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A MASS MEDIUM AND ITS AMBIGUOUS MESSAGE: ISOCRATES'S LITERATE RHETORIC

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Abstract

*No less revolutionary than the contemporary transition into a digital age, the discipline of ancient rhetoric emerged at a time when classical Greek society was transitioning from mere orality to literacy. This paper examines how ancient texts on the art of rhetoric of the fourth century BC negotiate the interplay and tension between oral and written media, and particularly argues that Isocrates uniquely redefines the constraints of written discourse. Unlike his contemporaries Plato (in *Phaedrus*), Alcidamas (in *On those who write written speeches*) and Aristotle (in *Rhetoric* 3.12), who stress a text's fixed form, untimeliness (loss of *kairos*), and separation from its creator and hence the need for a precise style (*akribeia*), Isocrates sees the potential of the written text as a mass medium that shifts the burden of precision of the reader. This paper argues – echoing McLuhan's (1964) axiom “the medium is the message” and building on Jeroen Bons's insights on Isocrates's written composition (1993) – that the written medium creates the opportunity for novel rhetorical techniques, such as Isocrates's introduction of the *amphibolos logos* ('ambiguous argumentation'). Since new media increase audience reach, strategies to address heterogeneous audiences emerge.*

Keywords: *amphibolia, ancient rhetoric, literacy, media ecology, Isocrates, written style*



1. Introduction: technological revolution in antiquity

No less revolutionary than the contemporary transition into a digital age were the invention of writing and the transition from mere orality to literacy in ancient societies, particularly in Greece, with its extensive literary output. When new media arose in our previous century, the earliest introduction of a new medium – the advent of literacy in oral societies – became a major scholarly topic (for a bibliography on this, Werner 2011). Scholars like the classicist Eric Havelock (1963; 1982; 1986) and cultural historian Walter Ong (1982), a student of the media pioneer Marshall McLuhan, argued that the transition from orality to literacy fundamentally altered humans' way of thinking. According to Havelock (1982, 7–8), the introduction of the (easy, phonetic and vowelized) alphabetic script in Greece in the eighth century BC brought about “a new state of mind” for “the alphabet converted the Greek spoken tongue into an artifact, thereby separating it from the speaker and making it into a ‘language’, that is, an object available for inspection, reflection, analysis”.¹ Havelock argued that, different from oral transmission, which was characterized by performance, cultural memory, and a mythic worldview, the written word enabled the literate mind to develop abstract, rational thinking, causing a “literate revolution” by the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

Not all scholars (classicists in particular) have agreed with Havelock's strong claims. His work has since been criticized for being deterministic, overdrawn, and overestimating literacy and reading skills in ancient society (e.g., Burns 1981; Harris 1989; Thomas 1992; Halverson 1992). Next to what Brian Stock (1990, 5–6) has called the “strong thesis” that argues for major mentality changes with the advent of literacy, the “weak thesis” instead accounts for a less rapid but gradual change in both the transition to literacy and the cognitive changes. As the classicist Rosalind Thomas has argued (1992), oral and written practices were not incompatible but were often connected and interdependent in ancient Greek society. Writing was normally used to record oral practices (Thomas 1992, 74–100), and written works were commonly read aloud (for examples and counter-examples of reading aloud, Knox 1968; Johnson 2000). Many literary texts of the fifth and fourth centuries BC represent oral practices (Haskins 2001), such as the Socratic dialogues, the sophists' showpieces, and perhaps even Aristotle's works that served as teaching notes. Although writing and reading became more common, especially for the elite, the oral was still dominant (Harris 1989, 65–92).

The interplay between both media is especially foregrounded in the developing field of rhetoric: in its early days, the art of speaking was inextricably bound to the upcoming art of writing (Worthington 1995; Gagarin 1999; Thomas 2003; Enos 2012). For instance, the earliest rhetoricians, the so-called sophists, were known both for their public performances and oral teachings *and* their special relationship with the written word and the books they published (Jarratt 1991; O'Sullivan 1996). As some have argued, rhetoric took its technical form not only when writing became common, but also because it did, since putting communication into a visible form catalyzed theorizing about language (e.g., Connors 1986; Cole 1991; Thomas and Webb 1994; Enos 2006; 2020). However, the rise of the written word also raised new questions for these specialists in the spoken word (Harris 1989, 90–92).

This paper examines how ancient texts on the art of rhetoric of the fourth century BC negotiate the interplay and tension between the oral and written medium, and particularly argues that Isocrates redefines what others saw as the constraints of written discourse. Unlike his contemporaries

¹ Recent studies, e.g., Waal (2023), show that the alphabet was in use earlier than previously assumed and that the so-called Dark Ages (twelfth to eighth century BC) were not as illiterate as traditionally believed.



Plato, Alcidamas, and Aristotle, who stress a text's fixed form, untimeliness, and separation from its creator and hence the need for a precise style (*akribeia*), Isocrates sees the potential of the written text as a mass medium that shifts the burden of precision to the reader. This paper argues – echoing McLuhan's (1964) axiom “the medium is the message” and building on Jeroen Bons's insights on Isocrates's written composition (1993) – that the written medium creates the opportunity for novel rhetorical techniques, such as Isocrates's introduction of the *amphibolos logos* (‘ambiguous argumentation’, *Panathenaicus* 240). Before turning to Isocrates in the last section, the first two sections first illustrate the use of written texts in rhetorical practice, by means of Plato's *Phaedrus*, and subsequently the critiques on writing by the sophist Alcidamas and Plato, and Aristotle's description of the differences between written and spoken styles in *Rhetoric* 3.12. The (r)evolution of the written word in rhetoric did change minds, though not all in the same way.

2. Oral practices in written texts, written texts as an oral practice

The opening of Plato's *Phaedrus* (written around 380/360 BC)² tells us about the oral and written practice of early rhetoric (Reames and Sloey 2001, 6–9; Thomas 2003, 171). At the beginning of the dialogue, Phaedrus eagerly tells Socrates about a speech on love by Lysias he just heard and discussed with others (227a–228e). Socrates asks Phaedrus to repeat Lysias's speech verbatim for him, but Phaedrus protests that his memory is not good enough to “recall what Lysias, the most accomplished of today's writers, has put together at leisure over a long period of time” (228a).³ Socrates then teasingly remarks that he thinks Phaedrus had asked Lysias to repeat his speech several times, and “ended up borrowing the book (βιβλίον) and scrutinizing” it so that he knew it by heart to impress others (228a–c). Phaedrus pretends to protest again that he does not remember the exact words and that he can only tell the gist of it (228d). Socrates sees right through him: Lysias has hidden the actual speech of Lysias (τὸν λόγον αὐτόν) under his cloak (the physical book is referred to again in 243c). Socrates asks Phaedrus not to practice the memorized speech on him but instead to read (ἀναγνῶμεν) Lysias' original piece together (228e). And thus Phaedrus reads the speech aloud (231a–234c), which prompts the rest of the dialogue.

In this playful opening paragraph, we see how oral and written practices functioned together in the education of the intellectual elite. The speechwriter Lysias is said to have carefully composed an *epideixis* in text that he delivered orally, even several times, to a group of listeners who then used the lecture as discussion material. There are thus several written versions of Lysias' speech with different functions: the text is used as a vehicle to memorize by the speaker, to record by the listener (Phaedrus possesses a copy of the speech), to discuss (after rereading) by students, and probably also to revise, publish and distribute the work to a wider audience (Worthington 1995, 171–173; Gagarin 1999; Thomas 2003, 170–173). At that time, the written “texts [were] servants to the performance” (Thomas 2003, 171): rhetorical pieces were put into text merely to support or supplement an oral performance (Gagarin 1999, 165). As we learn from Aristotle, reading and memorizing speeches was a common didactical principle of the early sophists, who “gave their pupils to learn by heart speeches which were either rhetorical or eristic” (*On Sophistical*

² The exact dating of ancient texts is always difficult, and so is it for Plato's *Phaedrus* (see e.g., Usacheva 2010 for the discussion on the dating of this text). As this paragraph shows, there were several versions of a (published or unpublished) text that were discussed before, during and after the final publication of a text.

³ All translations of *Phaedrus* by Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2022.



Refutations 183b, quoted in Kennedy 1963, 52). Teachers themselves also often performed their written pieces before large audiences to showcase their rhetorical expertise and attract new students (Alcidamas, *On Sophists* 31).

Besides their speaking skills and public performances (which, according to Thomas 2003, 186, were still dominant over their literary output), the sophists were known, already in antiquity, for their books and their interest in prose language (O'Sullivan 1996, 121; Thomas 2003, 168–170). That the early rhetoricians wrote many books is, for example, showcased when Phaedrus and Socrates list “the stuff that's written in the handbooks about the art of speaking” (266d, cf. 271c; see also Thomas 2003, 167). The sophists were so closely associated with writing and publishing that Phaedrus thinks people “are ashamed both of writing speeches and leaving their own writings behind, fearing for their reputation in time to come: that they'll be called sophists” (257d). By the end of the fifth century BC, rhetorical manuals, published speeches, and the profession of the *logographos* had appeared and became popular (Kennedy 1963, 127–129). The rise of the new medium also brought new problems. Whereas reading aloud or memorizing a written text was a common didactical rhetorical practice, it was not the convenient mode of expression for orators: the written texts or notes had to be learned by heart and recited persuasively, since speaking extempore (or at least the appearance) was still highly valued (Thomas 1992, 92).

3. Rhetoric and the literate (d)evolution: speaking versus writing

Opposing the increasing dominance of the written word in rhetorical practice, the sophist Alcidamas, student of the famous sophist and skilled speaker Gorgias, wrote his pamphlet *On those who write written speeches* (also known as *On sophists*; c.390 BC; for analyses of this text, O'Sullivan 1992; Muir 2001).⁴ In this work, Alcidamas criticizes his colleagues who “are proud and boastful about their practice of writing speeches and displaying their own intelligence through their books”, but who “are just as inexperienced in the practice of speaking as ordinary men” (1). Alcidamas paints a teasing picture of his rivals' methods: they take all the time to write and rewrite, to consult the works of others, and “to imitate passages that happen to be expressed well” (4) – Alcidamas must have been shocked by the current rise of LLMs. On the other hand, to speak “appropriately, on the spot, [...] to find just the right speech to match the current situation (τῷ καιρῷ) and people's desires” (3), is way more difficult and requires more talent and training, according to Alcidamas. This conviction leads him to make a paradoxical statement (especially when you take into account that not everybody was literate, see Harris 1989, 93–115): “since writing is easier for us than speaking, it is reasonable to conclude that the ability to write is of less value” (5). To support this claim, Alcidamas argues that skillful speakers are easily able to write well, whereas a skilled writer will panic over the lack of time to perform a spontaneous speech (6–8).

In the rest of his pamphlet, Alcidamas repeats the benefits of kairotic extempore speaking over the slow process of writing. He mocks the persons who, when they are given the floor, first grasp for their writing tablet to compose a speech and are hence tongue-tied (9–11). He complains about the difficulty of memorizing complete speeches, while remembering only the essential arguments of a speech is much easier (18–21; cf. Kennedy 1963, 53, remarks that orators commonly learned commonplaces by heart but composed the rest of the speech extempore). He further explains that extempore speakers can adapt more easily to live situations and the arguments of their opponents, while those who have carefully composed a speech have difficulty deviating from their prepared

⁴ All translations of Alcidamas by Gagarin and Woodruff 1995.



text (24–28). Alcidas compares written texts to “bronze statues or stone sculptures or pictures”, which might be pleasant to look at but are otherwise useless. Similarly, written speeches “may have some striking effects when viewed in a book” but are useless in a specific situation because of their fixed form, whereas spoken words are “animated and alive” (ἐμψυχός ἐστι καὶ ζῆ, 28), and can adapt to the real-life situation (cf. *Phaedrus* 275e, see *infra*). It does not escape Alcidas that there resides some irony in the fact that he shares his critique of writing via the written medium (29). He does not dismiss writing altogether (30) but thinks it should be done only ancillary to speaking (2). Alcidas sees, however, some advantages in writing: in this way, he can reach more people than by speaking alone (31), and with a written text he can “leave behind a memorial of myself” (32).

Alcidas also discusses stylistic differences between spoken and written speeches. The latter is characterized by its “verbal precision” (ἀκριβεία 13, 14, 16, 25, 33, 34; on the concept of *akribeia*, Kurz 1970; Harris and Taub 2023), but because of its precision, it also loses “spontaneity and verisimilitude” and causes “distrust and resentment” in the listeners’ minds (12). For this reason, Alcidas argues, professional speechwriters “imitate the style of extemporaneous speakers” (13). Some decades later, Aristotle makes a similar distinction in *Rhetoric* 3.12 (for a detailed analysis, Graff 2001; Innes 2007), where he describes differences between written and adversarial styles (λέξις [...] γραφικὴ καὶ ἀγωνιστικὴ, 1413b4): “the style of written compositions is most precise (ἀκριβεστάτη), that of debate requires the most in delivery (ὑποκριτικωτάτη)” (1413b7–8).⁵ The first is suited for the epideictic genre (“for its function is reading” 1414a16), while the latter is used mostly in deliberative and judicial settings. Whenever a written speech is read aloud in a public debate, it is seen as “meager”, while reading a recorded speech appears “amateurish” because the performance is absent (1413b14–15). Aristotle remarks that the style of a delivered speech is “least precise” (ἥκιστα ἀκριβεία, 1414a14), and compares this adversarial style with “shadow painting” (σκιαγραφία), since “the greater the crowd, the further off is the point of view; thus in both too much detail (ἀκριβῆ) is superfluous and gives a worse impression” (1414a7–9). As Aristotle noted, the written style is intended for “others” (1413b7), not the immediate audience present at a performance (Innes 2007, 154–155). As the gap between author and listener/reader becomes bigger, more accuracy is required in the communication process.

Alcidas’s pamphlet echoes the ending of *Phaedrus*, which is famous for what is often called Plato’s critique of writing (e.g., by Derrida’s 1981 interpretation of *pharmakon*; see also Hyland 1968, 38–44). After three speeches on love – one by Lysias, and two by Socrates – the dialogue turns to the topic of speech-writing. According to Socrates, speech-writing itself is not disgraceful, but it can be practiced either well or badly (258d), just as rhetoric, which Socrates (261a; cf. 271c) defines as “the art of leading the soul by means of words” to knowledge. Elaborating on the art of writing, Socrates tells the myth of the Egyptian god Theuth, who invented the script (γράμματα, 274d). Promoting his invention to the king of gods, Thamus, Theuth argues it “will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory” (274e). The king, however, answers that he suspects the art of writing will lead to the opposite result of forgetfulness, for its users do not have to memorize everything anymore (275a). Moreover, while reading, students only get a “semblance of wisdom” rather than the “real thing”, yet think they are knowledgeable (275b). Socrates endorses this myth and thinks writing is nothing “more than a reminder for him who knows what the written words are about” (275c). He then compares the written word with a painting (ζωγραφία, with the same root as γράφω ‘writing’), since both seem lively but do not answer when you ask a question (275e).

⁵ Translation Freese and Striker 2020.



A text “always needs the help of its father” (275e) to clarify when it is (deliberately) misunderstood by the reader.

Although this passage is often understood as a mere critique of writing, Socrates’s argument regarding the written word in *Phaedrus* is more subtle. According to Socrates, it is wrong to think that written texts produce “something clear (σαφές) and constant (βέβαιον)” (275c; cf. 277d), adjectives that were seen as characteristics of written style (O’Sullivan 1992, 46; cf. 234e) and which are a paradoxical Platonic (word)play since only true knowledge is clear and stable. The mute written discourse is juxtaposed by the “living and animate speech” (276b), which “is written with knowledge in the soul [and is] capable of defending itself” (276a). Written texts are hence an imitative image or reflection of this dialectic type of discourse (276e). While the written word may thus not be the “real thing”, it is not completely written off by Socrates (Street 2022, 404). Just as the case was with rhetoric, there are good and bad types of writing. To show this, Socrates compares writing to sowing: you can grow plants in a very short time for decoration, but these will also die quickly, or you let plants grow slowly and sustainably so that they reproduce themselves (276b). In a similar way, writing without knowledge is like “writing in black water” (276c) where the words will fade away, while the knowledgeable writer, who seemingly writes “gardens of letters [...] for fun (παιδιᾶς)”, writes to “store up for himself a treasure house of reminders when he attains an old age of forgetfulness” (276d) and, more importantly perhaps, to let others grow when they read and discuss the text (276e–277a). Just like a well-cultivated plant propagates itself, writing can be fertile ground for readers.

The analogy of writing as agriculture establishes something more: it separates the producer from the product and from the recipient. It objectifies discourse, just as writing does. For that reason, Socrates and Phaedrus are able, after their first bewilderment by its persuasive power, to reread Lysias’s text and analyze it carefully sentence by sentence (262c–264e). It is also telling that the dialogue in *Phaedrus* takes place outside Athens’ walls in the countryside and not on the city’s agora. As Socrates remarks at the beginning: “the countryside and trees don’t want to teach me anything but people in town do”, but Phaedrus “by holding speeches in books in front of me, appear[s] to be about to lead me around the whole of Attica and wherever else you wish” (230e). Different from the spoken word, the written word can speak to people elsewhere in time and place, also in the silent countryside. Only the good writer, who Socrates calls “philosopher”, knows that written words are merely seeds of wisdom, and not the wisdom itself, as “poets, speechwriters and lawmakers” believe about their writings (278d–e).

4. Isocrates’s final work and the birth of the precise reader⁶

Isocrates (436–338 BC), contemporary of Plato, Alcidas, and Aristotle, had a strong preference for the written over the spoken word and hence wrote speeches – and was, therefore, perhaps a target of Alcidas’s criticism (O’Sullivan 1992, 24–31; Muir 2001, xiv). Isocrates is a remarkable figure in the history of rhetoric: he is listed in the canon of the Ten Attic Orators, although he never delivered speeches publicly because he lacked “a strong voice and courage (*Panathenaicus* 5; *To Philip* 81; *Epistle* 8.7; see Too 1995, 113–150, for this deliberate self-depiction). Furthermore, Isocrates is celebrated as “the master of all rhetoricians” (Cicero, *De Oratore* II.94), but no technical

⁶ In this paragraph, I build largely upon the sophisticated interpretation of Isocrates’s written-to-be-read style by Bons (1993). I add to his reading the insight that Isocrates reverses the characteristics of the written style from negative to positive evaluations and from writer to reader.



handbook of him was handed over to us (although there are indications that a handbook of Isocrates existed, see Cicero *Brutus* 48, Quintilian II.15.4). Instead, Isocrates wrote oratorical speeches and read these with his students, since, according to him, “the study of political discourse can help more than any other thing to stimulate and form such qualities of character” (*Against the Sophists*, 21).⁷ As a teacher, Isocrates saw it as his task to “in himself set such an example of oratory” (*Against the Sophists* 17–18; cf. *Antidosis* 276–277), and hence produced written political speeches to teach his students critical capabilities useful for their rhetorical and political careers (on the Isocratean curriculum, Poulakis 1997; Haskins 2004).

Throughout his oeuvre, Isocrates reflects on his deliberate choice for the written medium (Too 1995; Haskins 2001, 163–168; Enos 2012, 170–175; Viidebaum 2021, 62–73). In doing so, he subtly recasts the characteristics of written discourse that his contemporaries deemed negatively (a similar point made by Too 1995, 113). For example, just like the other authors, Isocrates compares the written medium to visual art in his *Evagoras* (c.370 BC), an encomium on the Cypriot king, but has a completely different purpose with this comparison. To leave a memorial to a distinguished person, says Isocrates, one could better compose an artful encomium than erect a statue, for “images must of necessity remain solely among those in whose cities they were set up, whereas portrayals in words may be published throughout Hellas” (74). Different from an art piece, a written text is fixed but not stationary, and can travel through space and time. It was the first mass medium, and Isocrates was well aware of that.

In his speech *To Philip* (346 BC), a letter to the Macedonian king, Isocrates explains the benefits of reading by reversing the negative features of writing (also analyzed by Bons 1993, 162–164; Too 1995, 119–122; Graff 2001, 22–24). Isocrates acknowledges that works written to be read are usually considered inferior to those delivered orally, because the latter exudes importance and urgency (25), while a speech of the former is “robbed of the prestige of the speaker” (26; see Too 1995, 121), its persuasive delivery, and “the advantages of timeliness (τῶν καιρῶν)”. When someone reads (out loud) such a “deserted and stripped” speech without persuasive power or any personal character (ῥήθους), one will be bored (26–27). However, just because the speaker’s authority lacks in a written speech, a reader is “in the best position to discover with accuracy (ἀκριβέστατα καὶ κάλλιστα) whether there is any truth” in it (Bons 1993, 164). When a reader scrutinizes the text “with good reasoning and philosophic reflection” (29), one will “form a sounder judgment about such discourses” than passively listening and “relying upon the opinion of the masses” would do. The burden of precision (*akribeia*) that others attributed to the written style and thus the writer, Isocrates shifts to the reader as well. Over two thousand years ago, Isocrates already recognized that the death of the author is simultaneously the birth of the reader (Barthes 1967; cf. Kennedy 1989, 495).

How this precise reading can be done is shown in Isocrates’s last work, *Panathenaicus* (342/339 BC), a political encomium on Athens in honor of the Great Panathenaic Festival, which he finished at the age of 97 (*Panathenaicus* 267). This work can be read as a testament to his oeuvre (Eucken 1983, 3–4), for Isocrates reflects in it on his career, curriculum, and reception as well. In the prologue of the work (1–38), Isocrates explains he was prompted to start another ambitious writing project at his high age because of the many misunderstandings and harmful misrepresentations of his works “by obscure and worthless sophists and [...] by the general public” (5). Not only did they deny him his good reputation, but they were also “abusing [his] discourses, reading

⁷ Used translations of Isocrates’ texts are the following: *Against the Sophists* and *Panathenaicus* by Norlin 1929; *To Philip* by Norlin 1928; and *Evagoras* by Van Hook 1927.



them in the worst possible manner side by side with their own, dividing them at the wrong places, mutilating them, and in every way spoiling their effect” (17). A written text, robbed of the prestige of the speaker, cannot defend itself, but since this author was still alive, he decided to respond to his critics: not with a direct answer but, in the Isocratean fashion, with a full-blown speech on “the achievements of Athens and the virtues of our ancestors” (5) in order “to prove that our city had been the cause of more blessings to the Hellenes than the city of the Lacedaemonians” (24).

A lofty praise of Athens and a harsh critique of Sparta are followed by a puzzling epilogue (199–272), in which Isocrates discusses his written speech so far with a group of (ex-) students to evaluate it, just as was the practice of the early rhetoricians, as we have seen. Whereas most of the students just applaud Isocrates’s rhetorical firework, one former pupil “who had lived under an oligarchy and had chosen before to extol the Lacedaemonians” (200) takes the floor and gives a critical reading of the speech. The Laconophile remarks that Isocrates had praised Sparta before and has, therefore, to meet the expectations of both his Athens- and Sparta-favoring audience at the same time (passage also discussed by e.g. Bons 1993; Too 1995, 124–127; Blank 2023):

Pondering this difficulty, you proceeded to study in what light you could represent each of these two cities in order that you might seem to speak the truth about them both and that you might be able to praise your ancestors, just as you purposed to do, and at the same time to appear to be censuring the Spartans in the eyes of those who have no liking for them, while in reality doing nothing of the sort but covertly praising them instead. Seeking such an effect, you found without difficulty arguments of double meaning, which lend themselves no more to the purpose of those who praise than of those who – blame, but are capable of being turned both ways and leave room for much disputation – arguments the employment of which, when one contends in court over contracts for his own advantage, is shameful and no slight token of depravity but, when one discourses on the nature of man and of things, is honourable and bespeaks a cultivated mind. (Isocrates, *Panathenaicus* 239–241)

Because of the employment of ambiguous arguments (λόγους ἀμφιβόλους), Isocrates’ speech could be interpreted in two different ways (Bons 1993, 167). The ex-student explains that, whereas Isocrates’s characterization of the Spartans as “arrogant, warlike, and greedy” (241) are valued negatively by an Athenian audience, people who normally “praise and admire the Spartans” (242) could interpret these three characteristics also positively: a feeling of dignity rather than arrogance, heroic instead of warlike, and providing and taking care of oneself instead of being greedy (243–244). The Laconophile concludes that Isocrates composed his speech “with such intent” (245) that his discourse “to those who read it superficially (ἀπλοῦν) will appear to be ingenuous and easy to comprehend, though to those who scan it thoroughly (ἀκριβῶς) and endeavor to see in it what has escaped all others it will reveal itself as difficult and hard to understand, packed with history and philosophy” (246). The Sparta-sympathizer suspects that Isocrates might not be happy with his exegesis, “for by implanting understanding in those who are without knowledge I render the discourse naked and strip it of the honor which would otherwise attach to it through those who study hard” (247). In this case, the discourse is not (only) bereft of the speaker’s authority but also of the critical reader’s interpretative work (which is, for some, reason to read the Laconophile’s interpretation as ironic, e.g., Gray 1994, 225).

Although his former pupil advises Isocrates to clarify his intent (249) so that his reputation may benefit from it (262), Isocrates’s final remarks remain inconclusive and enigmatic. He praised his former pupil, but he “uttered not a word about the sentiments which he had expressed, as to how his conjecture had hit upon my purpose or missed the mark, but let him remain of the same opinion which he had formed for himself” (265). Perhaps it is not surprising that the author



Isocrates, who preferred written texts bereft of their authoritative voice to be studied critically by the precise reader, here withholds his purpose. Whereas Aristotle warns against *amphibolia* listing it as a stylistic sin in the third book of his *Rhetoric* (1407a31–36; and as a logical fallacy in *On Sophistical Refutations*; see Blank 2023), Isocrates seems to realize that a written text with its potentially infinite audience is, by definition, open to multiple interpretations. This insight provides the rhetorician with a novel technique: one could remain ambiguous on purpose to communicate different messages to different audiences. That it is hard, if not impossible, for a reader to grasp the intended meaning of a text is not altogether problematic for Isocrates: since the text will not talk back to you, you have to think for yourself.

5. Conclusion: *verba volant, scripta manent*

While rhetoric is undergoing turbulent times in our digital age, the ancient art of rhetoric came to fruition in the time of another “revolution”. The gradual but impactful societal transition from orality to literacy produced a dynamic interplay of oral and written modes of communication. Rhetorical practices were facilitated but also complicated by the use of writing: while texts could be (pre)recorded, the written draft had to be learned by heart and converted into a persuasive delivery. The rise of the written (rhetorical) word was not received positively by everyone in the fourth century BC. As we have seen, written texts were criticized for their fixed form and their inadaptability to the situation (losing *kairos*, for Alcidas) or to the reader's questions (losing the dialectical virtue, for Plato). Since an author cannot explain to or alter his text for every reader, its style should be very precise (*akribeia*), but such a precise style is ill-suited for a lively delivery (thus wrote Aristotle).

Isocrates, however, redefines the constraints of writing. While a text may be as steady as a statue, unlike the visual arts, written art can move around and thus be used as a mass medium reaching people all over Greece and beyond. Moreover, just because a text is bereft of its authorial intent, it is the reader's task to scrutinize with precision (*akribeia*) what the author could have meant. Embracing the complexities and possibilities of literacy, Isocrates points to a novel rhetorical technique of not avoiding but using ambiguous argumentation to address a divided audience. I do not want to pose here the “strong thesis” (*supra*) that this argumentative technique could only arise because of the new written medium. After all, the need to use ambiguity in front of a divided audience can also occur while speaking extempore. But since the chance of encountering a heterogeneous audience is much greater, if not always the case, when you spread your thoughts via the written word (let alone via the digital word), this technique is all the more useful. Whereas what you say may be heard by only some, what you write can last for over two millennia, from ancient Athens into our modern, digital age.

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