

# Towards a Computational Poetics: Some Features of Nineteenth-Century Poetic Style

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# sociological poetics

- seeks to understand the structural relationship of literature to social, economic, and cultural forces
- looks beyond individual writers to the larger social formations that make possible different literary forms

# the cultural field

“. . . every position, even the dominant one,  
depends . . . on the other positions  
constituting the field.”

Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production”

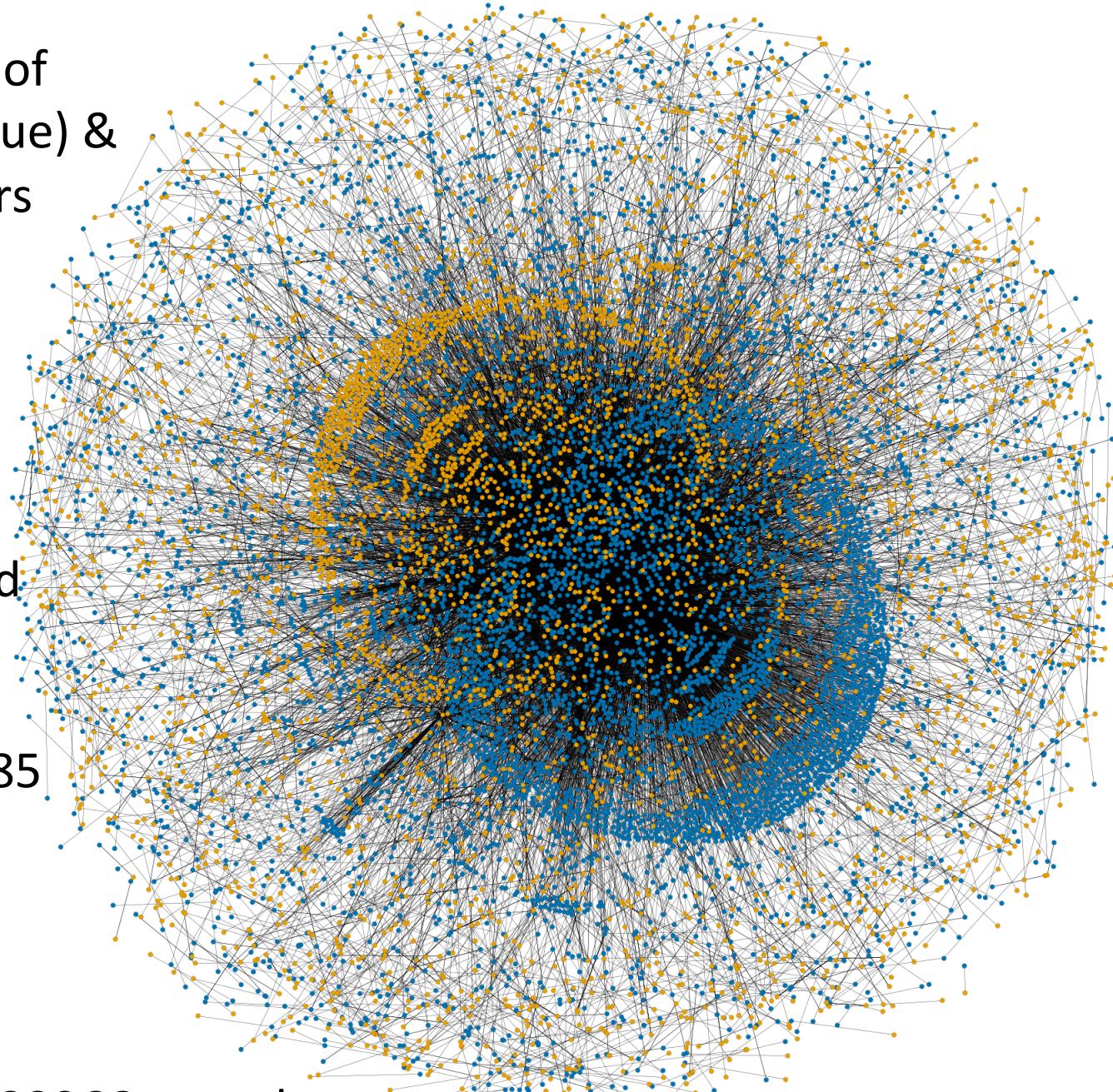
# style as distinction

“Each position [e.g. genre or its sub-categories] . . . is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions”

Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production”

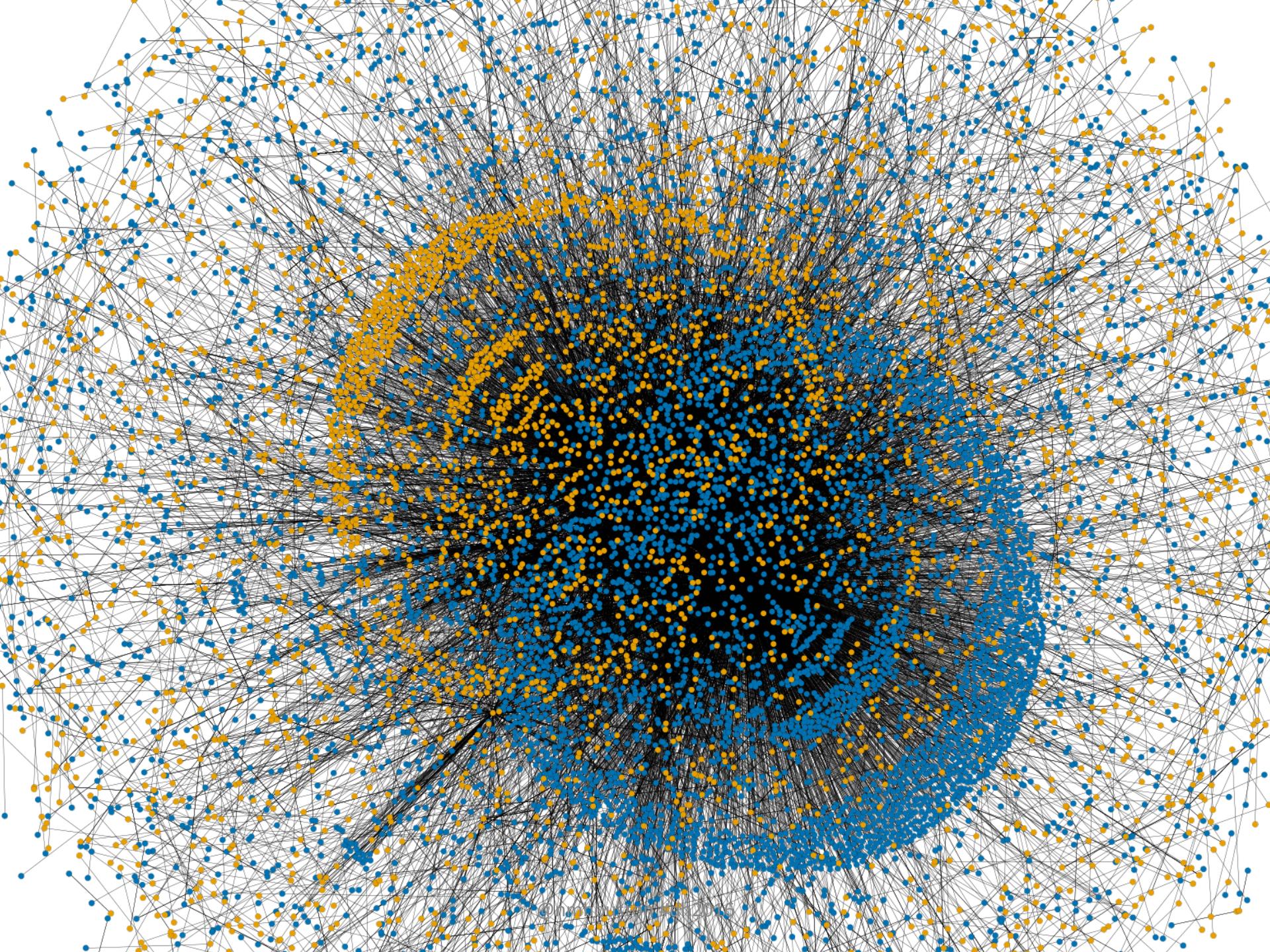
network of  
poets (blue) &  
publishers  
(gold)

books of  
poetry  
published  
in major  
cities  
1860-1885



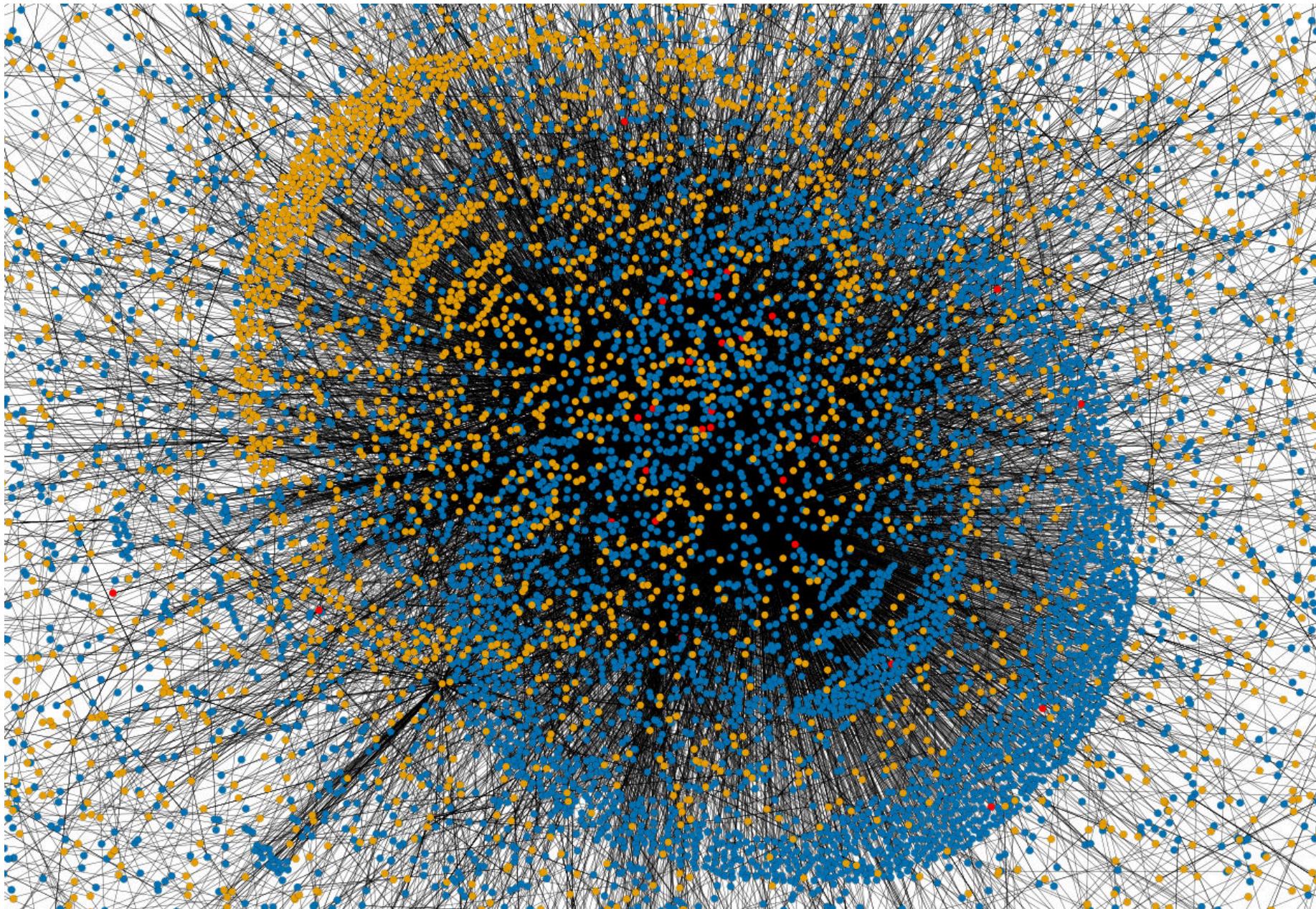
dataset: 33266 records

@lhmouston #dh2016



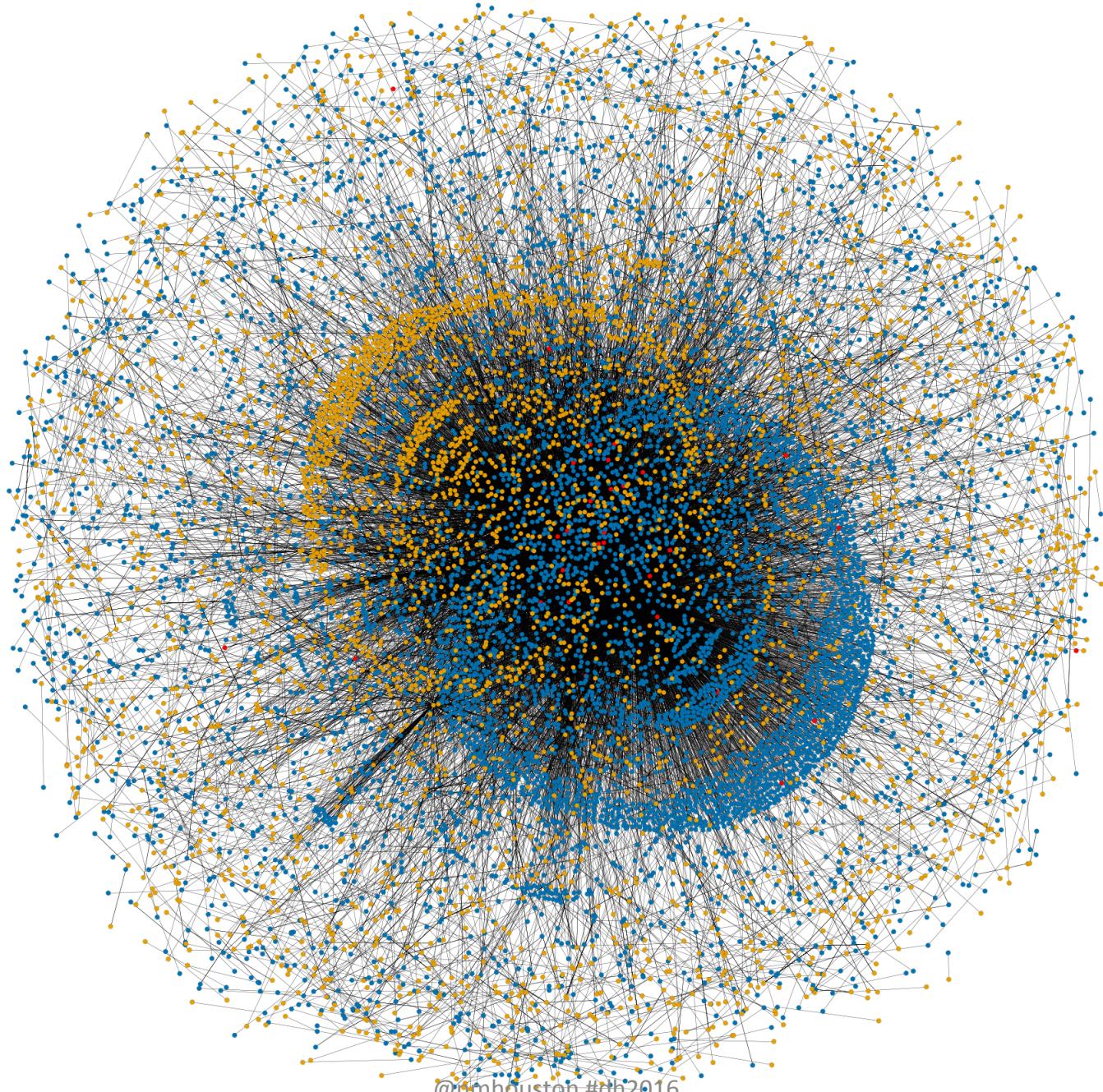
# the field of Victorian poetry

- *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Penguin, 1997)
- *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, ed. Thomas Collins and Vivienne Rundle (Broadview Press, 1999)
- *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory, Concise Edition*, ed. Thomas Collins and Vivienne Rundle (Broadview Press, 2000)
- *Victorian Poetry*, ed. Valentine Cunningham and Duncan Wu (Blackwell Essential Literature series, 2002)
- *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. Francis O'Gorman (Blackwell Annotated Anthologies series, 2004)



red nodes indicate poets included in 3, 4, or 5 anthologies

@nathanouston #db2016



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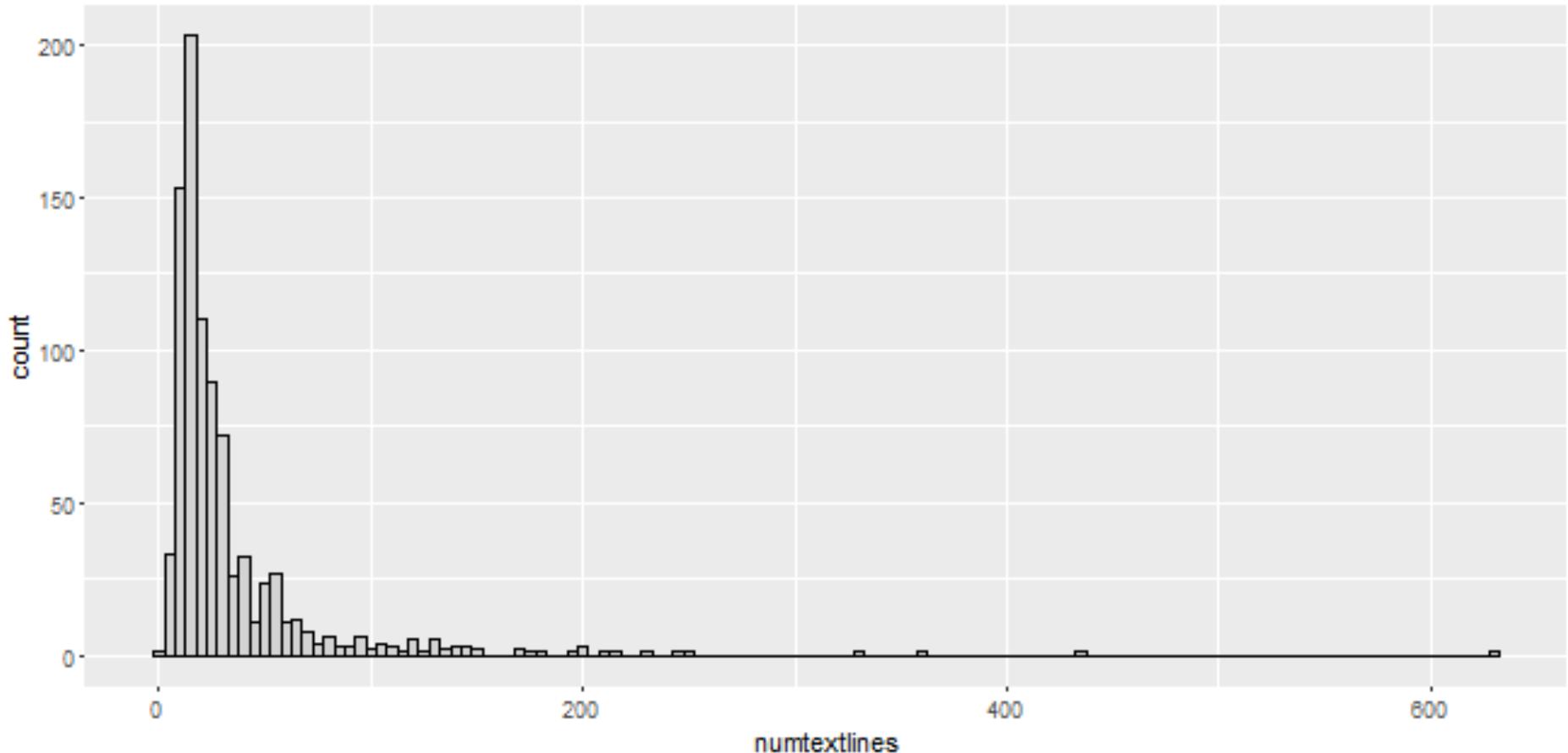
# poetic style in the cultural field

Digital literary stylistics can contribute to:

- exploring the structural relations between the canon and the cultural field
- identifying consistent/distinctive historical & aesthetic stylistic features
- new kinds of comparative analyses

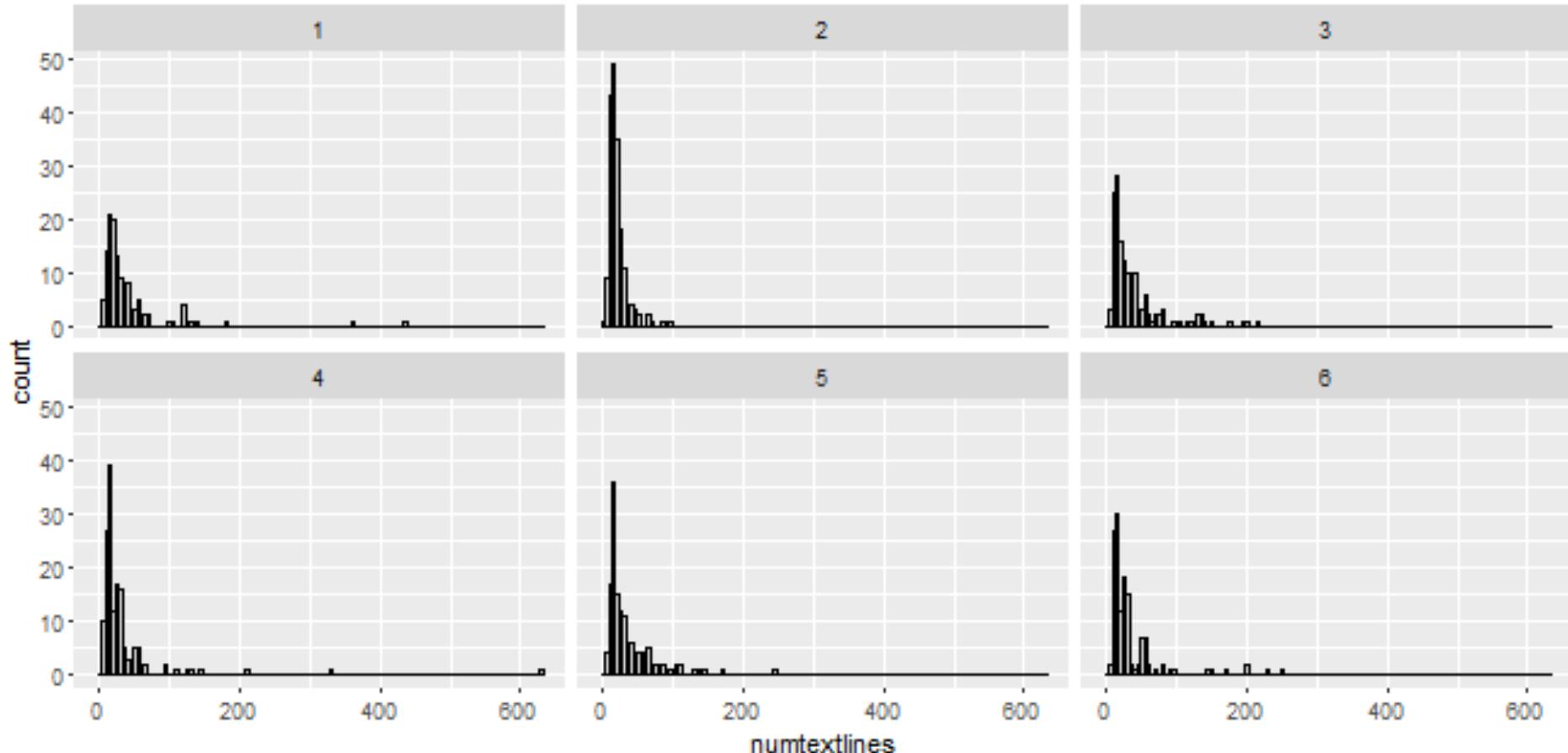
# number of text lines

Quiller-Couch, The Oxford Book of English Verse (1919)



# number of text lines

Quiller-Couch, The Oxford Book of English Verse (1919)



# poetry

- words (semantics)
- sentences (syntax)
- lines (poetics)

# the poetic line

“The sense in prose flows continuously, while in verse it is segmented so as to increase information density and perceived structure.”

T. V. F. Brogan, “Line” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*

# line features

- number of lines
- number of stanzas
- sentence: line ratio
- enjambment
- rhyme patterns

# simple end-stop score

- 10 [ . ? ! ]
- 8 [: ;]
- 4 [,]
- 1 [no punctuation]

from Christina Rossetti, “Uphill”

Does the road wind uphill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?

A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

You cannot miss that inn.

Does the road wind uphill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.

Endstop ratio:

10

But is there for the night a resting-place?

A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

You cannot miss that inn.

Sentence: line  
ratio  $16/16 = 1$

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?

Those who have gone before.

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?

They will not keep you waiting at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

Of labour you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?

Yea, beds for all who come.

## Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* III

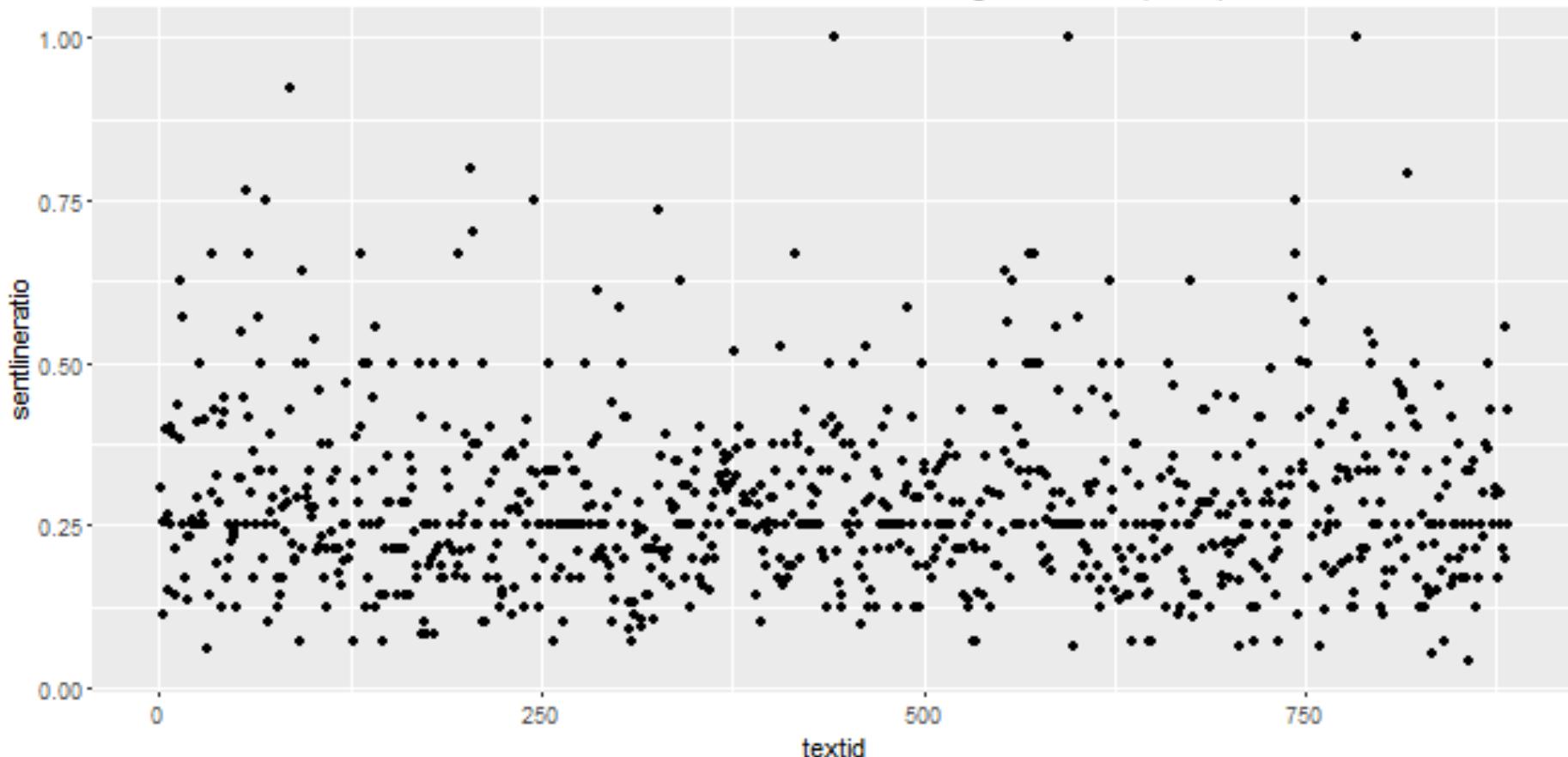
Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand  
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore  
Alone upon the threshold of my door  
Of individual life I shall command  
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand  
Serenely in the sunshine as before,  
Without the sense of that which I forbore—  
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land  
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine  
With pulses that beat double. What I do  
And what I dream include thee, as the wine  
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue  
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,  
And sees within my eyes the tears of two.

Endstop ratio: 2.07

Sentence: line  
ratio  $6/14 = 0.429$

# sentence:line ratio

Quiller-Couch, The Oxford Book of English Verse (1919)

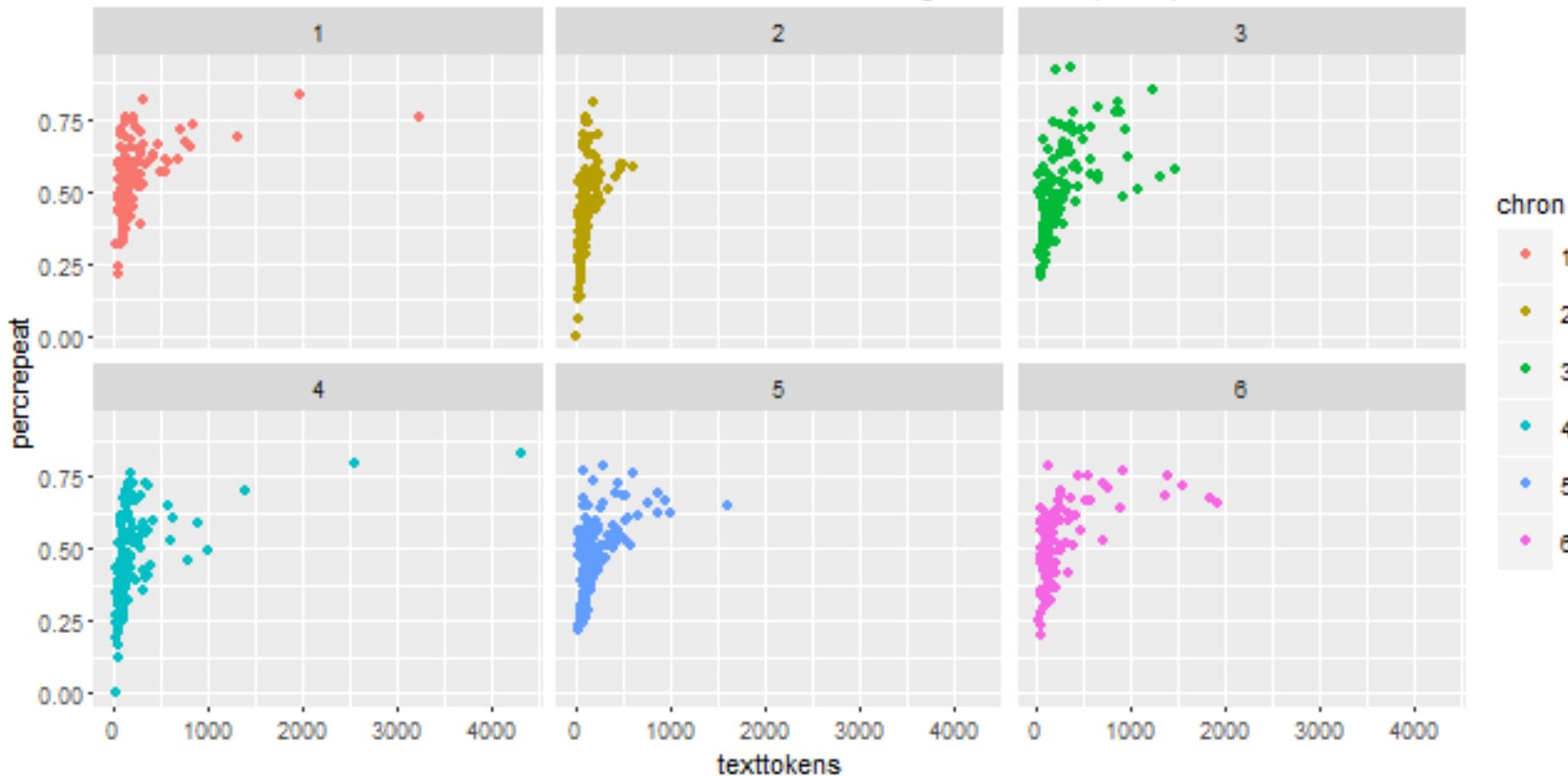


# words

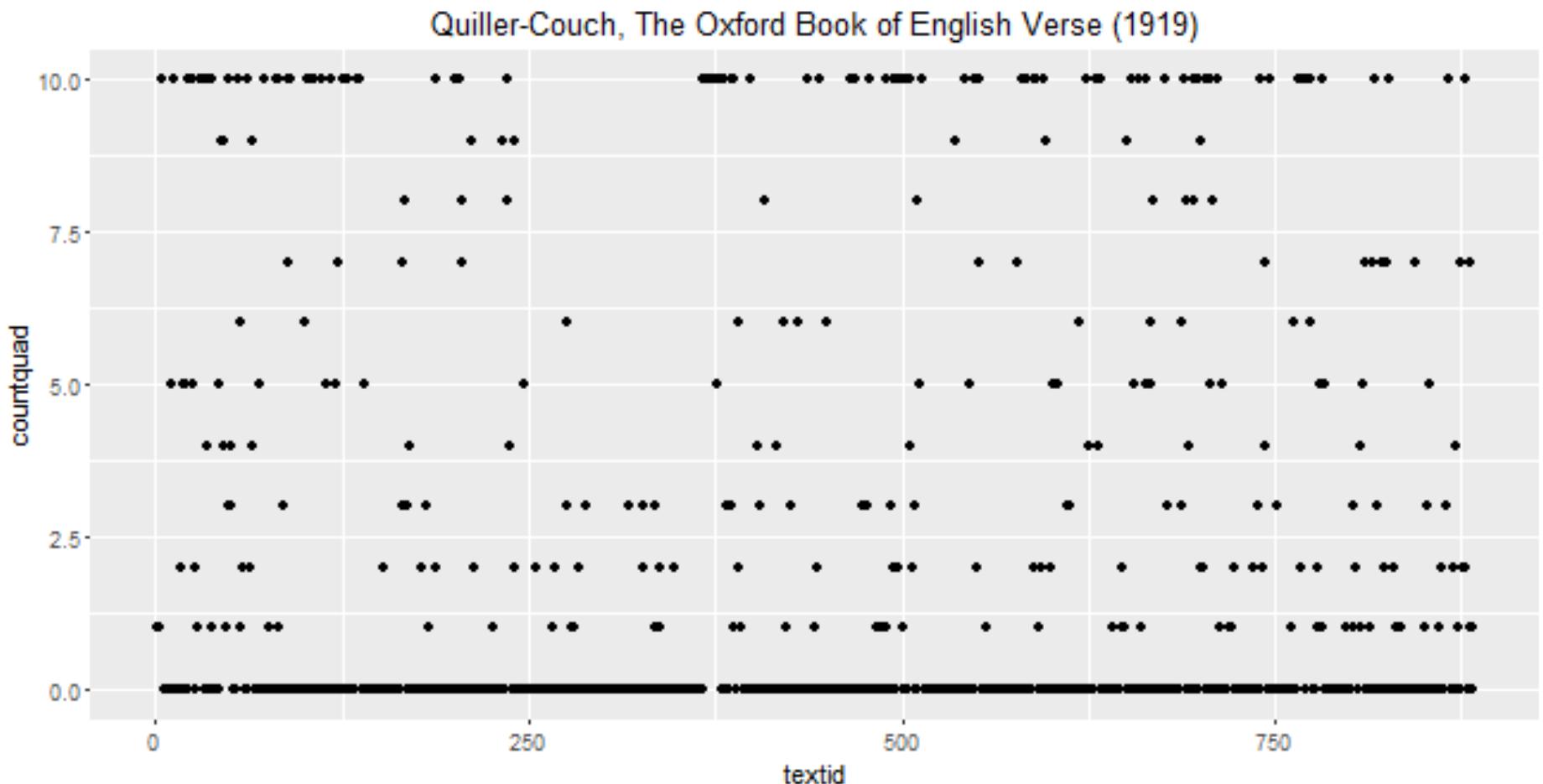
- types
- tokens
- 3gram and 4gram counts
- percentage of repeated words
- rhyme words

# repeated words

Quiller-Couch, The Oxford Book of English Verse (1919)



# repeated 4grams



“unquestioned representations of ‘what is’ . . . need to be subjected to a radical critique to return the humanistic tenets of constructedness and interpretation to the fore.”

Johanna Drucker, “Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display”

# computational poetics

- Poetics exists at the intersection of the quantitative and the subjective
- Methods of digital literary stylistics can encompass both precision and an awareness of situated interpretation
- Stylistics can contribute to our knowledge of literary history at both the small and large scale