



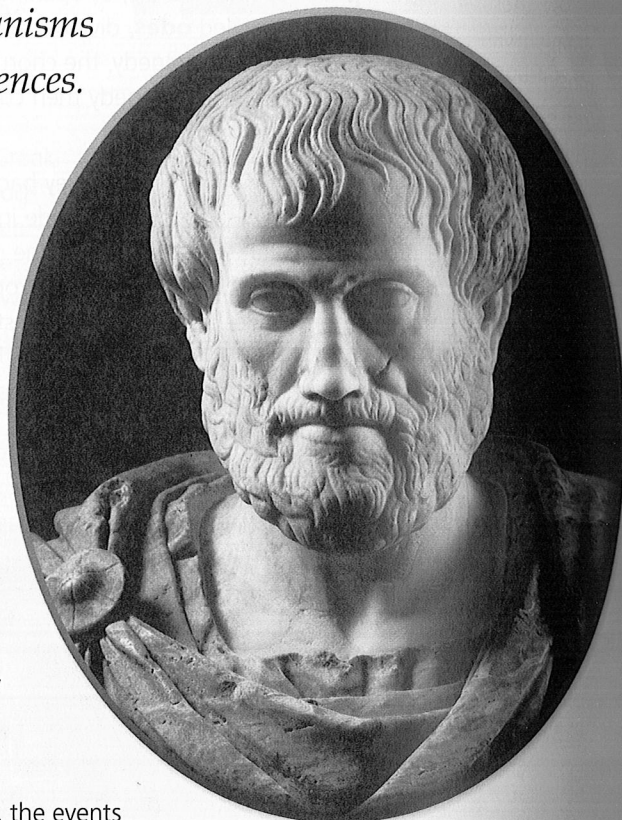
## Aristotle and Greek Tragedy

In *Poetics*, Aristotle examined the mechanisms that make tragedy so compelling for audiences. His work remains the most influential discussion of drama the world has seen.

**Fundamentals of Tragedy** In his landmark work *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (ar' is tät' l; 384–322 B.C.) provides a famous examination of tragedy. He describes a **tragedy** as a serious play recounting related events in the life of a person of high rank or importance who is brought low and often meets his or her doom. The main character, called the **tragic hero** or **protagonist**, experiences this reversal of fortune as a result of what the Greeks called **hamartia** (hä' mär tē' ə), a tragic flaw or profound error in judgment. When a **tragic flaw** is involved, it usually takes form as **hubris**, or excessive pride. Fate, too, plays a decisive role in ensuring the tragic hero's downfall. In addition, the protagonist may face an **antagonist**, a rival character whose opposition contributes to his or her downfall.

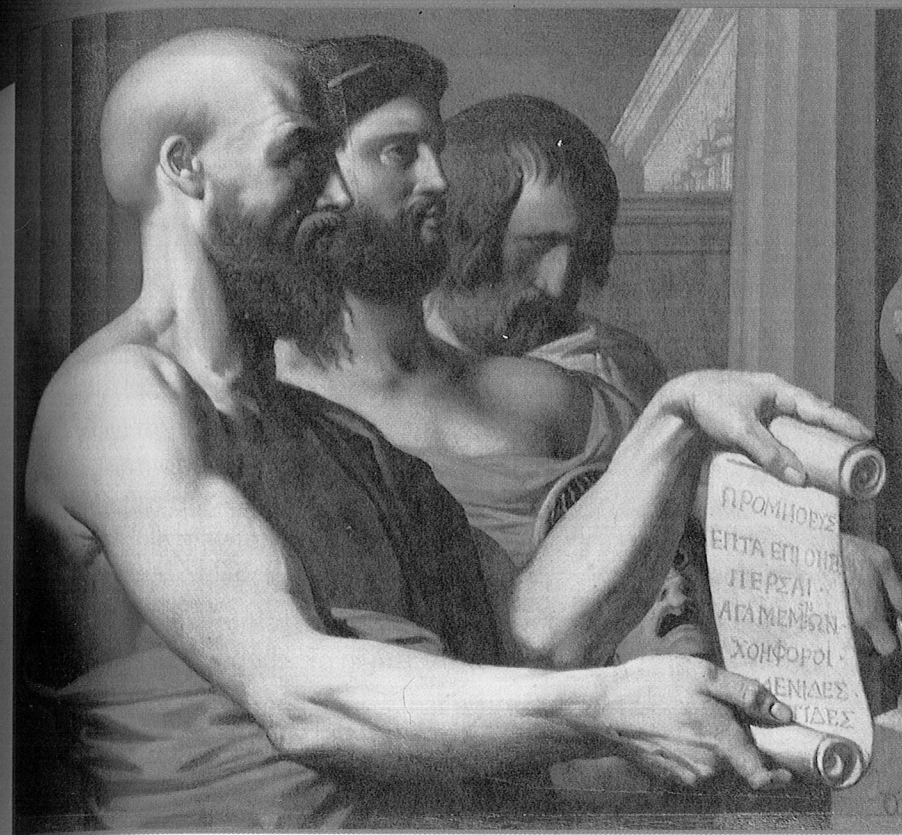
Although the plot and its outcome are central to a tragedy, the events come as no surprise to most audience members. Greek audiences knew the myths upon which the plays were based; they knew what would happen. Nevertheless—according to Aristotle—the audience becomes caught up in the action because the play arouses their feelings of pity and fear. At the end of the play, explains Aristotle, the audience experiences a **catharsis** (kə thär' sis), a cleansing or release of these emotions. Aristotle believed that the best plays engender fear and pity through the story and characters, not through the spectacle of the production itself.

**Three Masters** Three playwrights are considered the grand masters of Greek tragedy: Aeschylus (es' ki ləs; c. 525–456 B.C.), Sophocles (säf' ə klēz'; 496–406 B.C.), and Euripides (yōō rip' ə dēz; 480–406 B.C.). Between them, the three won first prize forty-two times in the annual drama competitions at Athens. Aeschylus, the pioneer of tragedy, is praised especially for his poetic language. Sophocles is most famous for his character development and insight into human nature. Euripides is noted for his efforts to address social concerns and humanitarian themes in his plays.



▲ This Roman bust of Aristotle is based on a fourth century B.C. Greek bronze.

Aristotle was the pupil of another famous Greek philosopher, Plato (plät' ō; c. 427–c. 347 B.C.), who himself studied under yet another famous Greek philosopher, Socrates (sok' rə tēz; c. 470–399 B.C.). Aristotle had a famous pupil too—Alexander the Great, whose conquests spread Greek culture throughout Europe, North Africa, and much of Asia.



◀ This painting by nineteenth-century French artist Jean Auguste Ingres depicts Aeschylus, (with scroll), Sophocles, and Euripides. The work is a study for a much larger work entitled *The Apotheosis of Homer*.

**Sophocles (496–406 B.C.)** Although he lived and wrote more than two thousand years ago, Sophocles is still considered one of the finest and most influential playwrights who ever lived. He won first prize at the annual Dionysia in Athens twenty-four times; never once did he place below second.

**A Golden Time to Live** Sophocles grew up in a prosperous family in Colonus, near Athens. At sixteen, he was one of the young men chosen to perform in a choral ode celebrating the Athenian victory over the Persians at Salamis, the event that marks the beginning of Athens's golden age. Throughout his long life, he remained a leading figure of that era. Admired for his good looks and athleticism, he was also a talented musician and a frequent contributor to Athenian public life. He served for a time as a city treasurer and also as a general in the conflict with Samos, an island that revolted against Athens in 441 B.C. Late in life, he was elected to a special committee to investigate the disastrous failure of the Athenian military expedition to Sicily.

**A Leading Light** It was in theater, however, that Sophocles truly shone. His career as a dramatist began in 468 B.C., when he entered the annual Dionysia and beat the celebrated dramatist Aeschylus to take first prize. Over the next 62 years he wrote more than 120 plays, seven of which have survived. Among the most celebrated are *Oedipus Rex*, the tragedy Aristotle considered the best example of the form, and *Antigone*, the story of Oedipus' daughter. Sophocles is known for strong female characters and for his insight into human nature. He is credited with introducing a third actor to drama and also with the practice of using painted scenery. He died two years before Athens surrendered to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, the event that marks the end of Athens's Golden Age.





## Making Connections

## Antigone, Prologue through Scene 2



To what extent does *experience* determine what we *perceive*?

## Writing About the Big Question

In the first part of *Antigone*, a woman breaks the king's law in order to uphold her deeply felt beliefs. Use these sentence starters to develop your ideas about the Big Question.

An **individual** may go against what others say when \_\_\_\_\_.

The **interpretation** of an action or an event can differ between two people because \_\_\_\_\_.

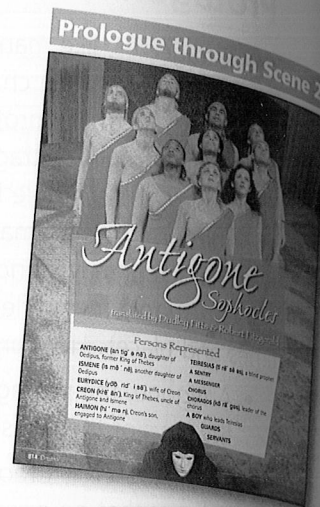
**While You Read** Look for moments when Antigone and Creon express their own points of view about what is right and what is wrong.

## Vocabulary

Read each word and its definition. Decide whether you know the word well, know it a little bit, or do not know it at all. After you read, see how your knowledge of each word has increased.

- **sated** (sāt' əd) *adj.* satisfied; provided with more than enough (p. 818) *We were sated after the big lunch.* *sate v.*
- **sententiously** (sen ten' shəs lē) *adv.* in a way that shows excessive fondness for wise sayings; in lecturing tones (p. 822) *I told him I felt ill, and he answered sententiously, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away."* *sententious adj.* *sententiousness n.*
- **deflects** (dē flekts') *v.* turns or makes go to one side (p. 824) *He deflects his opponent's blows by blocking with his forearm.* *deflection n.* *deflective adj.* *deflector n.*
- **edict** (ē' dikt') *n.* a public order; decree (p. 827) *At the press conference, the mayor gave his edict about stray animals.*
- **brazen** (brā' zən) *adj.* shameless; bold (p. 828) *There was chocolate all over her mouth, but she told a brazen lie about the cookies.* *brazenly adv.* *brazenness n.*
- **waver** (wā' vər) *v.* show indecision; fluctuate (p. 831) *He dipped his toe into the icy water and began to waver about diving in.* *waveringly adv.*

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## Background for the Play

## "Be Witnesses for Me"

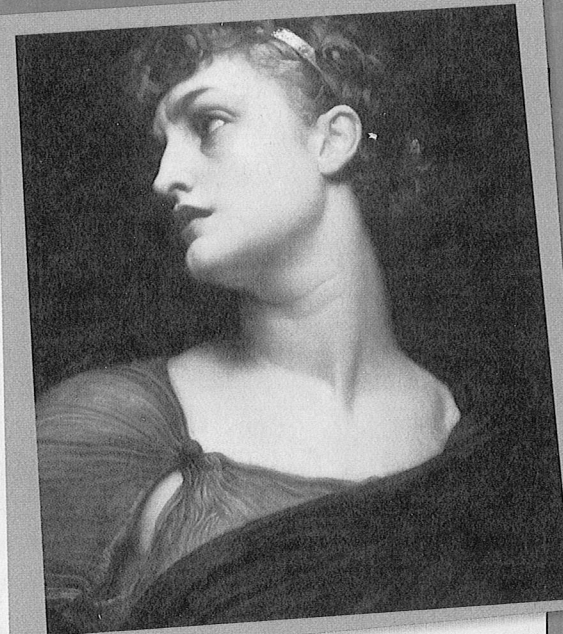
**The Theban Plays** *Antigone* is one of three surviving plays by Sophocles centering on the Greek myth of Oedipus (ed' i pəs), king of Thebes; the other two are *Oedipus Rex* (*Oedipus the King*) and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Known as the Theban plays, they are now often published as a chronological trilogy, with *Antigone* last. However, Sophocles did not write the plays for the same Dionysia, and he apparently wrote *Antigone* first.

**The Oedipus Myth** The myth of Oedipus was well known to Greek audiences; in fact, Aeschylus wrote several earlier plays about it, although only his *Seven Against Thebes* has survived. In the myth, a prophecy informs Laius (or Laios; lā' yəs), king of Thebes, and his wife Jocasta (or Iocaste) that their son will grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified, they send the infant off to be destroyed, but he is instead saved and adopted by a couple from Corinth. When the child, called Oedipus, grows up, he learns of the prophecy. Believing the warning refers to his adoptive parents, he flees in order to protect them. At a crossroads, he quarrels with and kills a stranger. Then, on the road to Thebes, he discovers the city is being plagued by a monstrous sphinx. In Greek mythology, the sphinx is a creature with a lion's body, bird's wings, and a woman's head. Waiting near the entrance to the city, the sphinx poses a riddle to all those who approach and eats anyone who cannot answer. The sphinx refuses to abandon its hold on the city until someone can solve the riddle. Oedipus does so, thereby saving the city and becoming a hero. As compensation, the recently widowed queen marries him, and he becomes king.

Years later, Oedipus discovers that the man he killed at the crossroads was his birth father, the Theban king, and that the queen is his mother. Filled with horror, Oedipus blinds himself, and Jocasta commits suicide. Oedipus goes to live in exile with his daughter Antigone (an tig' ə nē). After Oedipus' death, Antigone returns to Thebes. Earlier, Oedipus' two sons, Polyneices (pāl' i nī' sēz) and Eteocles (ē' tē' ə klēz'), decided to share the throne, ruling in alternate years. However, when the time comes for Eteocles to give up the throne, he refuses, and the two brothers kill each other. Creon (krē' ən), Jocasta's brother, then assumes the throne.

It is at this point in the larger story that the play *Antigone* begins.

The famous riddle that Oedipus answered was "What has four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?" The answer is a human being—crawling as a child, walking upright as an adult, and using a cane in old age.



▲▼ (above) Nineteenth-century artist Frederic Leighton painted actress Dorothy Dene as Antigone. (below) This relief depicts Oedipus as he solves the riddle of the Sphinx.



Extended Study: Antigone 813