

The Editorial Paradox: Using Phylogenetic Analysis Critically

Phylogenetic analysis can be used productively when studying large textual traditions, despite the difficulties presented by contamination, changes in order and major alterations to a textual tradition. For years, the Canterbury Tales Project has successfully used different methods to explore the textual tradition of Chaucer's most important work. The project has also succeeded in publishing stemmata that are valuable for readers. Despite this, not many seem to understand them and fewer use them for teaching purposes. Moreover, the misunderstanding of the use of computer generated stemmata is so widespread that other researchers have failed to produce meaningful results or to recognize this fact.

Within the English speaking world there is still a high degree of suspicion, and even hostility, towards the application of methods borrowed from evolutionary biology for the study of texts. Ralph Hannah and Thorlac Turville-Petre, Middle English scholars, have spoken and written against the use of phylogenetic analysis for textual critical purposes.

There is a question as to whether stemmatologists and other adopters of these methods are responsible for the misunderstandings surrounding them and to whether it might also be our responsibility to change the wide spread perception of these type of analyses. If we were to accept that we, as a community, must undertake the task of spreading the word about it, we should also accept that it is conceivable that our own publications might have lead to this misapprehension. If this is correct, we should

revise the manner in which our research is disseminated, particularly how it is analysed and published.