
What could possibly be erotic about the stuffy practice of reconstructing ancient texts? According to Yii-Jan Lin’s meta-critical study of New Testament textual criticism, quite a lot. Her work traces the presence of a particular constellation of metaphors and critical dispositions throughout the long and varied history of textual criticism that are decidedly biological, and indeed erotic. According to textual critics, Lin observes, texts have parents and children, they have racial profiles and adapt to their geographic location, they even have genetic codes to be mapped. Far from being benign signifiers in an objective sub-discipline, Lin argues that these metaphors carry unexamined assumptions about the nature of the discipline, its data and goals, and their mutability. Trained in cultural studies, rather than being a practicing textual critic, Lin possesses an incisive vantage point from which to evaluate poignantly the discourses of the discipline. The Erotic Life of Manuscripts fairly articulates the valuable influence that the biologizing of texts has had for textual critics in the construction of textual histories and in the emergence of new methods and disciplinary goals, while highlighting the presence of malignant biases like orientalism.

A major problem with genealogical accounts of manuscripts and their differences is the lack of a theory of variant inheritance, a problem that would be solved in part by Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection. Lin argues that Darwin’s natural selection finds its text-critical counterpart in B.H. Streeter’s local texts, a theory that understood types of variation to arise according to the geographical and cultural conditions of a manuscripts’ production. Lin considers Streeter’s theory of local texts as proposing a sort of textual adaptation, though at times it seems that she superimposes the language of adaptation onto the work of Streeter and others. The biological metaphors are more convincing among Streeter’s important intellectual descendants, the so-called narrative textual criticism. With scholars like Bart Ehrman and David Parker,
textual variation is no longer considered a corruption of a pure original but evidence of the ongoing life of texts and the creative (and often theological) work of Christian scribes. Lin also observes how the language of “living” and “dead” continues to operate for more traditionally-oriented critics in the description of text-types in an orientalist fashion. Here, text critics employ biological metaphors with great variation, but Lin carefully unpacks the underlying cultural assumptions that go along with them.

Finally, Lin treats one of the more recent innovations in the field of textual criticism, the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method, pioneered by Gerd Mink and his colleagues in Münster. While upholding the (slightly modified) traditional goal of textual criticism (the recovery of the earliest recoverable text), the CBGM mimics the shift in the biological sciences from Linnean morphology-based classifications to more Mendelian gene-based or phylogenic classifications. That is to say, relations between organisms or texts are understood on the basis of patterns of genes (an imposed code as in the case of texts) rather than morphological features. Here, Lin is able to make some programmatic observations about the relationship between the two fields, identifying shared ideology with respect to their object of study. As with phylogenics, specialized programs establish relations between features (genes or readings) without recourse to an explanatory narrative. However, the difference between a reading and a gene is a significant one – the former being an abstraction of a manuscript and the latter being a smaller physical feature of an organism (a point not noted by Lin) – yet the outcomes produced by the software present analogous relational stemmata. With such methods, textual criticism has the opportunity operate at its most scientific. But Lin’s study by now has shown that the biological sciences and textual criticism have been intertwined both in method and disciplinary assumptions for over two hundred years, and this pairing continues to shape data and conclusions in particular directions.

Lin ends her study by recounting the limits placed on the discipline of textual criticism by the metaphors of the biological sciences, exploring potential new and useful metaphors. After entertaining and rejecting the rhizome (as opposed to the tree) and the hybrid (from Homi Bhabha), Lin offers the metaphor of the cyborg, famously articulated by Donna Haraway in her “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1991). By drawing on the notion of the cyborg, Lin hopes it can disrupt the more problematic valences of the biological metaphors in current use and emphasize the human element in the practice of the discipline itself. The cyborg metaphor is provocative, but I wonder what it offers that Lin’s detailed genealogical study does not. Or if it propelled her interventions, why not develop it earlier on? Indeed brevity of her discussion of the cyborg will likely leave the reader wanting more. Nagging questions persist, such as the centrality of hybridity in the composition of a cyborg, hybridity having already been rejected as a useful new metaphor by Lin. Further, and perhaps as a result of Lin’s lack of text-critical experience, she does not put the metaphor to any substantive or specific text-critical work. Is this a reflexive move to be taken on by the producers of new kinds of critical editions, or should this metaphor facilitate new descriptions of manuscripts and their human copyists? Even with these questions left unanswered, *The Erotic Life of Manuscripts* remains an important read for those interested in and especially engaging in the practice of textual criticism in order to facilitate awareness of some of the foundational and embedded assumptions of that discipline.

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