



Signature titles

If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho, 2002

SAPPHO

Born: c. 612 BCE (Lesbos, Greece); died c. 580 BCE (place of death unknown, most likely Lesbos).

Style and genre: Sixth-century poet from Lesbos called “tenth muse” by Plato; her songs survive in vivid fragments.

True to her reputation as preeminent poet and lover, Sappho’s work intertwines palpable lyrics and erotic charms. Highly regarded throughout antiquity, her poems were collected in nine volumes for the lost library at Alexandria. She even had a meter—Sapphic—named after her verse structure, which contained three long lines and a final short one, like a gasp of desire. Her popularity meant that poem fragments have been found in many Greek philosophers’ prose, as well as—more romantically—on flecks of papyrus discovered in the desert.

Sappho’s life is as much of a puzzle as her complete works, which has not stopped poets, from Ovid through Mary Robinson to lesbian poet Olga Broumas, writing ardently and authoritatively about her. The generally accepted biography, a combination of poetic interpretation and ancient gossip, holds that she was an aristocrat who was part of an artistic and religious community of women on Lesbos, was exiled to Sicily after a coup, and had a daughter, Cleis. According to legend, she committed suicide after rejection by the ferryman Phaon.

The nineteenth century presented a sanitized Sappho, headmistress of a girls’ school; twentieth-century classicists argued that her beautifully observed poems mourning the marriage of beloved female friends were just traditional wedding songs. Regardless of these cavils, she remains a figurehead for lesbians, because of her sensual gaze at women, most famously captured in fragment 31, where the poet imagines herself in a love triangle, looking longingly at a woman flirting with a man. Whatever their basis in biographical fact, and through two and a half centuries of fragmentation and translation, Sappho’s poems send a shiver down the spine of any man or woman who has ever loved. **SM**

“Some men say an army of ships
is the most beautiful thing. I say
it is what you love.” –Fragment 16

ABOVE: A romantic engraving of Sappho—whose true appearance remains unknown.

SOPHOCLES

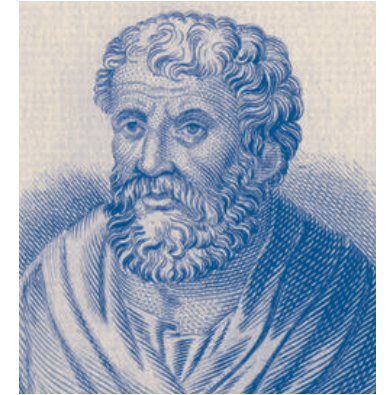
Born: also known as Sofokles, c. 496 BCE (Attica [Athens], Greece); died c. 406 BCE (place of death unknown, most likely Athens)

Style and genre: A bold, compressed, and understated dramatist who often contrasted characters, themes, and moods and employed irony to great effect.

In his long life, Sophocles of Athens (496–406 BCE) wrote 123 plays and competed against both Aeschylus and Euripides. Seven extant tragedies explore the greatness and suffering of exceptional humans who possessed almost divine abilities and who must choose between certain disaster or a compromise which would betray the heroic nature separating them from mere mortals. Sophoclean dramaturgical skill has been recognized since Aristotle, who praised its masterful sense of timing and unparalleled dramatic tension.

When divinely-sent madness causes Ajax to disgrace himself at Troy in *Ajax*, fierce honor and shame permit him (then the mightiest Greek warrior) no other option but suicide. Readers will have at least heard of the cursed Oedipus: *Oedipus Tyrannus* dramatizes how the very intelligence that empowers the king drives his excessive and relentless search for truth eventually leads to his madness, self-blinding, and exile. These tragic dilemmas can be understood in broader political terms as a clash between the values of a past Homeric world, which privileged the individual, and those of the contemporary world of the audience, fifth century Athens, which served the interests of the community and discouraged extreme behavior.

Heroic intransigence leads to a dreadful isolation from even the gods in a world governed by a mysterious and cruel fate. *Trachiniae* shows us Zeus will not even save his son, Heracles, the model Greek hero, from an agonizing death which strips him both of his flesh and masculinity. Yet the free and autonomous choice of suffering over the acceptance of human limitations endows Sophocles’ heroes with power in a world where the past yields no knowledge, the future no hope, and the present only suffering. **DS**



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Ajax (date unknown)

Antigone (date unknown)

Trachiniae (date unknown)

Oedipus the King (date unknown)

Electra (date unknown)

Philoctetes (409 BCE)

Oedipus at Colonus (401 BCE)

“Sophocles drew men as they
ought to be; Euripides, as they
were.” –Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460b35

ABOVE: An undated depiction of Sophocles drawn from contemporary descriptions.