

Antigone

by Sophocles



Greek Dionysian mask (early 1st century A.D.). Bronze, silver inlay, and traces of copper.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Gift of Gérard van der Kemp, 1958.

Greek drama grew out of ancient religious rituals honoring Dionysos (dī'ə-nish'əs), 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 celebrations became an annual festival held in Athens at a large outdoor amphitheater. 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: 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 (es'kə-ləs) 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, had become a four-day extravaganza. 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 wood demons, or *satyrs*, who formed the chorus) were comic and even raucous 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 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 would announce the titles of the competing plays, and masked revelers would dance through the streets, carrying a statue of Dionysos from the god's temple to his theater.

Sophocles

Sophocles (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, 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. 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 (e'də-pəs) 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,
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



Greek vase (late 6th century B.C.) showing Dionysos standing between a maenad and a satyr.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Rogers Fund, 1906.