**Frances Burney’s *Cecilia*, Toxic Men, and the Natural Language Toolkit**

Hilary Havens, University of Tennessee

I have a disclaimer – I mention suicide in this talk – and a slight title change: “toxic masculinity” should be “toxic men” since I am not discussing the damage caused by conventionally masculine behaviors,[[1]](#endnote-2) but rather the insidiously harmful male characters that populate Frances Burney’s second novel *Cecilia* (1782). For those of you who have yet to read it, *Cecilia* recounts the story of a young, beautiful, and intelligent heroine suddenly forced from her country home into the glittering and dizzying London metropolis. Cecilia has a large fortune (10,000 pounds plus 3,000 pounds a year once she comes of age) that is bestowed on the condition that her husband adopt her surname. She is under the control of three deeply flawed guardians: the ruinously spendthrift Mr. Harrel who commits suicide halfway through the novel; the rich, but miserly Mr. Briggs who lives in squalor; and the proud Honorable Mr. Compton Delvile who rejects Cecilia as his daughter-in-law and precipitates her madness. Amid such unreliable figures, she frequently solicits advice from Mr. Monckton, her trusted friend from childhood who is actually scheming to marry her himself once his much-older wife dies. Although Cecilia ultimately marries Mortimer Delvile, her third guardian’s only son and the man she loves, she must resign her fortune and name to satisfy his proud relations. The novel’s bittersweet ending, I argue, is a signal that we need to re-examine Cecilia’s relationship with Mortimer, especially in light of the numerous structural, thematic, and linguistic commonalities that he shares with the “villains,” Mr. Harrel and Mr. Monckton.

The greatest number of narrative resemblances appear between Mortimer Delvile and Harrel. As the editor of *Cecilia*, I was struck by the parallels between the section of the novel devoted to Cecilia’s residence with Mr. Harrel and that devoted to Cecilia’s romance with Mortimer Delvile. Margaret Anne Doody and Francesca Saggini have likewise observed that Harrel’s story occupies “half” of the novel.[[2]](#endnote-3) Indeed, Harrel’s suicide is the dividing line in the two-volume Birmingham edition of *Cecilia*; the second volume begins in its aftermath with Cecilia’s trip to Delvile Castle. **[SLIDE 2]** Other critics compare Cecilia’s interactions with Harrel and Delvile. Susan Greenfield argues that Cecilia believes her “reluctant consent to a secret marriage” with Delvile is “as immoral” as any of her transactions with the Harrels.[[3]](#endnote-4) Cynthia Klekar presents Cecilia’s “‘gift’ to the Harrels” alongside “the love exchange between Cecilia and Mortimer,” interpreting “her benevolent acts…as forced responses to paternal aggression.”[[4]](#endnote-5) I contend that while the marriage plot is the purported focus of *Cecilia*, it is significant that Harrel’s appropriation of Cecilia’s inheritance is given almost exactly as much space and prominence as her courtship with Delvile. Both men ultimately divest Cecilia of her wealth: Harrel through the 9,050*l* he extorts from her, which – significantly – Mr. Monckton loans to her. 9,050*l* is nearly the same amount Delvile expects Cecilia to contribute in a marriage sanctioned by both of his parents. Furthermore, Delvile wrenches the remaining 3,000*l* per annum from Cecilia by refusing to take her last name upon their marriage. The potential deaths of Harrel, Monckton, and Delvile haunt Cecilia throughout the text. Harrel repeatedly threatens and ultimately commits suicide. Delvile duels and dangerously injures Mr. Monckton and nearly fights Mr. Belfield as well, even though he knows that Cecilia despises duels more than she values her spotless reputation. **[SLIDE 3]** The three men are also prominently featured in illustrations within lifetime editions of *Cecilia*, such as the image of Harrel threatening suicide in the 1822 Caxton edition or that of Delvile and Monckton dueling in the 1820 Dove edition.

These structural similarities between Delvile, Harrel, and Monckton also appear in their language and characterizations, including their manipulation and avoidance of Cecilia. **[SLIDE 4]** Burney frequently associates the word “avoid” with all three of them. To evade repaying his debt to Cecilia, Harrel “constantly…avoid[s] any private conversation” with her (vol. 2, bk. 3, ch. 4) and again “avoid[s] all separate conversation with her so skilfully, that she could not find a moment to make him hear her” (vol. 2, bk. 3, ch. 8). Because of his secret designs to marry her, Monckton’s “principal study was carefully to avoid all public gallantry or assiduity towards Cecilia,” and “though he was now acquainted how much she was at home, [Monckton] had the forbearance to avoid making frequent use of that knowledge, that his attendance might escape observation.” (vol. 3, bk. 5, ch. 1; vol. 1, bk. 2, ch. 3) **[SLIDE 5]** And after Cecilia finally convinces Delvile that she is not engaged to Sir Robert Floyer, he also begins to shun her: “he had evidently avoided her while it was in his power, and when, at last, he was obliged to meet her, he was formal, distant, and reserved.” (vol. 3, bk. 5, ch. 1). This behavior continues and intensifies once Cecilia is living with the Delviles, “Delvile, far from manifesting any design of conquest, shunned all occasions of gallantry, and sedulously avoided even common conversation with her” (vol. 3, bk. 6, ch. 3).

The avoidance all three men practice toward Cecilia is linked with their manipulative practices, specifically their indirect schemes of obtaining her wealth and – in the cases of Delvile and Monckton – her hand in marriage. **[SLIDE 6]** Harrel convinces Cecilia that he is “in the very act of suicide,” threatening – depending on whether she assists him or not – to “shut...up” his razor or “steep it in [his] blood!” (vol. 2, bk. 4, ch. 5). He gaslights her regarding the nature of her relationship with Sir Robert Floyer, to the point that every other character in the novel believes his lies instead of Cecilia’s denials. Mrs. Harrel, for instance, tells Cecilia that “Mr. Harrel has told me a thousand times, that however you played the prude, you would be [Sir Robert’s] at last.” (vol. 3, bk. 5, ch. 7). Similarly, Monckton manipulates Cecilia into remaining at Mr. Harrel’s house, even as he defrauds her of her inheritance, to separate her from Mortimer Delvile by plying her with “praise so full of censure” about her reputation: that her “convenience has always been sacrificed to [her] sense of propriety” (vol. 3, bk. 5, ch. 7). He similarly threatens her reputation in a last-ditch effort to prevent her marriage to Delvile, declaring, “Good God…what is this you have done? bound yourself to marry a man who despises, who scorns, who refuses to own you!” (vol. 4, bk. 7, ch. 7). And when his sharp criticism fails, Monckton employs one of his servants to anonymously interrupt their marriage ceremony.

And yet, Monckton is not so dissimilar from Delvile. **[SLIDE 7]** Delvile also plays on Cecilia’s fear of offending propriety in order to coerce her into a clandestine marriage. Since she has been observed meeting him in private, he argues that her reputation will be stained if she does not marry him:

…weigh your objections against the consequences which must follow. It is discovered I attended you in town; it will be presumed I had your permission for such attendance: to separate, therefore, now, will be to no purpose with respect to that delicacy which makes you wish it….it will cast over your own conduct a veil of mystery and obscurity wholly subversive of that unclouded openness, that fair, transparent ingenuousness, by which it has hitherto been distinguished. (vol. 4, bk. 8, ch. 1)

Even though Cecilia loves Delvile, all she can focus on is the “eternal blot to her character” from her clandestine marriage, and she dramatically resolves that “happiness” would be “unattainable for the remainder of her life.” (vol. 4, bk. 8, ch. 1). And after Cecilia falls ill following Delvile’s duel with Monckton, she conflates the two men, declaring, as Delvile comes to visit her, “I thought you had been Mr. Monckton yourself.” (vol. 5, bk. 10, ch. 8). While my goal is not to draw an absolute equivalence between Harrel, Monckton, and Delvile – Cecilia undoubtedly loves Delvile and dislikes the two others – it is apparent that Delvile uses the same problematic strategies of avoidance and manipulation in his own interactions with Cecilia.

In the last part of my talk today, I would like to discuss whether the structural and thematic parallels that Harrel, Monckton, and Delvile share extend into their language. *Cecilia*’s language has frequently been termed “Johnsonian” because of its elevated diction and complex syntax, though – as Jane Spencer notes – Burney’s ability to create individualized character speech or “idiolect” is “highly dramatic.”[[5]](#endnote-6) Tina Davidson argues that Burney frequently uses character speech distinctions “as a signifier of her speakers’ morality,”[[6]](#endnote-7) while Catherine Keohane contends that Mr. Harrel manipulates language to keep his creditors at bay, as a type of “camouflage[].”[[7]](#endnote-8) Like Davidson, Keohane, and Spencer, I am interested in the significance of language in the novel, especially the things we can learn using digital technologies or methodologies from the Digital Humanities **[SLIDE 8].** This slide shows some of the things that we can find readily with computers, such as word concordances, or the language that appears on each side of a chosen word, and words statistically related to that chosen word. The question is whether computational text analysis – in this case, word frequencies, parts of speech tagging, and sentiment analysis – can actually reveal something about Burney’s use of language in *Cecilia*. The first step is to process the text, which I did by searching for all appearances of “Harrel,” “Monckton,” and “Delvile” in the novel and then by isolating each character’s spoken and written language. **[SLIDE 9].** This slide shows an example of what the text looks like after being processed. This is the plain text (.txt) file containing all of Delvile’s spoken and written utterances. All punctuation, other than apostrophes, has been removed. The next step is to perform textual analysis, which I did using Python, one of the most popular programming languages today. Python is particularly suited for such a task because it supports a library called the Natural Language Toolkit (or NLTK), which allows users to process and analyze language with a computer. **[SLIDE 10]** My code appears in a web-based, interactive Jupyter notebooks file, which is available through the link and QR code I shared. The code on the screen is from the beginning of the file where I clone – or copy – the GitHub repository where the files are stored, open the text files, removespecial formatting, and then print the list of words associated with each character.

The first and most basic thing you can do with computational text analysis is to look at word frequencies, and here my goal is to see whether thematic and structural similarities between Delvile, Harrel, and Monckton appear in their diction. To improve the results, I removed “stopwords” from their language files. Stopwords are a set of commonly used words in any language, such as “the,” “is,” and “and”. By removing stopwords, we can often discern distinctive aspects of a speaker’s language. **[SLIDE 11]** The following graphs show the most common words for each speaker on the horizontal axis, corresponding with the number of times each word appears on the vertical axis. For example, Delvile’s top five words are “would,” “may,” “upon,” and “Miss Beverley.” **[SLIDE 12]** Harrel’s top five are “come,” “shall,” “Miss Beverley,” and “know.” **[SLIDE 13]** Monckton’s are “would,” “upon,” “may,” “nothing,” and “world.” We can produce a visual representation of these frequencies by creating a “word cloud” in which a word’s size is proportional to the frequency of its use. **[SLIDES 14-16 - toggle]** Many of the most popular words – besides Cecilia’s name – are verbs, but I think the nouns are more revealing. “Cecilia” obviously appears for Delvile and not Harrel or Monckton because Delvile and Cecilia have a romantic relationship. “Money” is used frequently by the extravagant Harrel. Monckton uses “World” more than “Miss Beverley,” gesturing to his hyper-awareness of how others may interpret his conduct towards Cecilia. Interestingly, “mother” appears more often than “happiness” and “heart” for Delvile. This gives some credence to Doody’s claims about an earlier version of *Cecilia*: that “[Delvile] is crippled by Oedipal feelings: he admits that his mother is more important to him than his beloved.”[[8]](#endnote-9)

It is even possible, using the NLTK, to identify and isolate groups of words based on their parts of speech – and, by extension, to look even more closely at which nouns are associated with which characters. This is called parts-of-speech (or POS) tagging. Because time is limited, I am mostly going to discuss nouns, but I have also analyzed each character’s adjectives and adverbs, and those results appear in the Jupyter notebooks file on GitHub. **[SLIDE 17]** So here is an example of the output you would receive after POS tagging. These are the first 25 nouns and adjectives used by Delvile: they are largely correct – though not perfect – and when word frequency analysis is applied to these smaller groups of words, the results are meaningful. **[SLIDE 18]** At this point, it shouldn’t be surprising that “mother” is Delvile’s most used noun, while “honour” comes next, again boding poorly for Cecilia’s marital happiness. “heart” appears the same amount of times as “father.” Although “happiness” is higher, “misery” is still within Delvile’s top 15. **[SLIDE 19]** For Harrel, “house” and “money” are two of his top three, and “credit” and “bill” are also quite frequent, all of which reflect his financial concerns. “moment” and “time” round out Harrel’s top four, words that describe the frenetic pace with which he hurries to parties and amusements, evades payments to creditors, and demands financial help from Cecilia. **[SLIDE 20]** As for Monckton, that “world,” “fortune,” and “connection” are frequently used shouldn’t be surprising given his status in the fashionable world, but it is interesting that he, like Delvile, often discusses “character” and “family.” **[TOGGLE SLIDE 18 / 20]**. In fact, there are several other frequently-used nouns that Monckton and Delvile share, including “world,” “life,” and “happiness.” Their overlapping language reflects other parallels between the men, anticipating Cecilia’s declaration to Delvile, “I thought you had been Mr. Monckton yourself.” (vol. 5, bk. 10, ch. 8).

While text analysis focusing on nouns and word frequencies supports connections between Delvile, Harrel, and Monckton, the results after using sentiment analysis are not as clear. Sentiment analysis is a methodology used in natural language processing to determine whether data is positive, negative or neutral, so it helps determine the degree of positivity in a selected text. It is also called “opinion mining,” and while a customized model, trained on eighteenth-century texts using machine learning would be ideal, I used[[9]](#endnote-10) the NLTK’s standard sentiment analysis model called VADER, which stands for Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner. VADER has set parameters for how to define a word as positive, neutral, or negative.[[10]](#endnote-11) **[SLIDE 21]** Most words are neutral, and this slide shows examples of words in *Cecilia* that are defined as positive or negative by VADER. Positive words are assigned a value of 1, negative words are given a value of -1, and neutral words (which don’t appear here) are equal to 0. **[SLIDE 22]**  Because I wanted to focus on the degree of positivity in each character’s language, my code excludes words tagged as neutral and focuses only on positive and negative words. It comes up with a positivity score which subtracts the number of negative words from the number of positive words, and that difference is then divided by the sum of all positive and negative words that a character speaks. This measure ranges between -1 and 1, and the larger it is, the more positive a character’s overall tone. I ran the sentiment analysis on all of Delvile’s, Harrel’s, and Monckton’s language. **[SLIDE 23]** Interestingly, their morality and positivity measurements have an inverse relationship – Delvile at 0.035, Harrel at 0.051, and Monckton at 0.139. Monckton’s score is significantly higher, even though he is unequivocally the most malicious of the three men. Perhaps this is due to his hypocritical nature and ability to disguise his true feelings. **[SLIDE 24]** I ran the same sentiment analysis, but limited the dataset to the nouns because, as I have discussed, they are often linked to distinctive character traits and actions. Here the noun positivity rating is 0.228 for Delvile, 0.122 for Harrel, and 0.294 for Monckton. These are higher ratings than each character’s total language – probably because adjectives and adverbs are excluded. It is not surprising that Harrel’s score is the lowest due to his massive expenses and financial extortion of Cecilia, and again, Monckton’s is the highest, which connects to his hidden and unspoken villainy. **[SLIDE 25]** When I ran the measurement one last time, focusing on adjectives, patterns were closer to those of the overall language. Delvile’s score was significantly lower than Harrel’s and Monckton’s (0.073 versus 0.225 for Harrel and 0.277 for Monckton). Harrel’s focus on his debts could skew the noun measurement, but the tortured interactions between Delvile and Cecilia could explain why his positivity score is significantly lower, even though the other two men are more villainous. **[SLIDE 26]** While sentiment analysis is not perfect, that Delvile’s positivity scores are consistently lower than Harrel’s and Monckton’s is a troubling indication of his similarities to the toxic men that occupy Burney’s *Cecilia*, similarities that are embedded within the novel’s language, themes, and structure and justify – in part – its protracted length and the heroine’s reluctant marriage.

1. Toxic masculinity: “A harmful or destructive form of masculinity, typically characterized as arising from excessive adherence to conventional or stereotyped expectations of the behaviours, qualities, and attitudes appropriate to men and boys, and manifesting in traits such as aggression, misogyny, domineering behaviour, and emotional repression.” (*OED*, 1990 first use) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See Doody 134 and Saggini 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Susan C. Greenfield, “Money or Mind?: *Cecilia*, the Novel, and the Real Madness of Selfhood,” *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 33 (2004): 49-70 [57]. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Cynthia Klekar, “‘Her Gift Was Compelled’: Gender and the Failure of the ‘Gift’

   in *Cecilia*,” *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 18.1 (2005): 107-26 [108, 119]. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Jane Spencer, “*Evelina* and *Cecilia*” 34, 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Christina Davidson, “Conversations as Signifiers: Characters on the Margins of Morality in the First Three Novels of Frances Burney,” 282. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Catherine Keohane, “‘Too Neat for a Beggar’: Charity and Debt in Burney’s *Cecilia*,” 391. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Doody 139. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. For now – this is a possible area of expansion. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. For example:

    a = 'This was a good movie.'  
    sid.polarity\_scores(a)OUTPUT-{'neg': 0.0, 'neu': 0.508, 'pos': 0.492, 'compound': 0.4404}

    VS a = 'This was the best, most awesome movie EVER MADE!!!'  
    sid.polarity\_scores(a)OUTPUT-{'neg': 0.0, 'neu': 0.425, 'pos': 0.575, 'compound': 0.8877}

    https://towardsdatascience.com/sentimental-analysis-using-vader-a3415fef7664 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)