

**Descent *without* Modification,
the Impossible Ideal of Traditional Text Genealogy**

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In many ways text genealogy is the negation of genealogy. Unlike family genealogy text genealogy is able to produce heirs without the involvement of a second individual. Each manuscript is supposed to inherit all the readings and only the readings of its immediate ancestor, therefore preserving an apparently unbroken patriline.

Nevertheless, history and environment do get on the way. Traditional textual criticism considers that each time a manuscript is copied the genetic material of the exemplar gets diluted. As a consequence, the son will never be as good as the father. The passing of time only brings corruption in the shape of variation. Hence, the true ideal of traditional text genealogy would be cloning, e.g. the possibility of a text to always be reproduced with exactly the same traits.

Being the *Mahābhārata* a story about family genealogy it is interesting to contrast this approach with the essential role that descent *with* modification plays in the development of the plot. The differences in character of each family member, from generation to generation, are precisely the ones that allow the progress of the storyline. Every member of the family, with his own particularities (strengths and shortfalls) is a necessary block in the unfolding of events, in the survival of the dynasty.

Thus, this raises questions in the way that text genealogy has been generally approached. Perhaps also the individuality of each manuscript, even its shortcomings, have been necessary for the survival of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. In the array of *Mahābhārata* manuscripts there surely have been excellent and not particularly good exemplars, nevertheless all of them have played their valuable part in the transmission of the epic.

The present paper will explore why descent with modification, the intromission of foreign material in the patriline, is actually what provides the text (both at a textual and at a narrative level) with a true capacity for evolution.