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Between 500 and 400 b.c., the Greeks of Athens created the first great age of Western drama. During this period, Athenian playwrights such as Sophocles and Euripides used narratives drawn from myths and heroic legends, which they shaped to reflect contemporary issues. Another pivotal point in theatre history occurred from the late 1500s to the late 1600s, marked by the works of such playwrights as Shakespeare and Molière. Beginning in the late 1800s, the works of modern playwrights such as Ibsen, Chekhov, and Shaw charted important new directions in theatrical realism and theatrical experimentation. Following World War II, American drama flourished in the works of such playwrights as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Lorraine Hansberry.

Major World Dramas is an anthology of outstanding plays by many of the major figures of world drama. Because this anthology is primarily intended to serve as a supplement, the text excludes plays commonly offered in high school literature anthologies, including Antigone, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Tartuffe, The Tempest, A Doll's House, Pygmalion, and The Crucible. Although the collection includes only one work by a female dramatist, most of these plays offer strong female characters. Because a historical perspective is important for students' understanding of drama, the anthology is organized chronologically. An introduction offers students guidelines for reading plays. Background on theatre history is provided in selection headnotes and in the Image Gallery sections following each chronological unit. An illustrated glossary at the back of the book defines essential theatre and drama terms.