TEI By Example

TEI by Example. Module 7

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1. Introduction

When texts are considered random combinations of strings, this can entertain interesting predictions about the completion of the complete works of William Shakespeare by a(n army of) hypothetical monkey(s) randomly hitting the keys on a typewriter (see the infinite monkey theorem). Indeed, to a computer, the textual universe is a library of Babel, in which every possible text is as likely (or rather unlikely) to exist as any other text. From this perspective, perfect duplicates may perfectly co-exist with gazillions of close approximations and texts that have nothing in common at all. In an intellectual, human context, where characters are ordered along (arbitrary) rules, two sensible texts will most likely have nothing in common at all, rather than being related in any way. In fact, the chances of identical texts can almost be ruled out to either perfect mechanical photocopies, or blatant cases of plagiarism, and as such be considered uninteresting from an intellectual point of view. However, especially in the context of greatly valued literary, cultural, and/or historical works, the odd chance that such a text has a closely resembling counterpart becomes quite interesting. It may at least indicate some kind of relationship between both texts, even provide insight in its transmission through time, shed light on its history and conception, perhaps tell us something about the creative process of its author, or by extension provide insights in The Creative Process in the working of the human mind. These domains of knowledge inform different kinds of theories of textual criticism, each with their own research interests, principles and practises. What they all have in common, however, is an attempt to represent related texts found in different physical witnesses as different versions of the same abstract work.

As we have seen already, in order to make this world of meaning accessible to/via computers, text encoding with TEI provides a sensible approach. Moreover, besides the general provisions for text encoding, the TEI Guidelines define a range of specific elements and mechanisms to represent textual variation in a sensible way for further analysis. The TEI Guidelines devote a complete chapter, 12. Critical Apparatus, to the documentation of specific elements that are grouped into the textcrit module for the encoding of textual variation. In order to use the elements covered in this tutorial module, you are thus required to include the dedicated textcrit TEI module in your TEI schema.

For directions on composing a TEI schema by selecting TEI modules and elements, see TBE Module 8: Customising TEI, ODD, Roma.