

CHAPTER

5

HISTORYMAKERS

Sophocles

Author of the Human Drama

Section 3

"Many are the wonders of the world, but none is more wonderful than man."
—Sophocles, *Antigone*

The great playwright Sophocles was born just before the Greek city-states faced the challenge of the Persian invasions. He lived through the golden age of Athens, when that city gave birth to a flowering of art, architecture, literature, and philosophy. The plays he wrote—only a few of which survive—put a new stamp on theater and influenced drama in the Western world for centuries.

Sophocles was born to a successful manufacturer of weapons in the town of Colonus, near Athens. When Sophocles was six years old, the Persians invaded Greece but met defeat in the famous Battle of Marathon. Just ten years later, the Greeks won another great victory when they destroyed the Persian fleet at Salamis. The young Sophocles led the chorus that sang a song of victory to mark this triumph.

By age 28, Sophocles had written at least one play, which he entered in an annual drama competition against Aeschylus. That playwright was almost 30 years older than Sophocles and his reputation was already established. Nevertheless, the judges found the play of Sophocles superior, and he won first prize. It was not the last time he would be honored in this way. Throughout his life, he won 18 first prizes and many second prizes, but never anything lower.

Sophocles played an active role in Athenian life. He was a close friend of the politician Pericles, the philosopher Socrates, and the historian Herodotus. He took part in the political life of Athens, serving once as treasurer and twice as a general. He also acted as a priest to one god and founded a shrine to another god. While these activities contributed to the civic life of Athens, they are not Sophocles' main claim to fame.

His major achievement was the writing of about 125 tragic plays. Unfortunately, only seven still survive in complete form. It is from those plays, the few fragments that survived, and the comments of his contemporaries that Sophocles is known as one of the world's major dramatists. His most well-known works are the plays *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Electra*,

and *Oedipus at Colonus*. *Antigone* and *Electra* are especially notable as the first plays to portray heroic women.

Before Sophocles, Greek theater was dominated by the work of Aeschylus. Plays were built around a chorus that commented on the action, which was dramatized by two characters at a time. The characters and members of the chorus all wore masks, and the Greek gods played major roles.

Sophocles began working in this style but eventually pointed the theater in new directions. He made the masks more expressive, enhancing the effect of his productions. He also added painted scenery to provide a more interesting setting for the action. Most important, he introduced a third character to the plays. This step allowed him to explore more complex human interactions.

That change went to the heart of Sophocles' drama. He was the founder of theater that explored the human condition. The gods play a role in his works, but not prominently. The action arises directly from the nature of the human characters. Sophocles' writing shows a person in crisis—often a crisis that arises directly from that person's identity. His characters suffer great pain as they wrestle with difficult questions of life: What is fate? What is justice? Each major character, though, must face personal responsibility for his or her actions. By watching them confront this crisis, the audience learns something essential about what it is to be a human being.

Questions

1. **Determining Main Ideas** How does the quotation from Sophocles at the top of the page relate to his approach to drama?
2. **Making Inferences** Sophocles was active in many aspects of Athenian life. What does that suggest about the Athenian view of citizenship?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** How did the changes that Sophocles made to theatrical practice add to the impact of his plays?