

The Tragedy of Macbeth

Pronouns

How does Shakespeare use Pronouns in Macbeth compared to the rest of the Tragedies.

If you compare how Shakespeare uses pronouns in the Tragedies with how he uses them throughout his work, there are a number of interesting results. Using Wordhoard, we can see how frequently Shakespeare uses certain pronouns (for example: 'my', 'they', 'our', and 'we'). Doing this yields the following results:

Table 1

| Work analysed | Occurrence of "our" per 10,000 words | Occurrence of "We" per 10,000 words | Occurrence of "They" per 10,000 words | Occurrence of "my" per 10,000 words |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Othello | 19.76 | 47.25 | 44.47 | 169.12 |
| Romeo and Juliet | 25.28 | 37.63 | 39.37 | 152.21 |
| Full Corpus | 36.76 | 67.3 | 55.38 | 157.93 |
| Titus Andronicus | 43.47 | 71.33 | 74.34 | 172.79 |
| Julius Caesar | 45.54 | 50.25 | 66.13 | 104.65 |
| King Lear | 46.02 | 30.15 | 46.95 | 181.92 |
| Antony and Cleopatra | 58.16 | 106.61 | 51.85 | 143.53 |
| Coriolanus | 60.43 | 123.83 | 104.55 | 102.32 |
| Macbeth | 71.41 | 98.41 | 75.61 | 124.81 |

This shows that when compared to the full corpus – that is, all of Shakespeare's published plays and poems – Shakespeare tends to use possessive pronouns (such as 'our' and 'my') on a far more frequent basis across the tragedies. This, while interesting, is not really surprising, as we know that as a genre, the Tragedies tend to be identifiable primarily through the self-interested motives of the plays' protagonists. Compare, for example, the frequency of these pronouns in Shakespeare's comedies:

Table 2

| Work analysed | Occurrence of "our" in parts per 10,000 | Occurrence of "We" in parts per 10,000 | Occurrence of "They" in parts per 10,000 | Occurrence of "My" in parts per 1,000 |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| Love's Labour's Lost | 29.29 | 69.92 | 56.69 | 11.433 |
| As You Like It | 15.85 | 53.16 | 47.56 | 12.963 |
| A Midsummer Night's Dream | 36.55 | 65.05 | 37.17 | 13.195 |
| Much Ado About Nothing | 11.48 | 52.61 | 64.08 | 14.156 |
| Mean Values (comedies) | 19.966 | 53.277 | 46.147 | 15.6009 |
| The Merry Wives of Windsor | 16.37 | 50.97 | 55.17 | 15.71 |
| Full Corpus | 36.76 | 67.3 | 55.38 | 15.793 |
| The Taming of the Shrew | 21.3 | 56.15 | 32.91 | 15.973 |
| Two Gentlemen Of Verona | 19.93 | 33.99 | 50.99 | 17.113 |
| The Merchant of Venice | 13.78 | 49.42 | 40.86 | 18.009 |
| Twelfth Night | 13.7 | 39.59 | 30.46 | 18.121 |
| Comedy of Errors | 21.41 | 61.91 | 45.58 | 19.336 |
| Mean Value (Tragedies) | 60.43 | 123.83 | 104.55 | 102.32 |
| Coriolanus | 45.54 | 50.25 | 66.13 | 104.65 |
| Julius Caesar | 71.41 | 98.41 | 75.61 | 124.81 |
| Macbeth | 58.16 | 106.61 | 51.85 | 143.53 |
| Antony and Cleopatra | 33.6325 | 46.59 | 51.2825 | 169.01 |
| Romeo and Juliet | 25.28 | 37.63 | 39.37 | 152.21 |
| Othello | 19.76 | 47.25 | 44.47 | 169.12 |
| Titus Andronicus | 43.47 | 71.33 | 74.34 | 172.79 |
| King Lear | 46.02 | 30.15 | 46.95 | 181.92 |

As you can see, the frequency of these possessives drops dramatically in the Comedies when compared to the Tragedies, reinforcing the notion that possessiveness – as shown through pronoun use – is one of the hallmarks of Shakespeare's Tragedies.

But how does that help us with relation to Macbeth?

This effectively acts as a proof of concept. We have an idea (the Tragedies have specific patterns in their pronoun use); we have shown that their frequency when compared to the full corpus is increased (through our analysis in Wordboard, the values of which are shown in table 1); and we have shown that when compared with another genre, there is a vast difference in their frequency (as shown by our comparison with the comedies in table 2). Because of this, we can look at Macbeth in isolation when compared to the full corpus and to the Tragedies as a whole.

Table 3

| Work analysed | Occurrence of "our" per 10,000 words | Occurrence of "We" per 10,000 words | Occurrence of "They" per 10,000 words | Occurrence of "my" per 10,000 words |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Full Corpus | 36.76 | 67.3 | 55.38 | 157.93 |
| Tragedies | 41.41 | 69.16 | 59.56 | 154.26 |
| Macbeth | 71.41 | 98.41 | 75.61 | 124.81 |

This table shows that in some senses, Macbeth is particularly unusual as a Tragedy. Its pronoun use, compared to both the full corpus and the mean pronoun occurrence within the Tragedies as a genre is significantly different. For example, "my" is used in Macbeth around 20% less frequently than the Full Corpus or the Tragedies as a whole. While the frequent use of "my" in Romeo & Juliet arguably disputes this theory of Macbeth's factional nature – After all, the conflict Romeo & Juliet's stems entirely from the manner in which the Montagues and Capulets are almost entirely oppositional – it can be argued that this increase can be accounted for by romantic sentiments stated by both Romeo and Juliet, which would inevitably influence any statistical analysis of the play.

One explanation for this is that when compared to the rest of the tragedies, Macbeth is very much a "factional" play in that there are no characters who act as singular individuals. Macbeth works together with Lady Macbeth in his pursuit and protection of the throne; Macduff works together with Donalbain, Siward, and others to remove Macbeth from the throne, and the witches work together as what can perhaps best be described as "agents of chaos": they appear to have no stake in the outcome of the play, but set the events of the play in motion despite this fact.

In addition to this, we can take this idea of oppositional factions and apply it to Macbeth in other ways. As discussed above, Macbeth is driven by the above factions encountering and coming into opposition with each other. However, it can perhaps be argued that, at a deeper level, this is also reflected in some of the play's thematic conflicts.

Night and the King

The contrasts between light and dark show up in several key scenes in Macbeth. This symbolism of night and darkness is very important in understanding Macbeth's character at these points in the play. The word "night" is used more commonly in Macbeth than expected when compared to Shakespeare's other plays. This can be seen in the WordCloud. Through Antconc we can see that it appears the most densely between the murder of King Duncan and the death of Banquo.

HIT FILE: 1 FILE: Macbeth.txt



No. of Hits = 27

File Length (in chars) = 91690

Between these two actions, Macbeth is committing himself to the fulfilment of the Weird Sisters' prophecy. One of the most important points that this symbolism makes is again the nature of kingship. In Renaissance writing and plays, the King is very commonly and closely associated with the sun. King Duncan's murder marks the start of this frequent use of the word night, showing this correlation between the death of the king and the absence of sunlight.

What is also interesting is the continued use of the word "night" through to Banquo's murder. At this point, not only has Duncan died but he has been replaced by Macbeth, an undeserving king. The lack of sunlight and the predominance of night beyond Duncan's death can therefore be applied exclusively to Macbeth and used as a reflection of his actions as king. Banquo's murder, while not committed by Macbeth, was ordered by him. This is one of the first things that Macbeth does with his new power as king. The scene of Banquo's murder is full of light/dark symbolism but in this instance, since Macbeth is now king, the light symbolism can now be applied to him.

Kingship

Word choice is very important in Macbeth and using WordCloud some of the most important of these words are revealed. Using this tool, the word 'tyrant' shows up more frequently than in Shakespeare's other plays. In a play that centres around kings and kingship, 'tyrant' is a very unusual word to use because the king was believed to be chosen by God. This was known as the 'divine right of kings.' Kings could only be judged by God so for the word 'tyrant' to be used so frequently is interesting. More interesting, however, is where this word is used in the play, especially compared to the word 'king.'

The word 'king' is used most densely in the beginning of the play before Duncan is killed whereas 'tyrant' is used exclusively in the second half. This draws a distinct parallel between Duncan's rule and Macbeth's.

As well as being an obvious description of the kind of rulers both characters were, the word choice suggests a legitimacy in Duncan's rule that Macbeth lacks. This is an idea that is reinforced at the end of the play when the word 'king' is repeated three times in quick succession almost immediately after Macbeth is killed. This can be seen clearly below.

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Light and Dark – Banquo's Death

Right before Banquo's death, Banquo asks for a light. This means that both he and his son are illuminated when they enter stage. This is particularly relevant as it is this illumination that allows the Three Murderers to spot and identify them. As said before, light would normally represent the king. The relationship between Macbeth, the king, ordering Banquo's death, and the light of the torch that dooms him is clear here.

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What is also interesting in this scene is the fact that it is the extinguishing of this light that allows Fleance, Banquo's son, to escape. The torch dies out during the attack; one of the murderers cries out "who did strike out the light?" 3.3 in the fight and it is only once Banquo is dead that they notice the son had fled. This symbolism is not only significant in portraying Macbeth but it also acts as foreshadowing that extends back to the Weird Sisters' prophecy. The image of the extinguished light is symbolic not only of Macbeth's weakening grasp of power but also of his future demise. The second part of the witches' prophecy was that Banquo's descendants would go on to be future kings for generations to come, a prediction that came true with Fleance's escape.