convicted; see further Timothy Ganz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) pp. 603–8.
not mean that his goal is to persuade his audience, whom he is not trying to seduce (at least not in any literal sense). Nor should we assume that such a display is aimed at teaching someone else how to persuade a beloved in a real situation; for this purpose it would be far better to demonstrate more ordinary arguments that would be more relevant to real situations (the real non-lover, after all, will not be trying to seduce the boy he does not love). The aim of this and other similar speeches is intellectual, not practical, and persuasiveness is not a major concern of the author.

One may argue, of course, that even epideictic oratory is intended to be persuasive in the sense that the author wants to persuade the audience of his ability to give a good epideictic speech. Indeed one can say that every speaker tries to persuade his audience of something—a comedian, for instance, could be said to be trying to persuade his audience that he is amusing. But stretching the meaning of “persuasion” in this way to include all discourse would render meaningless the conclusion that the aim of sophistic rhetoric is persuasion. It is worth keeping the distinction between aiming to shock or give pleasure or tell the truth, and aiming to persuade, and it is thus legitimate to conclude that the first set of goals—shock, pleasure and truth (or enlightenment)—were more important for most sophistic logoi than persuasion.

Finally, we may approach the question of the persuasiveness of sophistic rhetoric by examining other references to persuasion in sophistic writings. Outside Helen, where persuasion is always used with reference to the logos that persuades Helen (6, 8–14, 15 and 20), Gorgias only mentions persuasion twice, and both times Palamedes stresses its ineffectiveness. First he asks how he could have hoped to rule the Greeks after betraying them: “By persuasion? By force? They certainly would not willingly be persuaded, nor do I have the power to force them” (14). Here persuasion, which is assumed to be an alternative to force, is seen as ineffective. Later Palamedes tells the jurors that since they are “the foremost of the Greeks in fact and in reputation, I should not persuade you with the aid of friends or entreaties or pity” (33). Again persuasion is scorned as ineffective.

This depreciation of persuasion is common in other Sophists too. A computer search of sophistic fragments using the TLG database of Greek texts turns up many occurrences of πείθω and related words, but most of these are from later writers who cite the Sophists

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and, like Plato, see persuasion as a primary goal of their work. In the Sophists’ own writings, however, persuasion is only common in Antiphon’s Tetralogies, where it occurs nine times. In these works persuasion is occasionally a positive force but more often is depreciated, as it normally is elsewhere. In Antiphon’s Truth (44B cols. 6–7) justice is criticized for not serving the needs of a victim, who must rely on persuasion rather than direct knowledge of the facts to prove his innocence. In Critias’s Rhadamanthys (5–6) a man is criticized for being “pleased to speak unhealthy thoughts and persuade his neighbors with his evil daring”, and in the last two verses of the famous fragment from Sysiphus the speaker concludes, “thus someone first persuaded mortals to believe there was a race of gods” —clearly a false persuasion in the speaker’s view. A similar linking of persuasion to the working of evil is found in Antisthenes’s Ajax (6) and Alcidamas’s Odysseus (20). The only approving mention of persuasion is by Antisthenes’ Odysseus, who is traditionally the scoundrel in the contest with Ajax; the fact that he criticizes Ajax for refusing to be persuaded that he, Odysseus, is right only confirms that the Sophists generally convey a low opinion of persuasion.

These examples reveal that in the surviving fragments the Sophists generally express their disapproval of persuasion as either ineffective or working evil. The fact that Gorgias in Helen exploits this view of persuasion and even enlarges its corrupting influence in order to absolve Helen of blame only confirms the conclusion that the Sophists fully understood and openly acknowledged the harmful power of persuasion. This does not mean, of course, that they never tried to be persuasive themselves. My argument is not that persuasion was never a goal of a sophistic logos, but that in most cases persuasion is in the background and is less important than several other objectives, such as the serious exploration of issues and forms of argument, the display of ingenuity in thought, argument and style of expression, and the desire to dazzle, shock and please.

This conclusion is based, to be sure, on those works of the Sophists that survive; we must not forget that the vast majority of their writings have been lost. But it would be perverse to insist that the surviving works are not representative of the Sophists’ thinking and teaching, just as it is perverse, in my view, to see the Sophists’ main goal as teaching others how to argue persuasively in forensic or deliberative situations. Works like Helen excited Gorgias’s con-

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27I exclude the court speeches of Antiphon. The Tetralogies and all the other sophistic works referred to are translated in Gagarin-Woodruff, cit. in n. 15 above.
temporaries not because these works taught others how to speak better in court (surely few if any litigants sought to imitate Gorgias’ arguments or his style) but because they opened up new and exciting perspectives on the major intellectual issues of the day. In his satire of sophistic teaching Aristophanes may show Strepsiades enrolling in Socrates’s school in order to be taught how to win a lawsuit (*Clouds* 112–18), but the content of Socrates’s teaching (as Aristophanes portrays it) has nothing to do with practical training in public speaking; rather it consists almost entirely of useless knowledge, such as how to measure the distance a flea jumps. And when Strepsiades in the end does use his newly acquired knowledge to ward off his creditors (*Clouds* 1214–1302), he uses various absurd and irrelevant arguments that no one would attempt in actual litigation.\(^28\) I would not go so far as to insist that no Sophist ever taught anything useful for forensic or deliberative argument; indeed, the “useless” intellectual skills and arguments they taught probably did in a general way help others become more effective speakers. But the Sophists’ primary goal was not to teach persuasive speaking.

In sum, the characterization of rhetoric as simply “the art of persuasion” and the heavy focus among scholars of classical rhetoric on techniques of persuasion has distorted our understanding of the sophistic contribution to what we call rhetoric. The Sophists have a fluid, multi-faceted understanding of *logos*, in which persuasion was but one feature, and not necessarily the most important. They often have no intention of persuading, as when Gorgias argues that nothing is, or that Helen is innocent because she was persuaded, or when the strong man argues that he is unlikely to have started the fight simply because he was likely to do so. In these and other sophistic *logoi*, displaying ingenuity and contributing new and interesting ideas are more important than persuasion—for the speaker and for his audience. Just as in much ethical discussion today, the context of sophistic discourse was normally not a real situation but a mythological or hypothetical case, in which persuasion is part of the background but not the main concern. For the most part the Sophists treated persuasion as ineffective or harmful, and they distanced themselves and their *logoi* from it. Plato was happy to bring up this negative aspect of *logos* in his own attack on sophistic culture, first isolating persuasion as the sole purpose of rhetoric and then further limiting rhetoric to the false and deceptive persuasion of the masses. His characterization of rhetoric as “the art of persuasion” carried the day, but the remains

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\(^{28}\) On Aristophanes’s *Clouds* see Schiappa, *Beginnings*, cit. in n. 4 above, pp. 70–72.
of actual sophistic *logoi* reveal that before Plato the art of *logoi* was both less and much more than this. For the Sophists, *logos* was more a tool for thinking than for persuading.\(^{29}\)

\(^{29}\)Brief versions of this paper were presented at the ISHR meeting in Amsterdam in July 1999 and at the annual meeting of CAMWS in Knoxville in April 2000. Fuller versions were presented at Northwestern University (January 2000), the University of Aarhus (March 2000), and the University of Texas (September 2000). I am grateful to the audiences on all these occasions, as well as to the readers of *Rhetorica*, for helpful suggestions and advice.