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The Eternity of Literature: Ancient Greek Literary Criticism

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Ancient Greek literature, as is well known, progressed through numerous genres, from epic to lyric, to drama, and to history and philosophy. Each genre drew from, and further developed, a former genre. History and philosophy followed these earlier genres as well, but criticized them too. Of all philosophers, Plato was the one who most thoroughly censured poets: epicist, lyricist, and dramatist and indeed wanted to expel them from his ideal city.

In this paper, I demonstrate that historians and philosophers, including Plato, in fact aim at the same goal as poets. This goal is the eternity. Poets believe that the Muses inspire them, allowing them to narrate what humanity in general can not know. It is through their divine narration that great deeds are handed down from generation to generation for posterity. The duty of historians is also to transmit great deeds for posterity, but historians no longer rely on the divine inspiration and investigate historical facts. Thucydides designs his history to be the eternal legacy. Philosophers condemn poetry because it blasphemes gods. They claim for themselves the notion of inspiration from the Muses and insist on their version of eternity in that they claim to perceive the eternal truth. Despite their different means, all Greek writers intend to be eternal and to approach the immortality of the gods.