

# History of the Drama

The origins of drama are obscure, but the form is probably as old as language itself. The first theater might have been a Stone Age campfire; the first actor-playwright, a person retelling the story of a hunt to other members of the tribe. All the ingredients were probably there: the suspenseful story, the conflict between hero and enemy, the tense hush in the audience, the climax, the satisfying ending.

Drama evolved through the ages. The drama of the early Greeks began as simple religious celebrations, but by the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., the Greeks were presenting their plays in huge, open-air amphitheaters. Costumed performers acted out the old Greek myths and legends, and the large audience spent all day at the theater, viewing a series of tragedies interspersed with comedies. When the center of Mediterranean civilization shifted from Greece to Rome,

there was a decline in the range and scope of the drama. Although the Romans enjoyed comedies and some tragedies, many of their plays were copied from those of the Greeks.

During the Middle Ages, drama was for a while confined to strolling minstrels and players, who sang or mimed their tales to small groups in marketplaces, fairs, or courts. Gradually, from the rich ceremonies of the medieval church grew another form of drama. As with the Greeks, this drama was connected at first to religious rituals. Bible stories were acted out, first by priests before the altar and later by actors on the steps of the cathedral. Biblical plays gave way to what were called "morality plays," in which actors pretended to be abstract qualities, such as vice, greed, or charity. These plays were enacted to teach certain morals or lessons. Eventually, as Greek and Roman manuscripts began to be rediscovered, the classical dramas were copied and restaged. By the end of the sixteenth century, the folk, religious, and classical elements of the theater had culminated in the dramas of William Shakespeare.

Since Shakespeare's time, drama has continued to take on varied forms, and certain forms have been associated with particular countries. Ever since the seventeenth century, the English have often used the stage to laugh at themselves and to criticize their own society. The Italians have produced grand opera. The French have produced plays that are, for the most part, cool, objective, and ironic—a theater of the mind. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Scandinavians produced a series of "social" dramas that were angry, hard-headed attacks on middle-class society. Americans became famous for the development of popular dramatic forms—musical comedies and movies, which made Broadway and Hollywood practically household terms.

## Tragedy and Comedy

Over the centuries, plays have generally clustered around two poles: tragedy and comedy. These terms were first established by the Greeks. *Tragos* in Greek means "goat" and *oide*, "song," thus "goatsong." This suggests a primitive play in which an actor, dressed in goatskin, sang his lines. We do not



The actor Menander and three dramatic masks. A Roman relief based on a Greek original.  
The Art Museum, Princeton University.



know much about these ancient "goatsongs," but we do know that as Greek drama developed, the word *tragedy* came to be applied to serious plays that depicted the fall and death of a noble character in conflict with forces beyond his or her control. It is not easy to say exactly what tragedy is, but it is clear that tragedy must have something to do with thought, with human decisions. A person who makes a series of foolish decisions and gets into trouble doesn't seem tragic. Tragedy requires that the hero or heroine make choices that lead to a situation from which there is no escape. Tragedy is the confrontation of human intelligence with forces that intelligence cannot cope with. We admire the tragic heroes and heroines for their struggles; we feel that perhaps we might do the same things; and we weep when we see them fall. When

we leave a tragic play, our feeling is one of profound sadness. Yet we also feel our hearts lifted, because we have been reminded of the fact that people are capable of nobility of spirit, even in the face of overwhelming disaster.

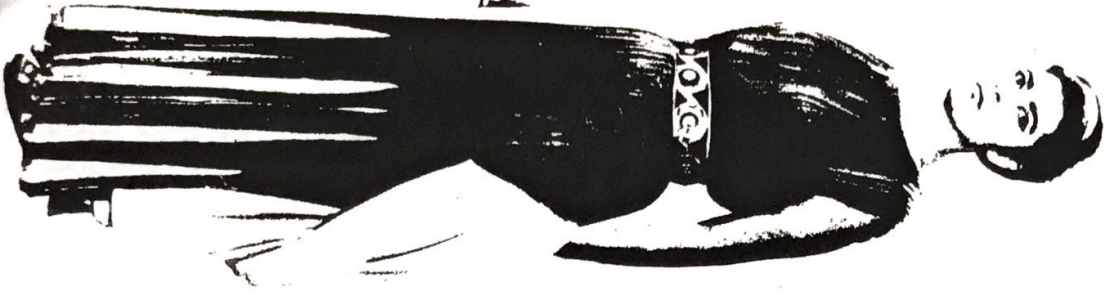
The Greek word *komos* suggests a festive procession, and *oide*, as already mentioned, is a song. Most likely, in ancient Greece, this song was sung by a daring peasant who, with temporary immunity, poked fun at his ruler and let him know a few of his faults. It is thought that classical Greek comedy rose from these primitive beginnings, and eventually developed into a special form of theater in which a comic hero acted out a story that mocked social customs and procedures. The best comedy of all ages seems to have continued in this tradition. Comedy usually takes aim at society, advocates changes, and makes us laugh at its boldness and truthfulness. Both tragic and comic figures struggle against authority of some sort. In tragedy, the odds are usually unquerable; in comedy, the hero or heroine is usually able to overthrow the authority figure and the play ends happily. One of the most popular comic plots is the one involving two lovers. In this plot, one of the lovers must overcome some obstacle—social or personal—to their marriage. Hollywood has been capable of finding endless variations on this popular comic plot.

In this unit you will find two tragedies: Sophocles' *Antigone*, first performed around 440 B.C. in Athens, and William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, first performed in 1599 in London. Though tragedy and comedy are useful generalizations, literature refuses to be easily pigeonholed, as you will see from the American dramas included here. The famous American radio play *Invasion from Mars* was first broadcast on the Mercury Theater on the Air the night before Halloween 1938. Robert Anderson's realistic American drama *I Never Sang for My Father* opened on Broadway in January 1968.



## Sophocles and His Theater

### Antigone



The theater for which *Antigone* was written was very different from the one we attend today. It resembled more what we would call a stadium. It was outdoors, and plays were presented during the daylight hours only. The Greeks were careful in choosing sites for their theaters, which were built on hillsides, preferably on those with a slight inward slope. This provided a natural semicircle, or amphitheater. Seats were built up in rows, either of earth and stone or of wood, to provide an arena, at the base of which plays could be performed. The area at the base was called the *orchestra*. The orchestra (so named because it was the place where the chorus chanted and danced) was also the place where the actors performed. There was no raised stage as there was later in Roman times.

The acoustics in these theaters were usually very fine, and people had little trouble hearing even in the highest rows of seats. The sound was also amplified by the large masks the actors wore. The chanting of the chorus also helped to carry the sound further. To aid viewing, the actors wore oversized, well-padded costumes, and boots with raised soles to add to their height. The masks not only were oversized but also had exaggerated features so that they could be seen clearly at large distances. Behind the orchestra was a painted wall called a *skene* (our word *scenery* comes from this word), through which the actors entered and exited. The actors, all of whom were men, masked and padded, moved in a stately and controlled fashion. We might think these actors were performing some stately ritual if we compared their acting to the realistic acting style of today's theater. The chorus would also strike us as artificial, and their chanting and dancing would add to our feeling of ritual. The chorus consisted of fifteen men with one spokesman, or leader, called the *choragos*. The chorus, usually representing the city elders, took part in the action of the play, reacting to what was happening as citizens might. But the chorus also commented on the action of the play and interpreted its meaning for the audience in a series of chanted

The Greeks took their theater very seriously and we would be right to see it as part of a religious ritual. In fact, the plays were written for performance at great festivals held seasonally in honor of the god *Dionysos*, whose altar stood in the orchestra. New plays were written specifically for these festivals, competitions were held, and prizes awarded. Many playwrights entered the competitions, and plays were performed continuously for several days.

Sophocles (496?-406 B.C.) first competed for the prize in tragedy when he was twenty-seven; he won, defeating the great Aeschylus, then the most famous playwright in Athens. Sophocles is said to have had a fortunate life. He was born at Colonus of a wealthy family. He was given a traditional education in music, dancing, and gymnastics. When the Greeks defeated the Persians in 480 B.C., young Sophocles led the chorus in singing and dancing at the victory celebration. He is said to have been graceful and handsome, and to have had musical as well as dramatic gifts. Sophocles was also active in public life. He was twice elected general, served as a priest of the god Asclepius, and at eighty-three was appointed to a commission studying a revision of Athens' constitution.

It is probable that Sophocles wrote over one hundred twenty tragedies in his lifetime. Only seven remain to us today, but they are among the greatest plays ever written. Sophocles won many victories for his plays and was greatly respected by his fellow citizens; at his death he was given the honors of a hero. It is hard to imagine, given his tranquil and successful life, how Sophocles came by his great and deep understanding of human grief and suffering. It may be that the ancient myths of his people provided him with insight into the depths of human nature and its relationship to fate and to the gods.