

**A HISTORY OF CLASSICAL GREEK  
LITERATURE; IN TWO VOLUMES,  
VOL. II, PART II, THE PROSE  
WRITERS FROM ISOCRATES TO  
ARISTOTLE**

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A history of classical Greek literature; In two Volumes, Vol. II, Part II, The prose writers from Isocrates to Aristotle by J. P. Mahaffy

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**J. P. MAHAFFY**

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ISOCRATES TO ARISTOTLE**



A HISTORY  
OF  
CLASSICAL GREEK LITERATURE

BY THE  
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*IN TWO VOLUMES*

VOL. II. PART II.

THE PROSE WRITERS  
FROM ISOCRATES TO ARISTOTLE

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ἐπεὶ δὲ τοῦ βίου μεταβολὴν ἄμα ταῖς τύχαις καὶ ταῖς φύσεσι λαμβάνοντος, ἐξωθοῦσα τὸ περιττὸν ἢ χρεια, κρωβύλους τε χρυσοῦς ἀφίρει, καὶ ξυστίδας μαλακὰς ἀπημφιάζει, καὶ πον καὶ κόμην σοβαρωτέραν ἀπέκειρε, καὶ ὑπέλυσε κοθορνὸν, οὐ φαύλως ἐθιζομένων ἀντικαλλωπίζεσθαι πρὸς τὴν πολυτέλειαν εὐτελεῖα, καὶ τὸ ἀφελὲς καὶ λιτὸν ἐν κόσμῳ τίθεσθαι μᾶλλον, ἢ το σοβαρὸν καὶ περιέργον· οὕτω τοῦ λόγου συμμεταβάλλοντος ἄμα καὶ συναποδομένου, κατέβη μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν μέτρων, ὥσπερ ὀχημάτων, ἢ ἱστορία, καὶ τῷ περὶ μάλιστα τοῦ μυθώδους ἀπεκρίθη τὸ ἀληθές· φιλοσοφία δὲ τὸ σαφές καὶ διδασκαλικὸν ἀσπασαμένη μᾶλλον ἢ τὸ ἐκπληττον, διὰ λόγων ἐποιεῖτο τῆς ζήτησιν.—PLUTARCH, *De Pyth. Oraculis*, 24.

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# HISTORY OF GREEK PROSE LITERATURE.

## PART II.



### CHAPTER I.

#### ISOCRATES.

§ 441. WE turn to another leading representative of Attic prose during the earlier half of the fourth century B.C.—a representative who, with Lysias and Isæus, with Plato and with Xenophon, makes up that wonderful constellation of writers of whom Demosthenes may be considered the greatest star. Our authorities are agreed that Isocrates was born at Athens in 436, the son of Theodorus, a flute manufacturer, and of Heduto. The names of three obscure brothers and a sister are mentioned. He may have been a few years younger than Lysias, eight or nine years older than Plato. His father, being wealthy, was able to give him so good an education that he himself boasts<sup>1</sup> he was better known and stood higher among his school-fellows than ever afterwards—a very credible statement, seeing that his great talent for form must have made him a brilliant and promising pupil. Among his masters are mentioned Prodicus, of whom critics have found traces in his orations, and Socrates, whom he once mentions<sup>2</sup> in connection with Alcibiades, without sympathy, so that the stories about his public mourning of the philosopher's death seem false; indeed, no natures could be more contrasted than those of the two men,

<sup>1</sup> *Antid.* § 161.

<sup>2</sup> *Busiris*, § 5.

and the praise of Isocrates in Plato's *Phædrus*, which Socrates speaks, is evidently mere Platonic Socratism.

It is fashionable to argue that he was necessarily influenced by Socrates, because he shows a high moral tone, and was superior in philosophic culture to Lysias and the earlier orators. But this opinion<sup>1</sup> is based on the vulgar notion that the real sophists were Plato's sophists, and on a false estimate of the philosophy of the speech-writers, whose art consisted chiefly in concealing itself. It is not fair to say that an epideictic orator is more philosophical than a court speech-writer, except the latter has had official means of affording us a comparison. At all events, the cardinal doctrine of Socrates, that virtue is a teachable science, was not held by Isocrates, though it was eminently in harmony with the profession of education which he adopted. On this point he shares the very noble and popular view expounded by Protagoras in Plato's dialogue.

When the Peloponnesian war ruined the fortunes of his family, Isocrates was obliged to turn his good education to account, and then probably took lessons from Gorgias, whose oratory was the model he adopted and vastly improved. He is also said to have been a friend of Theramenes, a more likely intimate than Socrates, also of Xenophon, and of Archinus—whom the critics restore in Suidas' notice—a well-known patriot and speaker.

§ 442. But it is evident that his first efforts in speech-writing were not in the style of Gorgias; they were the few court speeches which we still possess, and which the orator in after years deemed so unworthy of the far higher profession which he had adopted, that he stoutly denies ever having assisted in any litigation. The consistent external evidence, as well as the internal character, is, however, too clearly against him, and commentators are unanimous in refusing credence to the author asserting the spuriousness of these speeches. There is, however, another theory possible, concerning which I will speak presently, which holds all or part of these speeches to be rhetorical exercises, made on the occasion of real lawsuits, but perhaps in rivalry with the speeches really delivered, and to show what ought to have been said. This would justify Isocrates'

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Blass, *AB.* ii. p. 12.

assertion. Finding himself, however, not likely to surpass his rivals in this profession—both Lysias and Isæus must always have been more in repute—he turned to the profession of education, which had become fashionable under the Sophists and Socrates, but which he endeavoured in his manifesto *against the Sophists* to put on a new basis. In this fragment we can see the programme of all his life. He endeavours to steer a sort of midway between true philosophy, such as Socrates had taught it, and the pretended science of the Sophists, who held that expertness in speaking and in debate was in reality the only thing to be learned, and in itself the sum of education. He postulates a moral basis which, in opposition both to Socrates and the lower Sophists, he thinks impossible to attain by instruction, but, for the rest, he thinks the ideas required by a cultivated man few and easily comprehended; whereas to think them in an orderly way, and express them with elegance, is really the object of education. In fact, *le style—c'est l'homme*. In after years, when his position as a rhetorician was secured, he published some moral addresses (to Nicocles), which are on the level of the gnomic poets in thinking, and preach that vulgar and selfish piety which has not yet disappeared from Christian pulpits. But as for any criticism of received dogmas, any speculation about the nature or the destiny of man, such things are far above him. The only immortality he knows is that of fame;<sup>1</sup> the only sanction, that of material rewards. He is sceptical about the popular faith, but expresses his doubts as an ignorant man of fashion, not as a serious thinker feeling after the truth.

We have, in addition to the speech *against the Sophists*, a very long *resumé*, and defence of his life and teaching, in an imaginary speech entitled (by Aristotle) *περὶ ἀρτιόσεως*, concerning the exchange of property, from which, and from the *Panathenæicus*, we may take the remaining points of interest known to us concerning his life. But when he tells us that, in contrast to the fast youth of Atiens, his own life had been

<sup>1</sup> I am aware there is an exception, or an apparent exception, in his striking remark about the Mysteries (*Prægr.* § 28); but its repetition in a vague way elsewhere (*De Pace*, § 34) prevents any serious weight attaching to it.