# The *Ajax* Multi-Commentary: An interactive visualization of commentary networks

Charles Pletcher

January 5, 2025

#### Overview



https://bit.ly/4gMnOTd

### Outline of the presentation

- **1** Introduction: What's so ANT-ish about that?
- **2** Commentaries: Intermediaries or mediators?
- 3 Multi-commentaries: What do they do?
- 4 Conclusion: Travelers on the commentary tradition

#### Preamble

## Support

The *Ajax Multi-Commentary* project was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation under the funding scheme Ambizione (grant no. PZ00P1\_186033).

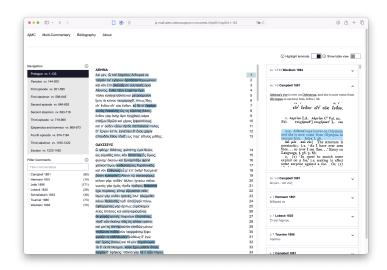
- PI: Matteo Romanello
- PhD Student: Sven Najem-Meyer
- RSE: Charles Pletcher (hi!)

Introduction: What's so ANT-ish about that?

### What is the *AjMC*?

- Roughly 200 years of commentaries on Sophocles' Ajax
- Online version (https://multi.ajmc.ch) only has public-domain commentaries
- Private version able to show Finglass, Demont, and forthcoming commentaries for those with access rights

#### What is the *AjMC*?



# A note about reading commentaries this way

Action should remain a surprise, a mediation, an event. It is for this reason that we should begin, here again, not from the 'determination of action by society', the 'calculative abilities of individuals', or the 'power of the unconscious' as we would ordinarily do, but rather from the under-determination of action, from the uncertainties and controversies about who and what is acting when 'we' act—and there is of course no way to decide whether this source of uncertainty resides in the analyst or in the actor. (Latour 2005, 45)

## Reading with a multi-commentary

If it is true, as ANT claims, that the social landscape possesses such a flat 'networky' topography and that the ingredients making up society travel inside tiny conduits, what is in between the meshes of such a circuitry? ... I call this background plasma, namely that which is not yet formatted, not yet measured, not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains, and not yet covered, surveyed, mobilized, or subjectified. (Latour 2005, 242 p. 244)

#### Second stasimon (vv. 693–718)





Commentaries: Intermediaries or mediators?

## Of pointers and pencils

A network is not so much something we find as something we make; it is the pencil rather than the object drawn; it is a means of checking how much "energy, movement, and specificity our own reports are able to capture." (Felski 2016, 749)

#### Commentaries as mediators

An intermediary, in my vocabulary, is what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs.... Mediators, on the other hand ... transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry. (Latour 2005, 39)

Multi-commentaries: What do they do?

#### What can't multi-commentaries do?

Third, interactions are not synoptic. Very few of the participants in a given course of action are simultaneously visible at any given point. The lecturer might believe she is center stage, but that does not mean that many others are not acting as well, only that there is no way to sum them up. (Latour 2005, 201)

Conclusion: Travelers on the commentary tradition

#### A movable network

Whereas the tradition distinguished the common good (a moralist concern) and the common world (naturally given), I proposed replacing 'the politics of nature' by the progressive composition of one common world. This was, in my view, the way to redefine science and politics and to carry out the task of political epistemology forced upon us by the various ecological crises. (Latour 2005, 254)

## Bibliography I

- Felski, Rita. 2016. "Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory." *Comparative Literature Studies* 53 (4): 747–65.
  - https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.53.4.0747.
- Finglass, P. J. 2015. "Jebb's Sophocles." In *Classical Commentaries:* Explorations in a Scholarly Genre, edited by Christina S. Kraus and Christopher Stray, 21–38. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof: oso/9780199688982.001.0001.
- Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pletcher, Charles, Sven Najem-Meyer, and Matteo Romanello. 2024. "The Ajax Multi-Commentary: A Digital Platform for the Comparative Analysis of Classical Commentaries."

## Bibliography II

Witmore, Michael. 2016. "Latour, the Digital Humanities, and the Divided Kingdom of Knowledge." *New Literary History* 47 (2/3): 353-75. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2016.0018.