The three greatest writers of Greek tragedy (textbook page 120) all lived, worked, and competed in Athens at about the same time. Aeschylus, born in 525 B.C., was the oldest by about thirty years; Sophocles was born about 496, Euripides about 485. While writing plays whose words and themes are still powerful, all three of these playwrights also made lasting changes in the dramatic form itself. As you read, think about how the events of a period influence its artists. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.)

For the playwright Aeschylus, the Persian Wars were perhaps the most important events of his life— even more important than his plays. His tombstone mentions his bravery at the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., but not his plays or dramatic honors! In Greece, this was a time of war and politics. Athenian democracy was young, and Athens was the center of an empire. In his plays, Aeschylus shows how a leader’s personal life can conflict tragically with public life and duties. In many, the hero faces impossible choices.

Aeschylus was born about 525 B.C. at Eleusis in Greece, but we know little about his first thirty-five years. Greek playwrights earned their fame at drama contests and festivals. Aeschylus won his first contest in 484, and had apparently been submitting plays for several years during the war years. He fought at both the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. and the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.

Although Aeschylus wrote more than 80 plays, only seven whole plays still exist today, along with some fragments. His language is powerful, bold, and heroic, his heroes larger than life. The earlier Greek dramas had just one actor and a chorus that commented on the action, but Aeschylus added a second actor, which made the plot stronger.

He won Athens’ annual dramatic festival 13 times. (In 468, however, he lost to a newcomer named Sophocles.) He was his own producer and staged showy spectacles with startling new special effects— bold masks, painted scenery, high boots to make the actors taller. Thousands of people attended the open-air performances.

Aeschylus’ earliest surviving play is The Persians (which won first prize in 472 B.C.). Based on the recent Battle of Salamis, it shows the victory of Greek democracy while still portraying the Persians sympathetically. Other plays drew on stories of the Trojan War and moral tales about the gods in which justice occurs over many years, often involving wrongs done generations earlier. Members of the House of Atreus face divine justice in the three plays of The Oresteia. In Seven Against Thebes, the House of Oedipus is destroyed because of past crimes.

Aeschylus spent many years away from Athens, working in the Greek city of Syracuse in Sicily. He died in Sicily in 456 B.C. A legend says that he was killed when an eagle flying overhead dropped a tortoise shell on his bald head.

Questions to Think About

1. What events in Greek history had an effect on Aeschylus’ writing?
2. What unusual innovations did Aeschylus make in the Greek theater?
3. Determining Relevance In Aeschylus’ time, Athenians were proud of their laws and democracy. How might this relate to the theme of justice in his plays?