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Writing Authority: Thucydides, Isocrates, and Textuality

The culturally privileged position of speech in Classical Athens made writers such as Thucydides and Isocrates very self-aware of their textual mode of dissemination. Both authors defended their textuality by absorbing, subverting, and ultimately usurping the traditional mode of oral communication to construct authority not only for themselves, but also for writing. In *Il.* 2.486, deferring authority to the Muse the poet paradoxically constructs authority for himself by positing an exclusive relationship with this source of truth. By analogy, Thucydides displaces the oral Muse with his literate historical method and defers authority to it in order to construct authority for himself. The comparison between *ktêma es aiei* and *agônisma es to parakhrêma akouein* therefore highlights his textually-aware rhetoric: permanence solidified in a material, impersonal product on one hand, and temporality encapsulated in an evanescent, public product on the other. Confronting the prejudice against writing exemplified in the person of Alcidas, Isocrates discredits the capability of oral performances to express truth because of their power to delude the audience. By expanding upon this logic Isocrates positions writing as the superior form of communication precisely because of its apparent weaknesses: it lacks the advantages of the immediacy and the physical presence required by orality. By subverting the dominant (i.e., oral) model of authenticity with its own terms, in *Ep.* 1.4 Isocrates employs this rhetoric to construct a position of authority for himself over those who were actually present for the addressee. Employing a strategy analogous to Thucydides', Isocrates defers authority, apparently to *lexis agônistikê*, only to reclaim it for *lexis graphikê* by rejecting orality's capacity for expressing truth. By comparing these two authors, I hope (1) to advance a new, non-stylistic argument in favor of interpreting *ktêma es aiei* as a reference to its textuality; (2) to add to Too's discussion of Isocrates as a writer in *The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates* (Cambridge, 1995) by considering him in a literate and stylistic context; and (3) to shed light on the textual self-awareness of Classical Athens.