INVECTIVE IN GREEK TRAGEDY: A MEANS OF RELEASING OR ESCALATING TENSIONS?

By Hanna M. Roisman

Summary: This paper assesses the impact of invective in extant Greek tragedy, including its effects on the emotional status of both the speaker and the recipient, as well as on plot development. After presenting definitions of invective in general and in tragedy in particular, case studies of the use of various types of invective in Euripides' *Andromache* and in twelve other tragedies are analyzed. The intention behind the invective is shown to be to belittle, shame, or otherwise harm the target of the invective. The factors affecting the emotional impact of this invective are discussed giving examples from extant tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. After this exploration of invective scenes in tragedy their roles are considered. The invective scenes are shown to enhance the audience experience of the tragedies by heightening plot tension, while also intensifying sympathy with those powerless characters who suffer verbal abuse and therefore contributing to the experience of *catharsis*.

Introduction: Definition of Invective in Tragedy

Invective is widely understood as the use of rude, abusive expressions with the intention to hurt, shame, humiliate, belittle, or exclude the interlocutor, or a third party not necessarily present, often including some kind of character assassination.[1] As such, invective has apparently been

1 For some definitions of invective, for example: 'criticism that is very forceful, unkind, and often rude' (*Cambridge Dictionary*); or as 'a form of rude expression or discourse intended to offend or hurt'; or as 'a denunciatory or abusive expression or discourse' (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*), see Papaioannou & Serafim 2021: 1-2. It is important to note that the element of comedy associated with invective in drama is not necessarily included in these definitions, leaving room for a more appropriate definition of invective in drama to be made.

Hanna M. Roisman: 'Invective in Greek Tragedy: A Means of Releasing or Escalating Tensions?' C&M Supplementum 3 (2025) 35-79.

part of human communication from the dawn of civilization.[2] It may be considered similar to verbal abuse, but in addition to often including public denunciation, it also requires some rhetorical skill, suggesting that simple insults might not qualify.

In recent years the skyrocketing use of invective in social media has led to increasing academic attention. In their discussions of invective and invectivity, Ellerbrock *et al.* (2017) examine invective as aspects of communication intended to disparage, harm, or exclude.[3] The concept of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) developed with Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory,[4] along with Culpeper's Theory of Impoliteness,[5] has also been used in theoretical discussions of invective as well as in the analysis of Greek tragedy.[6]

Any definition of 'invective in tragedy' must also relate to the custom/norm, *nomos*, of the time, with an emphasis on 'saving face' found both in the world depicted in tragedy and in fifth-century Athenian society. This necessitates recognition of the status of the two parties involved in invective, with expected styles of address changing according to context. Indeed, it is important to remember that the emotional impact of verbal communications, written or spoken, depends on several variables. These include the societal norms impacting on the interpretation of language and on expected behaviors; the relationship between the addressor and addressee, including the relative status of the two; the actual intent of the speaker with respect to inciting violence, insulting the addressee or dissipating tension; the way the context of previous events impacts interpretation; the capacity of the particular speech act to bring about an action (i.e., performativity), and finally the presence of third parties serving as an audience.

2 For the examples of invective recorded in ancient cuneiform tablets that follow in the text, and others, see: Noegel 2021: 101; D'Agostino 1998: 273-78; Matuszak 2014: 359-70; Lion & Michel 2016.

3 Ellerbrock 2017.

4 Brown & Levinson 1987: 25, 61-83.

5 Culpeper 2011.

6 See, for example, Battezzato 2021.

Invective speech may be defined as that which, while "having regard to the mores and ethical preconceptions of a given society, sets out publicly to denigrate a named individual. Its concrete manifestations are λοιδορία, ὄνειδος, κακηγορία, ψόγος, and *vituperatio*, all terms signifying abuse."[7] In classical invective literature, the target of invective is attacked for a variety of specific reasons, even if they do not actually apply. These may include: lowly birth, such as being born to a slave; poor upbringing, due to an 'unfit' mother; a simple, non-'noble' occupation; moral defects such as cowardice or greed; foreign origin; physical shortcomings (such as being short, lame, or ugly); bad fortune; peculiar attire and strange habits; old or young age. All of these are common targets of invective.[8] Invective often includes a form of dark humor, matching the advice found later in *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (1441b23-26):

> And in abuse speeches one should use irony and laugh at one's opponent on the points that he prides himself on, and in private with few present, seek to humiliate him; but in crowded settings one should rather abuse him with the standard accusations: one should augment and diminish one's abusive remarks in the same way as with eulogies. (after Rackham 1937)

In ancient Greek and Roman society, it is possible that invectives were intended to isolate, publicly denounce, or shame a person who may have breached societal norms, and so played a regulatory function, controlling behavior. Greek and Roman oratory is saturated with invective, strongly associated with the elements of comedy, satire, or farce normally found in various literary genres.[9] The comic aspects of invective are discussed at length by Papaioannou & Serafim (2021), who explain the ways that comedy can be associated with attack.[10] Early examples of

7 Watson 2015. For oratorical terms for invective, see Kamen 2020: 62-64.

8 For specific common *topoi* of invective in comedy, see Kamen 2020: 42-52; for those in orators see 68-81.

9 See also for example Booth 2007: ix-xiv.

10 Papaioannou & Serafim, 2021: 2. The authors argue that despite the aggressive nature of invective, from antiquity to modern times, invective has been associated with humor.

invective literature are found in the iambic poems of Archilochus (ca. 680-ca. 645 BCE) and Hipponax (541-487 BCE). In tragedy, as in human society throughout history, invective is used to disparage, harm, or exclude.[11]

The definition of invective in tragedy that will form the basis of the following discussions is:

> Any pronouncement that includes an outpouring of insults, inappropriate to the relationship between the two parties, made with the intent to damage the reputation of, or cause shame to, or to undermine, or to belittle, or in any other way emotionally wound the addressee. Invective may occur in the form of extensive speeches, as found in an *agon*, or in shorter addresses such as in *stichomythia*, or both. The insults may be hurtful either because they are unsubstantiated, or because of their incisive accuracy. The effect of any invective act on its recipient depends on its emotional impact. While invective may weaponize words, giving them some of the power of physical violence, and may incite actual physical violence, conversely it may lead to a dissipation of tension, with the verbal altercation sufficing, sometimes through dark humor, to resolve the issue. It usually serves a particular purpose within a play: it may be used as a means of characterization; it may heighten or resolve plot tension; it may advance or change the direction of plot action, for example when in cases of extreme anger, a curse may be invoked, directly or indirectly causing death or mutilation, or when a person is exiled or punished in some other way. Lastly, invective may add to the entertainment value of the tragedy, through its rich language and imagery.

While the subject matter covered in the tragedies usually focusses on royal families of a semi-mythical heroic age, the plays do not describe heroic actions in wars, but rather the human suffering of kings, queens, warriors, heroes, and their families. This may have helped the audiences to identify with the characters, but many of the situations would still be somewhat removed from their realm of experience. The poetic language of the playwrights may have inspired audiences and filled them with

11 Ellerbrock 2017.

awe, while also maintaining a certain emotional distance. The characters' use of invective might have broken down some of these barriers, making them more 'human' and relatable. Spectators would very likely have experienced emotional outbursts themselves or witnessed invective-filled rhetoric in the courts or political assemblies of the day.

The way in which invective is used to enhance audience empathy with, or adverse reaction to, different characters is discussed in the present chapter. Either way, the strong language of invective, often including exaggerated descriptions or graphic imagery, would have held the attention of the audience, either by entertaining them or adding to the plot tension. In some cases, the use of invective might have heightened audience empathy with a character, while in other cases it might have alienated them. The use of invective in tragedy as elsewhere is not limited by gender, physical strength, age, or political power. When invective is delivered by someone in authority, there is added tension, due to the individual's ability to turn verbal threats into physical force. As people often pity those with less power, the bullying aspect of invective used by those in power might have added a negative element to their characterization and increased the audience's empathy with the character on the receiving end. For example, the invectives used by Agamemnon and Menelaus against Teucer in *Ajax,* when they deride his lowly birth in an attempt to silence him, disgraces the speakers rather than the target of the invective. However, those invectives spoken by characters with lower status to those who hold power over them (for example: The Chorus to Aegisthus; Antigone to Creon; Andromache to Menelaus; Medea to Jason and, later, Jason to Medea) create a more positive characterization, leading to greater audience sympathy.

However, this is not completely straightforward. While individuals of lower status, addressing those who hold power over them, need courage to speak out in the face of adversity, the choice to use invective involves selecting a particularly aggressive style. Courage could be expressed in other ways. For example, when the young maidens Iphigenia and Polyxena agree to go to their deaths without protest, they are showing extreme courage in facing a fate that they have no power to change. They do not, however, use invective. Their speeches are instead characterized

by nobility of spirit.[12] In contrast to these heroines, Antigone defying Creon and Andromache fighting Menelaus exhibit courage, but they also do not shy away from attacking their adversaries, and using insulting language, in an attempt to belittle and shame them. These feisty young women might have intimidated some members of the audiences, but would have impressed many others, gaining great sympathy. Being emotionally invested in the characters, the audience would feel the plot tension to a higher degree and feel more relief or despair as the plots progressed, depending upon the characters' fates. Even the Chorus in *Agamemnon,* who seemed particularly obtuse throughout the play, would have gained audience sympathy upon their belated awakening and willingness to take on Aegisthus verbally and potentially physically. Philoctetes' invectives against Neoptolemus and Odysseus may have underlined his desperation, as well as preparing the audience for his eventual attempted attack on Odysseus. This would have raised plot tension and made the audience more invested in the action. In a genre written to be performed at competitive festivals, invective may have been a useful tool for the dramatists. The greater degree of audience emotional involvement with, and response to, the characters would have created greater enjoyment of the play. The effect of invective on the audience would have been enhanced by the playwrights' skills in portraying true-to-life characters in dramatic situations abounding with passions rising to fever pitch, including fear, anger, hatred, outrage, jealousy, and anguish. While some invective in tragedy does include comic overtones, in other places the use of invective is found in tense moments of great pathos.

The appearance of invective in scenes from Euripides' *Andromache* (147-765) along with those occurring in twelve other Greek tragedies, by Aeschylus (*Agamemnon* 1612-53, 1662-71*; Eumenides* 179-231); Sophocles (*Antigone* 450-581, 724-65; *Ajax* 103, 112-13, 719-32, 1008-20, 1047-1315; *Electra* 289-98, 516-633; *Oedipus the King* 316-462, 532-630, 1063-64; and *Philoctetes* 927-62, 986-1003, 1281-86); and Euripides (*Alcestis* 629-740*; Hecuba* 1132-1284; *Hippolytus* 616-68, 885-98, 916-1035; *Medea* 465-519, 1323-50; and *Trojan Women* 969-1032) will be discussed below.

12 See, for example, the discussion in Roisman 2021: 111-16, 171-73.

Overview of Invective in Euripides' *Andromache* and Other Fifth-Century Tragedies

The main body of this study will consider the use of invective by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in their tragedies while exploring the contexts and roles of invective, and in particular trying to understand whether invective takes the place of physical violence. The study starts with Euripides' *Andromache,* which includes three scenes of invective, involving four characters: Menelaus and Hermione versus Andromache and Peleus. These are the scenes most scholars agree are examples of invective in extant Greek tragedy. In all cases both sides insult each other, as opposed to one side insulting and the other defending his/her acts. The exchange of insults is followed by one of the acts of violence allowed on the Greek stage as it does not involve striking or killing, that is, binding. Euripides has gifted Andromache with a sharp wit and with the ability to hold her own rhetorically with her sparring partners. Andromache's masterful rhetoric stands out clearly in the invective scenes with both Hermione and Menelaus. While never starting the abuse, she stands her ground and answers every insult thrown at her with calm logic, never giving in or imploring.

The invective scenes in *Andromache* display almost all the characteristics that this rhetorical trope entails in extant Greek tragedy. The scenes raise the tension in the play, and thus in a round-about way contribute to the spectators' *catharsis* when the tension is finally released. They serve as characterization tools, and they comment on a political agenda as well as on social mores. They also contain a humorous touch that denigrates the opponent. The encounter between Andromache and Hermione as well as that between Andromache and Menelaus both present Andromache's dire situation: Hermione and Menelaus plan to kill her and her son. The plot tension focuses on the threat to the mother and son. Will Molossus' fate be like that of her older son, Astyanax, who was thrown from the ramparts of Troy? How can Andromache prevent such an outcome? Would Neoptolemus or Peleus arrive in time to save them? The situation of Andromache hiding at the shrine of Thetis while awaiting rescue easily arouses pity and fear, emotions that Aristotle thought the most fitting to be cleansed of if possible (*Poetics* 1449b21-28). The same is true of the encounter between Peleus and Menelaus. The two

noblemen, one a former warrior at Troy, the other Achilles' formidable father, most probably arriving with a warlike retinue, face each other over the fate of Andromache. Who will win?

The Plot Contexts of Invective

i) Plot Contexts in Andromache

The immediate context of the first scene of invective (147-273) is that Andromache, fearing death at the hands of Neoptolemus' wife Hermione and Hermione's father Menelaus, has taken refuge as a suppliant at Thetis's altar in Phthia, near the palace of Neoptolemus. Taken as a concubine by Neoptolemus after the sack of Troy, Andromache has borne him a son, Molossus (whose name is not mentioned in the play). Neoptolemus' subsequent marriage to Hermione remains childless. Although at this point he has cast Andromache out of his bed, the enraged Hermione believes that her childlessness has been caused by Andromache's use of drugs to poison her womb. Hermione has threatened to kill Andromache, and at this moment Neoptolemus is absent and Menelaus has come to visit his daughter. Andromache fears that he will kill Molossus also, and indeed Menelaus has found the boy in spite of Andromache's attempts to hide him. Upon her entrance Hermione attacks Andromache with bitter invective.

In the second invective scene, between Andromache and Menelaus (309-544), the context is a highly wrought, tension-filled scene, after Menelaus has brought in the little boy. The Chorus have just finished describing the terrible losses that the Trojan war caused, setting the scene for what may turn out to be ongoing violence resulting from the war.

The third scene involving invective takes place when Peleus arrives, having been summoned by Andromache's handmaiden (547-765). Seeing Andromache and Molossus, his great-grandson, bound in ropes, he ignores Menelaus and asks Andromache on what charges these men have bound the two. His arrival prevents any further violent acts by Menelaus or Hermione, but his question highlights Menelaus' cruelty. The binding

of the mother and son is underscored when Peleus himself unties them.[13] He taunts Menelaus by saying:

> So badly, scoundrel, have you mutilated her wrists?
> Did you think it was an ox or a lion that you were knotting tight?
> Or were you afraid that she would take a sword and defend
> herself against you? (719-22, Lloyd 1994)

ii) Plot Contexts in the Other Tragedies

In *Agamemnon* there is an invective scene between the Chorus and Aegisthus at the very end of the play. The main drama has already taken place, with Clytemnestra having successfully lured her husband into the palace, where she murders both him and Cassandra. However, as would be expected, the murder of the King and his concubine has left the *polis,* represented by the Chorus, reverberating with a new kind of tension. Throughout the play the elderly Chorus were in a kind of stupor, never fully understanding what was taking place around them.[14] Now they are finally on the verge of taking action. Confronted with Aegisthus' self-satisfied gloating, after allowing a woman to carry out a murder for him, the Chorus finally seem to boil over. Clytemnestra intervenes to prevent actual physical violence (1654-61, 1672-73). The arrival of Peleus in *Andromache* has a similar effect in preventing violence against Andromache and Molossus.

In *Eumenides*, the Furies seek to punish Orestes, effectively carrying out their role of hunting matricides. They have arrived at the sanctuary of Apollo, who tries to evict them. Apollo may, to some extent, have been involved in prompting Orestes to commit matricide, but the argument between the two sides relates to their conflicting positions: their altercation is secondary to the main plot. The audience would be focused on whether Orestes will be found guilty and condemned to death. Apollo's invective against the Erinyes describes them as horrid in appearance, underlining the nature of Orestes' suffering when pursued and maddened by them.

13 Sommerstein 2010: 30-46.

14 See discussion in Roisman 2021: 21-22.

The context for all of the invectives in *Ajax* is Ajax's threefold humiliation: at not having been awarded the arms of Achilles in the first place; at being prevented by Athena from murdering the Atreidae and Odysseus; and at having become a laughing-stock, since with his senses befuddled, he slaughtered the Greek army's flocks instead of their leaders and soldiers. The plot tension relates first to whether his friends and family can convince Ajax not to kill himself, which is the only course of action he sees possible in his deep humiliation. There are unusual incidents of reported invective in the play, following the entry of Teucer, who arrives in time to hear the Greek soldiers castigating his brother's name, but not in time to prevent Ajax from taking his own life. Teucer describes the biting invective he imagines he would receive from his father for not saving his brother. In this graphic scene Ajax would have been covered with blood, initially from the murder of the flocks, and then from falling on his sword.

After Ajax's death the tension relates to the Atreidae's attempt to prevent Teucer from burying his brother. As we will see in *Antigone*, attempting to disrupt proper burial rites brings emotions to a fever pitch. As in *Andromache*, and several of the plays yet to be described, it is the arrival of a third party, this time Odysseus, that brings the exchange of invective to a halt. Odysseus' words defuse the situation, allowing the burial to take place.

In *Oedipus the King,* when the *polis* is suffering from a plague, Oedipus curses the person responsible, not realizing he is cursing himself. He hurls abuse at the seer Teiresias, who refuses to explain the situation to the King. The invective is performative, in that Oedipus, on realizing the full implications of his true identity, gouges out his own eyes. Unlike in *Andromache*, the invective does not replace actual violence. The gouging of the eyes is described in graphic terms.

In *Antigone*, the invectives add to the plot tension throughout the play. Antigone is determined to bury her brother Polyneices, and Creon is equally determined to prevent the burial. The invectives continue to stoke the tensions, which reach a fever pitch culminating in the deaths of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice.

In Sophocles' *Electra*, Electra's report to the Chorus of the harsh language her mother uses against her depicts the ongoing interactions of

mother and daughter years after the murder of Agamemnon. This report sets the scene for the rest of the play, giving the audience the chance to decide how they feel about the two women.

In *Philoctetes,* the invectives addressed by Philoctetes to Neoptolemus and Odysseus portray his plight, and his anger at being abandoned on an island by his fellow Greek warriors, due to a foul-smelling snakebite on his foot. The invective informs the audience of the man's hatred for his former colleague Odysseus and his desperation. The three men should have been fighting alongside each other, not attacking each other.

In *Alcestis* the invective is not really a major part of the drama, but serves to characterize Admetus and his father Pheres, rather than to advance the plot. Alcestis herself, who agreed to die in place of her husband Admetus, is allegedly already on her way to Hades. At this point in the play, there is no indication that Heracles will fight Death, and bring her back. The scene serves as an interval between the first half of the play, in which the tension builds up before Alcestis' death, and the second half of the play when she is brought back. The invective scene is somewhat ridiculous, with Admetus, who is in fact guilty of causing Alcestis' death, blaming his father for not having saved her by volunteering to die himself.

Medea is an exceptionally violent play, with Medea killing the Princess and indirectly her father, King Creon, and then stabbing her own two children to death. The contexts to the invectives are Jason's decisions to marry King Creon's daughter, with Medea and her sons facing exile as a result, and Medea's punitive actions. The invectives characterize Medea and Jason, as their positions are reversed, taking place before and after the off-stage murders occur. Jason was metaphorically flying high, about to marry the Princess, before she is murdered – Medea is literally flying high in her grandfather's chariot as the play ends. Although she has killed her sons, everything is done on her terms. With the play's intense bitterness, desperation, and hatred expressed along with the violent intentions, the general tone of the invective here is perhaps more reminiscent of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* than of Euripides' own *Andromache*. While

the eponymous heroines of both *Andromache* and *Medea* survive, Andromache, who saves her son, is a real heroine; Medea is a much more problematic character.[15]

In *Hippolytus*, the characters seem doomed before the start of the action, with Phaedra craving sexual intercourse with her stepson Hippolytus. On being found out, her obsession with the necessity to die out of shame and her determination that Hippolytus should suffer mortal consequences, vie with the intensity of her sexual obsession. In *Hippolytus* words have real power. Hippolytus' spoken invective causes the death of Phaedra, as surely as Phaedra's written note causes the death of Hippolytus. Theseus' invective against his son includes a curse that brings about Hippolytus' death. The invectives both characterize the speakers and also have a concrete role in the plots.

In *Hecuba*, after the old queen has lost everything, she finally takes revenge on Polymestor, murdering his sons and blinding him, as he murdered Polydorus, her youngest son. Polymestor's invective tells the story of what Hecuba did; his description of what will happen to her foretells the culminating disaster of the former queen's tragic life. Hecuba in turn tears to pieces Polymestor's claims of wishing to help the Argives. Her horrid future, as Polymestor depicts it, has no effect on the desperate old queen. Meanwhile, the audience await the decision Agamemnon will make about the two combatants.

In *Trojan Women*, Hecuba's invective against Helen is part of the *agon* between the two women, which occurs after the brutal murder of Astyanax, Hecuba's grandson. His mother Andromache has been given to Neoptolemus as a captive concubine, and Cassandra has been allotted to Agamemnon. The tension that remains for the spectators is whether or not Hecuba will convince Menelaus to kill his wayward wife. Menelaus tells Helen that no decision has been made as to whether she lives or dies, but that the army has entrusted the decision to him (901-2). But in 905 he declares that he intends to kill her. Hecuba convinces Menelaus to let Helen then speak in her defense, promising to counter every claim she presents in her favor. Helen presents her case, claiming she is innocent

15 See discussion in Roisman 2014b.

(914-65). Hecuba's entire speech not only rebuts all of Helen's claims (except for her first one),[16] but also condemns every aspect of Helen's behavior and personality. Hecuba herself has no power over Helen, but she might hope that by winning the *agon* she can convince Menelaus or the army to punish her. Nevertheless, Hecuba is acutely aware that whatever she says, in all likelihood Menelaus will quickly be bewitched by Helen's beauty, which she is showing off to the best possible effect in her finery.

Hecuba's invective against Helen may, at least to some extent, simply be for Hecuba's own benefit. Hecuba is taking full advantage of this opportunity to condemn Helen in return for what Hecuba herself has suffered. Does this provide any *catharsis* for Hecuba? There may be some satisfaction to the person who loses everything in life to have at least the power of speech remain for them. This happens also for Polymestor at the end of *Hecuba.*

Factors Affecting the Emotional Impact of Invective in Tragedy

i) The Balance of Power Between the Speaker and the Person Spoken To

In Euripides' play *Andromache*, the first invective scene occurs between Andromache and Hermione, and it is evident in her speech that Hermione, as Neoptolemus' lawful wife, holds tangible power over Andromache (155-80). However, as the mother of Neoptolemus' only son, Andromache's status differs from that of the other household slaves and servants.[17] It is possible that she draws strength from this, and that her powerful rhetoric is not only related to her character, but also to her belief that when Neoptolemus returns, he will support her (183-231). Her main

16 Helen's first point that Hecuba and Priam are responsible for what happened to her because of giving life to Paris and not making sure that the baby is dead, was dealt with in the first part of the trilogy, which includes the human factors of compassion that Helen chooses to gloss over, but they would have been in the minds of the spectators. Hecuba ignores the charge not only because it would be of no interest to Menelaus, but because there is no effective answer to it besides pointing out the futility of such a charge; the sole effect would be to distract from Hecuba's line of rebuttal.

17 See discussion in Roisman 2023: 44-45.

problem is not knowing when that may be. Of course, she could have no way of knowing that he is already dead.

During the second invective, between Menelaus and Andromache, the balance of power between the two speakers is of particular interest. While Menelaus is a king in Sparta, he has no jurisdiction here in Phthia. However, Menelaus has claimed his right to kill Andromache and her son, despite his being Neoptolemus' son, too (309-18). Andromache counters his claims by invoking the fact that Neoptolemus is the father of Molossus, and he will not stand idly by once he learns of his son's murder (319-63). In the third invective, the arrival of Peleus (546) causes an inversion of power. Suddenly, someone else is in charge, and although he is elderly, he takes over the situation, frees Andromache and causes Menelaus to leave suddenly, abandoning Hermione.

In *Agamemnon*, the invective scene is unusual in that it takes place between the Chorus and Aegisthus, after Aegisthus' entry at line 1577. Interestingly, none of these men had taken part in the Trojan War. The Chorus stayed at home because they were elderly. Aegisthus was Agamemnon's enemy but could also easily be accused of cowardice. The Chorus do not have the status of Aegisthus, who is from the leading family of the *polis*, and is Clytemnestra's consort. Yet they now threaten to murder the man who is effectively ruling the *polis*. In some ways, then, the local Elders may be interpreted as having comparable status to Aegisthus, who is an interloper, and has been involved in regicide. Where there is no clear power hierarchy, invective scenes may become explosive – and indeed, the Chorus threaten Aegisthus with physical violence, and are only calmed by Clytemnestra, who, at least up until the murders of Agamemnon and Cassandra, has been at the pinnacle of the power hierarchy in the *polis*.

In *Ajax*, the invectives between Teucer and the Atreidae are also interesting in respect to status. Teucer suffers invectives from Menelaus and Agamemnon for insisting on giving his half-brother proper burial, while the two Atreidae want to leave Ajax's body exposed, because he intended to attack his own comrades. Menelaus first utters hateful invective against the dead Ajax. Part of this invective focuses on whether Ajax was inferior in status to Menelaus. Teucer's answers also relate to

status. Menelaus' claims imply that he was Ajax's superior and his commander in the war, while Teucer points out that Ajax sailed on his own volition. The *stichomythia* that follows this first invective speech concludes the *agon* between the two speakers (1120-41). Menelaus then moves from insulting the dead Ajax to castigating Teucer for his inferior status. Menelaus points out that Teucer is a bowman and so held in lower military esteem than the warriors who fight with swords and shields. When Teucer answers that he could defeat a fully-armed Menelaus even without a shield, Menelaus does not answer the challenge. Instead he refers to the issue of justice, asking whether it is just that his murderer (i.e., Ajax) be honored with a burial. Teucer escapes this rhetorical trap by mocking Menelaus when he says: "Your murderer? You have said a strange thing, if you have died but are alive" (1127).[18] The dialogue turns to the issue of proper burial and respect for gods. Menelaus again sets a rhetorical trap for Teucer by asking whether preventing a proper burial for an enemy is not honorable (1132). Teucer circumvents the trap by asking if Ajax was Menelaus' enemy. Menelaus' reply that they hated each other offers Teucer the opportunity to accuse Menelaus of cheating Ajax out of Achilles' arms. Menelaus then resorts to what he knows best, threatening Teucer with violence: "This speech is tending towards pain for someone." When Teucer does not flinch, Menelaus states again with bravado that Ajax must not be buried, to which Teucer replies defiantly that Ajax *will* be buried.

When Agamemnon enters, he claims that both Ajax and Teucer are nonentities and slaves (1228, 1235), reiterating Menelaus' false claim that Ajax was a commoner (1071). Agamemnon challenges Teucer's claim that he and Menelaus were not in command of the troops and that Ajax sailed as his own chief (1232-34), and goes on to discredit Teucer by claiming that his mother was a slave, which would indicate Teucer's lower status.

While it would seem that the two Atreidae hold significantly higher status and power than Teucer, he refuses to accept this. Teucer brushes off their insults related to his birth and status. Indeed, if anyone is acting nobly, and deserves higher status, it is Teucer, and not the Atreidae. The invective scene surrounds the burial of Ajax, just as the invective between Antigone and Creon is set in the context of Antigone wishing to

18 Translations from Sophocles are by Lloyd-Jones 1997.

bury her brother Polyneices, in defiance of Creon's decree that he should remain unburied. In both cases the person nominally holding power wishes to prevent a proper burial. In both cases they have been threatened by the deceased when alive, and in both cases a surviving sibling wishes to carry out the law of the gods in conducting a proper burial. Does having divine right on their side give Teucer and Antigone higher status, or at least let them feel that they have it? Their unrestrained invective would make it seem so. In Andromache's arguments against both Hermione and Menelaus, perhaps feeling that justice was on her side gave her the strength to fight so well, at least in rhetorical battles.

In *Medea* the way the characters perceive their own power changes after Medea has carried out her revenge, killing the Princess, Creon, and her and Jason's two sons. Medea was just a cast-off foreign wife during most of the play, until the murders. At the end, she has become almost divine, riding in her grandfather's chariot through the sky, preventing Jason from touching the bodies of his two dead sons. Jason's invective can no longer touch Medea, just as her earlier invective failed to touch Jason. He eventually realizes that he is powerless, and that she will ride off unscathed. However, by killing her own sons to wound Jason, Medea has wounded herself.

In *Hippolytus,* the young Hippolytus, Theseus' son, nominally holds a higher status than the Nurse, who is a slave. His invective condemning all free women has truly disastrous results both for Phaedra and for himself. Theseus is of a higher status than his bastard son and uses his power with calamitous results. Hippolytus behaves politely and humbly with his father, being careful not to enrage him. He does not answer his father's invective with invective of his own but tries unsuccessfully to explain himself and appease Theseus. The only thing Hippolytus vies for is to be recognized by his father as a son of legitimate status. However, even when Theseus realizes that Phaedra lied in her letter, he cannot bring himself to see Hippolytus as a legitimate son.[19]

In *Oedipus the King,* although Oedipus must think he is in a superior position to the seer Teiresias, because he is the king, Teiresias claims independence and equal status with Oedipus in having the right to answer. He is not Oedipus' slave, he says, but Loxias' and he will not be written

19 See discussion by Roisman 2025.

down as Creon's partisan (408-11). Oedipus is certainly of a higher social status than Creon, which Creon does not dispute.

In *Philoctetes*, the invective scenes are one-sided, with Philoctetes hurling abuse first at Neoptolemus and then at Odysseus. The crippled man has no power without his bow, and when Neoptolemus holds the bow, Philoctetes' only weapon is invective. It allows Philoctetes to vent his emotions, but he can do no real harm until Neoptolemus returns the bow to him. He only has the upper hand from a moral point of view. One does not cast out a wounded warrior.

Odysseus seems to have typically been cast as inured to both invective and verbal pleading. It is noteworthy that in *Ajax* Odysseus remains untouched both by Ajax's words and by his befuddled attempts to harm him. In *Hecuba*, he remains unmoved by Hecuba's supplication when she tries to save the life of her daughter Polyxena.

ii) Special Staging or Stage Directions Intensifying the Invective

In *Andromache*, Hermione wears a gold tiara and sparkling gown. Euripides has the character describe her golden crown and bejeweled attire on entering the stage. By doing so, he not only characterizes her as a spoiled young queen of Spartan ancestry but also emphasizes the difference in station between her and Andromache. The former Trojan princess is now a mere slave and would have been dressed as such. Stage directions may have had Andromache clinging to an altar, emphasizing her vulnerability. Menelaus arrives wearing hoplite armor, which emphasizes the difference in status between Andromache and himself and underscores his status as a hero. The Chorus comment on Peleus' 'aged steps' to contrast his physical condition with Menelaus' comparative youth, which only heightens the absurdity of Menelaus running away at the end of the scene. In *Trojan Women*, having Helen appear in all her finery, while Hecuba is dressed in rags, would have emphasized the pathos of Hecuba's situation, heightening the audience's sympathy with her.

iii) Rhetorically Heightened Tone of Invective

Using the rhetorical trope of talking *at* the opponent rather than talking to her/him serves to belittle the opponent. This technique is used several

times. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, Menelaus relates a fable, seemingly addressed to no one, in order to comment on Teucer's conduct, comparing him to a man of reckless speech who urged sailors to sail on during a storm, while he himself cowered in speechless fear. This is, he claims, how Teucer will eventually become mute in his argument with Menelaus. Teucer counters in kind, speaking *at* rather than *to* Menelaus, and mimics Menelaus' use of a fable by saying that he also saw a man full of stupidity who triumphed insolently in the misfortunes of others. However, someone like himself stopped him by saying: "Fellow do not persecute the dead; for if you do, know that you shall suffer pain!" (1154-55). Teucer thus not only has the final word but also brings the issue from sheer invective to the subject at hand: Ajax's burial.

Euripides uses a similar rhetorical trope in the invectives in *Hippolytus*. When Hippolytus arrives after Phaedra's suicide, Theseus does not confront his son with Phaedra's accusation but rather talks about the importance of being right-minded in a way that leaves no doubt that he is referring to Hippolytus (916-20). His imperiousness is reminiscent of Hippolytus himself talking *at* Phaedra rather than *to* her in his misogynistic tirade and warnings about the future, following the Nurse's revelation (616-68).[20] The invectives of both tragedians take advantage of this haughty, humiliating, and heartless rhetorical style to belittle opponents in an *agon*.

iv) The Speaker's Intention in Uttering the Invectives

The emotional impact of invective may vary according to the speaker's intentions. In the first invective scene between Hermione and Andromache, Hermione's intentions are not completely clear. While she accuses Andromache of poisoning her womb and states she will make sure that Andromache is put to death, she also suggests that if Andromache survives, she must clean her house. Perhaps the most hurtful of her insults is that Andromache somehow foolishly chose to sleep with Neoptolemus, the very man who killed Astyanax, the son she bore her husband, Hector. Furthermore, Neoptolemus is the son of Achilles, who killed Hector. Is

20 See detailed discussion in Roisman 1999a: 136-37; 2014a; Parker 2001.

Hermione trying to wound Andromache emotionally, as well as threatening to kill her? Hermione's motives appear complicated and confused. She appears to want to make Andromache feel bad, filled with shame and fear. Hermione is highly emotional, and causing her opponent to feel she is in a precarious position may be as important to her as the actual threats. Hermione concludes her first speech with one of the common strategies of invective by identifying Andromache as a member of a group of 'others' differentiated from the local population. Her accusation that Andromache is a barbarian and that amongst barbarians "father lies with daughter, son with mother, and sister with brother, nearest kin murder each other" (174-76) must have seemed particularly ridiculous, with Hermione's own mother being notoriously faithless, while Greek myths familiar to the original audience were overflowing with fratricide and incest. However, invectives often suggest sexual deviancy.

Andromache initially defends herself, explaining that she is a slave and Hermione is young, unjust, proud, and unlikely to listen to 'superior argument' from one inferior in status; she then counters Hermione's unfounded allegations, which start by simply blaming her for being a concubine (177-80), as if it were her fault or choice, and continue by accusing Andromache of wanting to supplant Hermione as the mistress of the house. Andromache does not grovel or ask for pity but counters the senselessness of Hermione's allegations head on. Then Andromache goes on the offensive. Having eliminated herself rhetorically as a source for Hermione's troubled circumstances, Andromache points to the real cause of Hermione's misery. She pinpoints Hermione's disposition as the fount of Neoptolemus' distaste for her: "You are not fit to live with" (206).[21] Hermione might be beautiful and young, but she lacks the qualities that make a successful wife (208). A wife should identify herself with her husband's household and not assert herself unduly. Hermione should identify herself as the Phthian spouse of Neoptolemus, rather than continuing to consider herself a Spartan, the daughter of Menelaus. Instead, Hermione taunts her husband by claiming that Scyros, Neoptolemus' birthplace, is of no account in comparison to Sparta, and that Menelaus is a greater man than Achilles (209-12).

21 Translations from Euripides, except for *Hippolytus,* where I offer my translations, are by Kovacs 1994, 1995, unless otherwise stated.

Andromache ends her rebuttal with another sting to Hermione:

> Do not seek to surpass your mother in her man-loving
> ways, woman. All children who have sense must
> avoid the paths their wayward mothers went. (229-31)

Andromache's reminder of Helen holds a malicious sting, which Hermione immediately recognizes, and which prompts her to exclaim, "Are you going to keep on probing my woes?" (249).

In the second invective scene, Andromache is attempting to save her life and that of her son. She belittles Menelaus and attempts to shame him into changing his mind, but to little effect. Her one actual weapon is threatening that Neoptolemus will avenge her murder and the murder of his son, by forcing Menelaus to stand trial and drive Hermione out of his house. By contrast, Peleus physically threatens Menelaus, saying he will bloody his head with his scepter (588). Was this a serious threat? The old man does actually drive Menelaus away with his blistering invective.

In the other tragedies, as in *Andromache*, the intention behind uttering invective is almost always to shame, denigrate, belittle or in any other way possible hurt the recipient. This is the case in all of the plays. In *Agamemnon*, The Chorus actually threaten Aegisthus with physical violence. They want to put him in his place. He is a regicide and should not regard himself as the ruler of the *polis.* In the *Eumenides*, Apollo wants to evict the Furies from his sanctuary. He underscores their hideous appearance. He also wants to prevent them from hounding Orestes. His words have little effect.

In *Ajax* as in *Antigone*, Teucer wants to force Agamemnon and Menelaus to sanction a proper burial for Ajax, just as Antigone wants to ensure that her brother is given a proper burial. Teucer's attacks on the Atreidae are even fiercer than Antigone's on Creon. Antigone uses an understated invective against Creon (450-70). The apparent restraint in her words gives them in fact more strength. She admits to Creon that although she knew about his edict, she has not acted out of audacity but out of consciousness of the penalty for disregarding the gods' statutes (Griffith 1999: 458-60). Teucer, in contrast, makes full frontal attacks. Antigone uses logic in her speech, acknowledging that she, like all mortals, must

die. However, at the end she includes a fierce barb, saying that if her actions appear foolish in Creon's eyes, "it amounts to a charge of folly by a fool" (470). When Antigone makes no headway arguing with Creon, she too, belittles her opponent, telling him that his edict has no worth in comparison to the "unwritten laws" (453-55). Whatever the "unwritten laws" entail is still a scholarly debate, but her claim that Creon's edict prohibiting the burial of Polyneices is not on a par with them undermines Creon's self-importance.[22] In Haemon's invective scene with his father, he wants to save Antigone's life (728-65). When he realizes that Creon will not relent, he threatens to kill himself; yet Creon somehow does not understand his son's intention.

v) The Effect of Invective on the Speaker

In *Andromache*, Hermione is highly emotional. Causing her opponent to feel that she is in a precarious position may be as important to her as the actual threats. Likewise there is no immediate contextual need for Andromache to mention Helen; she simply seeks to shatter Hermione emotionally even further. In the second invective scene, Andromache is under real threat, and is desperate to save her son's life, even if she cannot save herself. Despite her situation, she retains her rhetorical ability. Menelaus, elated that he has found Molossus, pays little attention to Andromache, and calmly lies to her about his true intentions. Once she has learnt that Menelaus deceived her, and intends to kill her, while letting Hermione determine the fate of Molossus, nothing holds Andromache back. She hurls every insult possible at Menelaus and Spartans in general. Peleus also is incensed at Menelaus' actions, threatening his great-grandson and challenging Peleus in his own kingdom. He insults and belittles Menelaus in every way possible.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King,* speeches are highly charged emotionally throughout. Most invectives in this tragedy are unlike any others considered in this paper. In lines 247-72 Oedipus declares a series of terrible curses on the unknown slayer of Laius, not knowing that it was he himself who killed the king. Oedipus' prayers can be interpreted as performative speech utterances of invective, as in the belief system of the

22 See detailed discussion in Roisman 2021: 129-31.

time, the curses alone are enough to bring about the events that followed. He also orders those hearing him to make his words good, in the name of the god, not realizing he is condemning himself. Oedipus' words are later reinforced by the seer, Teiresias, who hints at the truth by asking Oedipus if he knows who his parents are and warning him that the curse his mother and father received will be his undoing (415-19).

Except perhaps in the case of *Alcestis*, those speaking in invective scenes are not just 'blowing off steam' or releasing tensions. They are attacking others or defending themselves from physical or verbal assault. Their speeches may be regarded as part of a battle, the consequences of which may involve their own deaths or the death of someone they care for, or their proper treatment after death, which may have been considered equally important. Andromache is fighting for her life, and for that of her son; Peleus attacks Menelaus to save them. Apollo wants to scare off the Erinyes to save Orestes. Teucer wants to ensure a proper burial for Ajax, just as Antigone wants to ensure proper burial rites for Polyneices. Antigone eventually attacks Creon with great venom when fighting for her brother but relinquishes her own life with comparative ease. Hecuba in *Trojan Women* wants to assure the death of Helen at the hands of Menelaus. Helen, having spoken first, has no chance to retaliate, but later manages to convince Menelaus to spare her life anyway. In *Hecuba,* the old Queen simply vents her grief and despair when attacking Polymestor. Polymestor, on the other hand, blind and bereft of his sons, can only retaliate by revealing Hecuba's horrid future. Both Jason and Medea express their own desperation in their separate invective scenes. However much they may have wanted to alter a course of action, neither speaker has much impact on the other, but simply vent their own emotions. In all the other plays the speakers of invective are enraged at their opponents. Only Menelaus in *Andromache* does not seem to exhibit any anger at Andromache and her son but intends only to satisfy the needs of his daughter.

vi) The Emotions of the Recipient of the Invective

The emotions of characters on the receiving end of invective are portrayed in various ways. Although one might think that Andromache's

rhetorical skill and composure must have overcome Hermione's nonsensical accusations, it is Hermione who has the last word before entering the palace, confident that Andromache will be forced to step out of the shrine and be killed. Menelaus, likewise, is not moved by Andromache's verbal attacks. He is characterized as an insensitive, cowardly bully who is not interested in what Andromache says. However, while he seems initially unmoved by the invectives he receives from Andromache and Peleus, his sudden decision to leave Phthia does seem to have been caused by Peleus' words.

Aegisthus in *Agamemnon* is surprised that the Chorus have the courage to scold him but is not daunted by them. The Erinyes in *Eumenides* try to reason with Apollo to no avail. Odysseus, who does not hear Ajax's vituperation (*Ajax* 379-91), is oblivious to it, and it may be that this is what allowed Sophocles to have him act as a mediator in the end. Later in *Ajax*, the Atreidae and Teucer all stand their ground, whatever insults are hurled at them, with Teucer maintaining the upper hand rhetorically. Electra's description of her mother's verbal abuse (in Sophocles' *Electra*) indicates that she thinks the words are enough to justify her hatred of her mother. In *Alcestis*, Pheres is not rendered speechless by his son's invective and shows that Admetus' acts were not lost on him. Helen in *Trojan Women* is unmoved by Hecuba and simply begs Menelaus to forgive her.

In *Oedipus the King,* the ranting invective used by Oedipus against those around him has little effect on Teiresias or Creon, but he blinds himself following the curses he brought down on his own head. Teiresias is no less quick to anger than Oedipus. Although initially Teiresias seems to attempt to protect Oedipus by not sharing with him the devastating knowledge he possesses, he is worn down by Oedipus' invective. Teiresias' first speeches indicate that he has suddenly realized that he should not have come at all, and that he would prefer to return home. The fact is that although he does not present himself as Oedipus' adversary, Oedipus is right in intuitively suspecting the seer. After all, the audience know that Teiresias did not prevent the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta,

and thus allowed a horrible and unforgivable act of incest. Overall Sophocles casts the seer as ill-intentioned, un-civic-minded, or incompetent.[23] The knowledge he holds, that it is none other than Oedipus who murdered King Laius; that Laius was Oedipus' father; and that Oedipus is now married to his own mother will cause Oedipus' downfall. He could have prevented it, and it is not made clear in the play why he did not. The reality now is that it is the presence of Oedipus himself that causes the city's suffering. Oedipus' invectives eventually force the seer to speak, bringing catastrophe not on Teiresias, but on Oedipus himself. None of Teiresias' words are actually invective. None of his statements is an exaggerated insult: they are simply hard truths, which he could have revealed long ago. Throughout the play, it is only Oedipus who utters any kind of invective, wishing harm on others and unknowingly on himself, laboring under false assumptions until he blinds himself. The wholly tragic nature of these utterances, Oedipus' false accusations and his unwitting self-condemnations, sets them apart from other instances of invective. There is no dark comedy here. While Oedipus did want to shame Teiresias and Creon when he believed that they were the true culprits, the intensity of his own shame on discovering the truth is far greater. The invective used by Oedipus against Teiresias and Creon pales in comparison to the dreadful discovery that Oedipus makes. It is possible that Sophocles wanted to build the tension up slowly to this crushing revelation. In the end, neither Teiresias nor Creon suffer anything greater than insult, although on second thought the off-stage audience might have less than kind thoughts about the seer, whose traditional role is to warn of disaster rather than merely watch it happening.

In *Philoctetes,* while it is left unclear whether Philoctetes' invectives against Neoptolemus have any impact on the young man, it is possible.[24] Neoptolemus had pitied Philoctetes from the outset and been disturbed by the idea of deceiving him. His decision to return Philoctetes' bow to the crippled hero may have derived from his own doubts about his course of action, but may also have been influenced by Philoctetes' words.

23 For discussion see Roisman 1999b; 2003. For a complex discussion of Teiresias' reticence, see Battezzato 2021.

24 See discussion in Roisman 2005: 88-105.

vii) Two Special Types of Invective: Reported and Imagined Invectives

Ajax includes several instances of both reported and imagined invective. First, upon their entrance at line 134, the Chorus report how Ajax was slandered by the Greeks as rumors were spread through the camp by Odysseus, saying that it was Ajax who butchered the Greeks' herds and flocks of war spoils. Two more cases of reported invective occur later in the plot. The first is reported by the messenger, recounting the invective hurled at Teucer on his return to the Greek camp, while the second, to be discussed below, is reported by Teucer, after he *imagined* an invective by his father, Telamon, against himself once Telamon hears that Ajax has died.

Upon his return, Teucer becomes an object of vituperation by multiple parties. First, he is verbally attacked by the soldiers in the camp, who encircle him, calling him "brother of a madman who had plotted against the army," declaring that they will not be content until he is dead, mangled by stones. The verbal abuse goes almost to the point of violence when swords are drawn (724-30). It is only the intervention of some older men present that prevents the quarrel from turning into carnage (731-32). The scene shows how invective fans the flames of hatred and could lead to physical violence, even though Teucer could have known nothing about Ajax's previous actions. The scene is reminiscent of the much later *Andromache,* in which Peleus almost strikes Menelaus.

This threatening invective against Teucer and Ajax must have raised the tension of the off-stage audience. They, like the Chorus (743-44), may have believed that Ajax's thoughts had turned in a more positive direction, and hence might be safe. However, they now must wonder how Ajax would deal with the troops' intense hatred. An additional element is found in this invective with regard to Teucer. The audience hear that he was attacked (verbally and potentially physically) because of his brother's actions, not because of anything he himself has said or done. That may have made the invective even more difficult for Teucer to deal with. As well as being concerned for his own safety, he must have been exceedingly worried about his half-brother's wellbeing. People may be even more concerned about a person dear to them, than about themselves.

This may be compared to the 'imagined invective' that Ajax suffered from. He did not hear any of the Greeks' insults but experienced them in his mind. Often it is our own thoughts that hurt us the most, magnified by imagination, isolated from calming words that others might offer us. Similarly, the shame that Ajax experienced both at his own deeds in slaughtering the flocks instead of the Atreidae and Odysseus, thereby becoming a laughing-stock of the Argives and hated by them, and at not having been awarded Achilles' arms would have grown several magnitudes as he ruminated on all that had transpired (379-82, 440-46, 454-55, 458). Had Ajax heard Odysseus' actual words (121-26) it is possible he would have reacted differently. Immediately on seeing Ajax in his madness, Odysseus had in fact pitied him, despite hearing Ajax's violent intentions against him (103-17). Understanding the insignificance of men in the bigger scheme of things, Odysseus eventually persuades Agamemnon to do the right thing at the end of the play. Having heard Odysseus' earlier words (121-26), the audience may have hoped that someone could reason with Ajax and save him. While Ajax's own 'deception speech' (646-92) may have strengthened this hope, the invective described by the messenger would probably have had the opposite effect. Abusive words with incitement to physical violence saturate the play to the extent that it seems inevitable that there will be at least one victim.

The second imaginary invective is experienced by Teucer, who arrives too late to save Ajax. Teucer anticipates the invective that Telamon, his father, will use against him, calling him the bastard offspring of his spear's war-prize;[25] or a betrayer due to cowardice and unmanliness; or suspecting him of wishing Ajax dead so he could inherit Telamon's household. Teucer explicitly connects this vituperation by the old Telamon to anger (1012-20). As with the invective that Ajax must have experienced in his own mind, Telamon's speech is entirely the product of Teucer's imagination. He is actually hurling invective at himself, although he imagines the words coming from his father. Teucer perhaps foresees his father's response quite accurately, but nevertheless, his own knowledge of the words which would hurt him the most allows him to cause himself great pain with this imagined invective.

25 For the status of a *nothos*, a bastard son, see Patterson 1990: 41; Kamen 2013: 62-70; Roisman 2025.

Another case of reported invective is found in Sophocles' *Electra.* Electra tells the Chorus how her mother casts insults at her. She calls her "godless hateful creature!" and asks whether she alone lost a father, wishing her an ugly death (289-92), and also reports that when anyone mentions Orestes, Clytemnestra blames her daughter for saving Orestes and promises she will be punished (294-98). Electra must hope that these cruel words will turn the Chorus against her mother.

viii) The Presence of an Internal Audience

In *Andromache*, the presence of the Chorus may be significant to Hermione, who wants to feel admired and loved by those around her but fails miserably in this aim. The Chorus however do follow Hermione's line of reasoning, that there are two women sharing one bed, and that this is the reason behind Hermione's jealousy. They ignore Andromache's claim that this is no longer the case. They connect the situation to the beauty contest of the goddesses, as a result of which Aphrodite awarded Helen as a prize to Paris. Once Paris had taken Helen back to Troy, Tyndareus invoked the agreement with Helen's suitors to go to war against Troy to return Helen to her rightful husband. Likewise, in the second invective scene, the Chorus, rather incredibly, initially attack Andromache for defending herself against Menelaus. Only after she leaves the altar, do they speak on her behalf to Menelaus, with no effect. The Chorus' continued speeches about a 'double marriage' show how removed from the reality of the situation they are. However, their sympathies now clearly lie with Andromache. As is typical, their speeches have little effect apart from commenting on the action and describing events for the off-stage audience.

Roles of Invective

i) Significant Questions

After looking at the characteristics of invective in tragedy, one may ask what role invective has in Euripides' *Andromache* and whether there are different functions for invective in other fifth-century tragedies. While

tragedy is not normally associated with humor, I will consider whether invective may introduce some humor into tragedy. Other questions in the paper will focus on whether invective incites physical violence, or, conversely, may take its place. Finally: how may invective have been used to enhance both audience identification with characters, and their appreciation of the plays?

ii) Invective as a Characterization Tool

Both Andromache's and Peleus' invectives against Menelaus characterize him as being cowardly and insignificant, despite his status as one of the generals of the Greek army in the Trojan War, and one who featured significantly in some of the *Iliad*'s battle scenes.

At the end of the first invective scene between the two women (*Andr.* 222-26), Andromache comes across not only as a good and devoted wife who puts the happiness of her husband above her own, but as chaste, reminiscent of the description of a Bee Woman by Semonides of Amorgos (*fl.* seventh century BCE), who in Poem 7 depicts different types of women as having sprung from different species. The perfect woman is the one sprung from the bee. One of her main characteristics is that she is not prone to sexual engagement except for procreation. Andromache's views once again conform admirably to the Greek patriarchal ideal. Hermione is the one who falls outside the accepted Greek norms. The rivalry between Andromache and Hermione is thus not between a barbarian and a Greek, but between a barbarian reflecting Greek morality and an immoral Spartan woman.

By preaching the total submission of a wife to her husband, Andromache must have infinitely pleased the Athenian male audience (213-14). She then goes on to lob Hermione's assertions about barbarian sexual mores back at her, accusing Hermione of being so sexually insatiable and so jealous of her husband's affections that she cannot tolerate the thought of him ever having had intercourse with another woman (215-21), and that she is so possessive that she would not allow even one drop of rain to spatter on her husband's face (227-28).

Like Andromache's invectives with both Menelaus and Hermione, in *Ajax* the invectives between Teucer and the Atreidae are interesting in terms of characterization. Menelaus is the first to utter hateful invective

against the dead Ajax. As Finglass (2011: ad 1052-90) points out, Menelaus' speech is schematic, constructed by claim and its reversal: "Menelaus thought Ajax a friend, but found him an enemy (1052-54); Ajax wanted himself to live, and his enemies to die, but the god reversed this (1057-60). As a result, he must not be buried but will have his corpse exposed (1062-65). Menelaus couldn't control him alive but will now that he is dead (1067-70). Before, Ajax was *hybristes*, whereas now Menelaus can have proud thoughts (1087-88)." Menelaus claims that Ajax was a subordinate of his and should have obeyed him, but did not. A large body is not an assurance of safety, he says. Only shame and fear of authority can assure one's safety. Terror in a city can assure its survival, not acting as one pleases; these and other such despotic proclamations are uttered by Menelaus as he forbids Teucer to bury his half-brother. The invective comes to characterize Menelaus as a Spartan, who would not have aroused much sympathy amongst the Athenian audience. His binary thinking shows him as a rather inarticulate and rhetorically limited man, and his pronouncement "Formerly he [Ajax] was heated in his insolence (*hybristes*), but now it is my hour of pride" (1087-88) shows him as a small human finding delight in the death of one much greater than he is.[26]

Even the Chorus (1091-92) caution Menelaus against preventing the burial, but it is Teucer's attack on his stature and character that strikes harder. Similar to the way in which Euripides' Andromache mocks Menelaus, claiming that for all of his repute, he is actually a coward (*Andr.* 458-460), Teucer belittles the Spartan, using the same argument: that reputation and high birth do not guarantee noble deeds.

Agamemnon's invective, which is mainly directed against Teucer, but also include insults against Ajax (1226-63), serves to characterize Agamemnon more than Ajax and Teucer. In belittling the war efforts of the two half-brothers, he not only shows himself small-minded and ungrateful, he also goes against one of the more fundamental codes of Athenian society. The best warriors were not only supposed to be honored; they were also supposed to receive the choicest spoils of war. Agamemnon denies both to Ajax. Instead, his speech is vituperative and furious. He

26 The translations from Sophocles' *Electra* are by Roisman 2008/2017; of all other Sophoclean plays are by Lloyd-Jones 1988; 1997.

taunts Teucer in the beginning and end of his speech, for having an enslaved mother (ignoring the fact that she was a princess before she was enslaved), and unintelligible barbarian speech. It should be noted that *Andromache* also entails the theme of an enslaved princess, and a situation one might be able to throw in the face of Molossus, as Agamemnon does now to Teucer.

Agamemnon goes on to belittle Ajax's contribution to the war effort and equates his own prowess in battle with that of Ajax (1236-37). He also brings up again the fact that the contest for Achilles' arms was decided by a majority of judges, and accuses Teucer, and by implication Ajax, of not accepting defeat (1242-45). His complaint that Teucer will never learn *sophrosyne* (1259) is reminiscent of Menelaus' use of the related term *sophronos* (1073-76) and appears equally hollow. His claim that intelligence is more valuable than brawn is not unreasonable, but it is unclear how this applies to Ajax (1250-54). As none of Agamemnon's claims rings true, they cast him in a poor light.

Teucer's reply is by no means less castigating and disparaging (1266-1315). To his credit, he returns the focus to Ajax and Ajax's accomplishments. First, he laments the lack of gratitude of the commanders towards Ajax and describes in detail Ajax's prowess in two incidents in which he saved the Argives: first when he saved the ships (1272-81), and second when he fought Hector in a duel (1283-89). Passing elegantly now to his own defense, Teucer states that in both cases he, Teucer, was beside his half-brother. Furthermore, Agamemnon should not try to shame his, Teucer's, descent. He is the son of Telamon and Hesione, a princess, daughter of Laomedon, given by Heracles to his father as a prize for his valor.

Teucer then moves to counter-attack Agamemnon's lineage by pointing out the Phrygian origins of Agamemnon's grandfather Pelops. He goes into detail about Agamemnon's father Atreus serving his brother Thyestes, the uncle of Agamemnon, an impious meal of the flesh of Thyestes' own children. He follows this with remarks about Agamemnon's mother, Aerope, who the audience would have known was Cretan, and insinuates that her father, Catreus, caught her with her lover and sent

her to Nauplius, king of Euboea with instructions to drown her. The latter, however, spared her, and she then married Atreus, Agamemnon's father (1291-97).

Up to this point Teucer has built up his own credibility by relying on facts to counter everything Agamemnon has said. He shows himself to be brave and resolute in facing both Menelaus and Agamemnon. After his convincing rebuttal of Agamemnon's claims, Teucer brings back the issue of burial. He boldly states that having been born of two noble parents, he would not disgrace his birth and allow his half-brother to be shamed by lying unburied (1304-7). Making effective rhetorical use of the tableau formed by the dead Ajax, himself, Eurysaces, and Tecmessa, which dominates the stage (1308-9), Teucer threatens that if Agamemnon casts out Ajax, he will also have to cast out the three of them. He does not end his speech before hurling an additional insult at the Atreidae: "I am proud to die before all fighting for him [Ajax] rather than for your wife, or shall I say you and your brother" (1310-12). Finally in reply to Agamemnon's former concern for his own reputation (1241), Teucer ends his speech with bluster, rudely warning Agamemnon that if he harms him (Teucer), he will wish one day he had been a coward rather than bold at Teucer's expense (1314-15). The invectives and the counter-invective show the extent to which Teucer towers in intellect and character over the Atreidae.

In *Alcestis,* the invective between Admetus and his father Pheres serves to characterize both men, without progressing the plot action. In *Hippolytus*, Hippolytus' diatribe against women casts him as a virginal misogynist who at the same time is thinking about marriage (*Hipp*. 616-67),[27] Theseus' invective against his son characterizes the father more than the son: Theseus shows himself an insensitive father completely subsumed by his public image. The invectives uttered by Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* not only bring about his downfall but also serve to characterize him as volatile and suspicious.

27 One needs to ask oneself, however, what else could the young man have done in these circumstances. See discussion Roisman 1999a: 113.

iii) Effects of Invective: Escalation, Suicide, Physical Attack, and More

Andromache: while the tension between Andromache and Hermione must have risen during the first invective scene, there are no immediate effects, as all attention becomes focused on the arrival of Menelaus as he brings Molossus on stage. Although Andromache's desperate rhetoric with both Hermione and Menelaus would have raised sympathy for her and for her son's plight, it has little impact on the plot action. The third invective scene has a greatly different outcome. Menelaus abandons Hermione, driven away by Peleus' words and probably by the former threat of his scepter. The plot of the play turns abruptly from this point. Instead of Andromache being in danger, it is now Hermione who seems so distraught that she may take her own life.

The invectives in Euripides' *Hippolytus* also have a particularly strong effect on the progression of the plot. Hippolytus' famous diatribe against women, which certainly qualifies as an invective, delineates what Hippolytus thinks is wrong with the entire female gender. It comes as an enraged answer to the Nurse's sexual proposition on Phaedra's behalf. Hippolytus is outraged at the Nurse, and assumes Phaedra is behind her actions. He is furious that the Nurse/Phaedra could think that he not only would engage in a sexual act but that he would defile his father's bed.

Hippolytus' anti-feminist invective treats three main themes in succession: procreation, household finances, and female cleverness. The only part of the speech that can be considered violent is the last part, beginning at line 640, "I hate the clever one (*sophen*)," where Hippolytus lashes out against the 'clever' women he detests. In and of itself, his objection to clever women is well within Greek tradition, since as far back as Archilochus, clever women have been considered deceptive, especially in sexual matters. So is the suggestion that women be enclosed in their homes, which conforms with the modes of the society in which he lives. In this society women live indoors and are supposed to be faithful to their husbands; they certainly should not make sexual propositions to their stepsons. For Hippolytus, however, it would not suffice for Phaedra to return to her traditional confines. He wants her to be completely secluded. It is clear that his invective, which started as a general diatribe against the female gender, is aimed finally at Phaedra, who is listening

while standing at the door to the palace. He talks *at* her rather than *to* her:

> A servant should not ever go to a woman, the
> voiceless bites of beasts should dwell with them,
> so that women should have no one to speak to
> and no voice to receive in exchange. (645-48)

Beyond wanting to confine women to their homes, Hippolytus would relegate them to a world very unlike a household – a world without the pleasure of human voices and populated only by fanged beasts.[28] Hippolytus' vision might be extreme and excessive, but it can be effected. This section of his speech is more threatening and sinister than the beginning of his tirade, and more difficult to dismiss, disregard, or excuse. The potential for implementing his vision of how Phaedra and other clever women should be forced to live makes its insidious inhumanity emerge in full force. The home, in Hippolytus' view, is a place where women plot mischief, and their servants help them accomplish it (649-50). To prevent such plotting – and, more specifically, the plotting of which he is now the subject – he would transplant Phaedra away from the conventional female surroundings of a household, away from her familiar, sheltering palace and into a foreign and harsh realm. Moreover, he would remove from that world the very pleasure of sound that he himself so enjoys and that gives his own world much of its value for him. We recall his rhapsody at hearing – or believing he hears – Artemis' voice in the woods where he hunts (86). At the end of the denunciation, he finally mentions Phaedra. He will come back upon his father's return and "I shall see how you meet his eye, you and your mistress too" (663). The way in which he continuously ignores Phaedra while talking at her, but finally includes her as if as an afterthought, just before cursing both of them: "May you two perish!" (664), shows his deep contempt for Phaedra. He follows his curse by "I will never be satiated with hating women, not even if someone says that I always say [this]" (664-65).

28 For the irony invested in this wish see Roisman 1999a: 110-12; see also Roisman 2024: on lines 565-731, 645-48.

The invective is emotional, cruel, and biting. The words and the content are violent. The hatred is palpable. The result of this one-sided invective is Phaedra's suicide. She does not believe that he will keep silent as he has promised. Phaedra is certain that Theseus will come to know about the sexual proposition and the word will spread, which will harm her sons. Hence, she takes her own life and writes a libelous note that Hippolytus has raped her. The invective thus causes physical violence that eventually kills both Phaedra and Hippolytus.

iv) Invectives Leading Nowhere

In *Ajax,* the invectives between Teucer and first Menelaus, then Agamemnon, lead nowhere. The two invective scenes come to a close with no resolution and no following *stichomythia* to offer one. Instead, Odysseus appears and will resolve the impasse. The invectives follow the charged scenes of Ajax's suicide and Tecmessa finding his corpse. The question of Ajax's burial is looming. The invectives between those who want to prevent a burial and those who intend to continue with it, despite the prohibition, create tension on the stage and in the off-stage audience. It is clear that all Teucer and Ajax's family have is the power of words, with which they attempt to counter the Atreidae's verbal abuse. Menelaus, as usual, would prefer to use force (1159-60), but is not brave enough to do so, and chooses what he does best – to depart. Agamemnon's verbal abuse has no logical or factual substance and only presents insults *ad hominem*. Neither invective advances the plot; this is left to Odysseus, who resolves the tension, even offering to help with the burial. The invectives use dark humor and the disparaging trope of talking *at* rather than *to* someone, which belittles the opponent. The *catharsis* will occur only after Odysseus' intervention. Sophocles uses the same strategy in *Philoctetes*, where the invective essentially changes nothing, but gives vent to Philoctetes' emotions.

Euripides also uses the strategy of invectives that bring no resolution. One may claim that the invective between Admetus and Pheres in *Alcestis* relieves Admetus of some built-up tension. His harsh words to his father could, of course, equally well have been directed against himself. There is no actual violence following the scene, and Alcestis will soon return to life with the help of Heracles. The invective probably serves only for the

characterization of both son and father, since it leads to no turn in the plot. The bitter invective between Hecuba and Polymestor in *Hecuba* also leads nowhere. From the start it was unlikely that Agamemnon would punish Hecuba. Both Hecuba and Polymestor have already lost almost everything. That Hecuba will turn into a dog and die at sea, hardly seems to add to her troubles. She is beyond caring what happens to her, wanting only to see Polymestor punished for his share in her anguish. Jason's invective at the end of *Medea* likewise achieves nothing except to release his emotions following the murder of his sons.

v) Invectives as a Last Resort

Both Sophocles and Euripides use invective in this way. In *Philoctetes,* Sophocles gives Philoctetes a last-resort invective against Neoptolemus (927-62), alternating between a direct address to the young man and apostrophes to the natural surroundings: the harbors, promontories, mountain beasts and jagged rocks. He wants all of them to know that the child of Achilles, after giving him his right hand in pledge that he would take him home to Oeta, seized his bow and plans to display him before the Argives and convey him to Troy. He claims to have been deceived. He curses Neoptolemus (961) and at the same time begs the young man again and again to return the bow to him. He alternately rages at Neoptolemus as being unworthy of Achilles' heritage and beseeches him to return the bow, in keeping with the nobility of his nature (927-62, 967-68, 971-73). The address changes from a harsh and insulting invective to praise (967-78, 971-73). Ultimately Neoptolemus returns the bow to him in spite of Odysseus' threats; whether this is due to the invective is left unclear. Philoctetes' curses are the weapons of a desperate man. Indeed, invective is often the last resort of a character, like Haemon's attack on his father, Andromache's attack on Sparta, or Jason's attack on Medea, when the characters realize that the irreversible situation leaves them nothing but abusive words.

vi) Humorous Invective Denigrating the Recipient

Andromache's and Peleus' invectives against Menelaus use dark humor against him. Andromache pokes fun at Menelaus, who shows up in full

hoplite armor to oppose a woman (*Andr.* 458-60). Peleus asks if Menelaus has cruelly bound Andromache for fear that she will fight him (721-22). To show Menelaus' cowardice Peleus needles him by saying that while causing others to die, he, Menelaus, alone came back from Troy without a scratch and "took your fine armor in its fine case to Troy and brought it back in the same condition" (616-19).

In *Ajax*, when Menelaus asks whether it is right and just that his murderer (i.e., Ajax) be honored with a burial, Teucer escapes the rhetorical trap by mocking Menelaus when he says: "Your murderer? You have said a strange thing, if you have died but are alive" (1127).

The invective scene between Creon and Haemon in *Antigone* (724-65) is much more threatening and horrifying than those between Antigone and Ismene or Antigone and Creon. It is explicit, blatant, and misogynistic, but both of them use the dark humor of sarcasm in belittling each other. To Creon's statement that a city is thought to belong to a ruler, Haemon answers "You would be a fine ruler over a deserted city!" (738-39). Creon calls Haemon not only a slave of a woman but "inferior to a woman" (746).

Hecuba in *Trojan Women* pokes fun at Helen's claim of divine compulsion in the form of the goddess' beauty contest. In the spirit of fifth-century rationalization, Hecuba points to the improbability of either Hera or Athena vying with each other in a contest about beauty, which for Hecuba is important only in the case of marriage. She wonders sarcastically whether Hera sought the judgment "so that she could get a better husband than Zeus", or whether Athena, who had begged for the gift of maidenhood, would be desirous at all of marriage (978-81).[29] Hecuba warns Helen not to attribute "foolishness" to the goddesses in an attempt to excuse her own misconduct. "I fear that you will not persuade the wise," she says (982).

29 For the importance of marriage in this play, especially as a theme in the various speeches of the female characters, see McCallum-Barry 2001; Mossman 2005: 358 and bibliography.

vii) The Effect of the Invective on the Off-stage Audience

Alcestis, which has often been referred to as a problem play, is also somewhat puzzling in terms of the discussions in this chapter. As has already been stated, the invective between Admetus and Pheres seems to be used more as a characterization tool than to forward the plot, although neither character gains much sympathy. Instead, the invective scene adds an element of dark humor and could have been included purely for its entertainment value. Pheres strips Admetus' sanctimonious blame to its bare truth: Alcestis is dead because he, Admetus, wants to live. Conversely, in *Hippolytus*, the invectives of both Hippolytus and Theseus are directly involved in progressing the plot as well as in characterization. None of the play's characters, except perhaps the Nurse, is particularly sympathetic, despite their subjective descriptions of their own intense suffering and the eventual deaths of Phaedra and Hippolytus. Euripides seems to have emphasized the importance of personal choice in the characters' actions, together with the power of words, spoken and written, in this play. Choosing any extreme path, whether it be a way of life, or a way of expressing oneself, may have serious consequences. The invective scenes in *Hippolytus*, therefore, may have been thought-provoking rather than entertaining or cathartic.

A further role of invective scenes may have been to enhance the audience's empathy with some of the characters. This may be seen with characters on the receiving end of fierce invective, especially when despite their lack of power or authority, they face down their tormenters. As noted above, Andromache's courage and resourcefulness, exemplified in her skillful rhetoric opposing both Hermione and Menelaus, would have produced a sympathetic reaction. The same may have been true in *Agamemnon*, when the Chorus of old men find the courage to stand up to Aegisthus. In Sophocles' *Antigone* the invectives would have served to heighten the audience's empathy with the young heroine, and enhance the emotional impact of the tragedy. Antigone's courage in doing what she believes to be right, even if it means challenging Creon's edict against burying her brother Polyneices, would have gained her sympathy and respect. Even though Creon now holds power over the whole *polis,* he is unable to defeat Antigone in the verbal debate between them. Creon admits that what he wants most is to capture and kill her (498), and then

exposes his misogyny by declaring that no woman will ever rule (525). While misogyny in itself may not have been problematic for audience members, Antigone's spirited responses, and her insistence on doing what she felt was right (450-70; 499-507), would have impressed the spectators. Being emotionally invested in the characters, the audience would feel the plot tension to a higher degree and feel more relief or despair as the plots progressed, depending upon the characters' fates.

viii) Invective as Commentary on Politics and Social Mores

The invectives of Andromache and Peleus against Menelaus, in *Andromache*, could have a political side to them, condemning contemporary Sparta. Andromache attacks Spartans for being treacherous plotters, murderers, cheaters, and deceivers (445-64). Peleus states that a Spartan girl, even if she wanted to, could not have remained chaste. The young girls leave their houses in company of young men. They wear loose tunics that show their bare thighs and exercise together (595-601). Andromache cautions Hermione to be silent about her "troubles in love," a custom that traverses boundaries and is not limited to one nation (240-44). Tritle suggests that Sophocles' *Antigone,* which was composed while Pericles was still alive, may be interpreted through Creon as a subversive commentary on "Pericles, his leadership of Athens and his harsh suppression of Samos" (2010: 16).

Other Features of Invective in Tragedy

i) Frequent Subjects

Cowardice and *lack of military skill*: In *Agamemnon* the Chorus accuse Aegisthus of cowardice for having a woman murder Agamemnon (*Ag.* 1633-35, 1643-44). In *Ajax,* Menelaus tries to belittle Teucer for being an archer, who by his profession does not fight face to face (1120-22, cf. 1244-45). Teucer, on the other hand, reminds Agamemnon that Ajax saved him from Hector in the battle over the ships (1273-82) and when he fought Hector in a duel (1283-88). In *Andromache* the title character pokes fun at Menelaus for arriving in full hoplite armor to oppose a woman (458-60).

Peleus, too, upon his arrival berates Menelaus and calls him a coward (590), and a man who, while causing others to die, was the only one who came back from Troy without a scratch and took "your fine armor in its fine case ... to Troy and brought it back in the same condition" (616-19). Eventually, Menelaus runs away from Peleus (729-46).

Servile origins and foreignness: In *Ajax*, Agamemnon categorizes Teucer as a mere barbarian slave because his mother was a captive (1228-35, 1260-63). In response, Teucer reminds Agamemnon that Pelops, his grandfather, was by origin a barbarous Phrygian and that Agamemnon himself is the son of a Cretan mother (1290-97). Creon in *Antigone* calls Haemon "slave of a woman" in the stichomythic invective (726-65, 756). In *Oedipus the King,* when Jocasta tries to discourage Oedipus from fetching the Theban shepherd who gave the infant Oedipus to the Corinthian shepherd, Oedipus answers her sarcastically: "Do not worry! Even if I prove to be the offspring of three generations of slaves, you will not be shown to be low-born!" (1062-63). In *Andromache* Hermione calls Andromache a slave won by spear, an Asian woman, a foreigner (155-76, 243).

Accusations of conspiracy: In *Antigone,* for a brief moment, Antigone, who does not allow Ismene to take a share of the responsibility for the burial of Polyneices, accuses her sister of siding with Creon: "ask Creon, you are his champion!" (549). She also directly states that her sister is more concerned about Creon than anything else. Creon does in fact suspect both Antigone and Ismene of conspiracy (488-96, 531-35). Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* is convinced that Teiresias is conspiring with Creon to depose him (380-89, 399-403, 520-22, 532-57, 622-27, 639-43, 679-82). In *Andromache,* Hermione accuses Andromache of poisoning her womb to prevent conception as well as scheming to take possession of her house (*Andr.* 155-58).

Age: Andromache attributes Hermione's open and explicit interest in sex to her youth (*Andr.* 234-44). Menelaus on the other hand mocks Peleus, claiming that in spite of his old age he is not wise (645-46).

ii) Invective Aimed at a Third Party

In *Ajax*, when Ajax regains his sanity and with it a clear understanding of what he has done, he is mortally stricken with shame at having become a laughingstock for his comrades: "Ah, the mockery! What an insult I

have suffered!" (367). He then utters a brief invective against Odysseus (379-91), focused on the scornful laughter and mockery Odysseus directs at him. He wants Odysseus and the Atreidae dead and then to die himself (387-91). This last part will turn out to be performative. In *Hippolytus,* Theseus' denunciation of Hippolytus also occurs while Hippolytus is absent (885-90).

Conclusions

This chapter has analyzed the invective scenes found in the surviving plays of the three extant fifth-century Athenian tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The very fact that all three tragedians include invective scenes in more than one of their extant plays is of interest in itself. Consisting as they do of conversations between on-stage characters found in highly charged situations, invective scenes may have been considered a natural feature of the tragedies. In particular, the invective scenes in tragedy often took place in fraught 'life or death' situations, with invective used as a last resort, when all other means of self-defense are lost.

Invective scenes play many varied roles in tragedy, from characterization, to serving as an alternative to physical violence, to performative utterances with violent ends, to raising plot tension, thus intensifying eventual *catharsis*. The intention behind the invective is usually to belittle, shame or otherwise harm one's opponent. This may be done by using sarcastic humor or by threatening actual violence. We have seen that in *Andromache* the three invective scenes form an integral part of plot action. By contrast, the invective in *Alcestis* has little effect on plot progression, serving more as a diversion from the main action. The invective scenes in *Ajax, Medea* and *Antigone* enrich the characterizations of the speakers, while also possibly shocking the audience with the violence of the feelings expressed. The invective in *Philoctetes* underlines how words may replace actions, when there is no physical power, while those in *Hippolytus* and *Oedipus the King* demonstrate just how powerful those words may be. There may be added layers of meaning to invective scenes, with Peleus' and Andromache's words possibly having political significance to the external audience. Sophocles' *Ajax* has fascinating cases of reported

and imagined invective, showing the power of the mind in intensifying emotions. The dark humor introduced in some invective scenes would also have been appreciated by the audience.

Whether invective scenes serve to release or escalate tensions depends on the perspective from which the question is asked. Invective scenes undoubtedly enhanced the audience experience of the tragedies by heightening plot tension, while also intensifying sympathy with those powerless characters who suffer verbal abuse and therefore contributing to the experience of *catharsis*. On the other hand, characters may have gained some short-lived relief from tension by venting their anger, although any advantage gained is often quickly overturned. In *Andromache*, Hermione may have gained some satisfaction not only by threatening Andromache's life, but also by insulting her in every way possible, regardless of whether her words held any truth. After her father's departure, however, Hermione's despair leads her to consider suicide. In *Hippolytus*, the hate-filled invective delivered by Hippolytus against all women in general, as well as against Phaedra in particular, may have allowed him to defuse his anger when confronted by the Nurse, but it is followed shortly by Phaedra's suicide and then by his own death.

We may also ask whether invective leads to characters attaining their goals, but this also has no simple answer. While spoken violence rarely leads to physical violence by the speaker, the emotional impact of the invective is often shown to have profound effects. In *Andromache*, Menelaus does leave after Peleus flings a tirade of invective at him but tries to save face by claiming that he needs to go and attend to an insurrection. In most cases where invective causes an action or reaction, the results are disastrous. After Theseus condemns his son to death, he discovers the young man was innocent. Oedipus curses the person who brought the plague on Thebes and then discovers that he himself is that person. Creon condemns Antigone to death and then suffers the loss of his son and wife. One exception may be in *Philoctetes* where Philoctetes succeeds in persuading Neoptolemus to return his bow, but then is forced by Heracles to join the Argives at Troy.[30]

30 For the possibility that Heracles is no other but Odysseus in disguise, see Roisman 2001.

It is highly possible that the power of words was of interest to all three tragedians when they used invective in their plays. The tragedies are often thought to depict human suffering caused by the after-effects of war. The use of invectives complements this but also highlights the potential for harm from violent language as well as violent deeds. Dark humor may, on the one hand, mitigate the impact of violence, but on the other hand, individuals may experience intense shame when belittled or laughed at.

Objectively it is difficult to compare the use of invective by the three tragedians due to the uneven number of passages. However, it might be possible to propose that in Sophocles, the characters sound completely sincere in what they say in their verbal abuse against their opponents. The invective reflects their true opinions as well as their anger. If Oedipus sounds less so, it is because he has less time to contemplate what is occurring. Teiresias completely surprises him with what he reveals. Aeschylus seems to connect invective more closely with incitement to violence, but we do not have much to go on. In Euripidean invectives there is more dark humor and sarcasm. The words the characters use are intended to hurt the opponent, whether the speaker believes them to be true or not.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Battezatto, L. 2021. 'Oedipus and Tiresias: Im/politeness Theory and the Interpretation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*' in G. Martin *et al.* (eds.) *Pragmatic Approaches to Drama: Studies in Communication on the Ancient Stage.* Leiden & Boston, 187-212.

Booth, J. 2007. 'Introduction: Man and Matter' in J. Booth (ed.) *Cicero on the Attack: Invective and Subversion in the Orations and Beyond.* Oakville, ix-xiv.

Booth, J. (ed.) 2007. *Cicero on the Attack: Invective and Subversion in the Orations and Beyond.* Oakville.

Brown. A. 1987. *Sophocles: Antigone.* Warminster.

Brown, P. & S.C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage.*[2] Cambridge.

Burnett, A.P. 1998. *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy.* Berkeley.
Culpeper, J. 2011. *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence.* Cambridge.
D'Agostino, F. 1998. 'Some Considerations on Humour in Mesopotamia' *Rivista degli studi orientali* 72, 273-78.
Drewnowska, O. & M. Sandowicz 2014. *Fortune and Misfortune in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 60th Rencontre assyriologique international, Warsaw 21-25 July 2014.* Winona Lake.
Ellerbrock, D. *et al.* 2017. 'Invectivity – Perspectives for a New Research Program in Cultural Studies and Social Sciences' Konzeptgruppe "Invektivität" (Dagmar Ellerbrock et al.: https://tu-dresden.de/gsw/sfb1285/ressourcen/dateien/Invektivitat_-English-_Anm_GP_final.pdf/at_download/file; published as "Invektivität – Perspektiven eines neuen Forschungsprogramms in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften" in *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift* 2017.1, 2-24).
Finglass, P.J. 2011. *Sophocles: Ajax.* Cambridge.
Griffith, M. 1999. *Sophocles: Antigone.* Cambridge.
Kamen, D. 2013. *Status in Classical Athens.* Princeton.
Kamen, D. 2020. *Insults in Classical Athens.* Madison.
Kovacs, D. 1994. *Euripides: Cyclops, Alcestis, Medea.* Cambridge.
Kovacs, D. 1994. *Euripides: Children of Heracles, Hippolytus, Andromache, Hecuba.* Cambridge.
Lion, B. & C. Michel (eds.) *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East.* Berlin.
Lloyd, M. 1994. *Euripides: Andromache.* With an Introduction, Translation and Commentar. Warminster.
Lloyd-Jones, H. 1988. *Sophocles: Antigone, Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus.* Cambridge.
Lloyd-Jones, H. 1997. *Sophocles: Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus.* Cambridge.
Matuszak, J. 2014. 'Don't Insult Inana! Divine Retribution for Offense against Common Decency in the Light of New Textual Sources' in O. Drewnowska & M. Sandowicz (eds.) *Fortune and Misfortune in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 60th Rencontre assyriologique internationale* at Warsaw 21-25 July 2014. Winona Lake, 359-70.

Matuszak, J. 2016. '"She is Not Fit for Womanhood": The Ideal Housewife According to Sumerian Literary Texts' in B. Lion & C. Michel (eds.) *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East.* Berlin, 228-54.
McCallum-Barry, C. 2001. '*Trojan Women*: Sex and the City' in D. Stuttard & T. Shasha (eds.) *Trojan Women*. York, 74-89.
Mossman, J. 2005. 'Women's Voices' in J. Gregory (ed.) *Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Oxford, 352-65.
Noegel, S.B. 2021. *'Wordplay' in Ancient Near Eastern Texts*. Atlanta.
O'Brien, J.V. 1978. *Guide to Sophocles'* Antigone: *A Student Edition with Commentary, Grammatical Notes, & Vocabulary*. Carbondale.
Papaioannou, S. & A. Serafim. 2021. 'Killing with a Smile: Comic Invective in Greek and Roman Oratory' in S. Papaioannou & A. Serafim (eds.) *Comic Invective in Ancient Greek and Roman Oratory*. Berlin & Boston, 1-22.
Papaioannou, S. & A. Serafim. 2021. *Comic Invective in Ancient Greek and Roman Oratory*. Berlin & Boston.
Parker, L.P.E. 2001. 'Where is Phaedra?' *Greece & Rome* 48, 45-52.
Rackham, H. 1937. *Rhetoric to Alexander*. Cambridge, MA.
Roisman, H.M. 1999a. *Nothing Is As It Seems: The Tragedy of the Implicit in Euripides'* Hippolytus. Lanham.
Roisman, H.M. 1999b. 'Teiresias and Obi-Wan: Outside the Scope of the Plot' *New England Classical Journal* 26, 23-35.
Roisman, H.M. 2001. 'The Ever-Present Odysseus: Eavesdropping and Disguise in Sophocles' *Philoctetes' Eranos* 99, 38-53.
Roisman, H.M. 2003. 'Teiresias, the Seer of *Oedipus the King*: Sophocles' and Seneca's Versions' *Leeds International Classical Studies* 2, 1-20.
Roisman, H.M. 2005. *Sophocles: Philoctetes.* London.
Roisman, H.M. 2008/2017. *Sophocles: Electra. Translation with Notes, Introduction, Interpretative Essay and Afterlife.* Newburyport.
Roisman, H.M. 2014a. 'Euripides: *Hippolytus*' in H.M. Roisman (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Greek Tragedy*. Chichester, 408-15.
Roisman, H.M. 2014b. 'Medea's Vengeance' in D. Stuttard (ed.) *Looking at* Medea. London, 111-22.
Roisman, H.M. 2021. *Tragic Heroines in Ancient Greek Drama*. London.
Roisman, H.M. 2023. *Euripides: Andromache.* London.

Roisman, H.M. 2024. *Euripides' Hippolytus. A Commentary for Students*. Norman.

Roisman, H.M. 2025. 'Reflections and Mirror Images in *Hippolytus*' in D. Stuttard (ed.) *Looking at Hippolytus*. London, 85-108.

Sale, W. 1973. *Electra by Sophocles*. Englewood Cliffs.

Sommerstein, A.H. 2010. *The Tangled Ways of Zeus and Other Studies in and around Greek Tragedy*. Oxford.

Tritle, L.A. 2010. *A New History of the Peloponnesian War*. Chichester.

Watson, L. 2015. 'Invective' in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (https://oxfordre.com/classics; https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.3308).

Worman, N. 2014. 'Oedipus Abuser: Insult and Embodied Aesthetics in Sophocles' *Cahiers mondes anciens* 5, 1-12.