

INTRODUCTION

I

Every society has a particular language or languages which an individual can invoke to demonstrate that he or she is a member of that community. This book is about the making of identity in the classical Greek city. It concerns itself with the complex rhetoric of self produced by the author and intellectual Isocrates in defining himself as a citizen of fourth-century Athens. The study examines how Isocrates constructs a language within which he proceeds to fashion and authorise his own identity. What I hope will emerge from my analysis is an awareness that language can serve as a potent non-material basis for an individual's authority within society.

Isocrates is at once an obvious and unobvious choice for the present book. Scholars in Antiquity and in the Renaissance regarded Isocrates (436–338 BC) as the pre-eminent rhetorician of ancient Athens and accordingly made him a central figure in their picture of fourth-century Athens. For the majority of modern scholars, however, he is a figure of inadequacy. He is an exception in a moment of otherwise remarkably self-aware literary, political and intellectual achievement that we have come to know as 'classical Athens'. Isocrates loses out on several counts. He is relegated to the margins of a particular Athens. This Athens features Demosthenes and Lysias as its preferred orators, Thucydides and Xenophon as its historians, and Plato as its privileged philosopher, as perhaps *the* Athenian intellectual of the fourth century. Even Marrou, who admits Isocrates' significance for the development of rhetoric in the West, must concede: 'De quelque point de vue qu'on se place: puissance de séduction, rayonnement de la personnalité, richesse du tempérament, profondeur de la pensée, art

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12452-2 - The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates: Text, Power, Pedagogy

Yun Lee Too

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

même, Isocrate ne saurait être mis sur le même plan que Platon...'¹ In the same vein de Romilly concludes an article which implicitly seeks to establish goodwill towards the rhetorician, 'Isocrates, it is true, is not very intelligent: but, all the same, it must be said: we all take after him, in some way or other.'²

My study attempts in part to restore authority to Isocrates. My intention will be to recover not the authority which readers in Antiquity and in the Renaissance attributed to the author but that which the author's own rhetorical discourse creates for him. Given what many observe to be our own mistrust of rhetoricians and rhetoric the project may initially appear self-defeating. Indeed, one may speculate that scholars subsequent to the Renaissance regard Isocrates as such a peripheral individual precisely because he was Athens' rhetorician *par excellence*. This description of the author enables critics to lay against him the charges that he is more style than content, more text than substance, in short that he is more rhetoric than anything else, particularly philosophy. Perhaps Aristophanes originates this view of rhetoric when he attacks the rhetorical education of the sophists in the *Clouds*. In any case it is certainly Plato who gives the most authority to the negative stereotypes of rhetoric. In one passage of the *Euthydemus* Socrates offers an attack on rhetoric which many scholars believe to be aimed specifically at Isocrates.³ Here the philosopher dismisses the rhetorician's profession as an inauthentic pursuit of wisdom. Rhetoric, he observes, occupies an intermediate position between philosophy and politics (cf. 305c7; 306a-b). In other dialogues Socrates offers the definition of rhetoric which many now take for granted, casting it as an 'art of persuasion'.⁴ From this follows a baggage of moral judgements, namely that rhetoric is the art of going to any and every length (*panta*

¹ Marrou (1956), p. 131.

² De Romilly (1958), p. 101.

³ Hawtrey (1981), p. 190 and Canto (1989), pp. 34-5.

⁴ Note Kennedy (1963), p. 7, 'Wherever persuasion is the end, rhetoric is present'; also Guthrie (1971), p. 50; Vickers (1988), p. 1. Also, Dodds (1959), p. 4, 'Rhetoric was the Art of Success.'

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12452-2 - The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates: Text, Power, Pedagogy

Yun Lee Too

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

legein) – deceptions, lies, force and so on – to achieve its goal of persuasion (e.g. *Republic* 494e4). Rhetoric is a language of inauthenticity, and so it is the antithesis of ‘philosophy’, of the discourse that Plato wants to be viewed as the language of what is real, true and just. Plato has caricatured rhetoric and rhetoricians, painting a portrait of bad language practised by insincere individuals.

Because etymology tends to decontextualise, it is a mode of reading which may begin to free us from Platonic notions and prejudices about (Isocratean) rhetoric. Pierre Chantraine may or may not be justified in connecting the Greek word for rhetorician, ‘*rhetōr*’, with *eirō*, which supplies some of the parts of the verb *legein*, ‘to speak’. He defines a ‘rhetorician’ simply as ‘celui qui parle en public’ or ‘orateur à l’assemblée, homme politique’.⁵ For Chantraine, a rhetorician is first and foremost an individual who speaks in a *public* place: the lawcourt, the Assembly, the marketplace, the panhellenic festival gathering, all of which – perhaps with the exception of the last – represent the civic community.⁶ In providing this definition of the rhetorician, Chantraine recognises a basic function of this individual’s discourse. Indeed, when Isocrates and later authors write of the role of language in creating society, they implicitly indicate that the fundamental purpose of their discourse, as rhetoricians, is to address the civic sphere.⁷

In a frequently cited passage from the *Antidosis* Isocrates speaks of the role of *logos* in creating civic communities and their institutions. He narrates how through *logos* men persuaded one another, associated with one another, created cities, established *nomoi*, the cities’ conventions or laws, and invented arts: ‘Since present in us was the ability to persuade one another and to make clear what we wanted, we not only departed from the life of wild animals but we came together,

⁵ Chantraine (1968), I, p. 326, viz. 2 εἶρω; also Benveniste (1948), pp. 52-4.

⁶ *Gorgias* 502d2-e8; *Euthydemus* 305b6-c2.

⁷ Also cf. Isocrates *Nicoles* 6-9; *Antidosis* 253-7; *Panegyricus* 48ff.; Xenophon *Memorabilia* 4.3.11ff. (on λογισμός); Cicero *On Invention* 1.2. Spence (1988), pp. 13ff., regards Isocrates as the paradigm of the ‘humanist rhetoric’ which orders society into being.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12452-2 - The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates: Text, Power, Pedagogy

Yun Lee Too

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

built cities, established conventions [or ‘laws’ (*nomous*)] and created arts; and speech (*logos*) is what formed for us nearly all the devices we discovered’ (*Antidosis* 254).⁸ In the narrative of this paragraph *logos* is introduced as a language of persuasion. As such, it creates public space and is in turn redefined within this public space, evolving, for instance, as *nomos* or law or as a technical, i.e. artistic, language. What this narrative suggests is that once *logos* has brought people together into a community, it becomes less a language of persuasion than a particular language or discourse which is designed to operate within that particular community to reinforce it. As a public discourse, as rhetoric, *logos* is to be perceived as a special language designed both to constitute and to announce the deliberate strategies that individuals use to devise images – whether good, bad, beautiful, ugly, truthful, misleading, and so on – of their societies, such as we have in *Antidosis* 254. It both constructs itself around, and sometimes also consciously rejects, discursive conventions which may be distinct from those, say, of dialogue, poetry, and so on. As rhetoric, *logos* also constitutes a whole ‘language’ by which an individual declares himself or herself to be part of a particular society through its use: it provides him or her with a mark of his or her membership in that society. In Isocrates’ case, the particular society to which allegiance is affirmed is a democratic one. If Schmitt-Pantel is right to see democratic ethos as being constituted precisely by the willingness of the individual to see himself and to be seen as a member of a group, then democracy is a society that supports and encourages rhetorical discourse.⁹

⁸ ἐγγενομένου δ’ ἡμῖν τοῦ πείθειν ἀλλήλους καὶ δηλοῦν πρὸς ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς περὶ ὧν ἂν βουλευθῶμεν, οὐ μόνον τοῦ θηριωδῶς ζῆν ἀπηλλάγημεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ συνεληθόντες πόλεις ὥκισαμεν καὶ νόμους ἐθέμεθα καὶ τέχνας εὕρομεν, καὶ σχεδὸν ἅπαντα τὰ δι’ ἡμῶν μεμηχανημένα λόγος ἡμῖν ἐστίν ὁ συγκατασκευάσας.

⁹ Cf. Schmitt-Pantel (1990) and Euben (1990), p. 111, on the literary construction of tyranny in terms of ‘isolation’.

INTRODUCTION

II

Hannah Ahrendt has declared that persuasion is irrelevant to authority and is in fact incompatible with it: it is not necessary to convince in order to have influence and power.¹⁰ Ahrendt's point in more detail is that persuasion assumes that equality exists between those persuading and those who are being persuaded, an equality which she regards as being absent between those asserting authority and those subject to it. From this understanding of authority it follows that Isocrates is most successful in constructing an authoritative image for and of himself, as I shall argue he is, precisely when he does not require his audience to believe what he is saying. Accordingly, I lay down as one of the assumptions for this study that, when any rhetorical author, and particularly Isocrates, intends to produce an authoritative image of himself, what he demands of his audience is merely the perception and reception of the images he produces rather than a belief in them. So also, a rhetoric of authority does not require its modern audience to believe or assume that it depicts ancient society and culture as they historically or actually were, and may even indicate that it is offering an account which differs from reality. Such a rhetoric demands only the realisation that it provides us with a means of approaching Antiquity that may constitute the basis for our own (re)constructions of ancient society and culture. It asks its reader to assent to the author's portrait of a community and of the individuals who constitute that community created.

As the most rhetorical representative of 'Athens', Isocrates should be the author who provides us with the easiest access to his society. Nevertheless, he finds himself in an extremely ironic position, for he is perceived to be one of classical Athens' least readable and communicable authors. The reason for this is the reader's failure to recognise that while rhetoric mediates a series of images to him or her, it

¹⁰ See Ahrendt (1958), p. 82 and Friedman 'On the concept of authority in political philosophy', p. 63 in Raz (1990).

INTRODUCTION

does so as a language of sophisticated and subtle codes. Rhetorical discourse is playful, at once setting up and violating its own codes. We shall see that in addressing the public space Isocrates both draws on and transgresses the norms of civic identity obvious to his own contemporary audience and to a modern one. He constructs his identity through strategies of self-depiction and self-authorisation less explicit than those employed by many of his contemporaries and often at odds with them. In particular, we shall see that he invokes a democratic language while actually putting forward an ideology of oligarchical elitism. He paradoxically locates himself on the fringes of the city through a discourse which defines just this common space. Isocrates invokes but also flouts the conventions which declare an individual to be a member of democratic Athenian society. What is ultimately needed to read Isocratean rhetoric, then, is an awareness that it at times manipulates and appropriates what appear to be and also are conflicting ideologies and their languages. I suggest that in the end Isocrates does as much, if not more, to undermine as to reinforce the status of rhetoric as a language of community. What emerges from the author's writings is a sense of his uniqueness and his superiority, constructed through the 'otherness' of contemporaries and potential competitors.

In an effort to confront Isocrates' recalcitrance the present study will take the form of a detailed analysis of his 'voice'. This study is divided into six chapters and each of these will attempt to elucidate different aspects of the *persona* generated according to and despite the constraints of public identity in fourth-century Athens. The first four chapters will examine how Isocrates poses a challenge to the values and functions scholars traditionally assign to oral and written language in classical Greece. Chapter 1 approaches the question of Isocrates' political identity through a consideration of the literary identity of his writing. It argues that he provides what must be seen in retrospect as a unique alternative to the ancient literary obsession (and also to the modern one) with the multiplication and classification of lit-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12452-2 - The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates: Text, Power, Pedagogy

Yun Lee Too

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

erary genres according to distinct styles and literary forms.¹¹ He names the ‘genre’ of his literary discourse as *logos politikos* (inadequately rendered in English by ‘political discourse’). For Isocrates *logos politikos* is the only legitimate language for a citizen and thus one to which all other discourses must be either subsumed or subordinated. He derives part of his authority from the fact that his writing is concerned with the city-state and its well-being. Chapter 2 investigates the coherence of Isocratean ‘political discourse’ and of the authorial voice. It considers the various ways in which the author structures his texts to create a body of works which suggest to its audience that it should be read as such and in this or that order. I draw attention to a sense of chronological ordering which affirms the integrity of the texts as a ‘corpus’ but also consider how the works sustain other structures, such as repetition and antilogy, which both reinforce and challenge their integrity as a corpus.

The next two chapters consider in detail how Isocrates radically transforms the political value and meaning of ‘voice’. Modern literary and philosophical criticism might imply that the challenge to Isocrates’ civic identity should come from his wish to be seen as a writer, in particular as the ‘leader of (written) words’. Derrida’s readings of Plato suggest that literary texts are prone to self-contradiction and dismantling despite the fact that the author might claim full control over them.¹² Against and at odds with this critical backdrop, chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate that Isocratean ‘political discourse’ constitutes a rejection of the discourses which traditionally ensure that one will be heard in the Greek city. Chapter 3 examines Isocrates’ political autobiography. He claims for himself a ‘small voice’ or, as scholars designate it, *mikrophōnia*. I show how in doing so he distances himself from the figure of the orator and litigant – the ‘new politician’, perhaps most notoriously represented by Cleon – whose public rantings bring about the decay of

¹¹ Tannenbaum (1986), pp. 1-16, sees a similar use of ‘genre’ to define political identity in the plays of Shakespeare.

¹² See the essay ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in Derrida (1981).

INTRODUCTION

the Assembly and lawcourts as civic institutions. In chapter 4 I shall argue that the ‘small voice’ also helps to validate literary language. Isocrates draws an analogy between his own ‘small voice’ and the ‘small voice’ which belongs to writing, namely his political texts. Through this characterisation of written discourse he offers a means of accommodating a mode of communication in a culture where spoken language is conventionally viewed as the privileged medium of political participation. I shall examine the politics implied by the attribution of *mikrophōnia* to writing. A ‘small voice’ is associated with a life of quietude, responsibility, that is political non-involvement, and with the abandoned democratic virtues, above all ‘moderation’. The quietistic text also has the potential, however, to wield enormous political influence. This text is depicted by Isocrates as travelling throughout the Greek world and establishing, with the author as its ultimate ruler, a cultural hegemony which is presented as superseding Athens’ military empire.

Chapters 5 and 6 of this study examine how Isocrates negotiates the fact that he might be viewed as a teacher and the ambivalence associated with such an identity. They consider the ways in which the civic identity that he has created for himself requires him to limit and qualify his pedagogical *persona*. In chapter 5 I demonstrate that Isocrates presents us with a text, *Against the Sophists*, which breaks off just at the point when it appears to teach. Scholars generally regard this ‘silence’ as a textual lacuna. I argue, however, that the obvious and conventional supplements that have been and might be proposed for this supposed lacuna are unsatisfactory, and I propose that Isocrates deliberately interrupts this work to resist the notion that teaching has to be a language or doctrine which prescribes the teacher as a model for the student’s identity. In the sixth and final chapter I explain that Isocrates cuts short this work for the further reason of maintaining the boundary of political discourse and to preserve his civic identity as the focus of authority in his writings. He has rejected the more conventional pedagogical discourses in order to assimilate the language of teaching to

INTRODUCTION

‘political discourse’. I show that he affirms the overall continuity of his discourse by using pedagogy as a metaphor that articulates the power of Athens and of her individual citizen, ultimately ‘Isocrates’. Even here pedagogical language and identity are ambiguous because Isocrates writes against a background in which the pedagogue is to be viewed as a treacherous citizen. I conclude my study of Isocrates by suggesting how his political valuation of ‘teaching’ offers us a way into the politics underlying current debates regarding ‘curriculum’ and ‘canon’ in the modern academy.

III

While this study of Isocrates is written first and foremost with classicists in mind, it also raises issues which, I hope, are of interest to others working in other disciplines, particularly literary criticism, history and political theory. In order to make it accessible to a broader range of readers I have decided to be as sparing as possible with my quotation of texts in Greek and Latin in the main body of the discussion, where all passages cited are transliterated or translated. I have, however, cited these passages in the original languages in the footnotes so that the reader does not have to turn frequently to Greek and Latin editions for reference.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12452-2 - The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates: Text, Power, Pedagogy

Yun Lee Too

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

ISOCRATES AND *LOGOS POLITIKOS*

Yet, at first sight, what could be more simple? A collection of texts that can be designated by the sign of a proper name.

Foucault¹

Literary taxonomy, like numerology, is a spendthrift affair: one can find significant patterns in virtually any random set of materials... They are simulacra of identity, concealing for the purposes of analytic economy the differences that have to break out if anything serious is to be said. The point of the taxonomic sketch is that its very fragility, its lapses and inadequacies, lead straight to a number of key questions. One has to stage an illusion of coherence and completeness in order to perceive how far it doesn't and can't suffice – to demonstrate that, when one moves out centrifugally into the realm of particular cases, the paradigm may well turn out to be a *hapax* in disguise.

Cave²

I

We often determine an author's identity at least in part through the number and the type of works that he or she writes. Yet characterising an author in this manner is not necessarily as straightforward as it might at first appear. To take an author and the body of works written by this individual, his or her *œuvre* or corpus, is perhaps, as Foucault goes on to observe, to be able to take very little, if anything, for granted. Accordingly, to take 'Isocrates' or 'the works of Isocrates' as the basis for a study, as I am now doing, is to risk opening up the continuities of discourse we know as this author and his works to a host of possibly disturbing questions.³ In particular, an ancient author like Isocrates high-

¹ Foucault (1972), p. 23.

² Cave (1988), p. 226.

³ See Foucault (1972), pp. 21ff.