

# INTRODUCTION TO GREEK DRAMA AND *ANTIGONE*

Greek drama grew out of ancient religious rituals honoring Dionysos (DI·uh·NICE·us), the god of wine and fertility. During these celebrations, worshipers danced around the altar of the god, singing hymns to the wild, passionate accompaniment of the flute.

At some point during the sixth century B.C., these Dionysian (DI·uh·nye·SEE·un) celebrations became an annual festival held in Athens at a large outdoor **amphitheater**<sup>1</sup>. Eventually, the dancing choruses of worshipers began competing for prizes (a bull or a goat). Tradition has it that a man named Thespis transformed these hymns into songs that still honored Dionysos but also told the story of a famous hero or even another god. Then Thespis added another **innovation**<sup>2</sup>: One of the chorus members would step away from the others to play the part of that hero or god. This individual actor wore a mask and entered into a dialogue with the chorus. Drama was born when the playwright Aeschylus (ESS·kuh·luss) added a second individual actor to the performance, thereby creating the possibility of conflict.

By the end of the fifth century B.C., this annual festival, called the Dionysia (DI·uh·nye·SEE·uh), had become a four-day **extravaganza**<sup>3</sup>. Public business was suspended; prisoners were released on bail. As many as fourteen thousand spectators gathered in the open-air Theater of Dionysos to watch as playwrights chosen by the city magistrates competed for prizes in tragedy and comedy. After an opening day of traditional choral hymns, three dramatists in each category presented their plays over the next three days. Each morning, one of the playwrights presented three tragedies and a satyr play, and that afternoon, another playwright presented a comedy. The tragedies were serious treatments of religious and mythic questions. The satyr plays (named for the **lecherous**<sup>4</sup> wood demons, or satyrs, who formed the chorus) were comic and even **raucous**<sup>5</sup> treatments of the same themes.

## THE GREEK THEATER

The Theater of Dionysos looked like a semicircular football stadium. The seats were carved out of stone on a hillside; at the bottom was a performance area divided into two parts. In the front was a rounded orchestra, a fairly large space where the chorus sang and danced around the remnant of an altar. Behind the orchestra was a platform where the actors spoke their lines from behind huge masks. These masks had exaggerated mouthpieces that amplified the actors' voices. Many were **stylized**<sup>6</sup> into familiar character types that were easily recognized by the audience. All the actors were men, and the choruses were well-trained boys. By switching masks, each actor could play several roles.

A few days before the festival of Dionysos began, that year's competing playwrights, choruses, and actors would march in a procession through the city of Athens. A **herald**<sup>7</sup> would announce the titles of the competing plays, and masked **revelers**<sup>8</sup> would dance through the streets, carrying a statue of Dionysos from the god's temple to his theater.

## SOPHOCLES

Sophocles (SOFF·uh·klease, 496?–406 B.C.) is generally considered the greatest of the ancient Greek playwrights. Few writers from any period have had a greater impact on drama, and few have been better loved in their own lifetimes.

A prominent citizen of Athens, Sophocles was known for his musical, poetic, and dramatic talents. He also took an active role in public life, serving as general, political leader, and priest. He is said to have been extremely handsome and graceful. At the age of seventeen, he was the *choragos*, or chorus leader, in a dramatic celebration of Greece's victory over Persia. When he was twenty-eight, he caused a sensation by winning first prize for tragedy at the festival of Dionysos, defeating Aeschylus, the leading playwright of the day. Over the next sixty-two years, Sophocles went on to win twenty-four first prizes and seven second prizes in thirty-one competitions—the best record of any Greek playwright.

Sophocles made good use of a remarkably long life, writing more than one hundred and twenty tragedies, of which only seven survive today. A religious **conservative**<sup>9</sup>, he was deeply concerned with the individual's need to find a place in the existing moral and cosmic order. His plays always contain a moral lesson—usually a caution against pride and religious **indifference**<sup>10</sup>. Sophocles was also a great technical innovator: He added a third actor to Aeschylus's original two, introduced painted sets, and expanded the size of the chorus to fifteen.

Few plays are more universally admired than Sophocles' three "Theban" plays—three tragedies about King Oedipus (ED·uh·pus) of Thebes and his family. Sophocles wrote these plays over a forty-year period, and actually began with the third part of the story, *Antigone*, first performed in 442 B.C. Twelve years later, Sophocles backtracked and wrote the first part of the story, *Oedipus the King*. It wasn't until the last year of his life that Sophocles wrote the middle segment, *Oedipus at Colonus*. Perhaps the ninety-year-old playwright hoped that people would soon say of him what one of his characters says after Oedipus dies and is mysteriously carried off by the gods:

. . . he was taken without **lamentation**<sup>11</sup>,  
Illness or suffering; indeed his end  
Was wonderful if mortal's ever was.

—from *Oedipus at Colonus*

## THE BACKGROUND OF ANTIGONE

The basic plot of *Antigone* was part of a long mythic story that was as familiar to Athenian audiences as stories about George Washington or Abraham Lincoln are to us. For Greek audiences watching *Antigone*, suspense came not from their anxiety about what would happen next, but rather from their knowledge of things the characters on stage did not know. As these characters spoke in their ignorance, the audience pitied them and wanted to warn them of their **impending**<sup>12</sup> doom.

The following story is the myth the Athenians knew and the one that we must also know if we are to understand *Antigone*.

## THE OEDIPUS MYTH

King Laios (LIE·us) and Queen Jocasta (yo·CAHST·uh) of Thebes learned from an **oracle**<sup>13</sup> that their newborn son would kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified by this prediction, they gave their baby to a shepherd with orders to leave the infant to die on a nearby mountainside with his ankles pinned together. But the shepherd took pity on the baby. Instead of abandoning him, he gave him to a Corinthian shepherd, who in turn gave the baby to the childless king and queen of Corinth. They named him Oedipus, which means “swollen foot” or “club foot,” and raised him as their son. They never told him he was adopted.

When Oedipus was a young man, he learned of the prediction that made his true parents forsake him. Believing the king and queen of Corinth to be his real parents, he ran away from home to avoid such a terrible fate. In the course of his travels, he encountered an **arrogant**<sup>14</sup> old man who tried to run him off the road with his chariot. Because honor was at stake, the two men fought, and Oedipus killed the stranger. Thinking no more of the incident—such occurrences were probably common on the roads in those days—Oedipus continued on his journey to the city of Thebes.

At the outskirts of the city, he encountered the Sphinx, a terrible monster with the wings of an eagle, the body of a lion, and the head of a woman. This Sphinx had been **menacing**<sup>15</sup> Thebes by lying in ambush for travelers and then challenging them to answer a riddle. If they could answer it correctly, they could proceed on their way; if not, the Sphinx would devour them. So far, no one had been able to solve the riddle, which went like this: “What creature goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?” Oedipus immediately guessed that the answer was “man”: He crawls on all fours as an infant, walks on two legs as an adult, and leans on a cane in old age. Upon hearing Oedipus’s answer, the defeated Sphinx leaped into the sea.

When Oedipus arrived in Thebes, the people welcomed him as their savior. Since Laios, their king, had recently been killed, they offered Oedipus their throne and the young widowed queen, Jocasta, as his bride. So Oedipus became king of Thebes, married Jocasta, and had four children with her: two sons, Polyneices (pol·uh·NICE·ease) and Eteocles (uh·TEE·uh·klease); and two daughters, Antigone (ann·TIG·uh·nee) and Ismene (is·ME·knee).

All went well for many years until a plague struck Thebes. Desperate to learn the cause, Oedipus sent Jocasta’s brother, Creon (KRAY·ahn, or KREE·ahn), to consult the great oracle at Delphi (DELL·phee). The oracle warned that the plague would not end until Thebes had punished the murderer of King Laios, who lived among them undetected. Oedipus vowed to save Thebes once again by finding this murderer. After questioning several people, including the blind prophet Teiresias (tie·REE·see·us), he discovered that the man he had killed on the road years before was none other than King Laios. Furthermore, he learned that he was not the son of the king and queen of Corinth, but rather the son of Laios and Jocasta. Thus Oedipus had in fact fulfilled the oracle—he had killed his father and married his mother. When Oedipus and Jocasta discovered this horrible truth, she killed herself and he gouged out his eyes to punish himself for having been blind to the truth.

After these disasters, Creon took over as regent (acting ruler) of Thebes, and after several years he decided to **exile**<sup>16</sup> Oedipus. Accompanied only by his daughter Antigone (in some versions of the myth, also by Ismene), Oedipus wandered the countryside as a beggar until he reached the sanctuary of Colonus, where he died.

Antigone returned to Thebes, where her two brothers had agreed to rule in alternate years. Eteocles' turn came first, but when it ended, he refused to give up his throne to Polyneices. Polyneices fled to the city of Argos, where he raised an army and attacked the seven gates of Thebes. The Thebans repulsed each assault, but in the course of the battle, Eteocles and Polyneices killed each other.

Creon then became king of Thebes and gave Eteocles, his ally, a hero's burial. Creon considered Polyneices a traitor, so he decreed that his body be left unburied, to rot in the sun outside the city gates. To the Greeks, this was a terrible punishment: Their holiest laws demanded that certain burial rites be performed, or else the soul of the dead person would be condemned to eternal unrest. This is the basis of Creon's conflict with the strong-willed Antigone: As you will see, she believes that God's laws must be obeyed, whatever the consequences.

## THE THEMES OF ANTIGONE

The conflict in *Antigone*—individual conscience at odds with established authority—is eternally **relevant**<sup>17</sup>. When we know that those in power are morally wrong, do we break their laws, or do we **collaborate**<sup>18</sup> with them by obeying? This was a crucial question for some Europeans during World War II. It was against the law, for instance, to help Jews escape the Nazis in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe. Despite the official censorship that existed in occupied France during World War II, the French playwright Jean Anouilh (ah · new · EE) presented his own version of *Antigone*. His characters wore modern military uniforms and carried guns instead of swords; Creon is portrayed as the dictator of a **contemporary**<sup>19</sup> police state. Anouilh's play was an outcry against French collaboration with the Nazis. In writing this play, Anouilh himself could be considered a kind of Antigone figure—the voice of conscience speaking out against moral wrongs at the risk of his own life. Perhaps both Sophocles and Anouilh are asking us whether we would be so brave if put to the test.