

NO OTHER BUT A WOMAN'S REASON
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER IN SHAKESPEARE

Author:

Katherine ROE

Supervisor:

Prof. Bob BERWICK

May 2015

Contents

1 Introduction

William Shakespeare, widely regarded as one of the best playwrights in any language, created hundreds of well-known and timeless characters of both genders. Although many thousands of books and papers have examined the role of gender in Shakespeares plays, very few if any have performed a rigorous quantitative analysis of the texts. For my 6.UAP project, I have performed such an analysis on the lines delivered by men versus the lines delivered by women to determine whether Shakespeare wrote male and female characters in a quantifiably distinct manner. I analyzed the number of unique words, types of speech, sentence length, line length, and sentiment of every line in 36 Shakespeare plays. My aim in this project was to write text analysis software that can be used to shed light on subtle aspects of gender treatment in Shakespearean theater and other literature.

2 Methods

2.1 Text

The first challenge was to represent Shakespeares plays in a way that allowed for data analysis. I started with an HTML version of every play analyzed. I then wrote a script that converted each line into a python object. These objects included the lines play, location in the play, location in the speech, act and scene, speaker, speaker gender, and text.

2.2 Analysis

Once the plays were prepared, I wrote a series of Python scripts to analyze the texts along several dimensions. These dimensions were number of words per line, sentence length, speech length, lines delivered, and number of unique words. Additionally, I used natural language processing Python packages to analyze the parts of speech distribution, subjectivity, and polarity of each line.

COMEDIES	TRAGEDIES	HISTORIES
All's Well That Ends Well	Antony and Cleopatra	King John
As You Like It	Coriolanus	Richard II
Comedy of Errors	Hamlet	Henry IV Part 1
Cymbeline	Julius Caesar	Henry V
Love's Labours Lost	King Lear	Henry VI Part 1
Measure for Measure	Macbeth	Henry VI Part 2
The Merchant of Venice	Othello	Henry VI Part 3
The Merry Wives of Windsor	Romeo and Juliet	Richard III
A Midsummer Night's Dream	Timon of Athens	Henry VIII
Much Ado About Nothing	Titus Andronicus	
Pericles		
The Taming of the Shrew		
The Tempest		
Troilus and Cressida		
Twelfth Night		
Two Gentlemen of Verona		
The Winter's Tale		

Table 1: Shakespeare Play Categorization

2.3 A Note on Categorization

For the data analysis, I divided Shakespeare's plays into comedies, histories, and tragedies as shown in Table 1.

3 Results

3.1 Numerical Metrics

Several strictly numerical metrics were used in the play analysis. These were number of lines, words per line, speech length, sentence length, and number of unique words spoken by men versus women in Shakespeare's plays.

3.1.1 Total Lines

An initial, obvious measure of gender differences can be found by counting the number of lines (here defined as a 10-syllable iambic pentameter unit) delivered by men and women in each play. Women were found to deliver strikingly fewer lines than their male counterparts, speaking just under 18% of the total lines in all of the plays. Even in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the eponymous wives deliver only 25% of that play's lines, and the shrew delivers a meager 219 compared to her tamer's 586. The plays overall ranged from the relatively egalitarian *As You Like It* (37% of lines delivered by women) to the incredibly masculine *Timon of Athens* (.4% of lines delivered by women).

It is worth noting that the proportion of lines delivered by women varied drastically by play type. Women were fairly well represented in the comedies, enjoying 23% of the total lines across the play type. In the tragedies, however, only 16% of lines were spoken by women, and in the histories women spoke a paltry 12% of lines. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the number of lines spoken by gender for each of the plays, separated by play type.

Figure 1: Total Lines in Shakespeare's Comedies

Figure 2: Total Lines in Shakespeare's Tragedies

Figure 3: Total Lines in Shakespeare's Histories

3.1.2 Words Per Line

Shakespeare is well known for writing in iambic pentameter, meaning that, with very few exceptions, each line of his plays include ten syllables. Counting the average number of words per line, therefore, is a good measure for the average length of a spoken word. I postulated that female characters might have a higher number of average words per line, correlating to shorter words. Contrary to this expectation, men and women speak almost exactly the same number of words per line. In fact, in all the plays, men speak about 7.53 words per line compared to

women's 7.41 (about a 1.6% difference). Women consistently spoke fewer words per line than men in all three categories of play, although there were individual plays (such as *Coriolanus*) where the overall trend was reversed. The average number of words per line for men and women in the tragedies are shown in Figure 4.

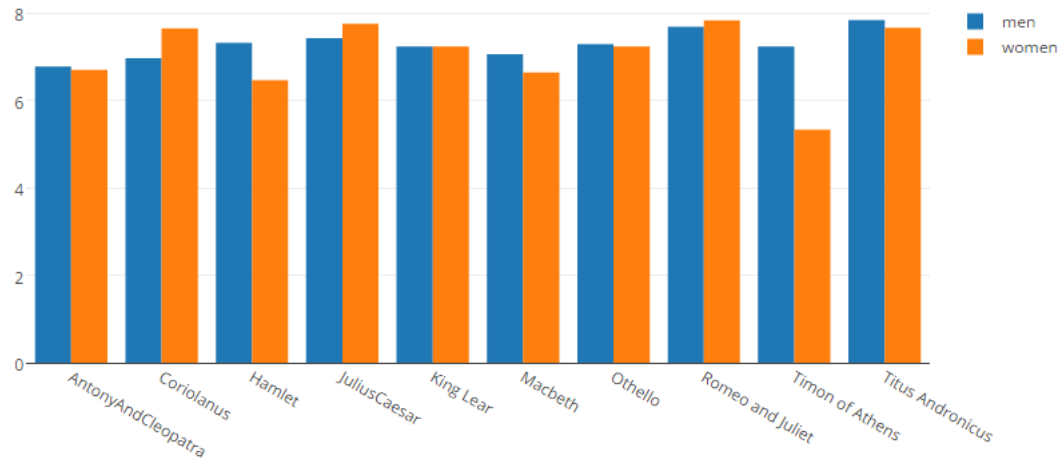


Figure 4: Words per Line in Shakespeare's Tragedies

3.1.3 Sentence Length

Another numerical measure was sentence length. I measured the average number of words per sentence spoken by men and women in all of the plays. Longer sentences suggest more complex thoughts, so I postulated that men would speak in slightly longer sentences than women. Although men did speak in slightly longer sentences, on average, than women, the difference was small. Men had an average sentence length of 13.125 words across all plays, compared to women's average sentence length of 12.833 words across all plays. Words per sentence for the comedies is shown in Figure 5.

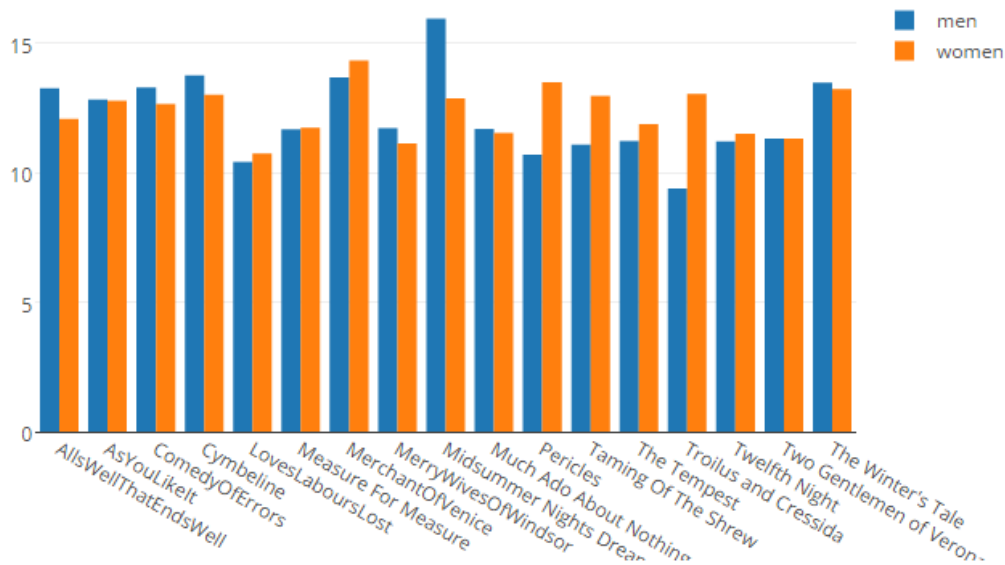


Figure 5: Words per Sentence in Shakespeare's Comedies

3.1.4 Speech Length

A measure related to sentence length is speech length. This simply measures how long each character speaks before another character interjects. I predicted that the speech length would be substantially longer for male characters than for their female counterparts. In fact, the average speech length was almost the same for men and women on average, at 26.2 words per speech for men and 26.4 words per speech for women. It is worth noting, however, that there was an enormous range for average speech length in different plays. For instance, women in Henry V have an average speech length of 7.4 words (compared to men's 39.5), whereas women in Julius Caesar enjoy an average speech length of 47.1 words (compared to men's 24.5). The data for all plays are shown in Figure 6.

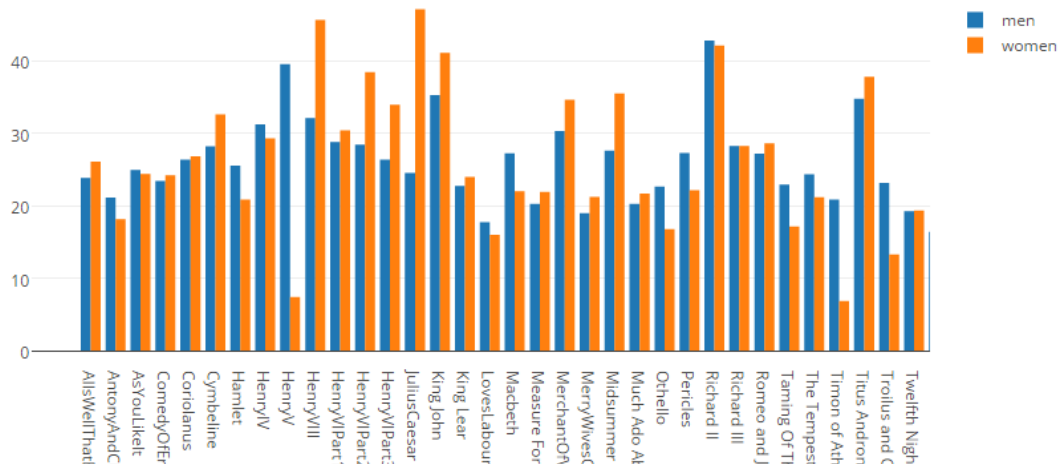


Figure 6: Words per Speech in Shakespeare's Plays

The data may have been slightly skewed by minor characters, such as unnamed servants and nobles, who are almost invariably male and tend to have shorter speeches. Closer analysis of major characters may reveal a different distribution. Furthermore, there are so few female characters in many of the plays that the data is perhaps not statistically significant. For instance, in *Henry V*, only 150 of the play's 3403 lines (10-syllable blank verse lines, not speeches) are delivered by women. The small proportion of lines delivered by women accounts for the variance seen in female line length.

3.1.5 Unique Words

Another measurement of thought complexity is the number of unique words used in speech. I didn't expect this measure to vary significantly between men and women, and this prediction largely proved correct. Although men do use more unique words than women (30486 across all plays compared to 12883 spoken by women), this is most likely a reflection of the substantially larger number of lines spoken by men. Indeed, when I compared the same amount of text spoken by men and women across the plays, I found that men used 1613 unique words compared to women's 1572 words over 5000 lines. This represents a difference of just 2.6% between the genders.

POS	MEN	WOMEN
Nouns	23.8%	23.0%
Verbs	15.9%	16.3%
Pronouns	19.8%	21.2%
Adjectives	6.9%	7.0%
Adverbs	5.4%	5.7%
Prepositions	10.4%	10.0%
Coord. Conjunctions	4.0%	3.8%
Determiners	7.7%	7.0%
Possessive Endings	2.9%	3.0%
Other	3.2%	3%

Table 2: Parts of Speech by Gender

3.2 Natural Language Processing

In addition to the numerical metrics, several measurements were made with the Natural Language Toolkit and TextBlob for Python. These measurements include parts of speech distribution, subjectivity, and polarity.

3.2.1 Parts of Speech

One measure of speaking style is determining the breakdown of parts of speech. Table 2 outlines the findings for POS breakdown for men and women. The "Other" category includes a wide range of uncommon types, including foreign words, numbers, and the word "to".

Although the differences in parts of speech are slight between men and women, they are statistically significant in several cases. Particularly notable is the fact that pronouns are 7% more common in female speech than in male speech. A possibly hypothesis for this discrepancy is that women are more likely to be talking about other characters than about objects and places. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the most common pronouns are almost all third person male pronouns. However, further analysis into the types of pronouns spoken by men and women is required before a definitive conclusion can be reached.

3.2.2 Subjectivity

Subjectivity and the following metric, polarity, were measured using the sentiment analysis on TextBlob for Python. A naive Bayes analyzer trained on movie reviews determines the subjectivity from 0.0 (very objective) to 1.0 (very subjective). Although there is a fairly high error rate for this type of analysis, it nevertheless can be useful for discerning broader trends in the data.

The data did, in fact, reveal a correlation between gender and subjectivity. The average female line scored a .254, which is 10.4% more subjective than the average male line's score of .230. This trend held throughout the comedies, tragedies, and histories, although there were individual plays, such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, which bucked the trend. The data for the comedies is presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Line Subjectivity in the Comedies

It is worth noting, as was observed previously, that almost every minor character is male in Shakespeare's plays. Analyzing only the subjectivity of main characters could render male and female characters approximately equally subjective, as minor characters are intuitively more likely to report facts and events than to declare strong feelings.

3.2.3 Polarity

Line polarity was measured through the same sentiment analysis tool as the subjectivity. Polarity measures how positive, negative, or neutral a line is, and ranges from -1 to 1. A score of 0 indicates a perfectly neutral text.

Female lines were found to have more polar lines in either direction, and also to be more positive than male characters on average. The average female line had a polarity with an absolute value of .153, whereas the average male line has a polarity with an absolute value of .141. These numbers indicate that female lines were approximately 8.5% more polar than male lines.

When the net value was considered (allowing positive and negative lines to cancel each other), the average female polarity was .077 compared to the average male polarity of .053. These differences indicate that women in Shakespeare are

more likely to express strong emotions in any particular line, and that they are also slightly more positive on average than their male counterparts.

The average absolute and net polarities are shown in Figures 8 and 9, respectively.

Figure 8: Absolute Line Polarity in the Comedies

Figure 9: Net Line Polarity in the Comedies

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, initial analysis suggested that women and men speak similarly in Shakespeare’s plays, although men speak far more. Women and men use similar word lengths, sentence lengths, and speech lengths, and share a similarly rich vocabulary. Using language analysis tools, however, certain differences can be uncovered. Women, for instance, are more likely to use certain parts of speech, such as pronouns, than their male counterparts. This may suggest that women are more likely to talk about other characters, particularly given that the plurality of pronouns are third person male pronouns.

Additionally, female lines tend to be substantially more subjective and polar than male lines. This difference suggests that Shakespeare wrote female characters, on average, as less logical and more emotional than male characters, echoing the prevailing notions on gender differences in Elizabethan England.

5 Acknowledgments

For the parts of speech and sentiment analysis I used TextBlob, built on pattern and NLTK for Python. Graphs were made using Plotly, a graphing library for Python. Additionally, I would like to thank to Professor Bob Berwick for his invaluable guidance in this project.