

Is stemmatology inherently dichotomous? On the *silva portentosa* of Old Norse stemmata

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In 1928, Joseph Bédier published an article in the journal *Romania*, in which he summed up his long struggle with the recension of the Medieval French verse romance *Lai de l'Ombre*. Since his first edition in 1890, Bédier had constructed no less than 11 stemmata for this text. However, he had become more and more sceptical to the stemmatic method, which was introduced in France by Gaston Paris in the 1870s. When Bédier looked through earlier editions of Medieval French texts, he was struck by the dominance of two-branched stemmata. Bédier found that 105 of 110 stemmata were two-branched. He did not give a list of these stemmata, so when Arrigo Castellani (1957) went through the same material he was only able to identify 86 stemmata, of which 71 were two-branched.

The preponderance of two-branched stemmata is a strange forest, *silva portentosa*, as Bédier chose to call it. Bédier gave two explanations for this phenomenon. His first explanation was that editors would prefer two-branched stemmata, since a two-branched stemma gave the editor free hands in determining the best text; if branch A had one reading and branch B another, the two branches had equal weight, and the editor could consequently choose the reading which he or she preferred on other grounds (e.g. from the point of view of syntax, style, metrics, or general context). In a three-branched stemma, a conflict between readings would often be of the kind where one branch had one reading and the other two branches another reading. In such cases, the stemma would force the editor to choose the reading attested in the majority of branches. This was a kind of stemmatic automaton, and Bédier believed editors tended to avoid such a beast; in order to retain their freedom of choice, they would choose a two-branched stemma over a three-branched one. This is basically a psychological explanation, and it is valid to the extent that the editors were preparing critical editions of the eclectic type, i.e. editions in which the text is constructed on the basis of a stemma. Such editions do not represent a single manuscript, but rather an approximation to the archetypus of the text tradition based on the evidence of the stemma.

Bédier's second and possibly less noticed explanation was inspired by the then editor of *Romania*, Mario Roques. This is what Bédier called the force of the dichotomy, *la force dichotomique* (1928: 175–76). When faced with several

manuscripts, the editor would divide these into groups until all manuscripts were accounted for. At the lowest level, the editor would typically not be satisfied with an analysis where three manuscripts were seen as sisters, such as in fig. 1. At some point, two manuscripts would be found to stand against the third, as in fig. 2. Thus, the whole stemma might become a series of bifurcations.

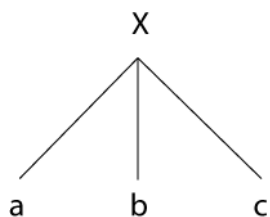


Fig. 1

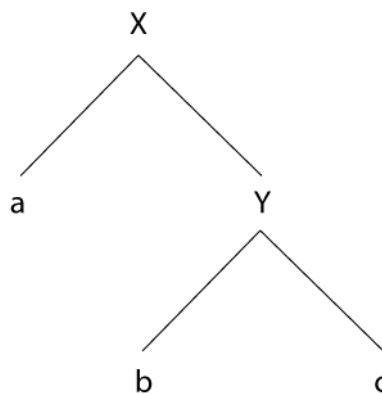


Fig. 2

This second explanation is of a more methodological character than the first, and should in my view be investigated in a broader context than Medieval French editions published in the second half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. Furthermore, if there really is a dichotomous force, this should be attested in all nodes of the stemma, not only the initial one.

Some years ago, I analysed all stemmata in two major series of Old Norse texts, *Editiones Arnamagnæanæ* (40 vols) and *Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana* (38 vols) from the foundation of the series in 1938 to 1996 (Haugen 1997). In these two series, 104 stemmata have been published, of which 65 are conclusive. The remaining stemmata are partial stemmata, often constructed as steps in a process leading up to a conclusive stemma. Of the 64 conclusive stemmata, I found that 55 were two-branched at the top level and 9 had three or more branches. This is close to the figures of Castellani and not far from those of Bédier, as shown in table 1.

	Two-branched		Other		Total	
Bédier (1928)	105	95.5 %	5	4.5 %	110	100 %
Castellani (1957)	71	82.5 %	15	17.5 %	86	100 %
Old Norse corpus	55	86 %	9	14 %	64	100 %

Table 1. Initial branching in Medieval French and Old Norse stemmata.

What about the remaining branches in the stemmata? In the Old Norse corpus of 65 conclusive stemmata, I found a total of 399 nodes. Of these, 265 were two-branched, while the remaining nodes had either one or between three and six branches (which was the maximum), as shown in tab. 2.

Branches	1	2	3	4	5	6
Occurencies	81	265	39	8	5	1

Table 2. Distribution of branching in Old Norse stemmata.

In other words, the preponderance of two-branched nodes is somewhat smaller in the whole stemma than at the top level, but the number is still very high; 265 two-branched nodes of 399 equals 66 %. This would mean that in two third of all cases, a manuscript was copied in two and only two copies. Unfortunately, we know too little about the practices of manuscript copying in Old Norse times, so even if this figure may look too high, there is no simple process of validation.

The stemmata discussed here have all been arrived at through the traditional method of error analysis, *Methode der Fehlergemeinschaften*, established by Karl Lachmann and other textual critics in the early decades of the 19th century. What about quantitative techniques? Do they share the same tendency to building bifurcating trees?

I will leave this question for debate at the workshop.

Cited literature

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