

‘Novels in the Greek Letter’:
Inversions of the Written-Oral
Hierarchy in the *Briefroman* ‘Themistocles’¹

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I. Introduction

The twenty-one letters attributed to the 5th century BCE Athenian politician Themistocles have long been recognised as a much later composition (probably late 1st or 2nd century CE), and as an attempt at what we would today call an epistolary novel or *Briefroman*. Although the definition of the latter has been much disputed, common sense has recently seen this label accepted (with varying degrees of qualification) by Holzberg, Rosenmeyer and Trapp, following earlier important arguments by Penwill and Doenges.² There was no established genre of *Briefroman* for the author of these epistles to be writing in, and the text we have differs in important ways from modern examples of the genre;³ on the other hand, it is clear that what we have is a

¹ I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Olivia Budds (1980–2005), a great friend, who could have been a great classicist.

² For the dating of the work, see Rosenmeyer 2001, 231; Holzberg 1994b, 33, Cortassa 1990, 34–35, and especially Vicente Sánchez (forthcoming), 14, 147–210, 429–30, whose linguistic and stylistic analysis places the letters within the 2nd century (see below, n. 4). On the ‘*Briefroman*’ label, see Holzberg 1994b, 33–38; Rosenmeyer 2001, 231–233 and 2006, 48–49; Trapp 2003, 30; Penwill 1978; Doenges 1981. I use Cortassa’s text (1990), with his chapter divisions. English translations are available in Rosenmeyer 2006 and Lenardon 1978. I will refer to the collection of letters as a whole by the title *Themistocles* for the sake of convenience and conciseness.

³ The closest thing we have from antiquity to a modern *Briefroman* is *Chion*, perhaps contemporary with *Themistocles*, or perhaps as late as the 4th century: see now the edition by Malosse (2004a), with my review (Hodkinson 2005).

narrative composed of a collection of letters – a narrative which can be characterised as autobiographical, since the letters are all from Themistocles, and as similar to another modern genre, the historical novel. In fact, following Penwill, who makes the strongest case for considering this text as a *Briefroman* of sorts, it seems best to regard the collection as containing *two* separate narratives, consisting of letters 1–12 and 13–21 respectively.⁴ There are some inaccuracies and inconsistencies within the narrative (though many of these are resolved if one conceives of the collection as containing two narratives), but these do not make *Themistocles* any less a *Briefroman*, albeit an imperfectly executed one.⁵ There is, however, much to be said about this and similar texts *as* narratives, and in order to do this I intend to move beyond arguments about the generic classification and imperfections of these letters, returning to them only where they affect my analysis of the text. It is clear enough that these letters are intended to be read as a collection, constituting as such a fictionalised narrative of the life of Themistocles after his exile from Athens.

Any account of the Greek *Briefroman* must take full account of the earlier Greek epistolary tradition, not only letters quoted in historians, but also the dozens of collections of (mostly) pseudonymous letters attributed to historical characters. Such collections seem to have flourished and become increasingly common throughout the Hellenistic and Imperial periods.⁶ The collections vary in cohesiveness, but there seems to be a trend (as far as dates of composition can be established at all) towards increasingly coherent collections, such that one might usefully think of them as letter books (by analogy with poetic books⁷) to be conceived of and read as a whole: they contain cross-references between letters, programmatic pieces, highlight set-pieces coming at important structural points within books, etc. Alongside this increasing interest in epistolary literature or letters in literature comes an

⁴ Penwill 1978, accepted and developed further by Holzberg 1994b, 36–37, assuming a unified composition; see now Vicente Sánchez (forthcoming), 147–210 and conclusions, 429–430 for a division of the collection into two parts composed at different times, with the collection as it stands the work of an editor attempting to create a unified collection.

⁵ For a slightly fuller argument along the same lines for the *Chion Briefroman*, cf. Hodkinson 2005.

⁶ See Rosenmeyer 2001, 193–233; Hodkinson (forthcoming) for surveys of the tradition and its development. All the texts, with Latin translations, are available in Hercher 1873; most have been neglected by scholars, since they are spurious, and many have therefore never been translated into modern languages.

⁷ On which see especially Gutzwiller 1998.

increasing variety in the literary exploitation of letters. Letters are frequently quoted in novels and other fictional narratives such as the *Alexander Romance* of Ps.-Callisthenes,⁸ while books of letters can be 'historical' or '(auto-)biographical', or can concern fictional characters. At the same time, the structure of books was becoming more complex, involving experimentation with multiple writers and/or addressees within a correspondence, letters from different characters standing alone, or a mixture of letters with and without responses.⁹ The *Briefroman* is on one level, therefore, just one strand within the development of the book of letters as a literary, and specifically a narrative, form. In my discussion of *Themistocles* I shall take into account this aspect of the text's inheritance, reading it against the background of the Greek epistolary tradition, and reading the letters that make up the narrative within the (literary) epistolary conventions informing that tradition.

Themistocles is of course very different to the ancient Greek novels in many respects, but there are also many similarities:¹⁰ both are fictional narratives, set in the past and sometimes using historical characters; both kinds of literature have roots in historiography and biographical narratives, including pseudonymous letters (and share a focus on individuals rather than states). Moreover, the possibility that the 'Alexander Romance' may have originally been a kind of epistolary novel before the appearance of the extant novels¹¹ suggests a close connection between these narrative forms from their beginnings. The differences of content are not so great as to outweigh the basic similarities of kind and function: both constitute leisure reading for educated Greek-speakers.¹²

The development of the ancient novel, then, seems to have been concurrent with, and possibly related to, that of the first attempts in the direction of the *Briefroman*. In addition to this, given a likely date of the second century CE for *Themistocles*, it makes sense to make comparisons with some of the extant Greek novels, which date from around the same time. For the purposes of this paper, I will highlight one feature in particular of *Themistocles*

⁸ On letters in the novel see Robiano, Panayotakis, both in this volume; Rosenmeyer 2001, 133–168; Letoublon 2003; Doulamis 2003, 60–63, 67–69, 78–80 and especially 205–221; on the *Alexander Romance* see Rosenmeyer 2001, 169–192.

⁹ For a sample reflecting this kind of variety, compare e.g. the letters attributed to Plato, the Pythagoreans, Hippocrates, and those by Alciphron and Philostratus.

¹⁰ As I argued in the case of the *Chion Briefroman*: cf. Hodkinson 2005.

¹¹ Cf. Gunderson 1980, ch. 2; Rosenmeyer 2001, 169–192.

¹² Cf. Bowie 1996.

that is shared (in different ways) by the novels: a self-consciousness concerning modes of communication, demonstrated by implicit and explicit comparison and exploration of oral and written media, both as ‘real’ forms of communication (letters or speeches quoted within or constituting the text), and as narrative forms. In order to do this I shall discuss the letters as parts of a novelistic narrative as well as taking them individually as letters.

II. The letters as epistolary communication and as epistolary literature.

It has been recognised by epistolary theorists ancient and modern that the letter is a substitute for oral, face-to-face communication, and is often an inferior form of communication; this aspect of real letters can effectively be explored by writers of epistolary literature.¹³ The absence which ‘necessitates’ the epistolary medium for long-distance communication is itself often imagined as a disadvantage to the satisfactory execution of personal or business affairs, where the writer’s presence would facilitate a swifter and more effective reaction to any problem. This is certainly the case for Themistocles, who is writing to associates in Athens from his exile;¹⁴ this situation means that the letter and/or messenger¹⁵ are the only modes of communication with Athens (and, increasingly, the other cities of Greece) left open to him. This is of course what provides his motivation for writing the epistles constituting the narrative of *Themistocles*: letters are, among other things, the medium of the disempowered, and Themistocles is an epistolographer not by choice, but of necessity. The *Briefroman* therefore naturally deals only with the post-exilic part of Themistocles’ career. This is just the most obvious aspect of its epistolary verisimilitude: in many other ways too the writer tries to imitate

¹³ See Trapp 2003, 36 n. 155, 38–40 with bibliography and examples from ancient epistolographers. See especially Isoc. *Ep.* 1 which lists many disadvantages. Ps.-Libanius, *De forma epistolari* 2, calls the letter a ‘written conversation’ in which one says what one would say if face to face with the addressee; Demetrius, *On style* 223–224, compares the letter to one half of a dialogue, but more formal and less impromptu. (Text and translation of these and other epistolary theorists mentioned are available in Malherbe 1988; cf. Malosse 2004b.) Cf. Hodkinson (forthcoming) for an examination of the disadvantages and advantages of the letter as a theme of epistolary literature, particularly regarding the fictional epistolographers of the Second Sophistic, Aelian and Alciphron.

¹⁴ Ovid’s exile letters are the obvious comparison for this epistolary motif; but in the Greek tradition, it is an important feature of the letters of (Ps.-?)Demosthenes and ps.-Aeschines.

¹⁵ For this distinction in *Themistocles* see further below.

'real' letters, that Themistocles might be imagined to have written from exile, and to create a situation in the narrative which provides motivation for writing the letters. In this section I shall examine both the ways in which the author attempts to create this epistolary verisimilitude by using recognised epistolary devices, and how the letters are constantly compared to other means of communication (whether explicitly or implicitly).

'Epistolary verisimilitude' in this context need not be very convincing: for it is a matter of referring to the conventions and motifs of letters in literature in order to make *Themistocles* seem more like a collection of 'real' letters, so that the result is in fact *hyper*-realistic. The letters are made to be self-consciously epistolary, and the text as a whole accumulates epistolary tropes and themes as no real letter-writer would.¹⁶ This is partly an authenticating device: the letters must have their epistolarity inscribed in them, since the whole conceit and part of the appeal of the *Briefroman* lie in the readers' awareness of it, and of the privileged access to supposedly private communication which its reading grants them. But in *Themistocles* this epistolary self-consciousness is also a result of the text's concern with modes of communication within the narrative, and of a self-consciousness of its own writtenness – traits it shares with the ancient novels. The *Briefroman*'s 'epistolary verisimilitude', then, is manifested through its use of devices and motifs commonplace in earlier or contemporary epistolary literature (and discussed by the ancient epistolary theorists). These include references within letters to their epistolary and physical nature, and to their means of writing, transport and delivery, but also motifs which, while not explicitly marked as epistolary, were thought of as particularly appropriate to epistolary communication.¹⁷ The constant attempts at this form of 'verisimilitude' in *Themistocles* create a book of letters which are extremely self-conscious in their epistolarity. This self-consciousness is also evident in the comparison of the letters to oral communication: either directly and explicitly, or implicitly by their inevitable imitation of, and equally inevitable failure to be (like), oral forms of communication.

Examples of devices which aim to produce 'epistolary verisimilitude' include, as mentioned above, the realistic motivation for letter-writing and thus for the epistolary narrative: *Epistle* 1 is written from Argos, the first stop on the exiled Themistocles' travels, and explains how he came to be

¹⁶ Cf. Rosenmeyer 2001, 204–209 on epistolary verisimilitude and self-consciousness.

¹⁷ Demetrius, *On style*, 230–233 notes that there are 'epistolary' topics.

there and what had happened between leaving Athens and his arrival at Argos. This is just what one would expect of a real letter: in a non-epistolary narrative, earlier events leading to his exile might have been included, but as Themistocles was in Athens then he would have had less need for letter writing, so to begin the *Briefroman* earlier would have been less realistic. Themistocles' exile and ostracism are mentioned as the reasons for his travels, of course, for the sake of the narrative – that is, for the sake of the external reader; but since the internal readers, the addressees of Themistocles' letters, are already in possession of more facts than the external reader, this has to be done in an indirect manner in order to maintain the verisimilitude.¹⁸ So in *Epistle 1*, addressed to Aeschylus at Athens,¹⁹ Themistocles does not need to explain that he has been exiled, as everyone at Athens was well aware of the fact; therefore the author has Themistocles encounter some Argive friends who are unaware of it, and has him write to Aeschylus 'They gathered around me to ask questions when they heard about my ostracism,' (1,3)²⁰ thus informing the external reader of the situation as the narrative begins. *Epistle 2*, to Pausanias at Sparta, gives the author an early opportunity to explain more of Themistocles' circumstances to the external reader by having an addressee for whom the ostracism is news.

Another way of achieving epistolary verisimilitude is by referring to a letter as a physical object, to its being written, delivered and read. Such references are frequent in *Themistocles*, some being fairly simple: for example in *Epistle 4*, Themistocles writes 'But I am not writing this in an attempt to convict the Athenians...' (8); and at the end: 'And so I thought I should write to you about this at once; and as events unfold I shall write further.' (28) In addition to references to itself within a letter, correspondence is often referred to for the same effect, for instance in *Epistle 5,7*:

I have told you what occurred with Admetus. Please write from Argos – not to Admetus himself... but to Cratesipolis. Send a letter from your sister as well as from yourself.

¹⁸ See Altman 1982, 210 on the epistolary novelist's conflict between 'the exigencies of story' and those of 'interpersonal discourse (communication between correspondents).' This kind of verisimilitude is difficult to achieve consistently: Rosenmeyer (2001, 208–209) gives examples where our author lapses.

¹⁹ 'Presumably the playwright,' says Lenardon 1978, 156; Penwill 1978, 87 agrees.

²⁰ All translations are my own.

References to the messenger delivering the letter are also frequent, such as that in *Ep.* 3,2: ‘Therefore you will also praise the messenger for his speed...’ One might be tempted to add *Ep.* 21, which ends with the formulaic epistolary greeting ἔρρωσο (‘farewell’), which adds to its realism. However, this letter may be a later addition to the collection or be misplaced at the end,²¹ and since the others do not use this convention its use here tends to confirm suspicions about *Ep.* 21. These examples and others like them merely serve as markers and reminders to the reader that they are reading an *epistolary* narrative.

The author also uses some more elaborate devices (also familiar from earlier epistolary literature), which not only mark epistolarity but also reflect on its nature. In *Ep.* 7,1–2, to Philostephanus, Themistocles refers to Philostephanus’ messenger ‘bringing me letters from you... He spoke to me in riddles, not understanding what he himself said thus, while I did, since I knew the code that we had established between us.’ Note that messengers might be expected to read out the letters they carried to the addressee,²² the use of a code is one way of attempting to keep the letter’s significance unknown to the messenger and anyone who might intercept him or be present at his reading.²³ In *Ep.* 14 the author introduces an untrustworthy messenger employed by Pausanias, thus emphasising the fallibility of epistolary privacy necessitating the use of codes:

But Gongylus, the worst of the Eretrians, is acting as your representative to the King (if you are really using this fine fellow as a messenger), and such rumours are reported back to Greece. (14,6)

²¹ See Lenardon 1978, 98–99, with n. 34. For a different theory, cf. Rosenmeyer 2006, 52–53.

²² Alternatively, and especially in the case of political or military matters with which this and much Greek epistolary literature is concerned, scribes or servants might read letters out to rulers, councils, assemblies etc. The reference to reading aloud in this letter may point to this being a standard or at least not unusual practice in such contexts. Cf. Th. 7.8–15 for a dual oral / epistolary delivery; E. *IT* 760–765, where Iphigeneia tells Pylades, her would-be messenger, to remember the contents of the letter: as Rosenmeyer comments (2001, 77), ‘In an ideal situation, Pylades will be able to confirm the contents of the letter, but in the event of disaster... human memory will suffice’; *IA* 107–23 with Rosenmeyer 2001, 81–83.

²³ The use of codes is attested in the form of the Spartan message-stick or σκυτάλη, notably in Th. 1,131, a passage on which our author drew for *Ep.* 16: see below. See further Rosenmeyer 2001, 23 on the σκυτάλη.

With this the author also highlights, by contrast with Pausanias, Themistocles' prudence as shown by his coded correspondence with Philostephanus.

Another epistolary device which draws attention to the supposed privacy of letters is employed in *Ep.* 8, which has a more public section and a confidential postscript, introduced as follows:

Therefore... think about these matters, O Leager, and see that you inform... all our companions about them... Show them the first part of this letter up to this point, if you like, and read it out to them; but after this point, either erase the writing and destroy this part, or cut it off and keep it and let it be known to no one but you alone. (8,21–22)

Of course this is a strong marker of epistolarity and of the physical 'reality' of the letter, but its effectiveness as epistolary verisimilitude is dubious: as Rosenmeyer points out,²⁴ this letter 'should not have made it into the collection in its entirety.' This is not so problematic, however, if the reader imagines the *Briefroman* to have originated from copies of his letters which Themistocles kept; this is in any case the most likely scenario where there are multiple addressees, the only alternative being that someone managed to get hold of originals from their recipients all over Greece and beyond. Apart from the issue of verisimilitude, this device also explores the privacy of ancient letters: for it to be effective, it is necessary for this letter at least to be read by the addressee rather than by a messenger (contrast *Ep.* 7), and for him to read at least part of it quietly rather than aloud if anyone else is present. The reference to reading aloud may suggest that anyone present would be suspicious if Leager were to read it silently on receipt, or indeed that it would be so natural for him to read it aloud that he might read something private aloud by accident without the advance warning it contains.

Epistle 16 is a *tour de force* of epistolarity: in it Themistocles relates the story of how Pausanias misused epistolary privacy, and how he was uncovered and convicted by the evidence of one of his own letters. Pausanias' dubious character and trickery is thus contrasted here again with Themistocles' morality and his cleverer use of letters.²⁵ Pausanias is plotting to go over to the Persian king Artabazus: I quote the crucial passage in full:

²⁴ 2001, 205.

²⁵ This episode is of course borrowed from Th. 1,128–32, on which see Rosenmeyer 2001, 55–56. The letter ordering the death of its bearer goes back to the earliest letter in Greek

Therefore he devised a scheme for concealing his messages to the King, which kept him safe for some time but then destroyed him. Every time Pausanias sent a messenger, Artabazus killed him. For Pausanias neglected nothing in planning his betrayal, and ordered that the messengers be killed so that no account of what he had done could be preserved in any way. The scheme turned out favourably for him until the murder of the third and fourth messengers; but it was uncovered in the case of the fifth. For the fear already felt by the servants of Pausanias was increased when those who had yet to be sent noticed that none of those who *had* been sent had returned. And when Pausanias was summoned for the second time and returned to Sparta, and when he was facing charges and sent messengers to the King, the last to be sent was even more afraid. He suspected that he might be killed, and decided not to risk this fate until he learned the truth: so first he copied Pausanias’ seal, so that if proved wrong, he could use it to reseal the letter. Then having opened the letter, and having read the many details about the enslavement of the Greeks and finally about his own death, he brought it to the ephors and showed it to them. (16,9–13)

So Pausanias is brought to justice because his attempt to ensure the privacy of his letters by means of a seal and the killing of messengers (as opposed to Themistocles’ code) fails; he is again betrayed by an untrustworthy messenger (and for good reason this time).²⁶ The contrasts between Pausanias’ and Themistocles’ use of letters are of course part of a bigger picture, in which the former is painted as a scheming traitor, while Themistocles is seen to go over to the King only out of necessity and as a last resort.

These examples illustrate the author’s attempts at verisimilitude, of a sort, and the acute self-consciousness which the letters display concerning their own epistolarity and writtenness. Indeed there is something of an overload of elaborate epistolary devices and motifs, giving a sense that the author has read his *Epistolographi Graeci*²⁷ and wants to use every trick in the book! But the accumulation of such devices makes this *Briefroman* an explo-

literature, that of Proetus in *Il.* 6,167–170. Th. also contains a letter from Themistocles to Artaxerxes at 1,136–7, which, as Rosenmeyer (*loc. cit.*) comments, ‘may have played a part in inspiring’ *Themistocles*.

²⁶ Messengers betraying the trust of the sender are a common motif in the historians: e.g. *Hdt.* 6,4; *X. An.* 1,6,3–5.

²⁷ I.e. Hercher 1873.

ration of the nature, the potential and the limitations of epistolary and written communication.

III. Epistolary and oral communication.

As mentioned above, the letter was conventionally represented as an inferior substitute for oral communication, and in the case of Themistocles his disadvantage in having to conduct his affairs by letter is bound up with the enforced distance from his addressees. But letters were also considered as *imitations* of oral communication – a letter is ‘one half of a dialogue,’ or a would-be speech.²⁸ Some of the disadvantages of epistolarity are necessary consequences of the writtenness of letters and of their physical nature, which mean that they can be read by others than the intended recipient, intercepted, lost, destroyed, or even used against their writer; moreover, the need for a messenger to deliver them adds the risk of treachery. The examples above show that many of these issues are staged in the action of *Themistocles*.

Another obvious disadvantage is the time taken to write as opposed to sending an oral message, which might sometimes jeopardise the recipient, as in *Ep.* 20: a messenger arrived ‘in haste’ to tell Themistocles to flee. Here there is no mention of a letter being brought, as is frequently the case in this *Briefroman*, so that we might assume an oral message. Further exploration of this written / oral dichotomy can be seen where oral communication is referred or alluded to in the letters, or indeed where it is conspicuous by its absence. In this latter category I count quasi-orality within a letter: that is, the use of words or phrases appropriate to oral rather than written communication. This constitutes an epistolary imitation of orality, which self-consciously betrays the mimetic nature of the medium: for the letter cannot help but attempt to be (like) or to imitate speech; but, equally inevitably, it fails to be oral.

One example of this quasi-orality is the use of rhetorical questions, for instance in *Ep.* 8,17: ‘What, then, is to be done?’ someone will ask me. Am I to flee, when no one forces me to leave?’ Unremarkable, perhaps; but to come across a *rhetorical* question can suddenly make the reader imagine that this is a speech, rather than a letter. For such a question implies a present

²⁸ See above, n.13. Cf. Isoc. *Ep.* 1 with Hodkinson (forthcoming) for a self-conscious speech-substitute letter.

audience, (one of) whom the speaker pretends to anticipate or to hear asking it of him, before going on to respond (compare the standard rhetorical question endings in English, '...I hear you ask,' or '...you/one might ask.')

This ploy does not work in a letter, where the audience is absent and only the writer is present to ask himself the question. It may be objected that rhetorical questions are so commonplace that the pretence need not really be there, and that they are precisely just an aspect of *rhetorical* language, however and wherever used. But the fact remains that rhetoric is an oral genre in its origins, and it is only by transference or imitation that its oral tricks such as the rhetorical question can be used in a letter: it does not, strictly speaking, suit this medium. Ancient readers of literary and epistolary texts alike were also likely to read them aloud to each other, or even aloud to themselves,²⁹ thus imitating orality in the very act of reading the written word. Writing itself could in fact be regarded, at least by Platonists, as an imitation of speech, which was somehow more 'real', or in a sense primary where writing is secondary.³⁰ To write is therefore just to imitate speech and to write a 'script' to be read aloud, so that the transference or extension of oral, rhetorical devices to writing seems more natural; moreover, the idea of this imitation renders writing necessarily dependent on oral forms of language, but not by that fact necessarily suited to it. Rather, although written forms cannot avoid imitating oral counterparts, they must always be imperfect imitations, so that their very existence betrays their inferiority. In the case of letters specifically, reading aloud gives added significance to the idea that they are a substitute for the writer's presence, imitating or acting the part of his voice (through a messenger, or the addressee or his servant reading them aloud), rather than being simply a mute piece of writing.

The whole of the first, public part of *Ep.* 8 is very noticeably 'quasi-oral', containing other rhetorical questions and direct speech put into the mouths of a pretend audience, and referring to what Themistocles writes in terms appropriate to a speech, e.g.:

²⁹ For letters as oral performances, cf. Libanius *Epp.* 476–477; Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 44. Evidence for ancient reading practices is slight; Svenbro 1993 cautions against assuming they were like ours.

³⁰ Cf. Pl. *Ph.* 274d–277a. This attitude might be extended to the Greeks generally: cf. Svenbro 1993, especially ch. 1.

Perhaps someone might say, ‘You frighten and terrify us, O Themistocles, by these words of yours.’ For if I am silent I do not scare you, but if I speak you will listen to me... (8,12–13)

Here and elsewhere in *Ep.* 8, Themistocles writes as if speaking to a plural audience rather than writing to Leager, to whom the letter is addressed; and of course, as the private ending of *Ep.* 8 reveals (quoted above), the first part *is* intended for a wider audience, to whom Themistocles invites Leager to read it aloud. Themistocles is effectively providing a speech for Leager to deliver on his behalf, and the language used in this part is appropriately oral, in contrast to the self-consciously written and epistolary nature of the second part: compare the ideas of speech, listening and silence in the passage above, to the end of *Ep.* 8: ‘I have written about these matters to you as I think things stand’ (8,32), and to the instruction to tear off or destroy this part of the letter. In *Ep.* 8, then, the two distinct parts – public and private – are characterised by imitation of oral communication on the one hand, and self-conscious epistolarity on the other: the author thereby explores two modes of letter writing within one complex letter.

In *Ep.* 6, the author similarly writes as if composing a speech for Themistocles to address to Philostephanus, rather than a letter to send him: that is, he writes in a rhetorically effective ‘vivid’ style to attack his addressee, conjuring up the letter writer’s presence before the readers (internal and external). But it is mere imitation: the audience (addressee) cannot ask further questions or engage with Themistocles with the immediacy which this quasi-oral letter with its rhetorical questions pretends.³¹ The contrast between letter and speech is made clear at the end – a piece of epistolary self-consciousness which reminds the reader that this is no speech: ‘Therefore now write to me in response who you are to me...’ (6,12) This is crucial: Themistocles in this letter has jumped to the wrong conclusion about Philostephanus’ trustworthiness, following misinformation by Tibius who turns out to be the untrustworthy one. Because of Themistocles’ distance from Philostephanus and the consequent epistolary nature of their exchange, he labours under a misapprehension, and has to wait for a letter in response, which he duly requests; but this serves to underline the fact that Philostephanus’ imaginary presence as

³¹ Contrast Th. 7,8–15 where Nicias uses a letter in order to make sure his message is not forgotten, but verses his messengers in the situation well enough so that they can also answer questions from their audience. Cf. Rosenmeyer 2001, 57–58.

an audience to a quasi-oral letter, was precisely imaginary: he did not, in fact, have the opportunity to pose the question which Themistocles pretended to pose for him, nor therefore to defend himself on hearing the answer: the information came from Tibius. If the imagined presence had been real – that is, had this been an oral instead of a written communication – the whole misunderstanding would have been cleared up instantly, rather than needing two letters from Themistocles (*Epp.* 6 and 7) and one from Philostephanus to him (which we must imagine as responding to *Ep.* 6). This pair of letters thus makes an implicit comparison between written and oral communication, deciding in favour of speech.

Epistle 9 is a response to Callias' rebukes in a speech to the Athenians for electing 'unworthy' magistrates such as Themistocles, about which someone in Athens must have written to inform him.³² Themistocles repeats the idea of Callias 'rebuking' the Athenians, using many different terms for it, and attempts to undermine any position of authority from which the latter might claim to make such reproaches, e.g.:

...with words, then, in which you are most incapable, you try to advise [Athens]; and concerning military matters, in which you are most ineffectual and cowardly, you criticise the Athenians for choosing this course and not the other. (9,8)

The letter thus presents the supposed contents of Callias' speech (without quoting it), and forms Themistocles' riposte addressed to him; 'O Callias' in the opening sentence is particularly appropriate to a speech. The rhetoric of the letter is strong, and seems as if it might be effective. But this is only the case if we forget the rhetoric's epistolary medium: for Callias has had his say before the Athenians, while Themistocles, of course, cannot speak to them. This 'speech', if also delivered before the Athenians as a response to that of Callias, *might* have been persuasive, but as it is, it is a futile letter to Callias, who will presumably not pay much attention to its contents, let alone present them to a wider audience. In its context and contents *Ep.* 9 seems to imitate oral discourse, then, and to do it well; but in reality it must fail, and its mock-orality simply highlights Themistocles' absence and consequent lack of opportunity to speak.

³² Cf. Costa 2001, 175 on line 33.

I examined above the epistolary tricks in *Ep.* 16 which end in Pausanias' downfall; but there is also a parallel oral element to the story. After the messenger brought Pausanias' letter to the ephors and told them what he knew, *Ep.* 16 continues:

And then they [the ephors], possessing evidence against Pausanias both in this writing and in other words, set about discovering the whole truth. (16,14)

They go on to contrive a meeting between Pausanias and the messenger (the latter as a suppliant to ask Pausanias to spare his life), and send some men to eavesdrop on the conversation, and thus convict him. In this scenario, oral and written forms of communication are combined: the possibilities of breaching both epistolary and oral privacy are illustrated, as well as the use of communications in both forms against their originator. As Rosenmeyer says of this episode in Thucydides:³³

[The ephors'] suspicion of written documents, which may be forgeries even when appropriately signed and sealed (after all, the courier had already counterfeited one seal), and their faith only in an oral pronouncement from the man himself, reflect an ongoing debate between oral and written authority.

Note that it is the letter which provides the initial evidence which leads the ephors to accept what the messenger says and to gather further proof; but that on its own it is not enough, and an oral confirmation is required.

I have argued so far that the letters which constitute *Themistocles* often show a self-consciousness concerning epistolarity, and that they explore the limitations of written communication, sometimes in comparison (explicit or implicit) with oral communication, which is usually (though not always) presented as more advantageous. The apparent presence of orality in a letter is deceptive; moreover, the imitation of oral forms shows that letters *must* sometimes imitate speech, since it is in their nature to do so, being substitutes for the presence and speech of their writers. This is especially so in Greek intellectual and sophistic culture, in which the Platonic designation of

³³ See above, n. 25.

writing itself as a mere imitation of speech was influential.³⁴ But these imitations must fail in their epistolary context, since they *are* only substitutes and can bring about neither real presence, nor immediacy of response or action.

IV. Epistolarity and orality in the narrative of *Themistocles*.

So far I have been considering the letters mostly as items of communication between Themistocles and his addressees, rather than between the author and the external reader – that is, as fragments of a narrative. In this section I shall consider what difference epistolarity makes to the narrative of this *Briefroman*, with specific reference to its use of (quasi-)orality quoted within or juxtaposed with letters. I shall briefly compare this situation to the novels, which contain letters (as well as direct speech) quoted within them and used as narrative devices; these uses have been explored relatively often in recent scholarship.³⁵ An obvious general point is that while in the novels letters can be used to vary the means and pace of narration and to provide differences of focalisation, in an epistolary novel the reverse is true: so *Themistocles* contains reported and direct speech to add similar variety.

One use of the letter in literature is to lend an appearance of authenticity, and thus authority, to a narrative (or to a report within it, etc.). This arises from the personal and private nature of real letters, which thereby appear to give privileged and unmediated access to the writer's actual thoughts and intentions – in theory at least. In fact, as we have seen, this privacy is by no means guaranteed; nor, of course, is the authenticity – a letter could be forged, for instance, just as a seal is forged in *Themistocles* (this possibility, however, is not explored here). Nevertheless, letters are still used in this way in literature, and indeed this paves the way for the subversion of the motif through breaches of epistolary privacy. When used as part of a larger (non-epistolary) narrative, letters can give credibility to a report for their internal readers, i.e. their addressees, and also create realism or an illusion of authen-

³⁴ Cf. Gunderson 2003, 46 n. 40 for a parallel from the world of declamation – an example which 'privileg[es] speech over writing even as writing comes to be a metaphor for speech.' The privileging of orality by such written, quasi-oral texts as the dialogues of Plato and the elder Seneca's declamation is of course paradoxical: in Platonic terms, they are necessarily engaged in the same mimetic process.

³⁵ See above, n. 8. See especially Rosenmeyer 2001 for the various ways in which letters have special status in the narrative of the novels.

ticity to external readers complicit in the fiction's attempt to take them in.³⁶ When the narrative is entirely composed of letters, then, this acts as an authenticating device for the whole story.³⁷ Backed by the 'epistolary verisimilitude' given to various individual letters (see part I above), the effect is to give a literary kind of realism to the *Briefroman*: these are plausible as real letters, and the story they tell is to be believed, as it is all straight from the main character's pen. The middleman – the narrator of a novel – is cut out, the action boiled down to what can plausibly be referred or alluded to in the letters. Thus the *Briefroman* might be thought to represent a crystallisation of the narration of the novels, with its focus on private lives and the thoughts and subjectivities of individual characters, into its most personal form.³⁸

I have said that letters, because of their privileged status as personal and private (and perhaps also the special status of writing, seals, etc.), can be used in the novel as authenticating devices (albeit by no means infallible ones). They can provide evidence to corroborate an oral report (as in *Ep.* 16 of *Themistocles*) or to uncover a false one, and are thus often very important when they appear in the novel.³⁹ *Themistocles* explores these aspects of the letter, as we have seen, and no doubt exploits them in lending an air of authenticity to the *Briefroman*; but at the same time it frequently compares letters unfavourably to oral communication. Epistolary communication is shown to be fraught with difficulties in *Themistocles*; while the special authority or privileged status often accorded to letters embedded in novels or other longer texts is in fact diminished or even reversed in this text. This is illustrated by *Ep.* 10, in which 'Themistocles in shame obliquely alludes to his ambitions in Persia and the fact that he is on his way to the King.'⁴⁰ The

³⁶ For a letter adding realism to the plot, cf. Rosenmeyer 2001, 148 on Achilles Tatius 1,3,6. See below, nn. 37, 39, for the authenticating and inherently credible properties of letters.

³⁷ Cf. Merkle 1996, 565–566 on the prefatory letters to Dictys Cretensis and Dares Phrygius, which similarly authenticate the whole subsequent narrative.

³⁸ I owe some of this formulation to Tim Whitmarsh (*per litteras!*)

³⁹ Cf. the trial in Chariton 5,4–8 involving a genuine and a forged letter as evidence; Chaeareas, the writer of the former, is assumed to be dead until he appears in person to verify the truth of the letter; see Rosenmeyer 2001, 139–143. Cf. Xenophon of Ephesus 2,5–10, where Manto's own letter is used as evidence that her later accusations are false. In Heliodorus 10,4, a dual oral and epistolary delivery reinforces the earnestness of an invitation.

⁴⁰ Lenardon 1978: 173, comparing *Ep.* 8,29 ('What I shall do if I am able, I am ashamed to say, but [I admit] that I wish to act if I can.' The text is corrupt here but something like 'I admit' must complete the sense: Cortassa conjectures οὐκ ἄρνοῦμαι or οὐκ ἐξαρνοῦμαι).

letter contains an allusion to an oral communication, but lacks its contents, so conveying absence more than presence (even the feigned 'presence' and mock-orality of a letter):

I have dared to do great and terrible things, O Habronichus. I sent Euxitheus to you and, when he spoke to you in person and revealed what I had decided, you were silent... (10,1–2)

This letter does not communicate very much, either to Habronichus or the external reader; the former has heard the oral report, of course, while the latter must fill in the gaps from his knowledge of the Themistocles story and the context of the other letters. One might regard Habronichus' silence here as a meta-textual reference to the lack of communication in this letter:⁴¹ the 'privileged' and private epistolary medium is *not* trusted by Themistocles enough to give that access to his true personal thoughts perhaps conventionally expected from letters within a longer narrative. As often in *Themistocles*, it is *oral* communication which is privileged here, while the written is merely an afterthought to the conversation which was too important and sensitive to be written down: the omission of the crucial speech itself serves to highlight the contrast.

As a narrative medium, the letter is of course rather limited, at least when used in a way which makes the letters seem plausible *as* letters, which I have argued the author of *Themistocles* attempts to do. Letters can of course contain narrative, which can in turn contain direct speech, etc., but the longer and more complex it gets, the less plausible a letter becomes.⁴² There

Contrast *Historia Apollonii* 20–21, where the princess can say in a letter what she could not orally, since 'wax... has no sense of shame.' However as Rosenmeyer (2001, 156) notes, 'her innate modesty forbids her to mention her beloved's name, even in writing.' See Panayotakis, this volume, on this passage. Cf. also Heliiodorus 10.13 with Rosenmeyer 2001, 166: 'The written text speaks for Persinna at this crucial moment when it proves difficult for her to find words to explain herself.'; and at 10,34, Charicleia is too modest to speak of her love for Theagenes and thus save his life: the narrative requires epistolary interventions to avert this disaster and come to its proper conclusion.

⁴¹ As Ewen Bowie has suggested to me.

⁴² Of course, there is no real limit to how long a letter can be, but ancient epistolary theorists certainly thought that there was an appropriate length for letters: cf. Demetrius *On style* 228 'Those that are too long... become in truth not letters but treatises with 'Dear *x*' tacked on.' Cf. Julius Victor *Ars rhetorica* 27. Conciseness is to be sought, insofar as clarity of expression permits: cf. Philostratus of Lemnos *De epistulis*; Ps.-Libanius, *De forma epistolari* 47–49.

is also the problem of how to inform the external reader of facts known to the addressee which would be superfluous if stated directly. There are also likely to be gaps in the knowledge of the letter-writer(s), which can be filled in by a novel's narrator but should be left as gaps in a *Briefroman*: this is largely overcome in *Themistocles* (as in *Chion*) by having the letter-writer as the main character in an autobiographical narrative. Such limitations, then, do not necessarily make for literature that is 'limited': indeed, the ways in which good writers deal with and explore formal limitations is part of their skill – a spur, because a challenge, to their creativity. I have tried to show how the author of *Themistocles* deals with these challenges and explores the idea of epistolarity in a varied and sophisticated manner. There is, however, one letter in which he 'cheats' the limitations somewhat: I shall end with the climactic⁴³ *Ep.* 20, which might be regarded as a test case for the epistolarity of this *Briefroman*.

Epistle 20, addressed to Polygnotus, is effectively the conclusion to, and almost a *mise-en-abyme* of, the whole *Briefroman*, going back to Themistocles' flight from Argos near the beginning of his exile.⁴⁴ It is extremely long for a letter, and begs the question why Themistocles could not have written to Polygnotus in the intervening time. Indeed, even the period since his arrival in the Persian empire (besides the summary of most of his previous exile experiences) is quite long: he even had time to learn Persian on his travels there *before* arriving at the King's court! Since it sums up the events of a long period, *Ep.* 20 is also more like a conventional narrative than a letter, and includes several short speeches and dialogue quoted in full;⁴⁵ there is even geographical description to accompany the Persian travel narrative:

As I journeyed I passed small mountains and low-lying valleys, and I saw and crossed great plains that were completely flat. The great majority of the area was inhabited and cultivated, but the desert nourished wild

⁴³ Quite possibly intended as the last of the book: see above, n. 21.

⁴⁴ Narrated in *Ep.* 3 (in the first sequence), *Ep.* 17 (in the second), which dwells more on the stay in Argos.

⁴⁵ Cf. Pérez Jiménez 1998 for an analysis of this letter and its differences from the rest of *Themistocles*: as he says (352), 'Frente a la mayoría de las otras cartas, que abundan en reflexiones sobre la situación del exiliado y sobre la ingratitud de quienes le deben casi todo, la carta veinte... es fundamentalmente narrativa, historiográfica.' The article focuses on the speeches embedded in the letter.

beasts and herds of other animals. And I sailed many rivers and met with all sorts of peoples. (20,29)

None of this is impossible for the content of a letter, of course: letters can potentially contain anything. But it does seem as if the author was here more concerned to give a mini-narrative (reminiscent of Herodotus or Xenophon) to round off the story than to continue with epistolary verisimilitude (although the letter does begin with an epistolary marker: '...what you told me to write, I have written to you,' 20,1).

The difference between *Ep.* 20 and the rest could be ascribed to the ultimately limited and limiting nature of the *Briefroman* form: the author wanted something more immediate and vivid to end with, and so resorts to a letter quoting several speeches, instead of employing several letters. Indeed, it is in the King's presence and in oral communication with him that the drama and suspense are at their peak:⁴⁶

[quoting the King's speech] '... Would you tell me how you have the audacity to be seen in my sight and to listen to my voice? Have *you* come here, that Themistocles, who the Persians say are the reason that neither I nor my father has ruled the Greeks? It would be better for me to have the Greeks than to inflict punishment upon you, but you have presented me with the latter alternative instead of the former – and so, having praised you, I shall punish you.' (20,32)

This kind of drama, with a real and present threat to Themistocles' life, would not have been possible if the author had made Themistocles write to the King from a distance instead of narrating an encounter with him in person. Themistocles' responding speech also shows his skill and quick thinking in a way which an epistolary exchange could not. But there is another reason for this new mode of narration here: the author is trying to present Themistocles in a good light, indeed to vindicate him for going over to the King, while writing a realistic 'historical novel' of sorts. Pérez Jiménez⁴⁷ provides an excellent analysis of the author's use of rhetorical techniques in order to vindicate Themistocles. He observes that the respective use or omission of Themistocles' name in the mouths of those praising and defending

⁴⁶ Cf. Pérez Jiménez 1998 on the 'dramatic' mode of *Ep.* 20.

⁴⁷ 1998.

him or of those accusing him plays a significant role in the letter's rhetorical effect, as does the mention of his merits and past achievements by others. Both of these techniques are exemplified in the excerpt from the King's speech quoted above, albeit the praise in the mouth of an old enemy is something of a backhanded compliment. The embedded speeches in this letter thus facilitate the inclusion of much praise of Themistocles which would have been unseemly self-praise in a simple letter.

The dialogic treatment of this episode also allows for an explanation for Themistocles' actions under immediate pressure from the King: an epistolary communication, on the other hand, would have shown Themistocles as pre-meditating his betrayal of Greece. Only a face-to-face encounter with the King, and the threat of punishment, can go some way towards achieving this vindication. Thus Themistocles writes:

When he had said these things, it occurred to me that I could use my trickery, which the occasion made a virtue, if of necessity I praised its merits [to the King]. (20,33)

In writing this, 'Themistocles' refutes interpretations of these events which would portray him as unpatriotic, such as Plutarch's *Life of Themistocles*.⁴⁸ He goes on to make his alliance with the King, before the letter (and with it perhaps the *Briefroman*)⁴⁹ ends with an apparent foreboding of Themistocles' suicide faced with leading the Medes against Athens. The author's final stretching of the narrative's epistolary form is, then, in keeping with his aim to present Themistocles in a positive light throughout, which would have been difficult to achieve otherwise. At the same time, it does provide a purple patch to finish the narrative with a suitably dramatic climax.⁵⁰

I have argued that the narrative of *Themistocles* explores its epistolary form and its limitations, finding various ways to meet those challenges. Its use of epistolarity is an authenticating device for the narrative as a whole, but unlike some uses of letters in the novels, it paradoxically privileges oral

⁴⁸ Cf. Pérez Jiménez 1998, 358.

⁴⁹ See above, n. 21.

⁵⁰ The use of 'purple passages' which stand out from a longer work was characteristic of the artistic prose of the Second Sophistic: cf. Anderson 1993, 144–55. Pérez Jiménez 1998, 358–359 points out several *clausulae* ('contra las normas del género epistolar') at the end of the speech and of the whole letter, elevating the final episode into an appropriately tragic and heroic mode.

reports, thus inverting the situation in the novels where a letter in the narrative can have special status and importance. By its inclusion of oral communication, the limited narrative scope of the *Briefroman* repeatedly brings competing modes of communication into close proximity, and thus explores their different potentials as communication, and at the same time, self-consciously examines the epistolary medium of the novel itself. The letter's potential to contain any subject matter, and to form a short and personal narrative (including quotation of speeches) is exploited to the full, and the author pushes at the limits of this narrative capacity without stretching it beyond what is necessary for his purposes.⁵¹

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