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## The Psychopolitics of Sexual Scandal: Can Gorgias of Leontini Help?

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Abstract: The author discusses the political implications of sexual scandal, considering the advice of Georgias of Leontini in his "Encomium of Helen" that was written sometime after 427 B.C.E.

Behavioral manifestations of gender identity and sexual orientation often enough have had political implications. Depending on social and cultural context, political leaders and those who aspire to leadership have had to confront public scrutiny for being too much the man or woman or not enough, for engaging in too many or too few sexual practices that may or may not adhere to socially acceptable standards, or for having had too many or too few sexual partners of the right or wrong kind.

In fact, political implications of sexual scandal seem to overshadow moral, ethical, or legal implications in attempts at scandal management. Regardless of the rightness or wrongness of actual or alleged acts, sexual scandal can be perceived as a crisis to be managed with political victory or defeat as consequences.

Private and public discourse on scandal management most often revolve around questions such as whether or not to admit perpetration of the actual or alleged acts, how to best modulate act explication to arrive at admitting something but not the thing or the thing that becomes something else, and how much responsibility to take if one admits to perpetrating the actual or alleged acts. This last question is most often addressed if not admitting acts is not possible because of the quantity and quality of data supporting the hypothesis that the act was indeed perpetrated by the alleged perpetrator. Answers to the last question then focus on parsing the political tradeoffs of showing leadership through taking responsibility versus showing leadership through rejecting responsibility by ascribing it to others or yet something else for an act that a leader could not commit. For help with the latter, one might turn to Georgias of Leontini—the font of sophistry before sophistry was tarred with the brush of sophistry—and his "Encomium of Helen" that was written sometime after 427 B.C.E.

In the "Encomium," Georgias attempts to defend Helen of Troy—both famous and infamous—from the malignant ascriptions of mythological, historical, and literary authorities. As many of the stories go, the Trojan prince Paris became sexually involved with Helen, wife of the Greek prince Menelaus, and then fled Greece with her to Troy—thus, precipitating the Trojan War. At Issue is the degree of responsibility of Helen, and Gorgias offers several explanations that could serve to absolve Helen of responsibility.

Explanation #1. Helen was so physically beautiful that she effortlessly and without intention elicited sexual arousal in men. Her beauty impelled men to seduce and flee with her regardless of her own intention and volition. If not Paris, it would have been someone else. Because Helen in no way was responsible for her beauty or for its effects on men, she can in no way be responsible for her seduction, absconding to Troy, and the war.

Explanation #2. What happened happened through Fate, as decreed by the Gods, or through some cosmic predetermination or predestination. No mortal could have ever understood, let alone resisted, such forces. Superhuman forces and power alone were responsible, and (going somewhat farther than

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Gorgias) these might not even be subjected to human criteria for good and bad, right and wrong, and legal, ethical, and moral determination.

Explanation #3. Helen was raped or otherwise subject to irresistible physical coercion from Paris. In fact, she was a victim of a horrible crime. Helen (again going beyond Gorgias) has been blamed along with or instead of the victimizer much as many rape victims are to this day. If anything, Helen deserves our nurturing, care, and compassion for being physically, mentally, and spiritually violated.

Explanation #4. Helen was seduced, mesmerized (going beyond Gorgias even if Mesmer comes much later in human intellectual history), or otherwise bamboozled. She had her own volition and willfulness stolen or deactivated. Or, perhaps, volition and willfulness were activated but still controlled by another—e.g., Paris. The responsibility for these phenomena would, then, rest with the language of Paris—especially his rhetoric. At this point in the “Encomium,” Gorgias launches into a very detailed description of the fantastic powers harbored by and through rhetoric and, presumably, its proud masters such as Paris. These fantastic powers could, in no way, have been resisted by Helen or any other human that was prey to masterly rhetoric.

Explanation #5. Helen was in love. There was (again, going beyond Gorgias) neither malignant narcissism nor intention for evil. In fact, we are all subject to the inexplicable powers of love and, thus, are all equally likely to have been thrust into such an uncontrollable situation and to have acted similarly. In fact, because love is such a human experience, its experience renders us even more human and, thus more admirable and beyond responsibility—as with Helen.

Analysis. The biggest problem with the advice of Gorgias resides in the focus on being subject to forces beyond one’s control. Even if there are such forces beyond human management, contemporary political symbology and expectation often incorporate the expectation that political leaders should be superhuman and be able to control anything. Thus, nothing should be beyond the human management of the leader. This is especially the case when things go badly and is even so when political candidates and leaders insist on a political iconography concentrated on rising from and still being of the salt of the earth.

Given today’s sex scandals involving adultery, homosexuality, and pederasty, it may be that Gorgias would be most valuable in an adversarial medium of some rule-based, criminal justice system, not in the expectation-based, political world of power. (See DeMause, L. (1987). American Purity Crusades. *Journal of Psychohistory*. 1987 Spr Vol 14, 345-349; MacDowell, D. (1993). Gorgias: “Encomium of Helen.” Bristol Classical Press; Owen, D. (2000). Popular politics and the Clinton/Lewinsky affair: The implications for leadership. *Political Psychology*, 21, 161-177; Pikayev, A. (March 22, 1999). START II As a Victim of Sexual Scandal in Moscow. <http://www.armscontrol.ru/start/publications/ap0319.htm>; Shepard, B. (2003). In search of a winning script: Moral panic vs institutional denial. *Sexualities*, 6, 54-59; Violanti, M.T. (1996). Hooked on expectations: An analysis of influence and relationships in the Tailhook reports. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 67-82.) (Keywords: Gorgias, Scandal, Sex)