

*Jeffrey A. Rydberg-Cox (Medford)*

**OFFERING ADVICE:  
TEXTUAL GIFTS AND GUEST-FRIENDSHIP IN ISOCRATES**

In the opening of the *Stromateis*, Clement of Alexandria justifies his decision to have written his thoughts in a book. He cautions his readers that the work is not a polished epideictic display, but rather a memory aid that pales in comparison with oral communication. Loveday Alexander has demonstrated that this sort of prejudice against written communication was common in much early Christian thought.<sup>1</sup> This preference for the spoken word is not, however, confined to early Christianity. Questions about the value of writing and written texts are also expressed in many ancient works, and particularly in those of Classical Athens. For example, in the *Suppliants*, Aeschylus contrasts an argument that is written with one that is clear. Similarly, both Herodotus and Thucydides consistently portray writing as a tool of tyrants and as a medium well suited for deceit.<sup>2</sup> These criticisms are particularly striking because they were articulated during a period that was experiencing an increase in the use of written texts. The late fifth and early fourth centuries B.C.E. witnessed an increase in the use of written material such as written evidence in the law courts, an extensive revision and writing down of laws, the establishment of state archives, and the gradual emergence of books.<sup>3</sup> In fact, by the end of the fourth century, Aristotle was able to argue that writing was useful for money making, household management, education, and the conduct of politics.<sup>4</sup> The tension between these two positions can be seen clearly in Isocrates' works. Because Isocrates relied on writing as a medium for the delivery of his political advice,<sup>5</sup> it was necessary for him to respond to his contemporaries' concerns about the use of writing and to create a favorable environment for the reception of his written advice. In this paper, I will demonstrate that Isocrates was aware of his contemporaries' concerns about the use of written texts and that, when addressing recipients outside of Athens, Isocrates tried to overcome these concerns by presenting his texts and their enclosed advice as tokens of the guest-friend relationship. Finally, I will suggest that Isocrates adopted this strategy so that he could legitimize his use of writing by placing it in a cultural context shared by its recipients and also to introduce the idea of being persuaded by a written work as the reciprocal obligation of receiving a gift of text.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander (1990), pp. 221-226.

<sup>2</sup> Aesch., *Supp.* 944-949. On the role of writing in Greek Historiography, see Crane (1996), Steiner (1993), Edmunds (1993), and Longo (1978).

<sup>3</sup> Harris (1989), pp. 66-89 provides a comprehensive discussion of these.

<sup>4</sup> Aristot., *Pol.* 3.1338a15-17.

<sup>5</sup> Isocrates is well known for his claims not to be a skilled public speaker and that he was only able to gain fame by writing and publishing his works. See Lowe (1993), pp. 63-72. Too (1996), pp. 74-112 contains an interesting discussion of the implications of Isocrates' disavowal of public speaking and participation in Athenian public life.

## I.

Discussions about the practice of writing in fifth and fourth century sources do not reflect a complete mistrust of the medium, but rather an awareness of both its positive and negative aspects.<sup>6</sup> For example, written laws are commonly praised because they protect people from the caprice of individual rulers. This can be seen in the *Suppliants* when Theseus claims that written laws provide equal treatment for all citizens while unwritten laws lead to tyranny. Similarly, in the *Statesman*, the stranger suggests that monarchy is the best form of rule when it is restrained by written laws but that it is the worst form of government when written laws do not exist.<sup>7</sup> Other authors praise written texts because they can be used to record the details of a business transaction. This is illustrated by a passage in the *Against Timarchos* when Aeschines describes the rationale for written contracts. Aeschines writes, “For you all know that we make contracts because we do not trust each other, so that the person who has not violated the written agreement can obtain a verdict of the courts against the one who has.”<sup>8</sup>

These statements must, however, be balanced with other passages that reflect concerns about written texts. For example, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle points out that a speaker can argue for the sanctity of written contracts when they support his case and challenge them when they do not.<sup>9</sup> Further, Athenian juries were aware that documents could be forged and required that written evidence be supplemented with witnesses.<sup>10</sup> Several Athenian authors also point out that written laws do not, by themselves, provide protection against abuses of power. In the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon argues that, although Cyrus understood the value of written laws, he still believed that it was necessary for him to supplement these laws with his own observations, orders, and punishments.<sup>11</sup> Neither is this observation confined to thinking about monarchs. Demosthenes, in the *Against Meidias*, paints a comic picture of the inability of written laws on their own to help someone who has suffered injustice. Demosthenes writes, “What strength do the laws have? If someone is wronged and cries out, will the laws come forward and offer assistance? No. They are only bits of writing with no power to accomplish this sort of thing. Where then is there power? In yourselves, if you uphold them and always make them powerful to help those in need.”<sup>12</sup>

## II.

Isocrates was clearly aware of this sort of ambivalence about written texts. For example, in the *Trapeziticus*, he argues that the written evidence in the case had been tampered with or forged. Similarly, in the *Antidosis*, he explicitly argues that custom is superior to written law for insuring

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<sup>6</sup> Harris (1989), pp. 90-93 catalogs many of the negative attitudes about writing while Thomas (1992), pp. 130-132 argues that writing was viewed much more positively in Classical Greece than in much modern scholarship.

<sup>7</sup> Eur., *Supp.* 430. Plat., *Stat.* 301d-302e. Compare Demosth. 23.74, Plat., *Laws* 891a.

<sup>8</sup> Aeschin. 1.161. Compare Demosth. 19.38-40, 23.162, 28.5.

<sup>9</sup> Arist., *Rhet.* 1376b. See Demosth. 29.21, 32.1-2, 33.35.

<sup>10</sup> See Demosth. 2.1, 19.36, 19.174. Calhoun (1914).

<sup>11</sup> Xen., *Cyrop.* 8.1.22. Compare Aristot., *Pol.* 1286a-1287b, Aristot., *Rhet.* 1374a-1375b, Lys. 10.7, 11.4. See Harris (1989), p. 90 n. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Demosth. 21.224.

virtuous behavior and fair treatment.<sup>13</sup> In addition to these general concerns about writing, Isocrates also points to two problems with written texts that would have directly influenced his ability to persuade his audiences: 1) the connection of writing to epideictic exercises and 2) the loss of the author as a mediator between arguments and their audiences. The connection between writing and epideictic exercises creates a problem for Isocrates because audiences expected written texts to be sophistic displays rather than serious political advice. This horizon of expectation for a written text is illustrated by Aristotle's claim that writing is the most appropriate medium for an epideictic work.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus tells Socrates that 'politicians' are not willing to commit their speeches to writing because they do not want to be confused with the sophists. Phaedrus claims, "You surely know that the most powerful and august men in our cities feel shame if they write speeches and leave behind their writings because they fear that those of later times might call them sophists."<sup>15</sup>

Isocrates had to address these sorts of perceptions so that his audiences would take his written political advice seriously. Thus, in the beginning of his letter to Dionysius, he laments that he was compelled to send his advice in a letter and risk that his text would be perceived as an artistic composition and not as practical advice. Isocrates writes,

*I know that when attempting to give advice, it is far better not to converse through writing but to come in person, not only because it is easier for someone who is present to discuss the same affairs with someone else who is present than to expound them in a letter, but also because everyone trusts a person who is speaking more than one who is writing because they listen to a speaker as if he were giving practical advice but they listen to a writer as if he were making an artistic display.*<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in the *To Philip*, Isocrates asks Philip to lay aside his preconception that written texts are only written for display or gain and to understand his written text as serious political advice. Isocrates writes, "The difference in the persuasive effect of spoken arguments and texts that are read out loud does not escape me. Neither does the fact that everyone assumes that the former are spoken about serious and pressing matters while the latter are written with an eye towards display and personal gain."<sup>17</sup>

The second problem with written texts that Isocrates acknowledges is the loss of the author as a mediator between the audience and the content of an argument.<sup>18</sup> In broad outlines, Isocrates echoes the criticisms of writing found in Alcidas' *Against the Sophists*, Plato's *Phaedrus*, and Demosthenes' first letter. In *Against the Sophists*, Alcidas argues that written works are inferior to those that are spoken because they lack the advantage of *καίρω* and, therefore, they cannot use to their advantage situations that arise during the delivery of a speech.<sup>19</sup> Alcidas further suggests that

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<sup>13</sup> Isoc. 17.34; 7.40.

<sup>14</sup> Aristot., *Rhet.* 1414a.

<sup>15</sup> Plat., *Ph.* 257d-e.

<sup>16</sup> Isoc. *Epist.* 1.2.

<sup>17</sup> Isoc. 5.25.

<sup>18</sup> Svenbro (1993), pp. 8-64 offers an interesting discussion of this problem .

<sup>19</sup> For this interpretation of Alcidas' argument, see Poulakos (1993), p. 65. See Hansen (1987), pp. 70-71 for a discussion of the types of interruption that a speaker could expect when speaking in the assembly and the law courts.

only a person delivering a speech can respond to questions or apologize for any offenses on the spot while the author of a written text must wait for another occasion to address the same audience.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato claims that after an argument has been written down, it is shared among those who do not understand it. Because a written text cannot answer questions or defend itself after it has been shared, the arguments contained in the text become hopelessly distorted.<sup>21</sup> Finally, in his first letter to the Athenian assembly, Demosthenes discusses the difficulties of using a letter to address the assembly that arise from the fact that he will not be able to respond to the audience during its delivery. Demosthenes writes,

*It is difficult for advice conveyed in a letter to remain in front of you because it is customary for many of you to oppose suggestions without waiting to understand them. In fact it is possible for a speaker to perceive what you want to hear and easily correct your misunderstandings. Written texts have no similar resources against those who cry out against it.*<sup>22</sup>

Isocrates also echoes these claims in several of his works. For example, in the *To Philip*, Isocrates argues that when someone other than an author reads a text out loud, it loses the persuasive advantages of *καίρῳ*.<sup>23</sup> This assertion sets an important thematic tone for the work because, throughout the *To Philip*, Isocrates claims that considerations of *καίρῳ* have caused him to take up or pass over topics. Similarly, in his letter to Dionysius, Isocrates asks that his letter be read favorably even though he is not present to clarify any of his arguments. Isocrates writes,

*When people are gathered together and something that is said is either not clear or not believed, when the speaker is present, he can respond to both situations by going through the argument. When an argument is placed in writing or in letters, this opportunity for clarification does not exist because when the writer is absent, the support of a defender is also absent.*<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Isocrates extends his concern about the loss of the author who can support his arguments, to the loss of other elements that the author's presence can provide. For example, in the *To Philip*, Isocrates claims that a written text lacks other important qualities that contribute to an oration's persuasive effect, such as the speaker's prestige and his control over the work's rhythms, emphases, and inflections.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alcidas, *Against the Sophists* 10-11. Alcidas' short work is frequently cited but rarely discussed in detail. For the text with a complete bibliography, see Avezzu (1982).

<sup>21</sup> Plat., *Phaed.* 274b-277a. See Süß (1910), pp. 34-35. Ford (1993) very cleverly connects the implications of this argument to the appearance of Protagoras' head to answer Socrates' criticism of his work in the *Theaetetus*.

<sup>22</sup> Demosth., *Epist.* 1.3. Demosthenes' complaint is of a more practical nature than those of Alcidas or Plato. Heckling speakers seems to have been a common practice in the Athenian assembly. For example, at the beginning of the *Acharnians*, Dikaeopolis claims that he had come to the Pnyx early so that he could obtain the best seat for interrupting the speakers who proposed any thing other than peace (Aristoph., *Ach.* 37-38). Isocrates and Demosthenes complain of this in several of their works (Isoc. 8.1-5, 10-11, 26-28, 39 & 62-66. Demosth. 18.143, 19.23) while Aeschines similarly laments that the law against this sort of behavior was not enforced (Aeschin. 3.2). See Hansen (1987), p. 71 with n. 461.

<sup>23</sup> Isoc. 5.25-26.

<sup>24</sup> Isoc., *Epist.* 1.3

<sup>25</sup> Isoc. 5.26.

## III.

How, then, does Isocrates create a favorable environment for the reception of his written texts? In works addressed to people outside of Athens, one of the ways that Isocrates accomplishes this goal is by presenting his texts as a guest gift, or as a token of the guest friend relationship. Gabriel Herman has demonstrated that guest-friendship continued as a powerful mechanism for alliance among members of the upper classes in different cities during the classical period. Herman argues,

*When during the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. the contours of the city-state were gradually drawn, the ancient world was criss-crossed with an extensive network of personal alliances linking together all sorts of apolitical bodies (households, tribes, bands, etc.). The city framework superimposed itself upon this existing network ... When the city finally became established as the dominant form of organization, dense webs of guest-friendship still stretched beyond its bounds.*<sup>26</sup>

The continuing presence of guest friendship in the fourth century can be seen in several orators' appeals to the ideals of guest-friendship to support their arguments.<sup>27</sup> For example, in Antiphon's *Prosecution of the Stepmother*, the speaker presents himself as a pious and dutiful son and his stepmother as impious; he supports this claim by describing the murder of his father and Philoneos in terms that suggest that she had defiled the guest-friend relationship between the two men.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in the *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates equates the murder of a guest-friend with the murder of a father or a brother.<sup>29</sup>

Isocrates exploits the continuing practice of guest friendship in his works in order to mitigate his audiences' concerns about his use of writing. Isocrates adopts the language of guest friendship in his works to present them as part of this larger cultural practice. For example, in the introduction of the *To Demonicus*, Isocrates claims that he is sending the text as a token of his friendship with Demonicus and his family.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in the opening of the *To Nicocles*, Isocrates describes his text as a guest gift that is more valuable than the items of bronze and gold that other men offer the king.<sup>31</sup> The idea that Isocrates intended this comparison to suggest that his text should be seen as a guest gift is supported by a passage in the *Antidosis* where Isocrates claims that he has been criticized in Athens because he had received gifts from Nicocles.<sup>32</sup> Because the guest-friend relationship involved reciprocal gift exchange among the parties, and these two passages imply that such reciprocal gift giving took place, we can conclude that Isocrates' wanted his audiences to understand his relationship with Nicocles as one of guest-friendship. Further, one of the salient features of guest-friendship in the classical period was the fact that this relationship was viewed with suspicion by the *polis* because it was a mechanism for alliances between people in different city states and these alliances could

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<sup>26</sup> Herman (1987), p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> See Herman (1987), p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> See Antiph. 1.1-19. Compare Aeschin. 3.224.

<sup>29</sup> Isoc. 12.121. See also Isoc. 4.152 and 19.10-22.

<sup>30</sup> Isoc. 1.2.

<sup>31</sup> Isoc. 2.1.

<sup>32</sup> Isoc. 15.40.

undermine a person's loyalty to his own city.<sup>33</sup> Isocrates' defends himself against this criticism by claiming that he had followed a democratic ideology in all of his dealings with Nicocles rather than by denying that theirs was a guest-friend relationship. This fact also suggests that Isocrates wanted his audiences to believe that he shared such relationship with Nicocles.<sup>34</sup>

While these passages attest to Isocrates' invocation of guest-friendship to obtain the good will of his audience, the connection between this tactic and his use of writing remains to be seen. In several passages, Isocrates explicitly connects some of his concerns about written texts with the paradigm of guest friendship. For example, in his sixth letter, Isocrates responds to a request from the children of Jason of Pherae to come and advise them how to rule. Isocrates first invokes the friendship between himself and their father as a reason that he would be willing to offer such advice but declines to come. In this passage, Isocrates explicitly argues that his guest friendship with the recipients should mitigate their perception that his written text was simply a sophistic display. Isocrates writes, "Do not think that I wrote this letter because I wanted to make a rhetorical display (ἔπιδειξις) instead of writing it on account of your friendship."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in his letter to Timotheus, Isocrates invokes the long standing guest-friend relationship between their two families to justify the fact that he is offering his advice in a letter instead of delivering it in person.<sup>36</sup>

This presentation of his texts as guest gifts has a further effect in Isocrates' works; it imposes a reciprocal obligation of being persuaded on the recipient. As noted above, one of the key elements of guest-friendship is the obligation of reciprocal gift exchange among the parties involved. Isocrates does not, however, seek material gifts in exchange for his advice, but rather he seeks the acceptance of his advice. In this spirit, Isocrates tells Demonicus that it is as foolish to reject the good advice found in his discourse as to reject the other material gifts offered by his friends.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Isocrates concludes his address to Nicocles by re-invoking the image of his text as a guest gift and then encouraging Nicocles to show his acceptance of the gift by responding positively to his advice.<sup>38</sup> Finally, in the conclusion of his letter to Timotheus, Isocrates suggests that adopting the advice in his letter would indicate a renewal of the guest friend relationship between the two men.<sup>39</sup>

#### IV.

Thus, by presenting his texts as tokens of the guest friend relationship, Isocrates hopes to eliminate some of the tension surrounding his use of writing as a medium for communicating his political advice and also to increase the persuasive effect of his works by establishing persuasion as

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<sup>33</sup> This phenomenon is illustrated in Thucydides' history when Pericles warns the Athenians that Archidamus might not pillage his land because of the ties of guest-friendship between the two men. In order to dispel any suspicion that this might cause, Pericles promises to give his land to the public treasury should the Spartans leave it intact (Thuc. 2.13.1)

<sup>34</sup> Isoc. 15.67-72.

<sup>35</sup> Isoc., *Epist.* 6.4.

<sup>36</sup> Isoc., *Epist.* 7.1, 7.10.

<sup>37</sup> Isoc. 1.18.

<sup>38</sup> Isoc. 2.53-54.

<sup>39</sup> Isoc., *Epist.* 7.13.

the reciprocal obligation imposed by the gift of text. Isocrates' use of this strategy allows us to see in detail one of the ways that an orator can invoke shared cultural practices to increase the persuasive effect of his works. As noted above, the invocation of the customs surrounding guest-friendship to support an argument is common in Greek rhetoric. Isocrates' use of this paradigm is, however, more interesting than the simple manipulation of a rhetorical *topos* because of the way that he connects this idea with the use of an emerging communication technology. Rather than directly engaging in debate with authors such as Alcidamas or Plato, Isocrates invokes an alternate context that allows his audiences to accept his use of written texts and give a fair hearing to his thoughts. In this respect, Isocrates' situation is, perhaps, not far removed from our own. We are in the midst of similar negotiations about the value of electronic texts; proponents of digital journals and libraries must navigate similar tensions surrounding the emergence of electronic publication. The ability of any person to publish almost any thing on the world wide web easily and cheaply is very attractive to both authors and publishers. This same feature of electronic publication, however, also calls into question the value of any electronic publications. Thus, in order to mitigate these concerns, electronic journals can adopt the language and practices of established journals and scholars such as copyright and peer review and, in a manner similar to Isocrates, attempt to establish the legitimacy of their own emerging communication technology.

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