1 Beginnings

1.1 Introduction

Voltaire's correspondence stands as one of the great literary monuments of the eighteenth century. The corpus of over 21,000 letters, of which more than 15,000 are by Voltaire himself, addressing some 1,800 correspondents, is impressive – and somewhat overwhelming (see Mervaud, 2009). Historians and literary critics who use this correspondence frequently employ it instrumentally to establish a date or confirm a fact, and only rarely have critics attempted to examine this epistolary corpus in its entirety and to understand it as a literary whole. Its sheer size is clearly part of the problem, making it an ideal test case for examining the pros and cons of 'close' and 'distant' reading. The aim of this essay is to experiment with a range of digital humanities methods and to explore to what extent they can help us to identify new interpretative approaches to what is possibly Voltaire's greatest masterpiece.

1.2 Voltaire's Correspondence as Literary Object

Letters versus Correspondence

If the correspondence is Voltaire's masterpiece, it is not one that he consciously set out to write.[1] It may therefore be helpful to begin by describing how the epistolary corpus that we have today came into being. A distinction needs to be made between 'letters' and 'correspondence': the survival of individual letters may be a matter of serendipity, whereas a correspondence depends on systematic exchanges – on a network, in fact – and a network can only thrive in particular social and economic circumstances. Improved roads meant that postal services became markedly more regular and reliable in the eighteenth century, and the reliability of the postal service in turn nurtured the growth of Enlightenment correspondence networks – as in this depiction of the postal network in France (see Fig. 1.1).

Voltaire spent most of his adult life away from the French capital, and letters played a vital role in sustaining his career, keeping him abreast of the news, helping him nurture relationships old and new and in general remain a dynamic presence in the literary world of Paris. If Diderot's correspondence, remarkable in its quality, seems disappointingly small, that is because, unlike Voltaire, he saw his friends in Paris regularly and did not need to write to them to stay in touch. Increasingly, letters became for Voltaire a literary form of choice: he wrote essays and articles in the style of letters and used 'real' letters in his

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[1] The argument of the following paragraphs is expanded in Cronk, 2019.

Figure 1.1 Postal routes in eighteenth-century France

imaginative works as well as imaginary letters in his non-fiction works – his predilection for manipulating the letter form is something of an obsession, an aspect of his writing that remains insufficiently explored.

Some authors self-consciously construct their correspondence as a literary object by recording their complete epistolary corpus: George Washington, clearly sensitive to his place in history, employed a copy press (a device that made copies of letters by directly lifting ink from the page) and then assembled letter books, bound volumes containing copies of letters both sent and received; similarly, Thomas Jefferson made use of the 'Polygraph' letter-copying machine from 1806 until his death.[2] More simply, George Sand kept a handlist of letters sent, so that even if some letters have disappeared, we still have a clear sense of the extent of the corpus. In all these cases, we are able to reconstruct the correspondence network, even if we lack the original letters. This is not the case with Voltaire, where much is lost and we must make estimations on the basis of what has survived. He made no attempt to keep a record of the large number of letters that he sent, and we can infer that he kept copies of his letters only in exceptional cases, for example when he thought that he might later want to publish a particular letter.

Voltaire certainly never envisaged publishing his correspondence as a whole. Only a small number of his letters were published in his lifetime, in journals or books, sometimes at his instigation, sometimes with his tacit approval, and at other times without his knowledge or even, when the publication of his letters was intended to damage his reputation, against his will. The general public was well aware of the fact that he corresponded with Frederick II and later with Catherine II, and these high-profile epistolary relationships with monarchs formed an important element of his public persona. At the other end of the scale, Voltaire's letters are often presented as models worthy of imitation for instance in Louis Philipon de La Madelaine's letter manual *Modèles de lettres sur différents sujets*, first published in 1761, and continuously reprinted into the early nineteenth century. Mostly citing letters by French writers no longer living, such as Mme de Sévigné and the abbé de Chaulieu, Philipon in addition includes some ten exemplary letters by Voltaire, who is thus consecrated as a living classic. It seems fair to conclude that Voltaire was celebrated in his lifetime as a great letter-writer but that his correspondence was not acclaimed as a single entity. The idea of a writer publishing their collected letters is very much a modern notion. The 'correspondence' understood as an integrated and organised collection of all his letters is not something that Voltaire would have

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[2] See www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/copy-press and www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/polygraph.

wanted to publish; it is by no means certain he would even have understood the concept. It was only after his death that a group of men of letters, all of them ideologically in sympathy with Voltaire, decided to 'create' his correspondence. This is a masterpiece that happened by accident.

Creating the Corpus

During Voltaire's lifetime, his letters were published only sporadically. The first attempt to assemble the correspondence was made by the editors of the so-called Kehl edition (1784–9), the first complete publication of his works produced after Voltaire's death. They managed to assemble a corpus of some 4,500 letters, printed in eighteen volumes, which they present deliberately as a monument designed to honour the great man. Subsequent nineteenth-century editions of Voltaire's complete works – and there were many during the years of the Restoration – followed the broad pattern set by Kehl, though they continued to add new letters as they came to light. Adrien Beuchot's edition (1829–34) included for the first time letters written to, as well as by, Voltaire, a key innovation that introduced a more sophisticated understanding of his epistolary exchanges and the sense of a network; this two-way correspondence has been retained ever since. By the time of Louis Moland's edition (1877–85), the corpus of Voltaire letters had grown to around 10,500, and further discoveries continued to be made in the course of the twentieth century. André Delattre catalogued these (1952) and helped pave the way for Theodore Besterman, who produced not one but two complete editions of Voltaire's complete correspondence. The first appeared between 1953 and 1964 and was immediately followed by the second, which Besterman rashly describes as 'definitive'. It was this revised edition, appearing in fifty-one volumes between 1968 and 1977, that gave us our modern corpus of 21,222 letters.

Current research on Voltaire's correspondence continues to uncover new letters, and even new correspondents.[3] Some of these discoveries are substantial, like the group of some 130 letters from Voltaire to his niece, Marie-Louise Denis, dating from between 1737 and 1744, while other important collections are known to be in private hands and will, it is hoped, eventually enter the public domain. Such research tends to rely heavily on serendipity, or serendipity now assisted by the increasing availability of online auction catalogues. It might also be possible to envisage a more systematic way of identifying lacunae in the existing corpus. Use of the simple word search function, for example applied to the subscription, has been employed successfully to identify the hitherto unknown addressee of certain letters (Cronk, 2016a). We are already aware of

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[3] See www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk/about-voltaire/voltaires-correspondence.

some gaping absences, like the letters exchanged between Voltaire and Émilie Du Châtelet, presumed to have been destroyed, and we might be able to identify other correspondents, even if their letters have not survived. It has recently come to light that the Duc d'Uzès kept copies of all his exchanges with Voltaire, and this allows us to reconstruct in full one small subset of the correspondence network (Cronk, 2016b); this example is perhaps rare but may not be unique. Such investigations could in due course help us compute an estimate of the true size of Voltaire's epistolary corpus. Our statistical analyses would look very different if we had a better sense of what proportion of the whole the present extant corpus represents.

1.3 Voltaire's Correspondence as Network

The second Besterman print edition of Voltaire's correspondence was included as part of the Mellon-funded *Electronic Enlightenment* (*EE*) project, begun in 2001 at the Voltaire Foundation and launched as a commercial product by Oxford University Press in 2009.[4] The full text and scholarly apparatus (including Besterman's editorial notes and variants) of each letter was transcribed from the print edition and encoded in XML (extensible markup language) and then linked to a common metadata scheme (people, places, names, etc.) as part of *EE*'s initial data entry project (Cronk, 2020). The existence of this new dataset instantly transformed the possibilities of research into Voltaire's correspondence. In addition to Voltaire's, *EE* includes other eighteenth-century correspondences, in both English and French, including those of John Locke, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, always taken from the best available critical edition: the guiding spirit of the project was to use the web to recreate the 'web' of eighteenth-century correspondence. While *EE*'s texts remain under copyright restrictions, its metadata has been made available to researchers freely since 2010, most notably as the founding dataset of the *Mapping the Republic of Letters* project at Stanford (Edelstein, 2020).

The centrality of correspondence networks to the flourishing of Enlightenment thought and exchange has become a significant area of scholarly interest. In the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot adopts a somewhat high-minded view of such networks, seeing them as potentially fostering the disinterested exchange of information between people of different ranks in different places:

> Il ne seroit pas inutile d'établir des correspondances dans les lieux principaux du monde lettré, & je ne doute point qu'on n'y réussît. On s'instruira des usages, des coûtumes, des productions, des travaux, des machines, *&c*. si on

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[4] See http://e-enlightenment.com/.

ne néglige personne, & si l'on a pour tous ce degré de considération que l'on
doit à l'homme desintéressé qui veut se rendre utile. (Diderot, 1755, p. 645)

It would be useful to establish correspondence exchanges in the principal
centres of the cultivated world, and I am in no doubt that this could work. We
shall learn about usages, customs, productions, projects, machines, etc. if we
include everybody and treat everyone with the consideration that is due to the
disinterested man who wants to be useful.

In order truly to recreate the Republic of Letters, it would be desirable to track the
exchanges of many scholars, including the so-called 'lesser' figures who worked
in provincial centres, like the Avignon physician Esprit Calvet (Brockliss, 2002),
or his friend the botanist and archaeologist Jean-François Séguier, based in
Nîmes.[5] There is therefore huge potential for future research as and when *EE* is
able to extend its current practice of including archival print editions of major
figures to include born-digital editions of the 'lesser' figures – who are, of course,
in their scholarly practice more typical of Enlightenment authors than the small
number of great writers who, by definition, are necessarily exceptional. Looking
to the future, we now begin to have the materials to set about re-creating, as it
were from the inside, the Republic of Letters, a concept much discussed but still
poorly understood (Hotson & Wallnig, 2019). A future goal, obviously, would be
to create cross-searchable datasets so that we could map the network of Voltaire's
correspondence in the context of the broader European, and later American,
network of Enlightenment correspondences. Digital resources have the potential
to provide powerful tools for the intellectual historian, and the challenge now is to
find the most appropriate ways of applying new digital methods to advance
Enlightenment intellectual history (Edelstein, 2016).

It is also important to focus on the networks of individual letter writers, and the
network of every great author has its own particularities (Clemit, 2019). Digital
researchers can already, thanks to *EE*, focus on the Voltaire correspondence
network as a single entity, and the earliest initiative to make use of *EE* explored
the possibilities of mapping the Voltaire epistolary network. Under Dan Edelstein's
leadership, the *Mapping the Republic of Letters* project at Stanford has helped us to
visualise this network.[6] We can now view Voltaire's correspondence as a geo-
graphical whole (see Fig. 1.2) or by chronological period, or we may compare, say,
the correspondence networks of Voltaire and Locke (Edelstein, 2019).

Sometimes the results are predictable (which is reassuring), as when we find
that Paris seems to be the hub of the Enlightenment, and sometimes not, as when
Edelstein points out that Voltaire's letters to England are far fewer in number
than we might have expected, given the standard narrative about the role of

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[5] See www.seguier.org.   [6] See http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/.

Figure 1.2 Voltaire's correspondence network, visualised in Palladio

England and France in the growth of the European Enlightenment (Edelstein & Kassabova, 2018). A natural extension of this research is to use the Voltaire corpus to explore the possibilities of social network analysis, and this is already yielding significant results concerning the social profile of Voltaire's correspondents (Comsa et al., 2016); we are still only at the very beginning of what is possible in the digital exploration of epistolary networks.

It is crucial in conducting these analyses to reflect on what precisely it is we are mapping when we visualise Voltaire's correspondence network. The Voltairean corpus poses a formidable challenge to the interpreter: many letters are missing, because they were destroyed or have been lost, while some of the letters in the present corpus are rewritten versions of the originals, and perhaps even forgeries. So in order to better explore this network, we need first to understand better how it came into being.

The Imbalanced Corpus

A striking feature of the epistolary corpus assembled by Besterman is its profoundly lopsided composition. The letters are far more numerous in the later decades of Voltaire's life than in the earlier ones, and the letters written by Voltaire (over 15,000) vastly outnumber those written to him (around 6,000). In trying to understand just how this lopsidedness came to be, three factors should be borne in mind:

1. The first is the question of definition, what we may call the laundry list problem. Besterman's criteria for defining a letter are remarkably vague, and he tends to include in his edition everything, from letters sent through the

post to literary works such as journal articles written in epistolary form. Such imprecise definitions are not as much a problem when we read the letters one by one in a printed volume, but they become misleading in a digitised collection where we are attempting distant reading. An essential next step in any future edition would be to attribute category labels to each text, thus distinguishing more clearly than at present between, for example, letters sent through the post and letters written for print publication in the first instance.

2. The imbalance between active and passive correspondence, between letters written by Voltaire and letters written to him, is also very marked. In the case of Damilaville, Voltaire's stalwart helpmate in Paris, *EE* records 576 letters written from Voltaire to Damilaville and only ten in the other direction. Or if we take d'Argental, a highly placed and influential friend in the capital who shared Voltaire's passion for theatre, we have 1,209 letters from Voltaire to d'Argental, and only forty-six in the other direction. Of course, these statistics describe not the number of letters actually written but the number of letters that have survived. French epistolary etiquette (then as now) emphasises the need to acknowledge receipt of any letter, so broadly speaking, we should expect to find, for each correspondent, approximately the same number of letters in each direction. We can infer that many of Voltaire's correspondents carefully preserved his letters; Voltaire himself, on the other hand, once he had replied to a letter, seems very often to have discarded it.

3. There is a significant difference, too, between the number of letters written in the early years of Voltaire's life and the far greater number surviving from later years. In part this evolution must reflect a reality: as he grew older and became increasingly involved in a wider range of activities, there were simply more letters to be written. But in part this disparity reflects the reasons for which letters were kept; when Voltaire was young and little known, his letters were easily discarded; as he grew more famous, the temptation to hold on to an example of the great man's writing became increasingly irresistible. Antoine Lilti describes Voltaire as the first modern celebrity (Lilti, 2014, chap. 1), and celebrity is clearly one key factor in explaining the distorted shape of this epistolary corpus: the more famous he became, the more zealously his correspondents sought out and preserved his letters.

How Was the Corpus Constituted?

Given that Voltaire himself did not consistently collect his letters for publication, how exactly did the editors of the Kehl edition assemble their epistolary corpus? There are broadly three sources for their material:

1. *Letters published in Voltaire's lifetime*. On occasion, Voltaire chose to publish a letter in a journal or in one of his printed works. In other cases, letters were published without his apparent authorisation – though the extent of his complicity in the publication of his letters is sometimes hard to assess, as in the case of the letters that appeared in the *Correspondance littéraire* after 1763. As Voltaire's fame grew, he must have realised that the risk of his letters being published was all the greater, and this in turn influenced the style and content of certain of his letters. On occasion the publication of Voltaire's letters by a third party was done with clearly hostile intent (and in these cases, the text was often falsified for polemical reasons). As a result, Voltaire struggled increasingly to maintain control over the dissemination of his letters.

2. *Letters collected by the Kehl editors*. The editors of the Kehl edition sought out letters still in the possession of Voltaire's correspondents, but this was no easy task, so in addition they advertised in 1780 for owners of Voltaire's letters to come forward.

3. *Letters left by Voltaire and inherited by the Kehl editors*. A certain number of letters or copies of letters survived in Voltaire's *Nachlass* and did not go to St Petersburg with the rest of his papers and library, acquired by Catherine II shortly after his death. The Kehl editors inherited these in due course, after an edition planned by the publisher Charles-Joseph Panckoucke had come to nothing, and clearly these letters constitute a significant part of their corpus. Voltaire informs one of his correspondents that he destroyed letters received on a regular basis, so what he left behind is presumably to some extent what he chose to leave behind, and it seems improbable, given his deliberate attempts to control his literary corpus in other areas, that he would have left much to chance in the manuscripts that he allowed to survive.

The Character of Voltaire's Epistolary Corpus

This brief survey of how the Kehl epistolary corpus came into being suggests that it is hardly a 'neutral' cross-section of Voltaire's letters. At least with regard to the letters preserved by Voltaire, it would seem that what has survived must be a carefully controlled set of letters preserved by Voltaire to show him in the best possible light. This is all the more interesting when we remember the ideological assumptions of the Kehl editors themselves, who insist that their purpose in creating the correspondence is to display the character of Voltaire in the most positive way. The 'Avis' inviting members of the public to share their Voltaire manuscripts urges them to contribute to perfecting 'le monument qui va s'élever à la gloire de ce beau génie' (Voltaire, 2017, p. 547) (the monument that

will be raised to the glory of this great genius), and the same desire to glorify
Voltaire's genius is expressed by the Kehl editors in their preface:

> Enfin le recueil des lettres complètera l'édition. Mais ces lettres seront
> choisies: c'est-à-dire qu'on n'imprimera que celles qui paraîtront dignes du
> public, soit en elles-mêmes, soit par les particularités qu'elles renferment, les
> circonstances où elles ont été écrites, les lumières qu'elles donnent sur l'âme
> et le caractère d'un homme vraiment unique, et digne par son génie et la
> singularité de ses talents d'être pour les philosophes un objet d'étude, comme
> il est un objet d'admiration pour tous les hommes impartiaux et éclairés.
> (Voltaire, 1784, vol. I, p. viii)

> Finally, the collection of letters will complete the edition. But these letters
> will be selected, that is to say that we shall only print those which seem
> worthy of the public, either in themselves, or in the particular details they
> contain, the circumstances in which they were written, the insights they give
> into the mind and character of a truly unique man, worthy by his genius and
> by his particular talents to be an object of study for philosophers, as he is an
> object of admiration for all impartial and enlightened men.

To a greater or lesser extent, all editors of Voltaire's letters fall into this
hagiographical trap, but it is not clear that the Kehl editors were aware of the
circularity of their argument. As editors we can only edit what we have before
us, but we can try at least to show an awareness that the corpus is in part shaped
by the controlling hand of Voltaire himself.

Another factor to be borne in mind is the ever-present tension between private
and public in these letters (as in other correspondences of the period): some are
clearly personal communications, some are private communications designed
to be shared with close friends, while others are clearly composed with the idea
that they might circulate in manuscript copy or even end up being printed. This
leads to a question concerning the accuracy, or rather inaccuracy, of the texts
that have come down to us. In the case of letters published in Voltaire's lifetime,
we can never be entirely confident, in the absence of the autograph, that they
have not been revised or rewritten for publication. Moreover, the manuscript
descriptions in the Besterman edition are often minimal and do not always help
us to distinguish between letters as they were communicated in private and
letters as they were prepared for print.

The letters written to Marie-Louise Denis from Potsdam in the early 1750s
describing life at the Prussian court are some of the most harshly ironic in the
entire correspondence, and for obvious reasons they have been much antholo-
gised; it is only since the completion of Besterman's 'definitive' edition of the
correspondence that we have understood that these letters are not in fact the
originals (the evidence of the autographs having been destroyed, it seems), but