



The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece

Andrew Ford

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By "literary criticism" we usually mean a self-conscious act involving the technical and aesthetic appraisal, by individuals, of autonomous works of art. Aristotle and Plato come to mind. The word "social" does not. Yet, as this book shows, it should--if, that is, we wish to understand where literary criticism as we think of it today came from. Andrew Ford offers a new understanding of the development of criticism, demonstrating that its roots stretch back long before the sophists to public commentary on the performance of songs and poems in the preliterate era of ancient Greece. He pinpoints when and how, later in the Greek tradition than is usually assumed, poetry was studied as a discipline with its own principles and methods.

The Origins of Criticism complements the usual, history-of-ideas approach to the topic precisely by treating criticism as a social as well as a theoretical activity. With unprecedented and penetrating detail, Ford considers varying scholarly interpretations of the key texts discussed. Examining Greek discussions of poetry from the late sixth century B.C. through the rise of poetics in the late fourth, he asks when we first can recognize anything like the modern notions of literature as imaginative writing and of literary criticism as a special knowledge of such writing.

Serving as a monumental preface to Aristotle's *Poetics*, this book allows readers to discern the emergence, within the manifold activities that might be called criticism, of the historically specific discourse on poetry that has shaped subsequent Western approaches to literature.

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