Aristophanes, when depicting the god Dionysus in search of a decent poet among the dead, sets up a choice between Aeschylus and Euripides, with the passing observation that Sophocles declined to compete against Aeschylus (Frogs 786–94). Why did Sophocles not assert his right to compete? He conceded to Aeschylus on his arrival (788), but undertook to take on Euripides himself should Aeschylus lose the contest. Of the tragedians, Euripides is Aristophanes’ preferred butt of ridicule, with a few references to the other two scattered among the extant plays. Amidst the fun, Aristophanes clearly assumes that for his audience these three are the tragic poets of note. Aristophanes does, however, parody Ion a little (Frogs 706, 1425) and mention him by name once, for the sake of a weak joke (Peace 832–7):

OIK. ὤκ ἦν ἃρ’ οὐδ’ ἀ λέγουσι, κατὰ τὸν ἀέρα ός ἀστέρες γιγνόμεθ’, όταν τὶς ἀποθάνης;
TP. μάλιστα.
OIK. καὶ τίς ἐστιν ἀστήρ νῦν ἐκεῖ;
TP. ἰὼν ὁ Χιός, ὡς ἐποίησεν πάλαι ἐνθάδε τὸν Ἀοίνον ποθ’ ὅς δ’ ἥλθ’, εὐθέως Ἀοίνον αὐτὸν πάντες ἐκάλουν ἀστέρα.

SERVANT: Wasn’t there something in what they say, that we turn into stars when we die?
TRYGAIOS: Absolutely.
SERVANT: So who is a star up there now?
TRYGAIOS: Ion the Chian, who long ago wrote “The Morning Star”; when he departed, immediately everyone called him the Morning Star.²

Ion may have enhanced his own reputation simply by virtue of composing his Epidemiai;³ in his memoir, as cited by Athenaeus, Ion describes a merry evening spent with Sophocles (104 Leurini = FGrH 392 F6 = Ath. 603e–604d). Athenaeus gives considerable attention to this event, providing a little information about Ion in the process of preserving more about Sophocles. Actual judgement of his work is found in Pseudo-Longinus On the Sublime, where the author, for argument’s sake, supposes the existence of a flawless writer. Which is better, he asks, splendid writing with a few faults (μέγεθος ἐν ἐνίοις δυτικαὶ μερίδες) or mediocrity without blemishes (τὸ σύμμετρον μὲν ἐν τοῖς καταρθομασίαις)? Should we look for quantity or quality (αὐτῷ πλείους ἁρτεῖαι... ἀὐτῷ μείζους)? ‘Longinus’ finds that great intellect does not guarantee precision, and notes the element of risk-taking (παρακινδυνεύει) that distinguishes the finest work. He then moves on to make some apt comparisons to illustrate his point, including the damning question, καὶ ἐν τρογγλίῳ Ἰων ο Ἠρες ὄν Ἡγαῖα Σωϕοκλῆς; (“And in tragedy, Ion of Chios, or by Zeus, Sophocles?”), and finishing with the comment that Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus is worth all Ion’s plays put together (T17 Leurini = TrGF 19 T6 = Subl. 33.5). ‘Longinus’ draws the same distinction between other pairs of writers, notably Bacchylides and Pindar, but is most emphatic in the case of Ion and Sophocles. This is not to say that Ion’s work was without merit; ‘Longinus’ notes that Bacchylides and Ion were ἀδιάφρωτοι καὶ... κεκαλλιγραφημένοι (“impeccable and... wrote beautifully”).

Sophocles lived long and was fully active as soldier and citizen; the biographical tradition, ever a creative genre, invests him with a striking

² I do not here follow Leurini’s decision to assign καὶ τίς ἐστιν ἀστήρ νῦν ἐκεῖ Ὁιόν ὁ Χίος; to the slave. On which see Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1902) 306–7; Platnauer (1964) 139.
³ The Epidemiai are apparently Visiis, as a note by John the Alexandrian tells us, noting that “Ypocras” apparently travelled and visited extensively and studied diseases in their locations, hence the term epidemis (100 Leurini = Iohan. Alex. Comm. in Hippoc. Epid. 6 part. 1.120a69–b2; see Rose 1871). This practice of Hippocrates is also mentioned in the curious Presbeutikos ascribed to Thessalos, son of Hippocrates in the Hippocratic corpus ([Ep.] 27). Duncan (1939) 135 finds Epidemiai not only genuine but a “reflection of a very refined social culture”. Jacoby (1947a) 17 does not see why Webster (1936) should doubt that Ion wrote Epidemiai. Cf. West (1985).