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How to Tell Stories with Networks: Exploring the Narrative Affordances of Graphs with the Iliad

Tommaso Venturini, Liliana Bounegru, Mathieu Jacomy, Jonathan Gray

No doubt, networks have become indispensable mathematical tools in many aspects of life in the twenty first century. They allow us to calculate all kinds of relational metrics and to quantify the properties of their nodes, clusters and global structures. These modes of calculation are becoming increasingly prevalent in an age of digital data. But networks are more than formal analytical tools. They are also powerful metaphors of our collective life, with all of its complexity and its many dependencies. This is why, among the various strategies of data visualization, networks seem to have assumed a paradigmatic position, spreading to the most different disciplines and colonizing sometimes as mere decoration a growing number of digital and non-digital objects. Contemplating the visual representation of a network, we don't (always) need to compute its mathematical properties to appreciate its heuristic value – as anyone who has ever used a transportation plan knows well. Networks are extraordinary calculating devices, but they are also maps, instruments of navigation and representation. Not only do they guide our steps through the territories that they represent, but they also invite our imagination to see and explore the world in different ways.

Over the past few decades, this visual representation of networks has seen a “renaissance” thanks to the development of graphical user interfaces and network spatialisation algorithms (Rieder, 2012). The analytical capabilities of graph mathematics have been written into software programmes that have multiplied the visual representation and exploration of graph properties and extended it outside of expert circles (Pousman, Stasko and Mateas, 2007). This proliferation of visual representations of networks through digital media shifts focus from the analytic capabilities of networks and raises questions about how such networks may be read narratively (Bounegru, Venturini, Gray & Jacomy, in preparation).

Can we think of the visual representations of networks as forms of digital storytelling (Couldry, 2008, Seegel and Heer, 2010)? Can we think of network analysis and visualisation software packages such as Gephi, NodeXL and Pajek, as “authoring systems” (Ryan, 2005, p. 515), which hold specific affordances for the production of narratives and the construction of narrative meaning? And how might these narrative affordances of networks be relevant for those conducting research in an “age of big data”? It is this storytelling potential of networks that will be the focus of this chapter. Not because this narrative potential is more important than the mathematical affordances of networks, but because the latter have a long tradition while the former have only recently become the subject of academic reflection.

A scan of recent literature reveals that – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – “networks” and “narratives” are brought together in recent research in information and communication technology and organisation studies in concepts such as “narrative networks” and “narrative network analysis” to describe organisational forms, processes and routines that emerge around information technologies (Pentland and Feldman,

2007, Weeks, 2014). Another branch of research that is closer to our line of enquiry in this chapter is recent literature that uses these concepts to describe the application of network analysis to the study of narrative texts. Such work typically aims to bring quantitative methodological approaches to bear on and contribute to narrative and social theory by applying network models and social network analysis to the study of narrative texts. (See, e.g., Moretti, 2011, Bearman and Stovel, 2000, Sudhahr, De Fazio, Franzosi and Cristianini, 2013).

However, a closer look at these latter studies shows that, even when network analysis is applied to the study of narrative forms such as novels or films, the focus of such studies is on the mathematical properties of networks and how they can contribute to the formal or structural analysis of texts rather than on the narrative affordances of networks.

A good illustration of this point is provided by a series of papers that, in the last few years, have analyzed the characters' networks in classic epics and, in particular, in the Iliad (Rydberg-Cox, 2011, Mac Carron and Kenna, 2012; Miranda, Baptista, and Pinto, 2013; Kydros, Notopoulos and Exarchos, 2015). While offering interesting insights into the formal characteristics of the epic genre, these papers seem to overlook the fact that, beside the structures of the societies they describe, these networks may also be read narratively. This privileging of particular styles of analysis of networks is not without good reason. While the mathematical analysis of networks has strong disciplinary roots (such as for example in graph theory or sociometry), to date the conceptualisation of the visual properties of networks remains comparatively underdeveloped.

It is for this reason that, in this chapter we will take a different approach. We will temporarily bracket the mathematical properties of networks and instead illustrate the narrative and storytelling potential of networks. We will do so through an examination of the Iliad's network of characters. Much like the way in which a film or game adaptation of the Iliad would reconfigure or reassemble the story in accordance with the affordances and constraints specific to the medium, in this chapter we are interested in exploring how network analysis as an authoring device organises stories; how it reconfigures and reassembles basic elements of a narrative such as characters, plot, events, setting, temporality and causality; and by doing so how it mediates and structures the phenomena it represents. In doing so we do not claim network graphs to be narratives per se, but to have the potential of "possessing narrativity." The distinction between being a narrative and possessing narrativity is aptly described as follows: "The property of 'being' a narrative can be predicated on any semiotic object produced with the intent of evoking a narrative script in the mind of the audience. 'Having narrativity,' on the other hand, means being able to evoke such a script. In addition to life itself, pictures, music, or dance can have narrativity without being narratives in a literal sense." (Ryan, 2004, p. 9).

Even though in this chapter we illustrate our analysis on a literary text, our objective is not to use networks as analytical devices for the study of structural or formal properties of narrative texts. Rather, by taking inspiration from studies of the storytelling potential of data visualisations more generally (as for example in Seegel and Heer, 2010), we aim to explore the narrative affordances of visual representations of networks. Elsewhere we develop the link between the mathematical properties of networks and the stories

that they evoke through an analysis of use of network graphs in a series of journalism projects (Bounegru, Venturini, Gray and Jacomy, in preparation).

We chose to illustrate the narrative affordances of networks through the Iliad because it is a well-known text, allowing the reader to intuitively grasp the stories told by the network, albeit different types of stories – which is partly the point of this chapter. The typology of “network stories” that we illustrate, however, can be applied to the reading of (almost) any network. We use the term “network stories” to describe “‘views’ or readings of phenomena, events, facets or elements of a narrative that emerge from the visual analysis of the properties of a network” (Bounegru, Venturini, Gray and Jacomy, in preparation). As we will try to show, these stories are rooted in the same local and global properties revealed by graph mathematics. Only, instead of calculating them with numbers, we will visualize them and tell them with words.

Three perspectives on networks and six “network stories”

In this section we will examine three different ways to narrate a network, corresponding to three different perspectives that can be taken on them. Consider the case of a railway map, a kind of network that we are perhaps most familiar in using, reading and dealing with. When looking at it, one can observe:

1. **The overall shape of the network** – exploring, for example, which zones are denser in connections (indicating regional agglomerations) and which are sparser (indicating rural regions with few urban centers) and whether the transportation system is more developed in the north or the south, the east or the west.
2. **The specific situation of a given station** – examining, for example, how some cities (the capitals maybe?) are better connected both in terms of the clusters of neighborhoods around them and routes to further regions of the map.
3. **The connections between two stations or areas** – trying, for example, to find the quickest route from the city where you are to the city that you would like to visit or, on the contrary, contemplating the possibility of going on a *grand tour* of the country.

In the next pages, we will exemplify these three perspectives – each translating into two different types of “network stories” – in the case of the Iliad’s network of characters. Before we introduce our six types of “network stories”, however, we need to provide some information about the way in which our example network has been built. The protocol we used for the definition of the nodes and the edges of the Iliad character graph is not particularly strict. This is because the focus of this chapter is not to contribute to the study of Homer epics, but just to illustrate a series of techniques that can be used to narrate a network. Therefore we contented ourselves with creating a node for all the entities performing one or more actions that influence the development of the story. We have been deliberately liberal in our definition of actors, in accordance with insights from Actor-Network Theory (see, e.g. Latour, 2005). Thus we have allowed the nodes of our network to represent not only mortals (e.g. Achilles) and divinities (e.g. Zeus), but also groups (e.g. the Myrmidons) and objects (e.g. the Golden Apple). Our definition of edges was equally supple: we connected two entities when the action of one influenced the action of another (e.g. Odysseus is connected to Achilles because if the earlier had not unmasked him from his feminine disguise, the latter would have not joined the war).

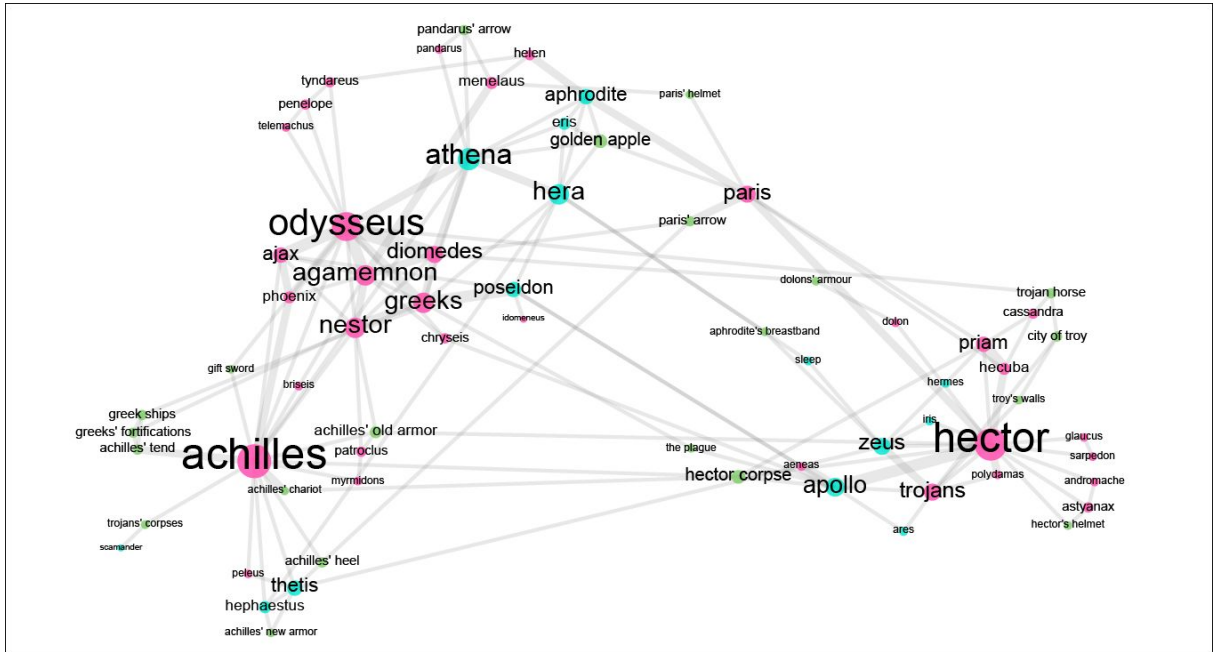


Figure 1. Graph depicting the network of characters in the Iliad.

To visualize the network data thus obtained, we performed a number of operations that we will detail below (cfr., for more details, Venturini, Jacomy and Carvalho Pereira, 2015). The most important is the *force-vector spatialization*. To place our nodes in the space, we used an algorithm that simulates a system of physical forces: nodes repulse each other, while edges act as springs attracting the nodes that they connect (on the specific algorithm we used, cfr. Jacomy et al., 2014). Once the algorithm is launched it changes the distribution of nodes until reaching a balance of forces. Force-vector spatialization minimizes edge crossing and, most importantly, confers a meaning to the distribution of nodes in the space of the graph. At equilibrium, the geometrical distance between nodes become a proxy of their structural similarity: two nodes being the closer the more directly or indirectly they are connected. Once the network was spatialized we gave nodes a size proportional to their degree, i.e. the number of edges adjacent to each node, and a color corresponding to their nature (pink for humans, blue for gods and green for inanimate entities).

Knowing Iliad's storyline, you can look at this network and recognise familiar elements in the graphic (figure 1). You may even discover things you ignored about the relations between characters. However, unless you are a network expert, you may not know the conditions under which your observations are valid. This is not a problem in our case since our goal is to explore new narrative scenarios which may be used in the service of new modes of interpretation and inquiry. We would use different methods – such as statistical methods – to test and validate our hypotheses (cf. Tukey, 1977). In this case our challenge is less to consolidate evidence, but more to organize disparate insights into a relevant whole. The six narrative views or reading paths we propose are strategies to achieve this coherence.

The Panorama > The Camps

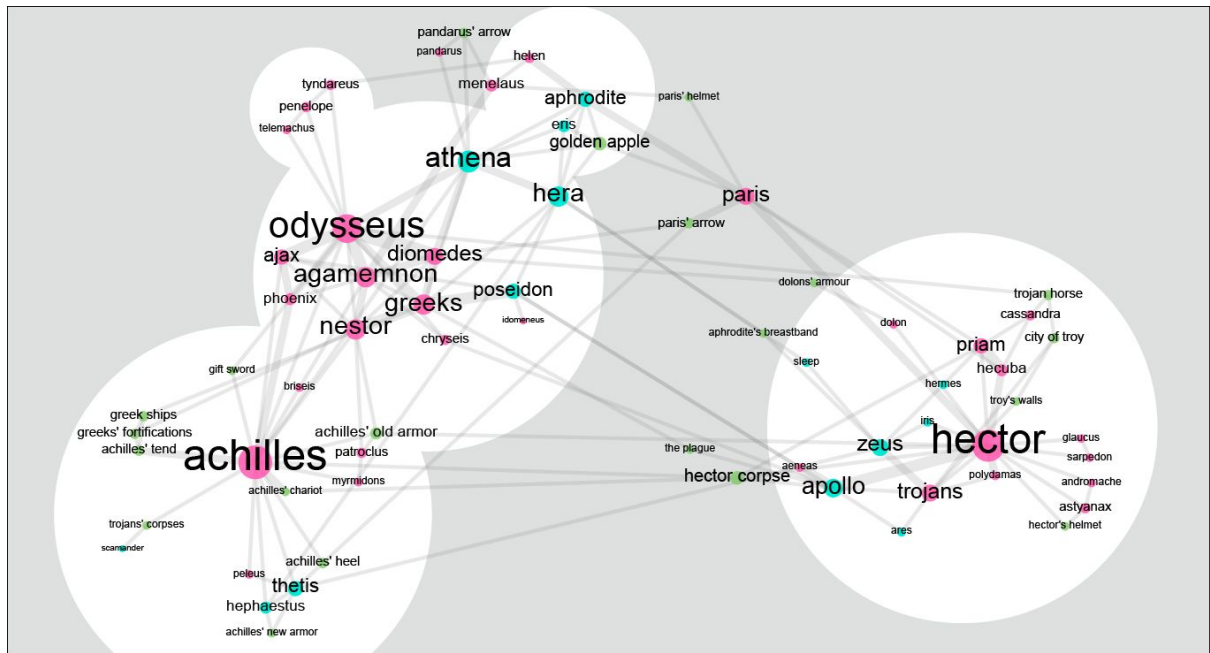


Figure 2. The Panorama > The Camps. Narrative reading of network clusters as camps in Iliad's network of characters.

The first family of narrative readings is called “panorama” as it is meant to capture the global distribution of connectivity in the graph. In the two “network stories” associated with it, “the camps” and “the (im-)balance of forces”, we will not look at any individual nodes, but rather at the varying density of connections in the network. The first reading path in particular, is intended to narrate the clusters of the network as camps of nodes that gather together in a (relatively) tight communities opposing each other. This view captures two opposing camps of characters, represented through two sets of node clusters separated by a structural hole (Burt, 1995). Taking a bird's eye view, one can note the existence of two main regions in the Iliad graph, not surprisingly corresponding to the two main armies deployed in the field (figure 2). Network and cluster properties such as density, position and sub-clustering also evoke some of the qualities of these two groups of characters and their protagonists. The right side of the map is occupied by the Trojans mobilized around the prince Hector, the King Priam and the city of Troy itself. It is a densely connected cluster showing no interior separations. On the other side of the graph, the Achaeans are, on the contrary, divided in two main sub-clusters: one gathering the main Greek warriors (Odysseus, Agamemnon, Diomedes, Nestor and Ajax) and the other occupied by Achilles and his cohort. As everyone knows, the Iliad narration begins precisely by describing the arising of such division over a fight between Agamemnon and Achilles for the beautiful slave Briseis (notably positioned between the two factions) and the sore consequences for the Achaeans.

Two other smaller clusters are visible. They both correspond to characters that are relatively marginal in the narration of the Iliad itself, but that play a crucial role either before or after it. The first is located above the Greek heroes cluster and contains notably Aphrodite, Helen and The Golden Apple. This cluster is the principle cause of the war of Troy. Eris, goddess of Discord, offended for not having being invited at the marriage between Thetis and Peleus throws a Golden Apple with the inscription “to the fairest” between Aphrodite, Athena and Hera. The three goddesses immediately start to

quarrel over it and soon involve Paris (prince of Troy and most handsome of the mortals) to judge their beauty. Paris gives the Apple to Aphrodite in exchange of the love of the prettiest woman in the world, the Spartan queen Helen. The war of Troy breaks over the kidnapping of Helen and the will of Menelaus (Helen's husband) to defend his marriage. The other small cluster (on the top-left) contains Odysseus' wife Penelope and son Telemachus who will play a crucial role in the narration of the Odyssey.

The Panorama > The (Im-)Balance of Forces

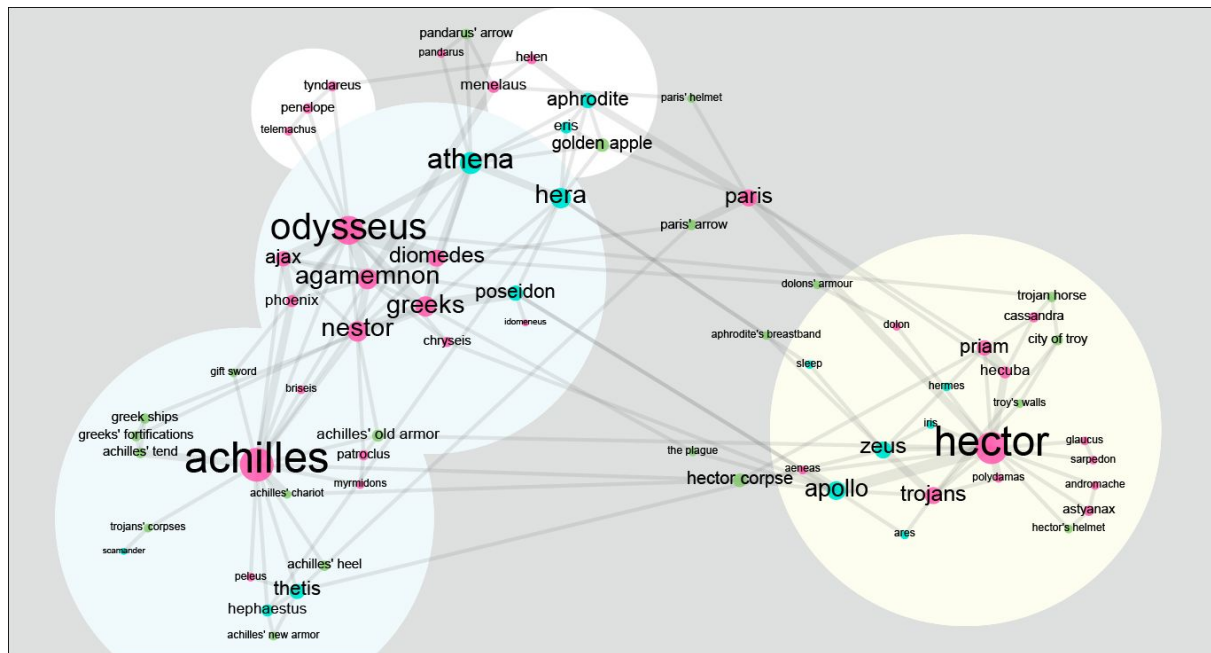


Figure 3. The Panorama > The (Im-)Balance of Forces. Narrative reading of cluster size and volume of nodes as imbalance of forces in Iliad's network of characters.

The second type of “panoramic” narrative reading addresses the balance or imbalance of the forces expressed in the network (figure 3). To the description of the distribution of nodes and edges in clusters, it adds the discussion of the consequences that such distribution has on the phenomenon described by the graph, reading the nodes as weights and the edges as lines of force. The focus is less on how the network *is* and more on how it may *evolve*.

In our example, despite its duration and its convolution, the outcome of the war is never doubted in the narration of Homer. Several prophecies have predicted the destruction of the city of Troy as the characters of both camps are often reminded. In Book 8, Zeus weighs the fate of the Trojans and the Achaeans on a divine scale and is forced to recognize that (despite his best wishes) Troy is bound to fall.

A similar imbalance of forces is clearly visible in the graph, as the size of the clusters corresponding to the two camps and their volume of nodes shows the Achaeans are stronger and more numerous and only their division prevents them for winning the struggle. The bigger size of the nodes of both the mortals and the gods playing in the Greek camp (confronted only by the greatness of Hector) indicates their higher degree of

mobilization and suggests that by uniting forces the Achaeans have all the means to prevail.

The Vantage > The Crossroad

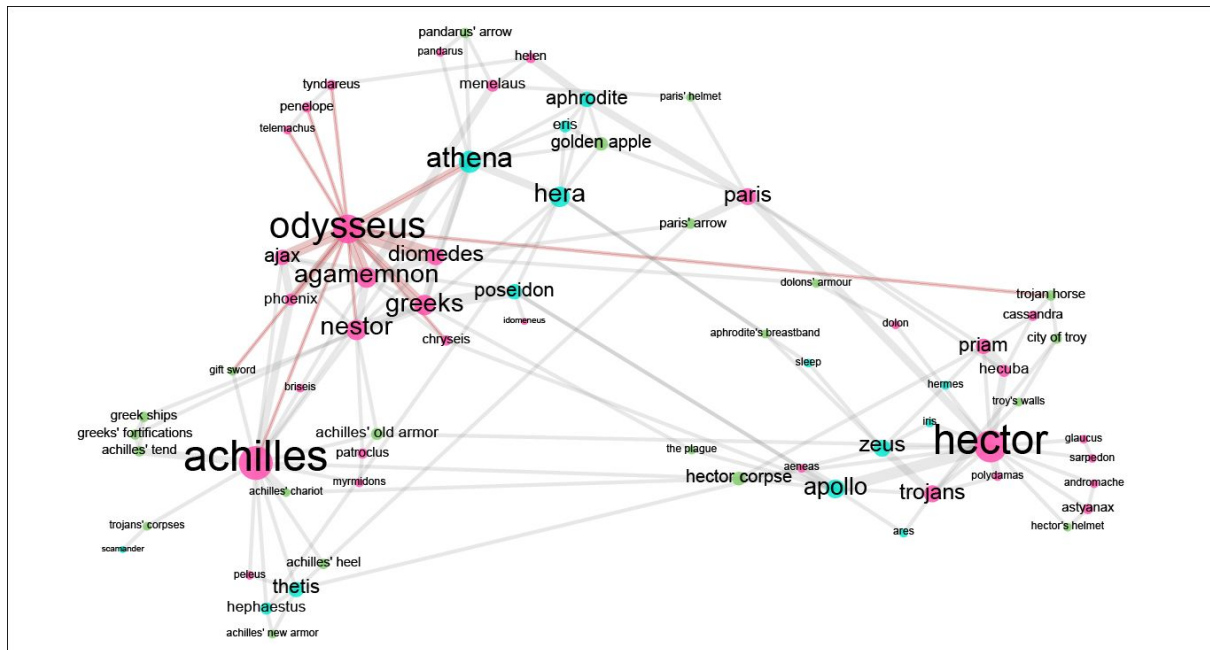


Figure 4. The Vantage > The Crossroad. Narrative reading of the location and size of nodes to identify characters at the crossroads of multiple regions of the Iliad's network of characters.

The second set of narrative views reads the location and size of nodes in order to highlight actors that occupy a vantage position in the network. The first such position is that of central nodes that, being highly connected, find themselves at the “crossroads” of one or several regions of the graph (figure 4).

In the Greek camp, the most central position is occupied by Odysseus, king of Ithaca. The importance of this character in the Iliad is well-known. Though ruling over a small and not particularly rich island, Odysseus is by far the most ingenious of the Achaeans. His presence is felt in almost all books of the Iliad, not only fighting at the side of most other Greek heroes, but also through his constant work to keep the Greek army united. He repeatedly sermonizes the Greeks renewing their courage; he is the one who enrolls Achilles in the war (with the ruse of the gift sword); the one who brings back Chryseis to her father and appeasing the anger of Apollo; the preferred referent for Athena interventions; and, of course, the inventor of the stratagem of the wooden Horse which will eventually win Troy.

A similar role is played also by the Nestor king of Pylos. Nestor is too old to fight directly, but, the wisest of the Greeks, he often counsels the other heroes. In particular, he is the one persuading Patroclus to wear Achilles armor to frighten the Trojans and push them back from the Achaeans' ships.

The Vantage > The Bridge

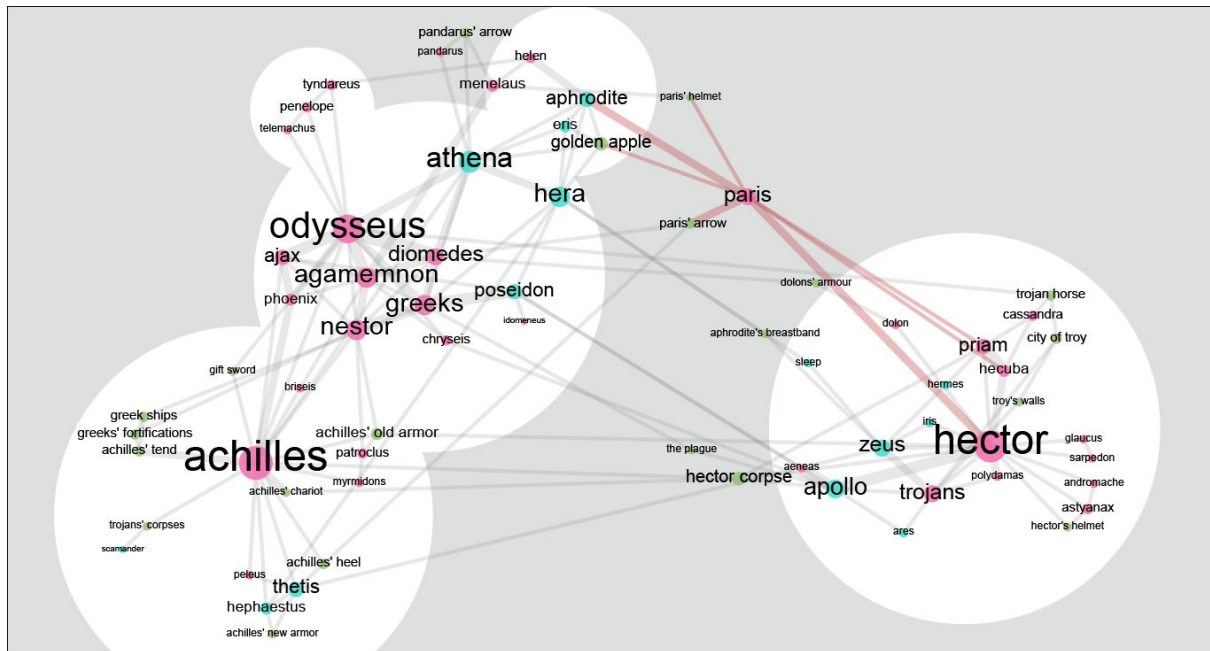


Figure 5. The Vantage > The Bridge. Narrative reading of the location and size of nodes to identify characters that occupy “bridge” positions in the Iliad’s network of characters.

The second type of vantage position is subtler and characterizes nodes that, although located in a (relatively) marginal position, find themselves between two important and separated regions of the graph. Often located in one of the structural holes of the network, such nodes work as bridges connecting two or more clusters (and sometimes serving as the point of passage between them).

In our example, this position is notably occupied by Paris (figure 5). Paris is not at all as central to the Trojan camp as Odysseus is to the Greeks. In fact, he is actually located outside that cluster, somewhere in between the cluster of the Trojans and the cluster of Aphrodite and Helen. This position corresponds perfectly to the role of the young prince who fails repeatedly to support the cause of his city – most notoriously in Book 3 when he loses the duel with Menelaus and is saved only by the intervention of Aphrodite who teleports him into Helen’s bed. This does not mean, however, that Paris does not have a crucial role in the Iliad. On the contrary: by separating Helen from Sparta and associating her with Troy he sets the story into motion by connecting the otherwise separated peoples of the Achaeans and the Trojans.

It is interesting to notice that this capacity to connect different regions of the narration is represented by Paris’s ability in archery. The only real feat accomplished by the Trojan prince is to put an arrow (which is the closest node to him) through Achilles’s vulnerable heel, thereby depriving the Greeks of their champion.

The Journey > The Shortcut

The Journey > The Grand Tour

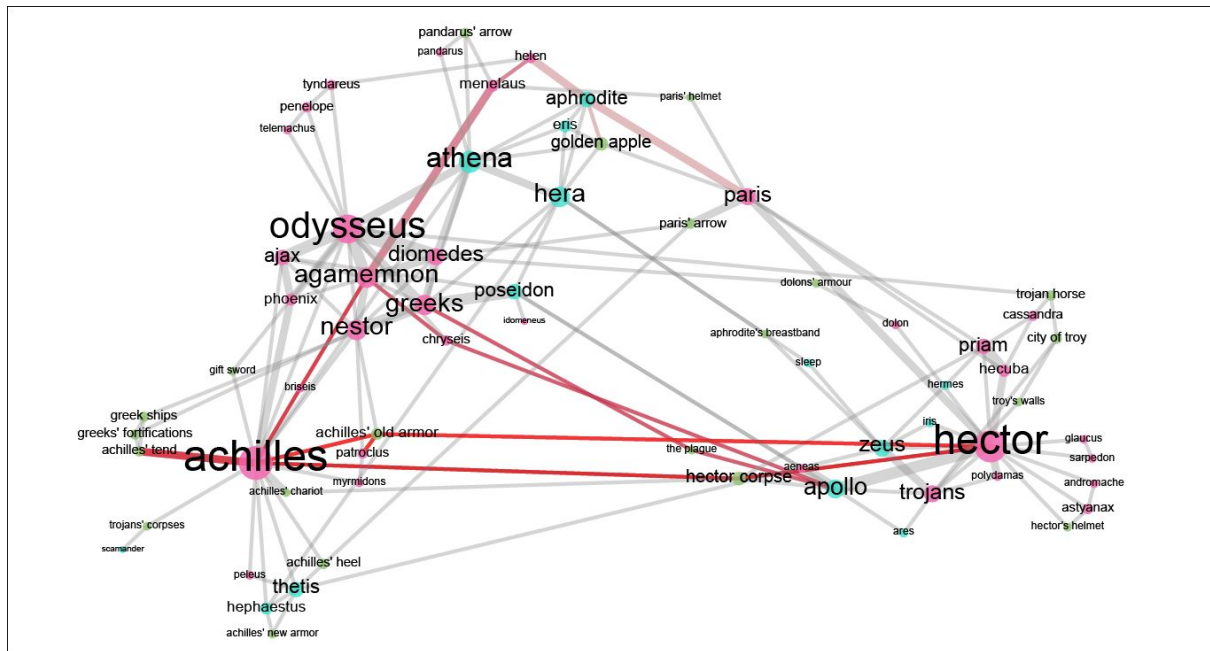


Figure 7. The Journey > The Grand Tour. Narrative reading of the story timeline by “taking a tour” of the perimeter of Iliad’s network of characters.

A second type of graph journey can be construed by following the sequence of creation of the edges between nodes and thereby reconstructing the chronological plot of the network. In this case, the focus is not on the edges that can cut across the network and shorten its diameter, but on the contrary on following patiently the largest tour of its perimeter.

Reading our example graph (figure 7) from top to down (and coloring the nodes with a more and more saturated shade of red), we set off from the Golden Apple of Eris arousing the yearning of Aphrodite. Aphrodite persuades Paris to call her “the fairest of goddesses” (over Athena and Hera) and in exchange helps the young prince to abduct the queen of Sparta and bring here to Troy.

The kidnapping of Helen pushes her husband Menelaus to ask for the help of his brother Agamemnon, king of Argos. Agamemnon calls upon the other kings of Greece and convinces them to bring war upon Troy.

Nine years after the beginning of the siege, the Greeks sack Chryse (a town allied with Troy) and slave among others Chryses who ask for Apollo to send a plague on the Achaeans.

To appease Apollo, Agamemnon accepts to return Chryses, but takes in exchange Briseis one of Achilles’ slaves. Insulted by the action, Achilles withdraws from the fight and retires to his tent.

After several overturnings, the war seems to turn in Trojans’ favor and Achilles is implored by his friend Patroclus to lend him his armor. Disguised as Achilles, Patroclus enter the fight and succeed in pushing the Achaeans back. He is, however, killed by

Hector, prince and champion of the Trojans, who takes Achilles armor. Mad with grief for the loss of his friends, Achilles re-enters the fight and end up killing Hector thereby definitely tipping the war scale against the Trojans.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrated how narrative meaning can be construed from visual properties of network graphs such as topology, density of connections, absence of connections, size, position and colour of nodes. While the narration of networks is as old as social network analysis (read Moreno, 1934 for some beautiful examples), such techniques have so far been taken for granted. By exploring six narrative views or readings evoked by the visual properties of the Iliad's network of characters we hope to have made a modest contribution towards explicating and formalising them. The six network narrative views we introduced ("The Camps," "The Balance of Forces," "The Crossroad," "The Bridge," "The Shortcut," and "The Grand Tour") should not be considered exclusive or exhaustive. They can be mixed and matched at pleasure, and they can be complemented by other narrative strategies that we have not yet acknowledged.

Why should the narrative affordances of networks be of interest to media scholars? As powerful and indispensable as they are, we do not believe that the mathematical uses of networks exemplified by graph theory are in themselves sufficient for describing relational phenomena. Nor do they fully account for the ways in which networks can be used to organise human attention to bring certain elements into the foreground and others recede into the background in the interpretation of these phenomena. No matter how many metrics they can compute, network analysts will always have to provide some description of their objects. And this is all the more true for the humanities and social sciences, for which textual narration remains the main argumentative tool.

For this reason, the approaches that we outline above do not attempt to produce new knowledge about the literary text and advance the understanding of Homer's epic, nor to innovate the methods of graphs analysis. In reading the graph of the Iliad's characters we restricted ourselves to use our lay knowledge of the Iliad's plot, deliberately restraining from original interpretations or innovative findings. We leave the task of using networks to investigate narration to another equally interesting but somewhat symmetric area of research (cfr. Franzosi, 2004 and Moretti, 2015).

Our interest in this chapter was in how narration can help to convey findings about networks. In doing so we have, more modestly, tried to fill a gap in the toolkit of the scholars working with networks. A gap that does not concern the analytical capacities of networks, but the construction of meaning from the results of such analyses. Common metaphors that compare network visualisations to "hairballs" or "spaghetti plates" may be considered to point to this gap. Over the many years in which statistics has been employed in journalism, sociology, policy or advocacy, we have developed a literacy around its visual representations such as charts and tables, and an ability to read them narratively. Similarly, in order for networks to become powerful knowledge instruments, we now need to advance not just their formal analytical or computational affordances but also their narrative ones. It is the latter that this paper has tried to contribute to through the development of six narrative views or readings of networks.

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