

Text Networks

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Abstract

Since Huet, modern study of the “ancient novel” has centered on single-authored texts such as Khariton’s *Kallirhoē* or Hēliodōrus’ *Aithiopika*, which more closely resemble the modern novel insofar as they plausibly descend from a single archetype. These, however, were not the most popular pieces of prose fiction in Late Antiquity. More widely disseminated, and arguably more typical of their period, are what we might call “text-networks”, i.e., the vast corpora of compositions known today as the Alexander Romance, Barlaam and Joasaph, the Life of Ahiqar, Kalīlah wa-Dimnah; pseudepigrapha such as the Enoch corpus, including many of the narratives—canonical as well as apocryphal—of the various Judaic (e.g. Hebrew, Samaritan, Aramaic) and Christian Bibles. Often disparate exemplars of such texts are assigned a putative author such as “Callisthenes” or “Moses”, but such names affixed to the head or colophon of the manuscripts do not have the same “author function” as “Virgil” or “Kallimachus” or “Loukianos”—if anything, they are much more like the ascription “Homer”. Not unlike the Homeric poems, in fact—though here we are dealing primarily with scribal culture—these texts have no known “author” and clearly do *not* descend from a unique source. Rather, they exist only as a multiplicity of different versions, in a wide variety of different languages, retailored to fit a host of different cultural contexts; as we find them, the manuscripts were diffused (always in a multiplicity of directions) over much of the Asian-African-European land mass, and were in constant (re)production from ca. 450 BCE to ca. 1500 CE. One way to describe them would be as “translations without an original”, which is precisely the sense of the Middle French *romans* in the works of, among others, Chrétien de Troyes, who constantly refers us to a definitively lost (i.e., obviously non-existent) Latin “source”. That the ap-

preciation of such “text-networks” has been relegated to the margins of the modern study of the “ancient novel” clearly has more to do with our own difficulties in discussing texts that lack a single author or a definitive form than with the realities of their popularity or historical diffusion. With this in mind, the paper offers an introduction to the study of the “text-network” as a characteristic and central type of Hellenistic world literature, with the aim of introducing both greater generic precision as well as a of set critical strategies that are better suited to the study of these literary phenomena.

Biography

Daniel L. Selden is Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. With Ralph Hexter has is author of *Innovations of Antiquity* (1992), and has written widely on Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Iranian, and Old Ethiopic literatures of the Hellenistic period.

Key words

Text networks, multiforms, autopoiesis, scribal culture, textual criticism, translation literature, tributary empires and metaphysics.