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SOME CONSIDERATIONS
ABOUT READING STEMMATA

WENDY J. PHILLIPS-RODRIGUEZ

Traditionally, the end objective of textual criticism is to examine the extant manuscripts of a literary tradition with the purpose of reconstructing the most ancient version of the text possible. To do that the textual scholar will first analyse the manuscript evidence in order to make a *stemma codicum* or *constitutio stemmatis* that would then guide his work, helping him choose the best readings on stemmatic grounds. The making of such stemma is a crucial point in the editorial process. It has to be meticulously made by analysing all the available witnesses, assigning them a place in relation to a putative archetype and inferring intermediate nodes. Thus, a *stemma codicum is*, we have heard many times, like a family tree or a genealogical tree of manuscripts (MSS).

Nevertheless, there may be a problem in stemmata being frequently compared with genealogical trees. Although they do share a number of similarities there are also quite a few differences that should not be disregarded. Just to choose one among them, which will make the central argument of this paper, I would point out that genealogical trees deal with realities all the way through, stemmata do not. One part of the stemma deals with real objects (the available MSS), the other deals with inferred data. On the other hand, in a genealogical tree all the nodes represent family members that truly existed, even if they are no more. As a general rule, if one is compiling a genealogical tree one would stop as soon as there is no more available evidence about the ancestors. If we would make room for inference in a genealogical tree we would have to work on it infinitely, for certainly every descendant always has an ascendant.

This difference, which at first may seem trivial, is actually very relevant because it has shaped the way we tend to look at stemmata. When

we read stemmata just the way we read a genealogical tree it is not infrequent to forget that the highest part of the stemma (I am referring here to the classical rooted stemma) is inferred and therefore we may expect the higher nodes to be as real as the terminal ones.

This is clearly exemplified by a frequent question that tends to make stemmatologists a bit uncomfortable: if a text is constituted by means of stemmatic principles does that mean we can consider it a historical reality once upon a time supported by MS evidence? If we are to look at the whole spectrum of what a textual tradition may encompass the only honest answer to this question would be «not necessarily». In the ocean of statistical possibilities it is hardly possible that such text, with that particular collection of variants, had ever crystallized in a real manuscript. A text constituted by means of stemmatical principles may propose a plausible state of the work at some point in time. However, it would always be an abstraction for its reconstruction is based on a model of evolution, and models, by definition, are not reality. What is the use of such text to scholarship is a matter for another discussion, however, the anxiety this issue tends to raise points out to a deep misunderstanding of the difference between the text and the material manuscript that contains it.

In her paper «What is a textual tradition?», Bárbara Bordalejo explains the difference between a textual tradition and a manuscript tradition. Such differentiation is extremely important if we want to achieve a finer understanding of what exactly are we observing when looking at a stemma. She explains:

The manuscript tradition is a historical event. It might be incomplete (as most traditions are, due to the loss of witnesses) or it might be complete (as the artificial textual traditions [created to study «in vitro» processes of transmission][1]), but the most significant thing about it is that it is made up of material objects that exist in reality (even if that existence might appear to be intangible at times). As historical objects with a physical presence in space, manuscripts can be studied for reasons that go beyond the text they might hold.

From this we understand that a MS is a document that holds a text, but that is «much more than only text» (Bordalejo). It also contains other sorts of information besides the chain of characters one can read. It encompasses a full range of historical non-textual evidence such as the materials it is made up, the writing tools that were used, the calligraphy of the scribe, etc.

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[1] Information in square brackets is mine.

The textual tradition, on the other hand, is just made up of the different «states of the text», irrespective of their documentary manifestation. When talking about written evidence a state of the text is the particular series of letters and meaningful characters, which can be read and made sense of. For example, the transcription that we make from a MS represents the state of the text of such MS, but it certainly cannot be said to be the MS itself. Strictly speaking, the stemmatological method (be it the traditional «Lachmannian» approach or the computerized tools) works only with this dimension of the MSS. The other dimensions (as studied by palaeography, diplomatics, codicology, etc.) may or may not be incorporated to the final stemma of the editor but they are always considered as «external» evidence.

It is often thought that to each MS corresponds a state of the text, in such way establishing a sort of equivalence:

one manuscript = one state of the text

Nevertheless, this equivalence is all too fragile for there have been states of the text that never existed with the support of a MS and there are MSS that contain more than just one state of the text. Just to provide a clear example of this let us imagine a text which is being dictated to a group of four scribes:

- the MS that is being read represents one state of the text
- the oral dictation, which often varies from the written text (our dictator may introduce changes at will or may make mistakes), represents another state of the text
- the text that is being written by each of the four scribes represents a new state of the text, for each of them may vary, in some measure, from what is being heard.

I do not believe this scenario is all too infrequent in many literary traditions. Furthermore, one can make it even more complex by providing that the MS being read contains corrections and marginalia, effectively containing two (or more) different states of the text that are being recorded in a single document.

From the point of view of the MS tradition between the document that is being read and the new four copies there is no intermission. In a diagram it would appear as a single node that gives rise to four descendants. However, in the textual tradition there are three distinct stages: that which is written in the exemplar, that which is being read and that which is being copied. The stemmatological method would have its own

ways to deal with that. If the dictator ignores completely the corrections and marginalia, the stemmatological approach has some good chances to find out that all four copies come from one exemplar, which in this case happens to be a MS. However, if the dictator decides to read (partially or in full) the variant readings provided in the MS the stemmatological approach would infer a state of the text that never existed as a MS (that which existed only ephemerally during the time of dictation). This is an extremely simplified example, however it should make evident that MS tradition and textual tradition do not always go hand on hand.

We are used to perceive the text and the document that contains it as an inseparable unity (indeed, ontologically speaking, they are). Nevertheless, for the sake of gaining knowledge about the processes of transmission it is useful to separate the reality (which is ungraspable due to its complexity) from a model that simulates such processes in a systematic manner.

That is what biologists do to study evolution, and that is why some of their tools are also useful to stemmatologists.[2] Thus, the diagrams that textual scholars produce with the help of phylogenetic programs or other computerized tools (which analyze only the sequence of characters that constitute the text) do not represent the relationships between MSS but the relationships between different states of the text, as contained in the available MSS. Traditional stemmata, on account of their being made by humans, used to take under consideration not only textual information but also other sorts of data (the so-called external evidence). As a result they were closer to being historical maps of manuscripts, and that is the way we are used to regard them. Many of us keep thinking of stemmata as diagrams that represent the relationships between physical objects and therefore we desire that the nodes inferred from such objects may also hold a concrete existence.

However, in the long line of transmission, as modelled by our methods, the text has gone trough many different states, but not all such states may have manifested themselves in MS evidence. We must be aware that MSS are historical objects whose actuality was conditioned by many circumstances that cannot be guessed by stemmatic means. The ancestors that we infer by means of stemmatological means are likely suggestions about possible states of the text, but we certainly are not guessing MSS. It may sound like a truism but a stemma is not a true genealogical tree, it is an inferencial tree.

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[2] See A.C. Barbrook et al. (1998), C.J. Howe et al. (2001), L.R. Mooney et al. (2003), P. Robinson and R. O'Hara (1992, 1993, 1996), B.J.P. Salemans (1996).

In order to make a true genealogical tree of MSS we would have to assume that reversibility and strict determinism hold throughout the process of transmission. Nevertheless, historical interactions are not reversible: they cannot go forward or backwards equally. Once a MSS has taken shape it is impossible to go back and explain how exactly that particular combination of variants came into being. Probabilism and irreversibility are the essence of complex cultural processes. There are even states of the text that never existed with material support other than the mind of the scribe.

Therefore, as Bordalejo rightly warns: «a high degree of interpretation is required to move from a stemma of a textual tradition to a history of the manuscript tradition». The first of them is a reconstruction of events based on an epistemological model of evolution, the other attempts to represent the genealogical relationships between physical objects.

Actually, if we want to be more discerning on the matter, there is a difference between a genealogical tree of MSS, a traditional stemma and a diagram made by computerized means. The first of them, the genealogical tree of MSS, can be made only when we have access to all (or most) of the manuscript evidence and therefore our higher nodes are just as real as our lower ones. Nothing is being inferred, we are just organizing the material according to their relationships. It somehow represents the ideal situation. Besides the artificial traditions, I cannot think of any other case where we can really claim to be able to make a genealogical tree of MSS.[3]
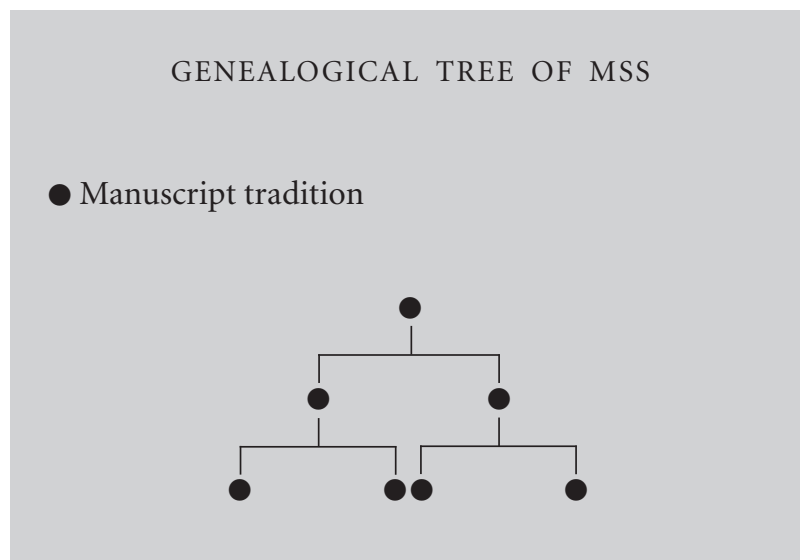

FIGURE 1. A genealogical tree of MSS is concerned all the way through with real historical objects. No data is inferred.

[3] See P. Baret et al. (2006), M. Spencer et al. (2004).

The traditional stemma, on the other hand, would intend to be a genealogical tree of MSS but would not be able to fulfil this purpose due to the fragmentary evidence it is built with. Its terminal nodes are the extant MSS, which will be arranged according to textual (and in most cases also non-textual) evidence. Higher nodes will be inferred according to stemmatological principles. In a way, a traditional stemma is a mixture of textual transmission and manuscript transmission: textual transmission at the top, manuscript transmission at the lower branches. The mixed nature of this sort of diagram is the one that has caused a great deal of confusion, by making us believe that inferred nodes must be actual MSS.

TRADITIONAL STEMMA

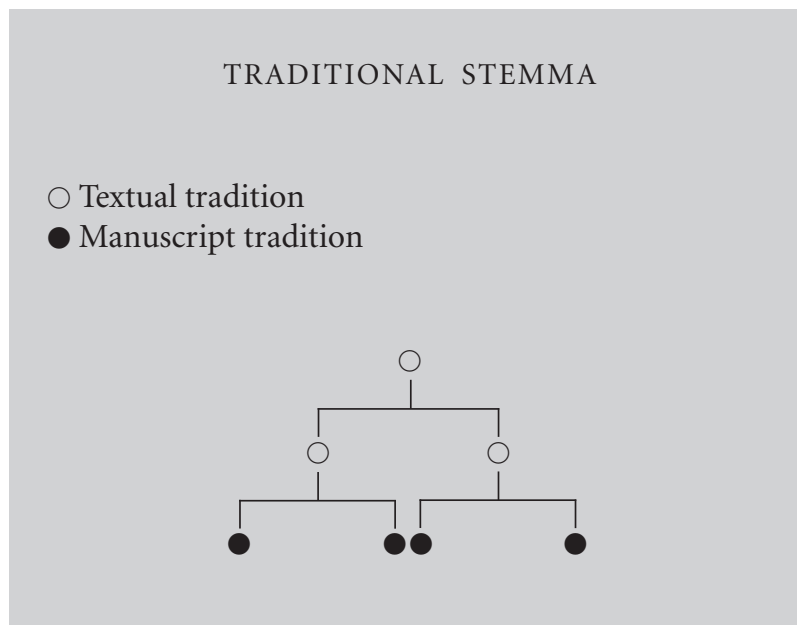○ Textual tradition
● Manuscript tradition

FIGURE 2. A traditional stemma is concerned with MSS only in its lower part, the higher part deals with inferred states of the text.

On the other hand, a diagram made by computerized means, being phylogenetic or others, is a diagram that does not really deal with MSS at all, but only with the state of the text as contained in the available MSS. It is different from the traditional stemma in that it does not use any external information that may be available about the MSS (the editor may later incorporate such information in some way, but at the level of the method such information is irrelevant). Computerized methods, just as traditional stemmatics, do not infer MSS but only states of the text independently of their manifestation or not as tangible objects. If they are powerful they may give us some clues about the MS tradition

(but again we would have to interpret the information correctly, «to interpret» being here the keyword).

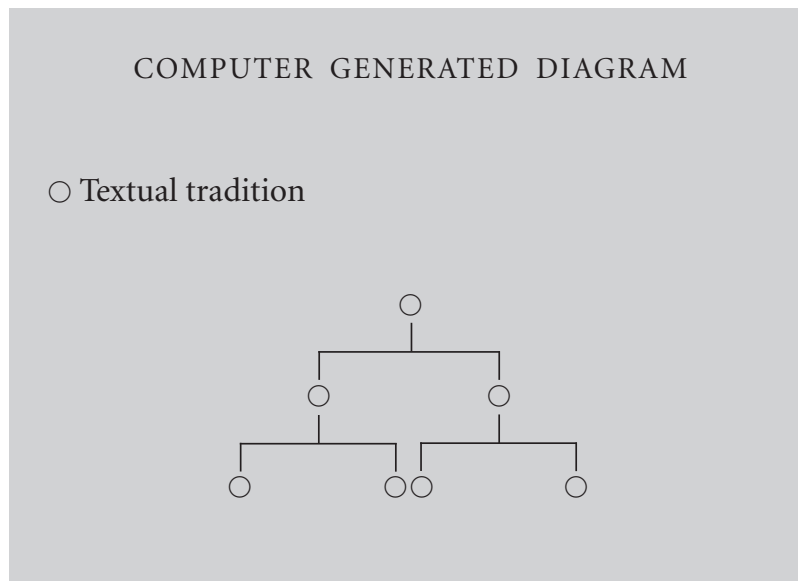COMPUTER GENERATED DIAGRAM

○ Textual tradition

FIGURE 3. A computer generated diagram is only built on textual data. Not even the terminal nodes represent MSS, but only the state of the text on such MSS.

Thus, we have seen how the MS tradition and the textual tradition are deeply interrelated but they are not all the time identical. With the help of stemmatological methods (traditional or computerized), which work only with the textual tradition, we may be able to detect some historical trends and indeed we should strive do so. However, we must always be aware that stemmatics are not able to reproduce history as such.

In other words, any diagram made by means of algorithmic operations, e. g. according to a model, may be successful at giving us clues about the textual tradition (by means of which we may be able to identify some clues related to the MS tradition) but it would be inaccurate to read it as a historical map of MSS.

It is at this point that artificial textual traditions prove themselves extremely useful. Their virtue is that they allow us to see how the methods behave, how much they tell us about the textual tradition and how much of what they tell us can actually be related to the MS tradition. They represent precious chances to look both at the model and the reality and see how they compare against each other. Thus, the usefulness of an artificial tradition does not depend so much on how exactly the con-

ditions of historical transmission have been reproduced (that would be of no use anyway if we cannot find the right model to study them), but on finding out the way our methods behave towards the phenomena presented. It is very probable that our methods will have unexpected ways to express certain features of the transmission. It is our task to learn to recognize how do they shape the information.

There are many other issues, some of them very punctual and practical, about reading stemmata. However, I consider that this point is important to be made for many times it seems that we, textual scholars, are not sure what sort of information are we supposed to read from our diagrams. To learn to see the difference between the textual and the MS tradition, and to observe how such difference is accounted for by our methods, is an extremely important step in our path forward to a deeper, more sophisticated study of our literary traditions.

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