

Title: Dangerous Liaisons: Epistolary Structure and Plot Analysis

Format: Regular Talk

Author: Thomas E. Lombardi

Author's Title: Visiting Assistant Professor, Washington & Jefferson College

Email: tlombardi@washjeff.edu

Address: 60 South Lincoln Street, Washington, PA 15301, USA

Abstract

Recent advances in the field of literary and linguistic computing have demonstrated the effectiveness of networks for modeling literature at both large and small scales. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Franco Moretti defined the challenge of modeling literature at the large scale with what he called distant reading, and since that time researchers have demonstrated the plausibility and possibility of this approach to literary and linguistic research. In roughly the same period, researchers working at the small scale learned to extract social networks from novels, conduct plot analysis, characterize the structure of Shakespeare's plays, and develop semantic networks. In a somewhat different locus of interests, but overlapping in time, researchers have also pursued epistolary studies addressing both traditional letters and directed new media such as email. This study makes the case that epistolary studies and networked approaches to literature share an important set of concerns. Moreover, the union of these approaches has a natural application to a specific genre: epistolary novels. In particular, the novel, *Dangerous Liaisons*, provides an excellent case study in the application of network models to epistolary novels.

This paper demonstrates that the structure and dynamics of the network of letters in an epistolary novel is sufficient to make some reasonable inferences regarding plot without automated dialogue extraction. First, the changes in connectivity and centrality reflect or anticipate plot developments. For example, the measurement of betweenness centrality provides important insights into the novel because high betweenness confers brokerage capabilities to a character. In a novel about seduction, a character's ability to manipulate those around her or him will be closely connected to this measure of centrality. Second, triadic closure in this network signals important shifts in plot. Although this network is primarily a communication network, the structure of the network at times reflects important aspects of the underlying social network upon which it is based. On four occasions, a character sends a letter that closes one or more triads in the network. As the characters' interactions unfold, the network structure shifts from a simple line of connected characters to something resembling a social network with many closed triads. This process accelerates towards the end of the novel propelling the plot to its conclusion. Third, the lack of gender homophily in the novel supports thematic content in the plot. Thus, a novel about seduction should demonstrate little homophily based on gender. In other words, the structure and dynamics of the network of letters in *Dangerous Liaisons* mirrors the themes and development of

the novel's content. Finally, the study compares the network of literary correspondence to real-world epistolary networks such as the Carlyle Letters to highlight features unique to epistolary novels.

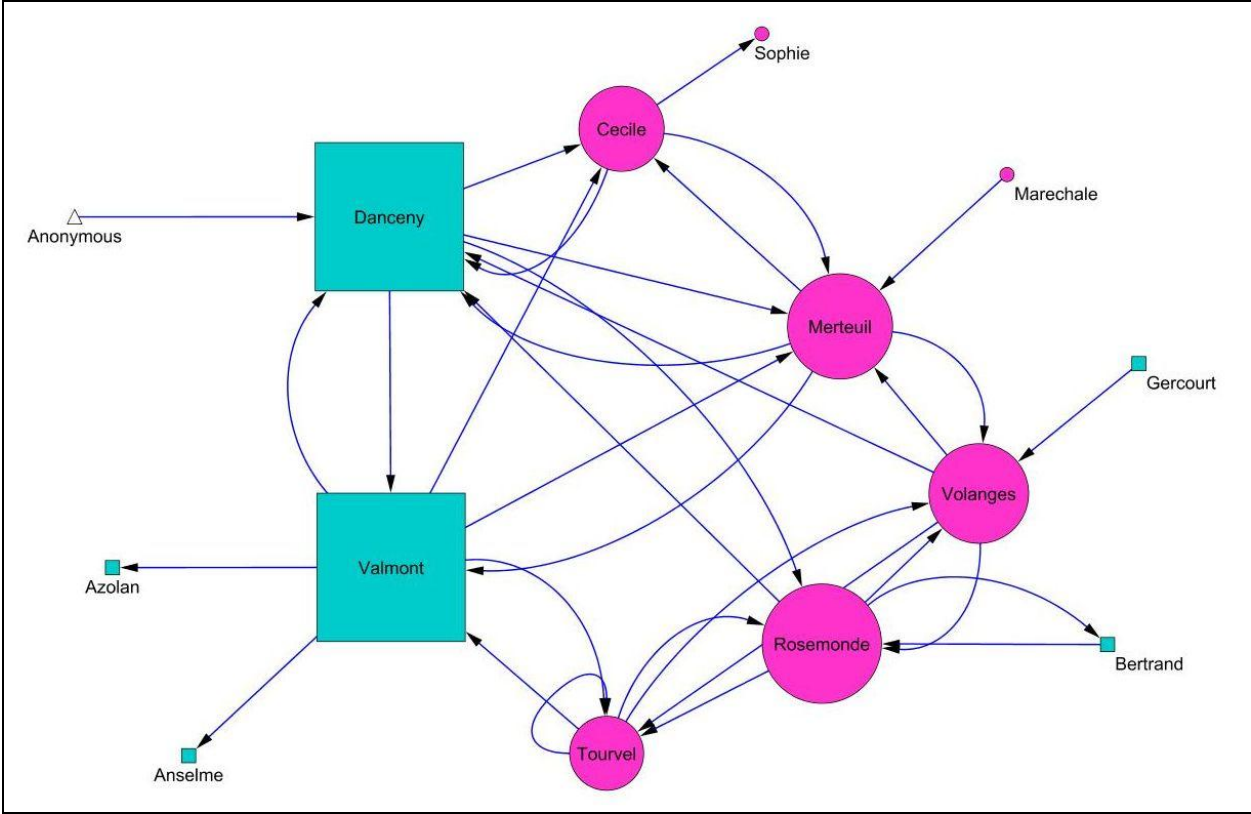


Figure 1: Network of Correspondence in *Dangerous Liaisons*