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Tips and Tricks for the Study of the Ancient Mediterranean

Trends in Classics: What the Critics are Saying (and How the Machines are Changing It)

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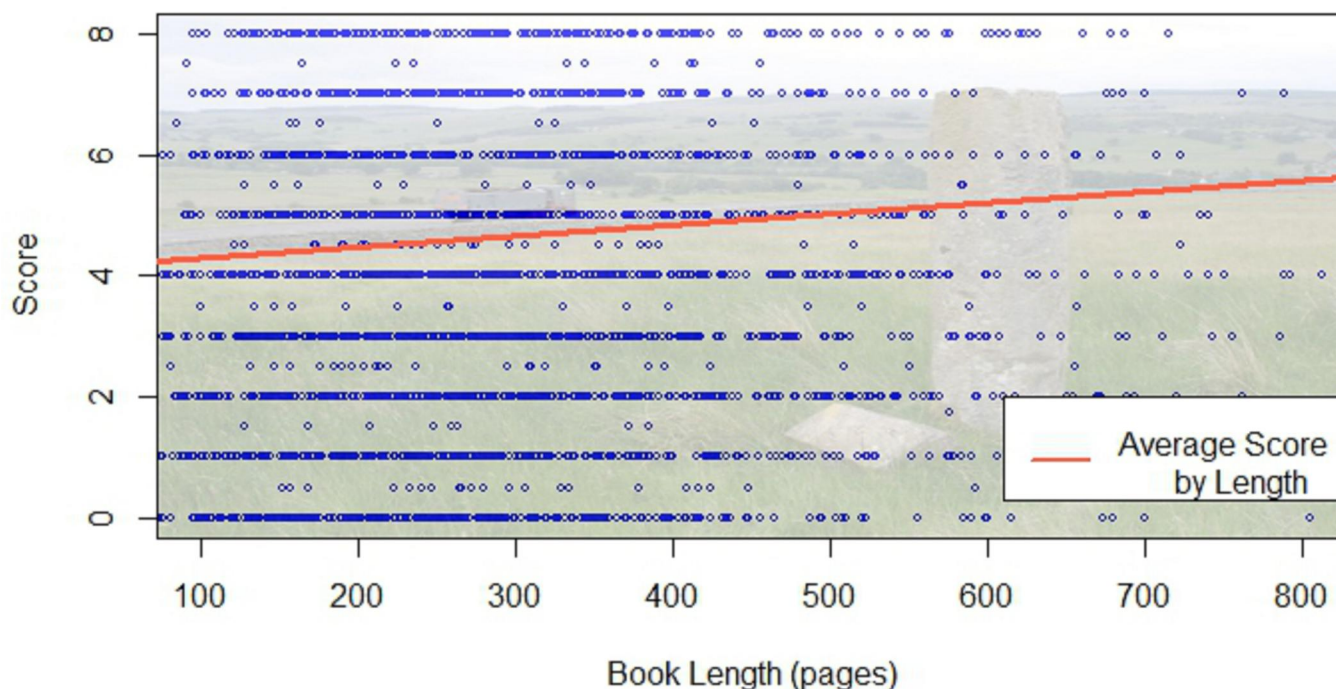
We're back again with the fifth installment of our series exploring trends in classical scholarship. [Last week \(https://libraryofantiquity.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/trends-in-classics-can-a-machine-review-the-reviews-of-books-about-books/\)](https://libraryofantiquity.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/trends-in-classics-can-a-machine-review-the-reviews-of-books-about-books/) I sent a computer to do an undergrad's job, and had it tell me which sentences in each of the ~8000 (English) Bryn Mawr Reviews were complimentary and which ones were critical. This time around, I've pulled out all of the sentences that fall into those two categories, and I'm going to take a (somewhat) closer look at them. What things do we most frequently laud? Where do we find fault? Is there anything here that I can blame on the internet? As always, the answers are below the jump.

Below there are two word clouds, one each for sentences of praise and blame, as flagged by my homemade sentiment analysis program. For obvious reasons, these and all of the other images below exclude those features (words and combinations thereof) that the program uses to identify praise and blame, as well as the [usual list of \(www.ranks.nl/stopwords\)](http://www.ranks.nl/stopwords)stopwords (www.ranks.nl/stopwords). As you can see...

Really? This again? Apparently it isn't just titles where we can't stop ourselves from using colons — it's any time we write *anything* that we think someone might read. "Colons" includes both the regular and semi-variety because if I plotted them separately, nothing else would fit. All told, for 8,000 reviews we used almost 12,000 (semi-)colons in sentences where we praise the book, and another 4,500 in sentences that criticize it. If raw numbers are your thing, 1 in every 3.7 sentences of praise has a colon or semicolon, and the same is true for 1 in every 2.6 sentences of criticism. Yeesh. I really need to believe that classicists don't use colons in one sentence out of three as a general rule (<http://stevenpinker.com/why-academics-stink-writing>), so I looked at a few dozen randomly drawn critical sentences which include a colon of some persuasion. Most of them fell into three categories. Lists of typos and minor errors separated by semicolons account for about half of the total (*phew!*). (1) The rest are fairly evenly divided between criticisms that include the title of a book (2) and attempts to moderate or 'soften' criticism (<http://englishlive.ef.com/blog/criticize-gently-english/>) that might otherwise seem harsh by extending the sentence. (3)

Next, I've given you word clouds for the 150 words most commonly found in sentences of praise and criticism respectively. Of necessity, I've added both colons and semi-colons to the list of stopwords, so they won't appear. The word clouds are color-coded to reflect how 'trendy' they are.(4)

LONGER BOOKS GET BETTER REVIEWS



All else being equal, each 100 additional pages gets you an increase of about 5% of the average score.
Relationship significant at... $p=0.000001$? Lol.

For those of you who haven't taken statistics in a while, significance is usually calculated at $p=0.05$, or that this could happen by chance one time in 20. If there were no real relationship between number of pages and praise, these results would happen by chance about one time in a million.

Notes:

1. E.g. "I noted the following printing errors: on p. xxii, "over the Crete" should read "over to Crete"; 14, "The words <that> concluded"; 14, "triangular" is misspelt; 44, "quick<l>y"; 121, "O 'Con<n>or"; 174, "suitors<'>"; 190, "Klytaimnestras."
2. E.g. "A glance at the chapter on population and demography reveals the omission of W. Suder, <i>Census populi: bibliographie de la démographie de l'antiquité romaine</i> (Bonn 1990), the most important bibliography on the subject."
3. E.g. "7 [Ed's note: *we're not sure what this means either*] suffers a bit (I think) from its failure to deal adequately with what has recently come to be known as "endoxic method"; his two first chapters, on the other hand, which deal with the life and works of Aristotle are sufficiently rich and up-to-date to suffice for the needs of most readers, especially beginners."
4. The calculation to determine trendiness is difficult to explain succinctly, but intuitive. It compares the frequency with which a given word appears in a sentence (of praise or criticism) in the four-year periods from 1999-2002 and 2011-2014. E.g., 'analysis' appeared in 176 of 7445 (2.4% of all sentences) sentences of praise for the earlier period and 270 of 9250 (2.9%) for the later period, which works out to an increase of ~19%. It may be worthy of note that I originally intended to compare the frequency with which these words appeared in a given review, but reviewers actually became less 'judgmental' over the same time frame. When the millennium was new, reviewers expressed 1.7 criticisms and 6.2

compliments per review on average. That has fallen to 1.03 and 4.3 respectively.

5. If those numbers seem too low to worry about, bear in mind that no single word that carries any real meaning (i.e., excluding normal stopwords + 'greek', 'book', 'would', 'one' and 'also') appears in more than 6% of positive or negative comments.
6. This is a personal impression based on how my habits have changed. If you have your own opinion, feel free to drop it in the comments, and we'll crowdsource an explanation.

~J for our anonymous author.

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