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

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1 Overview

1.1 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

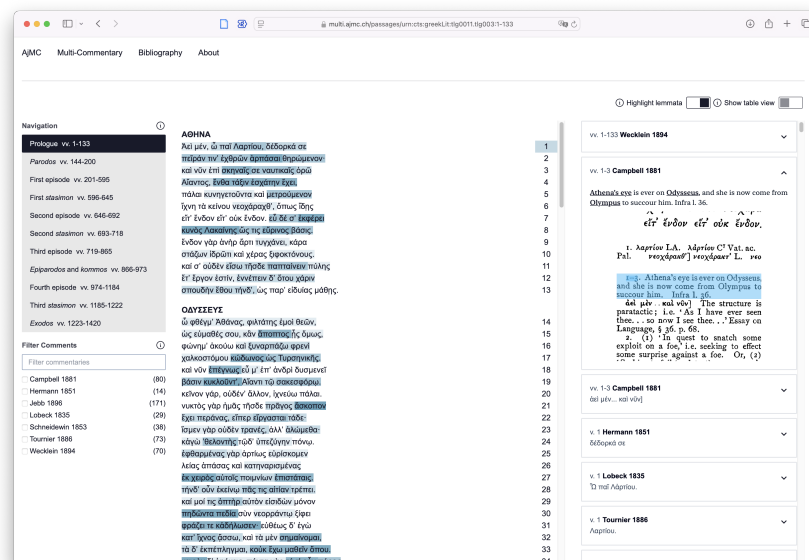
2 Introduction: What’s so ANT-ish about that?

2.1 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
1. Note The *Ajax* Multi-Commentary — available at <https://multi.ajmc.ch> (Pletcher, Najem-Meyer, and Romanello 2024) — is a born-digital platform for simultaneously consulting the past 200 years of commentaries on Sophocles’ *Ajax* alongside a more or less uncontroversial edition of the critical text (Lloyd-Jones and Wilson’s OCT, as digitized by the Perseus Project). Hereafter called the “AjMC”

for short, this project involves a fair amount of computational heavy-lifting: OCR on scans of thousands of pages of commentaries, including automated detection of each page’s layout; natural language processing and named entity recognition to determine citations and other nouns of interest within each glossa; and a reading environment that provides interfaces for all of the above as well as ways to change the critical text, tabulate citations, and view lemmata and glossae at a glance.

2.2 What is the *AjMC*?



1. Note If we have time, I’d be happy to present a live demo of the application later. For now, I’m hoping that a screenshot will suffice to give you a sense of how the application works. You can see that we have navigation and filters for the available (public-domain) commentaries on the left, the critical text in the center, and glossae on the right. (I’m using the term “glossae” somewhat freely here, as its what we call the whole object in the programming environment.) I’ve expanded one of the glossae to show that it includes an OCR transcription as well as an scanned image of the page, with the relevant comment and lemma (if available) highlighted in blue.

To start, we’ll discuss the reading environment’s “heatmap” of cita-

tions, which shows the density of glossae among all available commentaries on each lemma. From this starting point, we will briefly highlight the various actors and networks that emerge in the seemingly — but only seemingly — synchronic presentation of commentaries, before finally presenting a few thoughts on how an ANT-informed view of the multi-commentary enriches our reading experience and opens up new avenues of investigation in the commentary tradition.

2.3 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)

1. Note [Read quotation]

Engaging with commentaries in this way brings Latour’s questions about the under-determination of action to the fore. It discombobulates our sense of “we” and makes clear how the networks of citation and comment challenge our ability to locate the sources of uncertainty.

2.4 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)

1. Note In so doing, reading with a “multi-commentary” also forces us to confront the endless recursions of interpretation that are prompted by *any* commentary, meaning that we need to investigate what Latour refers to as the empty space between the threads in the network.

2.5 Second *stasimon* (vv. 693–718)

The screenshot displays a digital text interface for the second *stasimon* (vv. 693–718) of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The interface is divided into several sections:

- Navigation:** A sidebar on the left lists various episodes and stasimons, with the second *stasimon* (vv. 693–718) selected.
- Filter Comments:** A section below the navigation pane allows filtering comments by author, with a list of authors including Campbell 1881, Hermann 1881, Jebb 1896, Lobbeck 1835, Schneidewin 1853, Tournier 1886, and Wecklein 1894.
- Main Text:** The central area displays the Greek text of the stasimon, with line numbers 693 to 718 on the left. The text is in a serif font, and some words are highlighted in blue.
- Commentary:** On the right, there are three panels showing commentary from different scholars:
 - v. 693 Jebb 1896:** Discusses the text's meaning and its relation to other works.
 - v. 693 Lobbeck 1835:** Discusses the text's meaning and its relation to other works.
 - v. 693 Schneidewin 1853:** Discusses the text's meaning and its relation to other works.

1. Note In order to demonstrate this point, I want to look at a few glossae on the second stasimon. (If the glossae look a little sparse, it's because we're only highlighting lines and lemmata that have been confirmed by hand. We hope to have filled out most of the annotations by next summer.)

As this screenshot on the first few lines shows, several comments overlap by targeting the lemma ' in line 693. It is tempting at first to treat these comments and the citations that they contain as what Rita Felski has called “network-y” networks (Felski 2016, 748). We certainly could deploy some network theory here, where, for example, each commentary is a vertex with edges connecting it to the web of shared references that emerge from the glossae's internal citations — but to do so is beyond the scope of this presentation.

Rather, we would do well to take a leaf from Michael Witmore's article, “Latour, the Digital Humanities, and the Divided Kingdom of Knowledge,” and notice how “No matter how distinctive or statistically sound the pattern discovered is, one has done nothing to explain it until one provides a motivated link between the features in question, their patterned distribution, and something else that this pattern is a proxy *for*” (Witmore 2016, 366). Witmore's argument deals mainly with the complementarity of humanistic and quantitative modes of inquiry, drawing on Latour's notion of “objects of concern” to theorize

the aforementioned feature-proxy relationship.

In Latourian terms, the glossae here are actors, and the network — really, as both Felski and Latour stress, the assemblage — of citations that they summon necessarily occurs through the intervention of the reader of the multicommentary.

3 Commentaries: Intermediaries or mediators?

3.1 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)

1. Note Early in her 2016 article on ANT and literary studies, Felski clarifies what Latour means by network by comparing it to a pencil:

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)

Like Felsk’s pencil, the multicommentary is not an inert object to be stumbled upon but a tool for activating relationships among commentators, primary texts, and readers. Even when we focus on these older, public-domain commentaries, the pencil metaphor reminds us that we must continually encounter their immediacy. This reading environment, if I may be so bold, provides tools for assembling a critical network that lets us notice new things — or re-notice old things — about the relationship between commentaries and the texts that they gloss and cite.

3.2 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)

1. Note When Latour articulates the difference between an intermediary and a mediator, he gestures towards a debate at least as old as Plato's *Phaedrus*: What can that scroll of Lysias up one's sleeve — or that commentary in the sidebar — actually say?

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Latour's radical move, which gets him dangerously close to some elements of new materialism that ought to give us pause, is to show that even the "dead and rigid knowledge shut up in /biblia," to draw Derrida into the conversation, can nevertheless participate as mediators and actors in the social realm of the philologist's work.

4 Multi-commentaries: What do they do?

4.1 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)

1. Note In Latour's list of five things that face-to-face interactions cannot do, he notes that "Third, interactions are not *synoptic*." If you'll permit me to treat reading a commentary as a kind of face-to-face interaction — even if only a poor proxy for one — this condition of the interaction seems to me one that we often forget. It is easy to slip into a mental mode where we believe that we have brought together all of the relevant knowledge on a passage under a single heading, but the multicommentary and Latour help to disabuse us of this notion by reminding us of all the knowledge that is not there. The multicommentary *calls attention to our attention*, that is, it makes us notice where our eye wanders on the screen, which commentators and citations we look for and which we overlook.

It is somewhat paradoxical that manually flipping through pages of large commentaries makes it easier to fall for the synoptic illusion of

the knowledge that we have thereby assembled. But the homogeneity of the multicommentary interface, I want to suggest, makes it more obvious that we are dealing with actors that bring their own positions, networks, and histories to bear on our own work — even if, as Finglass and others have shown, we mostly forget any Sophoclean commentator before Jebb (Finglass 2015).

5 Conclusion: Travelers on the commentary tradition

5.1 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)

1. Note Throughout *Reassembling the Social*, Latour uses the metaphor of traveling, and specifically traveling slowly, to describe his and the reader’s approach to Actor–Network Theory. In the conclusion, this metaphor is subsumed under the heading of various notions of progress, as in the quotation on this slide:

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Although the multicommentary presented here at first appears to be a static entity — and in a punnily ironic twist, it is built as a static collection of files that do not depend on a server — I think it is useful to think about the assemblage of commentaries ecologically, that is, as a collective that forces us to reckon with how we order our epistemological *oikoi*.

If the multicommentary succeeds in generating networks of citations, it is thanks in large part to the efforts of the readers who fill in the gaps — what Latour calls “plasma” — between glossae, primary texts, and even the historical situations of the commentators themselves. Above all, I hope to have shown that even Hermann’s pedantic Latin commentary — to take just one example — has the potential to join modern assemblages of glossae to help us see *Ajax* differently. By mobilizing these different points of view, we tap into the core effort of renewing and reusing these texts that, despite changes in the social order, have stuck with us for twenty-five hundred years.

Thank you.

5.2 Bibliography

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