

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ix

Introduction [Read Me]	1
<i>Exhibit A: Grammar</i>	21
1 How We Count [Literary]	28
<i>Exhibit B: Art</i>	50
2 How We Read [Word Lists and Dictionaries]	55
<i>Exhibit C: Table</i>	77
3 How We Classify [Linguistic]	80
<i>Exhibit D: Music</i>	92
4 How We Express [Typographically Unique]	96
<i>Exhibit E: Illustration</i>	129
5 How We Argue [Original Bibliography]	134
6 Coda [How to Cite]	168

<i>Appendix: Full Citation Information for PPA Sources</i>	175
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<i>Acknowledgments</i>	179
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<i>Bibliography</i>	183
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<i>Index</i>	203
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Introduction [Read Me]

I NEVER WANTED to be a digital humanist. I wanted to read poems. I wanted to read poems and reconstruct the history of how poetry was read and taught and thought about across several disciplines in formation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I was interested in how poems showed up in odd, noncanonical, nonliterary places—grammar books and poetry handbooks—and how several had macrons or breves, accent marks or invented symbols of some kind. I had learned from researching and writing my first book that there was a whole range of discourses around what poetry was and how it meant, and most of this had something to do with how the word “poetry” signified at any given moment, in any given text. There was no one answer to what a poem was, and there was no one measure for a poem’s successful adherence—or miserable failure to adhere—to a standard.

This book is about the history of how scholars measured the shifting standards of what a poem is, how a poem works, and what to count as the data in poems. And it is also about what I had to learn so that I could find, collect, and recount the traces of that history. My process of learning how to find and organize this various, fascinating, and not easily mappable discourse about the history of poetry turned me into the kind of reader who started to think differently about the sources on which I had relied, the research practices I had learned, and the data that underpinned it all. To write a new history of old poems, I needed to build a database, and to build a database I had to figure out what poetry and data had to do with one another.

This book, then, records several moments of media shift over the past decade and a half in which I thought about this question nearly every day. This book recounts poetry’s role (or lack of role) in that media shift, how it has fared in the digital humanities era, and is my attempt to account for poetry’s role in

that shift. I never thought that the history of prosody would be part of the history of digital humanities, but it turns out that it is, and if I don't tell this story here, you might not otherwise know how to find it.

The key terms in this book's title—*poetry's data*, *digital humanities*, *the history of prosody*—all coalesce around my decade of work on the Princeton Prosody Archive (PPA), a database built by the Center for Digital Humanities, a center that I built at Princeton University over roughly the same time during which I participated in the collaborative work of the historical poetics reading group.¹ To read and understand the complicated valences of poetry's data, I had to learn everything I could about digital humanities and its history in computational humanities, about knowledge infrastructures in library and archival science, and about their relationship to the twenty-first-century version of digital humanities we are constantly redefining. And there is no better way to learn how something works than to try to build it, preferably with help, so learning how to build and define digital humanities at Princeton taught me, in turn, how to build and then define the work of the PPA.

Until recently, I thought I was writing a book about the history of linguistics and English poetic forms. I was curious about T. V. F. Brogan's insistence in 1981 that "metrical structure is in essence an extremely simple pattern of extremely simple elements," but that "the full and adequate explanation of English verse-structure still remains to be written." "Indeed," he continued, "I judge it is still about half a century away." For Brogan, metrical structure rests on "linguistic material that continues to astound us by its intricacy, even for what little of it we understand."² Brogan hinted at the importance of historical phonology to the study of poetry and lamented throughout his detailed reference guide that we would need to wait for the "last word" on a "unified field theory" for metrics, a solution that would bring to bear the modern discipline of linguistics to solve, once and for all, the intractable problem of how to measure a poem.³ It was never my intention to present a unified field theory for the study of English meter, though I follow closely the scholars who work in that domain. Rather, I am interested in why the disciplinary histories of English literary studies and linguistics had such trouble arriving at a theory,

1. Historical Poetics, updated 2023, <http://www.historicalpoetics.org/>.

2. T. V. F. Brogan, *English Versification* (1981) (EVRG), xii–xiii.

3. Brogan, 16. This desire was also clear when a reviewer of *The Rise and Fall of Meter* longed for me to "rewrite Saintsbury's chapters on the nineteenth-century poets, 1860–1930, using the best available twenty-first-century knowledge about versification, poetic rhythm, and linguistic prosody."

and I began to suspect that the historical interactions between those disciplines might teach us something about the divisions between aesthetics and empiricism, about what we think poetry can and should do and how we interpret or describe it. To understand the complicated history of how poetry had been measured, I needed a structure that was different from that of a book. Eventually I understood that the structure I needed was a database, and initially the PPA's function was to collect the materials I wanted to analyze. And yet in the process of collecting these materials—in struggling to figure out how to access the materials I wanted, how to read them computationally, how to understand what digital archival work really meant—I learned about the mediated nature of all research over the past fifteen to fifty years and how little our profession seemed to know or care about it, how easily it had been dismissed as not pertinent to our work as literary scholars. I began to see the reticence to address or acknowledge the mediation of our research practices as of a piece with the reticence to address the mediation of poems, of poetry.

My own odd trajectory from historian of prosody to digital humanist to historian of “digital humanities” serves as a through line to this book, but my aim is to show scholars of literary studies the urgency of theorizing the practices that the adjacent disciplines of critical archival and critical data studies have understood as vital to our enterprise for quite some time. The collaborative work of creating and maintaining our shaky knowledge infrastructures in the digital age has taught me new ways of interpreting poetry. *Poetry's Data* analyzes in parallel the material mediation of poetry in the present digital age with the often unseen and underexplored materiality of poetry in the past.

This book makes three general arguments. First, the way we write and think about poetry's sounds (its data), and how we mark or textually encode these sounds, is mediated by literary and linguistic history that the discipline of literary studies generally does not bring to bear on the way it teaches poetry and poetic form. Second, scholarly research is itself mediated by technological infrastructures that have become knowledge infrastructures (data models, databases). Whether corporate controlled or scholar created, these knowledge infrastructures have historical antecedents that we have been trained to theorize (the “archive”); and yet we have not been trained to identify and navigate, so as to critique, the current landscape of knowledge production. Third, because we live and research in this technologically mediated landscape, our old models of reading and researching—methods that presume an autonomous, single scholar gathering resources and making claims—no longer hold. We need to theorize both the embeddedness of our sources inside multiple layers

of mediation and how we are situated inside an information ecosystem that demands our active participation.

Reading and researching in the digital age is fundamentally collaborative and interdisciplinary. Of course, we can read a poem circulating online and value our intimate, individual response to that poem. But our continued disciplinary focus on individual interpretations of literary texts has undermined our ability to read the technologically mediated ways that poems circulate and the knowledge infrastructures that make that circulation possible, both past and present. It is precisely that mediated circulation that allowed readers, and continues to allow readers, to interpret poetry's data as a synecdoche of literary and aesthetic value systems.

Poetry's Data

Poetry is full of data. We read poetry informed by principles that we accept based on how we have been trained to read, speak, and interpret. We read poetry in its digital forms through technological mediations we seldom name or theorize, just as we might render invisible the varieties of print formats and market pressures that mediate a poem's circulation in a particular cultural field. In this book, I examine the evolving concepts of data in English poetry, what scholars believe poetry is made of, and their obsession with the ways poems function. I show how (what we think of as) a poem's component parts and mechanisms have been mediated by the ways information about poetry has circulated in texts that do not fit neatly into the category of the "literary" but nonetheless have had tremendous influence on how we approach what we understand to be the relevant information in a poem today. This category, the "literary" as such, determines what counts as poetry worth reading. These stories are connected. Poetry's data includes what is in the poem, what would be recognizable to its historical readers as its component parts—its versification, its sounds or sonic field, its various genres or modes of recognition, and what is around the poem—and where the poem appears (in a collection by an author, in an anthology, as an example in a grammar book, in a column of a newspaper, in a periodical). To find and understand the history of how scholars have thought about the data in English poems, to reconstruct an archive of how English poems have been read, we require new ways of reading as well as a deep understanding of all the ways we have already been taught to read.

But what do I mean by poems? By poetry? For the purposes of this book, I am referring primarily to English poems written and published between the

sixteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century. The historical and linguistic structures of meter and rhythm in which these poems participated have been called both versification and prosody, but the discourse about “prosody” in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the lens through which we cannot help but view verse structures in the past, takes place in two distinct fields: literary studies and linguistics. In literary studies, prosody refers primarily to versification; in linguistics, prosody refers primarily to pronunciation.

My interest lies in the historical uses of the word “prosody” broadly construed, and how the confusion over its meaning has contributed to conflicting and entangled definitions of poetry. I have chosen to focus on the data of versification and pronunciation (*prosody’s* data, if you will) to get at how scholars have selectively relied on prosody in definitions of poetry, which, in turn, has led to both disciplinary norms and disciplinary confusion over what constitutes the *relevant* data when we interpret a poem. In giving an account of these broad disciplinary trends in interpretation, a prehistory of one kind of close reading, I argue that studying the messy history of prosody reveals one reason that scholars might prefer to approach poetry *as if it is* unmediated, *as if it might* return us to some prior, unmediated sense of language or experience.

In many ways, it doesn’t matter that I have the proof—the data—to show that poetry has never been only a black box that generates a special kind of aesthetic experience. The belief in poetry’s transcendence of mediation is more important than the facts. I am not suggesting that we disregard whatever cumulative power we might assign to a poem as an object, or try to undermine the choices we make about what data we use to anchor our interpretations of poems. Rather, I argue that our critical desire for poetry’s immediacy requires that we look away from other poems and archives and requires a disavowal of the broader historical fields out of which our contemporary understandings and misunderstandings of poetry emerged. *Poetry’s Data* asks for an expanded understanding of context, especially in an era when “poetry” is asked, even more than it has been in the past, to represent “the human” across our data-mediated information environment.⁴

4. As just one example, Anthropic’s model Claude has three tiers: “haiku,” “sonnet,” and “opus.” <https://www.anthropic.com/news/claude-3-family>, accessed June 24, 2024. “Poetry” as a representation of uniquely human nuance and complexity is a marketing tool for AI companies, which flaunt their models’ abilities to write plausible-sounding verses. See Köbis and Mossink, “Artificial Intelligence versus Maya Angelou: Experimental Evidence That People Cannot Differentiate AI-Generated from Human-Written Poetry”; Singh, “ChatGPT Amazes

I make these claims based on the Princeton Prosody Archive, a digital archive, which, it is important to note, is not a database of poems. Arguably, we don't need another database of poems. Poetry is easy to find on websites like poets.org, poetryfoundation.org, the bartleby.com verse collection (bartleby.com/lit-hub/verse), poems.com, and a number of other sites. Rather than collecting poems, the PPA collects information about historical poems on historical pages. The discourse *about* poetry and about the ways scholars have measured how particular texts might or might not count as poetry enables readers to trace how poems circulate beyond their original print contexts, reprinted in poetry handbooks, versification guides, grammar books, pronunciation guides, anthologies, and schoolbooks, and even on websites like poetry.org. *Poetry's Data* proposes that we confront not only the conditions of a poem's circulation in these less traditional texts, but the historical and contemporary conditions that mean we are less likely to see poems as extracted examples of versification or pronunciation. And just as we often read poems with a disregard for the way their prosody and sound are mediated by layers of history, so too do we often read digitized sources with a disregard for the technological infrastructures (the images generated from page scans and the accompanying text files, generated by optical character recognition, or OCR) that mediate our access to the past.

Our scholarly choices about how we read poems signal our participation in different literary histories and prosodic discourses. The PPA and this book urge us to consider why and how we read a poem a certain way; I aim to prove that our choices as readers signal our participation in one or another version of literary history and several possible theories of reading. Scholars take part in one kind of poetic reading practice when they pay attention only to poems that have been published in books, canonized, and anthologized; they read another way when they focus on the poetry that circulated widely in the periodical press and in reviews and journals (only sometimes making it into books), a relatively newer approach to literary history made vastly more accessible by digitization. And yet another kind of reconstructed literary history relies on perceived relationships between individual poems, taken out of their historical contexts and read via different theories, sometimes connected to their authors and sometimes not at all, but often as exemplars of historical,

Twitter Users with Shakespearean-Style Poem on Climate Change"; and Flood, "Robot Artist to Perform AI Generated Poetry in Response to Dante." The AI or computationally generated poem as a test for whether there is a uniquely human aesthetic sensibility has become an even more popular trope in recent years.

philosophical, or formal literary arguments. For those and other reasons I'll explore in the following pages, the PPA assembles historical materials about the ways that scholars in the past have read poetry; it is a collection of possible reading practices. And yet *this book* also thinks through how we have come to value our arguments in monograph form because we have not yet been trained to read the arguments that databases might make—or we have decided not to value those arguments, for reasons that have everything to do with the way that databases expose several kinds of mediation we would rather not acknowledge. In its collections, ongoing curation, history, and design, the PPA forwards several arguments that (it is my hope) this book will teach you how to read.

The kind of data I consider in the PPA is not comprehensive—no archive is—nor does it aim to represent every possible historical account of reading poetry, but it does attempt to gather, as far as is legally possible, the commingled literary and linguistic histories of how scholars approach English poetry's prosody, the primarily sonic data of a poem. A full-text searchable digital collection of materials related to the study of prosody, both versification and pronunciation, in English between 1532 and 1928, the PPA has at the time of this writing about seven thousand items (over two million pages, and 540 million words).⁵ Some of the discourses in the PPA are hard to read because of historical provenance and semantic change; some of them are hard to read because they posit new ways of reading poetry that rely on squiggles and numbers and waves and triangles and dots and all sorts of odd-looking marks that do not resemble any of the diacritical marks to which our modern pronunciation guides might adhere. The database marks these typographically unique pages so that you can view them since there are no Unicode equivalents to their invented signs. This is not to say that you can't trace a concept of poetry's data in the shifting (and increasing) ways that interpretations of poetry moved from sonic data to examples of figurative language—that, too, is in the PPA—but my focus in this book is the historical use of prosody as versification and pronunciation. I trace an underexamined path through the history of poetic interpretation and English disciplinary history, a history that presents challenges to the modern poetry classroom. Without a collection of materials in a

5. By "words" I refer to word instances or tokens after running Optical Character Recognition correction. The count is 770 million nonalphabetic "tokens," which, because of OCR correction, are removed. This word count is talking about words as content *only*. For text analysis we performed OCR correction to (necessarily) remove suprasegmental marks like prosodic notation. I'll discuss this in more detail in chapter 4, "How We Express [Typographically Unique]."

clearly marked database, this underexamined path through the history of poetry's sonic data is likely to remain underexamined. The untranslatability between the image of the marked text and its underlying codes is one part of poetry's data that this book explores.

If the primary sense of *Poetry's Data* calls attention to the written inscription of sonic patterns in poetry as guides to versification, the title also refers to the difficult work of navigating and maintaining access to materials of the past in the digital age. At the time of this writing, scholars might still use Google Books to check a reference, though the ability to trust what Google Books is indexing might have already eroded.⁶ The PPA collaborates with the HathiTrust Digital Library, which currently maintains the largest set of digitized books managed by academic and research libraries, as well as with Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), owned by Gale-Cengage, and Early English Books Online (EEBO), owned by ProQuest. I name these collections and their owners because this is an important part of the story of poetry's data and of the PPA. One argument of the PPA, and this book, is that we must theorize and understand the shaping mechanisms of the constraints on which we rely when we search full-text data and metadata for information. Search is not the same as research, as I'll explain in these chapters. The power of the PPA derives from the discoveries it enables within carefully constructed limits—or organizing principles—against the backdrop of a constantly shifting landscape of available digitized source material.

And so, unlike putting the words “versification” or “prosody” into larger databases and skimming the results for relevance, the PPA represents a careful and ongoing process of data curation and classification so that it can present the most complete collection of existing writing about prosody in English. The database contains books and articles, but also a great deal of paratextual material—prefaces, appendixes and front matter—which is where some of the most compelling prosodic discourse is nestled. These paratextual materials have been carefully excerpted from longer works when necessary. I pause over the words “collected” and “excerpted” in the pages that follow, since what the PPA provides on the whole is a focused distillation of the much larger digital resources I name above, as well as navigational pathways through them.

Just as the multiple valences of the word “prosody” are important to understand as part of the complicated history of poetry's data, so, too, is the word

6. David, “Google Books Reportedly Indexing Bad AI-Written Works”; Pechenick et al., “Characterizing the Google Books Corpus.”

“archive.” The collection’s first impetus was to archive—as in to preserve—images of textual materials from the past that might otherwise be difficult to see or access. The poems that appear throughout the PPA are used as examples—for versification, for pronunciation, for criticism, for teaching. These examples highlight how scholars have extracted parts of poems as data to make claims about poetry, but they also highlight what past writers have noticed about poems broadly and at which historical moments and for what purposes. But just as in any archive, what is in the historical record of English poetry that the PPA collects is as useful for what it contains as it is for what it leaves out. I consider poetry’s data to be incomplete.

The “archive” in the name Princeton Prosody Archive gestures to the concept of “digital archive” as it was understood in a bygone era of digital humanities (DH), harkening back to the early 1990s in which many dreamed that the digital archive could be a way to expand and develop, as Jerome McGann put it, a “webwork of relations.”⁷ Here, “archive” is a way of rethinking our collective practices of preserving and accessing information from the past, and critical archival studies frameworks help me think through the collective relationships inside prosodic texts (for instance, in citational structures) and across institutional and legal frameworks that reveal and conceal power structures of the past and present. Like “digital humanities,” “digital archives” as a term means something different now than it did in the past, and I situate the PPA and its arguments in the histories and possible futures of these contested terms. I consider both “data” and “archive” to be forms of mediation impacted by new technologies and by networks of relationships among archivists, catalogers, metadata librarians, bibliographers, information scientists, application developers, and user experience designers. Our research methods depend on institutional structures and collaborative labor by people we may never meet and systems we might never acknowledge or know how to name.⁸

The curatorial aspect of the term “archive” lingers in the PPA, as its initial bibliographic source material reconstructs what would have been “the papers of” the literary scholar T. V. F. Brogan, whose several bins of books about versification have been reconstructed in the collection titled “Original Bibliography.” The idea of the PPA began as I was assembling materials for *The Rise and Fall of Meter*, in the five or six years before that book’s publication in 2012.

7. McGann, “Rationale of Hypertext.”

8. Cf. Leung and López-McKnight, *Knowledge Justice*; Caswell, *Urgent Archives*; Gitelman, “Raw Data”; Stauffer’s *Book Traces* (chapter 5, p. 154) is clear on this point. See also Berry, “House Archives Built.”

This was the era of “digital archives” before the critical archival turn. Collecting, classifying, and organizing so as to preserve access to this odd material about the history of prosody allowed me to rethink and ultimately reshape my relationship to several senses of the word “archive” as a fundamentally cocreative enterprise.⁹

How and why we arrived at our methodology for organizing the PPA into distinct “collections” is part of the argument of this book. The names of the chapters that follow are taken from the PPA’s six collections and appear in brackets to signify their connection to the rectangular spreadsheet boxes by which we sorted and re-sorted the materials. In deciding how to transform the literary history of prosody into new entities, I learned how to see canonical forms of poetic knowledge making in the traces of the older entities that had never quite worked. In each of the chapters, you’ll learn how and why each collection came to be, as well as the disciplinary assumptions I had to unlearn about how we count, how we search, how we classify, how we express, and how we argue as literary scholars. In all this unlearning, I learned how to read and understand poetry’s data and poetry as data.

By poetry’s data, I do not mean to suggest close or distant reading per se, but rather a way of reading that emerges in the wake of digitization that requires a historical approach to genre, format, and mediation.¹⁰ Poetry’s data can refer to the complicated and contradictory units of measure in a description of versification. It can refer to linguistic data like phonemes, emphasis, stress—any concept of sound before those were stabilized into linguistic terms. It can also refer to definitions of poetry in texts that were, again and again, and in conversation with and in opposition to one another over centuries, trying to define what makes a poem, what we might think of as networked data. Poetry’s data is also *metadata*—how we find information about poems—and it involves the transformations of a variety of formats into data so that we can find (or fail to find) poems in a digital environment. Data is in the archive; it is on your computer; it mediates nearly every action we undertake as scholars today; and poetry, despite its lofty reputation, is no exception. But unlike prose (and even though poems might be viewed as easier to quantify since

9. See Owens, “What Do You Mean by Archive?” Go to <https://prosody.princeton.edu/collections/> to view the collections in the PPA interface.

10. Cf. Gitelman, on Xerox, in *Paper Knowledge*; Gitelman, on Pitman, in *Scripts, Grooves and Writing Machines*; Emerson, *Lab Book*; Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces*; Tenen, *Plain Text*; Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms*; Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes*; Kirschenbaum, *Bitstreams*; Cordell and Smith, *Viral Texts*.

they contain structures that seem more easily tractable), historical poetry has largely been ignored in theorizations of digital humanities and new media, though this book will detail the very few exceptions as well as ask why this has been the case.

Digital Humanities

Just as I never thought that studying the history of prosody would turn me into a digital humanist, neither could I have ever imagined that the history of digital humanities, or computational humanities, would be so deeply concerned with prosody, or to put it a different way, that the history of poetry was also a history of how to think about the cultural record—particularly its language—as data. And yet the converse of this realization was that the discourses about the data of poetry—as themselves part of the unexplored cultural record—were not amenable to being transformed into data in the ways that DH and humanistic data science have developed. This book tells a prehistory of DH that addresses some of the alienation scholars might feel when they see the title of this book—how can poetry have data? How can those two terms coexist? But the truth is that they have always coexisted, and the three time frames of this book show both how they coexist and why we might not want them to.

The first and longest time span I consider is the history (1532 to the present day) of how critics have been attentive to, and have attempted to fix, the quantifiable elements of English poetry into systems of meter, with particular attention to books about the sound of verse and language. We can study this longer historical arc only because of the large-scale digitization projects that parallel the rise of computational humanities over the course of the twentieth century. This large-scale digitization provides the second historical arc, snapping into place over the 1980s and 1990s and culminating in the establishment, normalization, and corporatization of the technologies that underlie most of our digitized reading today. The final time frame I consider is my personal historical arc, which plays out in what I call the Google Books era (roughly 2008 until 2024). Thinking critically about this period allows me to situate these two other histories in relation to the recent past. Because of the availability of these digital copies, the past twenty years have seen increased scholarly attention to the concepts of canon and archive, and a reconsideration of what Ted Underwood called “the broad contours of literary history.”¹¹

11. Underwood, “We Don’t Already Understand the Broad Outlines of Literary History.”

These three overlapping histories are interwoven into the book's argument. If we take seriously digital media as *mediation*, the process through which textual forms are transformed into data and delivered to us via data structures, then our reading of historical texts in digital formats must reckon with these mediations. *Poetry's Data* is about the shifting grounds of knowledge production, and our responsibility as literary scholars to engage actively with these shifts. I use these shifts to explore questions about labor, authority, property, and prestige. I explore how we have been taught to be comfortable in and around certain norms of print that are not the same as the norms of digital knowledge production, and what happens when we confuse the two. I confused them—I still might—but the narrower personal arc of this book builds to what I hope is a more complex, and collaborative, understanding.

Many of the methodologies of digital humanities have helped me understand poetry's data, and they are the backdrop of this book. "Digital humanities" is not one field, and I have learned that each evocation of that term must be situated in its historical, disciplinary, or institutional context. Just as Christine Borgman urges us to ask not "what is data" but "when is data," this book spans the longer history of what we might consider a computational humanities framework from each of the timescales I outline above.¹² It is nothing new to argue, for example, that nineteenth-century writers were grappling with issues of information overload and that reading their navigation of new print formats might help to guide contemporary scholarship. The long history of counting and grappling with how to count poetry's data joins other *longue durée* histories of literary quantification, navigating information overload, and grappling with new media worlds (textual and imaginary) that span several traditional historical periods.¹³ Here and in the PPA, I show the prehistory of the separation between the practical and the theoretical (formerly universal or metaphysical) modes of poetic reading. I think through how, and why, for "poetry" to become synonymous with one concept of the "literary," literary studies needed to disregard and disavow precisely the kind of scholarship that makes up the PPA and that this book explores.¹⁴

12. Borgman, *Big Data, Little Data, No Data*, 4–5.

13. Cf. A. Blair, *Too Much to Know*; Lee *Overwhelmed*; Alfano and Stauffer, *Virtual Victorians*; and most recently, and brilliantly, Fyfe *Digital Victorians*.

14. Here I refer not only to philology, a favorite comparison for one track of disciplinary history, and not only to "rhetoric" as another historical arc that is relevant to the story I tell in this book, but to the overlapping disciplines of language teaching in grammar books and pronunciation guides, elocution handbooks, poetry teaching manuals, guides to versification, and

I also explore computational humanities and digital literary studies through the lens of historical poetics, thinking through what hopes for versification my predecessor T. V. F. Brogan pinned not only on the science of linguistics but on the technological advances of the 1970s–1990s. Here, I join longer histories of DH with histories of information science and critical archival studies.¹⁵ Rather than focusing only on computation methods and trends during the rise of the World Wide Web, I focus on the way that “poetry,” as a stand-in for a particular kind of creative output and interpretive practice, played a role in the movement of scholarly resources from university libraries to external corporations. I situate the study of poetry within the rise of scholar-created archives and alongside exploratory computational tools that might aid in the study of poetry, neither of which, I argue, adequately engages with the longer history of poetry’s data.¹⁶ Recent scholarship in critical DH explores the extractive and colonial logics of both traditional and digital archival projects as well as their subsequent infrastructures (and infrastructural failures). Concurrent with the technopositivism of the 1980s and 1990s, the fifty-year history of computational humanities to DH is a story about failed attempts at sustained collaborative cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary infrastructures. We witness, over this middle-distance history of the last fifty years or so, a continued and pervasive attachment to humanistic methods as individual, taught and rewarded as such, rather than opening up the possibility of (and institutional support for) new collaborative practices and modes of knowledge production. The constraint on institutional resources for humanities goes hand in hand

a collection of works that are less philological and more phonological. Though phonology has been considered at times as a branch of philology, often scholars who study the history of philology are referring to historical phonology in classical languages. Here, I consider phonology not as a residue of nineteenth-century philology but as a part of the history of linguistics as it pertains to the study of sound *specifically* in poetry. Henry Sweet usefully distinguished between “living philology” and antiquarian philology, and it is the former concept of a “living” philology, as a precursor to Otto Jespersen and Ferdinand de Saussure’s “linguistics,” that concerns me here. Henry Sweet, “Presidential Address (1877),” in Sweet, *Collected Papers*, 91. See also Ku-ming Kevin Chang, “Philology or Linguistics,” in Pollock et al., *World Philology*, 311–31.

15. For a useful guide to information in media theory, see Hayot, Detwyler, and Pao, *Information*. For a longer history of language as information, see Binder, *Language and the Rise of the Algorithm*. My concern here is primarily the history of information *science* as opposed to information *theory*.

16. Cf. Amy Earhart’s crucial historicization of digital literary studies between 1990 and 2015: *Traces of the Old, Uses of the New*. See also Mandell, *Breaking the Book*; Rockwell and Sinclair, *Hermeneutica*; and Siemans and Schreibman, *Companion to Digital Literary Studies*.

with the idea that humanities scholars can and should work alone, though I argue that we never have, and never can. Our archives, our source material, our access to information about the past have always relied on other scholars. This is not to say that these cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary infrastructures didn't exist (and don't continue to exist, though haltingly), but the transformative potential of collaborative modes of knowledge production in the humanities were and continue to be undervalued and were (and therefore are) largely unsustainable.

I started to learn about the digital humanities just as I was preparing to go up for tenure, a process that, in the humanities at my institution in 2012, relied on the production of a single-author monograph. At the same time as I was putting together my materials for tenure, I was trying to figure out how to find—which I quickly learned meant how to build—the resources I needed for the PPA. I had avoided all training in DH as a graduate student, even though my research had relied on at least one digitized archive. How did I get the feeling that I needed to travel to the physical archive to justify my reliance on the digital copy? There was no orientation to digital research methods at that time, and for that reason I narrate my education in the field as an accidental witness who then became an engaged participant in the field's development. I also use “accidental” here since my account of DH and its relationship to poetry over the past twenty or so years is not something I set out to understand. In fact, I actively resisted thinking that my subject of study (poetry) or my preferred methodology (historically contextualized close reading) could ever be relevant to computational methods, and I refused—or did not know how—to see my research as part of that process.

I was as wary of quantitative methods in humanistic research as I was wary of the prosodists who obsessively argued for their new methods of measuring English verse. I purposefully observed the field of computational approaches to poetry in the context of what I saw as its much longer history and felt relief that this literary historical vantage point meant that I didn't have to learn how to use or build these tools myself. My ignorance—my belief that poetry was somehow special or apart from the debates and discussions about digital scholarship—was hardwired into my training and into the profession, and it kept my scholarship apart from the actual workings of the institution and the multiple mediations of my source materials. This book contends with the messy materiality of this new information environment and the systems that underpin it, and it asks, what happens if we don't hold poetry apart from that uncomfortable space?

We are long past the separation of “the digital” from “the humanities” and have been for quite some time, and yet, for just a moment, think of the “digital” as representing that complicated material of technical infrastructures and information management; as the attempt to undermine hierarchical labor practices across undergraduate and graduate researchers, software engineers, archivists, and librarians; and as the long history of collective scholarly discussion about how to understand cultural materials in, and as, and through data in the library sciences. Before I learned anything about statistics or vectors or the possibilities of what a center for collaborative humanistic research could look like at Princeton, I learned that by holding on to the perception that there was a rarefied space for poetry that could transcend this entangled information landscape, I also upheld the idea that there was a rarefied space for me, as the scholar of literature, to exist above and yet in complete reliance on the invisible labor of the people who made it possible for me to do my work. One concept of poetic reading—close reading of a poem in a historical context as the highest mark of achievement in my professional field—clashed with my growing sense that even my ability to close read could not remain an individual activity. Along with my education in digital humanities and as a digital humanist, I became a scholar who works almost always in collaboration with others, and with an acute awareness of the complex interdependencies that structure these collaborations. The values that DH promoted—of translation between disciplines, of a variety of different skill sets coming together, of undermining academic hierarchies—were supported by my collaborative work in historical poetics.

Historical Poetics and the History of Prosody

Digital humanities, as an evolving orientation toward the project of archiving, reading, and defining our methods as humanists, clarified my thinking about historical prosody. We don’t close read alone. Close reading can and does often happen in the classroom, where initial interpretations might yield to a collective understanding of a text. Heffernan and Buurma’s *Teaching Archive* gives several examples of collaborative classroom activities to upend the common—and wrongful—assumptions about lone critics arriving at their insights based on years of quiet, individual study rather than testing out these ideas with students and other collaborators.¹⁷ Their research shows that when we expand

17. Heffernan and Buurma, *Teaching Archive*.

our understanding of literary criticism to include additional interpretive texts like syllabi, lecture notes, lesson plans, and the like, we are better able to understand the critical approaches and literary histories that shape our profession.

My attention to the textual materials about the teaching of poetry prior to the twentieth century is not as specific to pedagogy as Heffernan and Buurma's, but the historical poetics reading group I have been participating in over the past two decades has taught me much about the value of nontraditional materials such as the poetry handbook for studying the history of poetry. The collaborative reading practices I learned in conversation with the historical poetics reading group have taught me how to approach poetry and historical material about poetry at the same time. Just as I don't believe we can navigate the new information environment as literary critics and believe we are in any way alone, so too did I learn that I am able to come to understand the material mediations of nineteenth-century poetry only with a group of devoted colleagues. Reading historical poems, reading about how scholars and critics in the past positioned these poems and positioned their own criticism of poetry in worlds of print, is difficult work to do without being able to draw on multiple kinds of expertise at once. Participating in this group also helped me understand that the poetry reading that interests me most explores how poems make meaning in multiple contexts and in relation to multiple discourses, sometimes overlapping and sometimes distinct.

From our collaboratively written statement, we define the Historical Poetics project as one in which "we pursue intensive reading of poems in relation to multiple discourses around, about, and in poetry, including (but not limited to) histories of genre, form, format, medium, prosody, parody, performance, circulation, translation and transmission. We read both forward and backward in history through poetry, to discover the historical constitution of poetics and the poetics of historical thinking."¹⁸ As I'll explore throughout this book, digi-

18. See Historical Poetics. I have often quipped that the kind of collective reading that we model is ideal, and without Meredith McGill's model of melding book history and media studies in her readings of poetry, and Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson's approach to the mediating work of meter and genre, my own work on the PPA would not have been possible. All of them serve on the advisory board for the project, but I learn most from them when I am participating in the reading group, reading a multiply-mediated poem in conversation, as voices cross in conversation, disagreement, and layered understanding, with several other voices to riff off of one another and finally build into an interpretation of a poem on a page that none of us would have been able to arrive at on our own.

tal humanities and historical poetics have evolved for me in close contact with one another, though not always in explicit alliance, and the availability of newly digitized materials has allowed our group to focus on historical approaches to poetry that we might not have otherwise been able to access. Because part of my methodology is to consider how a work circulated and how it was situated in relationship to different reading audiences in the past, this book presents a historical poetics in miniature of quickly changing media formats for conducting research over the past twenty years or so.

Part of the story of poetry's data is how we were taught not to read for certain kinds of data, not to look for evidence of circulation, and not to think about digital mediation when encountering the image of a historical page on a screen. And yet historical formats nevertheless mediate our ability to read those page images (which we might conveniently forget are images). Reading through and along with the multiple mediations of print and technological formats, with what we know, or think we know, about historical genres as themselves forms of mediation—these are all operations that we perform seamlessly without slowing down to consider each stage of the operation, to think about the ways information makes its way to us. We ignore mediation all the time when we read, but we can be better readers, and it is my hope that this book might nudge us to think together about how.

How to read literary forms in a variety of print and media contexts is not just a project for those of us who work on historical cultural materials. In addition to bringing to bear what we know about literary forms and their rich contexts from having studied the history of their circulation, we also need to understand how these forms are crucial to the way we read. The language of the past is mediated by today's technology, and in order to know how to read what corporations redefine for us as language worth reading, we need to feel confident that we are able to bring our skills as humanists to provide both historical contexts to the operations of today's technology and cultural contexts for the ways that generative language models proliferate texts that will need interpreting. This book argues for a wider adoption of the kind of collaborative critical thinking that might help us better interpret digitized source materials and, increasingly, statistically generated outputs about the past. These source materials now underlie what a model might recombine or transform into new material for us to interpret—all words and images dissolved back into the data that made them up to begin with. To know how to interpret these new outputs, we need to know how to navigate them thoughtfully.

Database : Collection :: Monograph : Chapter

The book explores what my engagement with poetry's data (its various interfaces, expressions, and visual formats) helped me understand about how we read poems and the literary history of poetry reading. It also uses, as its source, a web application that relies on the ongoing collaborative labor of a large group of people, and so I cannot guarantee that someone will be able to see the application far into the future. There are features that will break, bugs that we will decide not to fix. We have thought and theorized about the impossibility of the PPA continuing as a scholarly resource, and instead we are focusing on what it has taught us, here and in the site's final years in active development. Part of why a book's technology outlasts a web application's technology is that web applications require ongoing maintenance. We are actively exploring the implications of when, why, and how to end the development of the PPA, but in anticipation of PPA's eventual decline, *Poetry's Data* shares several images from the site's content in "exhibits" that are interleaved with the book's chapters.¹⁹ Almost all these exhibit pages come from texts that appear in several of the "collections" in the database, indicated in brackets. The exhibits act as a hinge between the chapters, providing transition and provocation, and showing examples of the odd textual materials the PPA contains that we, as its creators, have struggled to classify. The exhibits correspond with and signal the concerns of the chapters that follow them, but they are also evidence of the strangeness of the data itself. The data in the PPA is messy, and does not fit neatly into any one category or history, which is part of the argument of the database. The books featured in the exhibits have trouble classifying themselves—"grammar of," "art of," "science of," "music of"—and are themselves mini-exercises in compilation, navigation, and classification.

Like the exhibits, the chapters each draw attention to the database's argumentative work. The questions suggested in the chapter titles refer to the many issues of classification-as-interpretation that working on prosody and data have taught me. This twin understanding of prosody (as part of the contested data in poems) and prosodic discourse (as the multidisciplinary data

19. In May 2025 we will hold a conference called "The Ends of Prosody" at Princeton, at which we will explore the data in the PPA collectively. We will add works to the database for a few years yet but do not plan to develop additional features. As Erika Ortega has said, "there is nothing more ephemeral than a website." Quinn Dombrowski (Stanford) chose this quote to print on a broadside at Ryan Cordell's Skeuomorph Press at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, <https://bsky.app/profile/quinnanya.me/post/3ksf7vbm7of22>, accessed September 26, 2024.

about poems), scattered as it is among various odd texts, informs the titles of each collection and the questions of each chapter. Together, each chapter reflects on how “poetry’s data” changes over centuries. When is something a poem, verse, or song? When is a work a grammar book, teaching text, or schoolbook? When is a line divided into syllables, phenomes, accents, or beats? When you have a lot of material, how can you organize it so the parts make arguments? How do you do this in a database? How do you do this in a book? No one agrees on the data in poems, so while the PPA’s construction allows for keyword searching and author, date, title, and other usual suspects of faceted search, there is an interpretive structure to the heterogeneous collection of materials that this book will argue is relevant to the understanding of historical poems. The leading questions in the chapters are intended to be applicable to the other chapters in a sort of database logic of serendipitous discovery.

In chapter 1, “How We Count [Literary],” I consider the still contentious question of what counts as literary criticism when our objects of study have not been solely “literary” for some time. How and what we count as objects worth studying, I argue, has been mediated by how cultural materials have been classified in the past and how our institutions value our work as literary critics in the present. This chapter thinks through the long history of what has and has not counted as poetry to rethink how and when we began to use poetry as a stand-in for one concept of “the literary” and how that shapes our approach to poetry in the past. Chapter 2, “How We Read [Word Lists and Dictionaries],” presents the two collections that are both deselected—or made optional—for the researcher in the PPA so as to explore the contexts we have been trained to ignore when we read poems, from historical formats, to historical sound, to the ever-expanding contours of literary history. In chapter 3, “How We Classify [Linguistic],” I reflect on how metadata restricts our ability to read the histories of disciplines in conversation. This chapter describes the challenges of locating prosody in the digital archive and the challenges of curating collections that adequately reflected the arguments in the PPA. In chapter 4, “How We Express [Typographically Unique],” I show how many marks for poetry intended to teach expression are rendered “mute” without a corresponding symbol in Unicode, the character encoding system used for textual data. Conversely, “expressive use,” the only way to *see* these typographically unique symbols, is precisely what corporations who own these digitized page images restrict us from reading. The final chapter, “How We Argue [Original Bibliography],” reveals a longer history of technological challenges and innovations regarding how we might present poetry’s data. Sections within the

chapters move between the book's three time scales. The chapters are not chronological but purposefully recursive. A reader may chart their own path through the sections (though each section is related to the larger chapter and the collection on which it is based) in the same way that they might find a variety of suggestive connections in the PPA. Both structures serve an argumentative purpose. I call the coda "How to Cite" both as a gesture toward the PPA, which is itself scholarship that deserves citation, and to signal that even though this is a monograph, it is a collaborative one that I could not—and would not—have written alone.

Poetry's Data provides a thick description of an evolving methodology of reading and researching that I urge other scholars to record for themselves as we navigate together the way our access to our research materials is changing. In our profession, the idea that digital humanities means preservation, digitization, discovery, and digital scholarship has evolved to a broader concept of thinking about data in the humanities, or data-driven humanities, which both is part of the former idea of DH and also exceeds it. That shift from digital to data forces us to describe, collectively and individually, how we classify and represent our interpretive choices and research processes as experts, especially at a moment when access to the cultural record is no longer limited to those of us who were trained to distinguish and define the various print formats, genres, and modes of cultural production. I do not describe in minute detail the technology behind the database,²⁰ but if we do not understand this technology and those mediating our access to information, just as we might not bother to understand the technology of a poem, we might be more easily mystified by or convinced of its perceived power.

20. Anna Shechtman, in a review of *Bitstreams* by Matthew Kirschenbaum, wrote, "At a conference in 2016, a colleague and I discussed, with some frustration, a rhetorical tic that we saw developing among digital humanities scholars. Presuming, and rightly so, that most humanists know little to nothing about the mechanics of computation, DH scholars were turning to narrative to demystify their methods. This often led to first-person descriptions of unremarkable activities—I turned on my monitor and opened a .csv file—leading the reader through the banalities of scholarship, which academics using nondigital tools usually repress or relegate to the acknowledgment pages of their work." Shechtman describes this narrative turn as banal and jokes that it would not be methodologically interesting to narrate how nondigital humanists work: "first I created a library account and requested various papers; then I went to the reading room." It is precisely this level of awareness I am interested in as method. Why did libraries have those papers and not others? Part of the point of narrating my journey through digital humanities questions is to show that these are not questions that are either digital or humanist, but crucially both. See Shechtman, "Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Bitstreams*," 1086.

EXHIBIT A: GRAMMAR

Goold Brown. *The Grammar of English Grammars*. New York: Samuel S. and William Wood, 1851. Title page caption: Goold Brown. *The Grammar of English Grammars*. New York: Samuel S. and William Wood, 1851. Title page (figure 1).

[Literary] [Linguistic] [Typographically Unique]

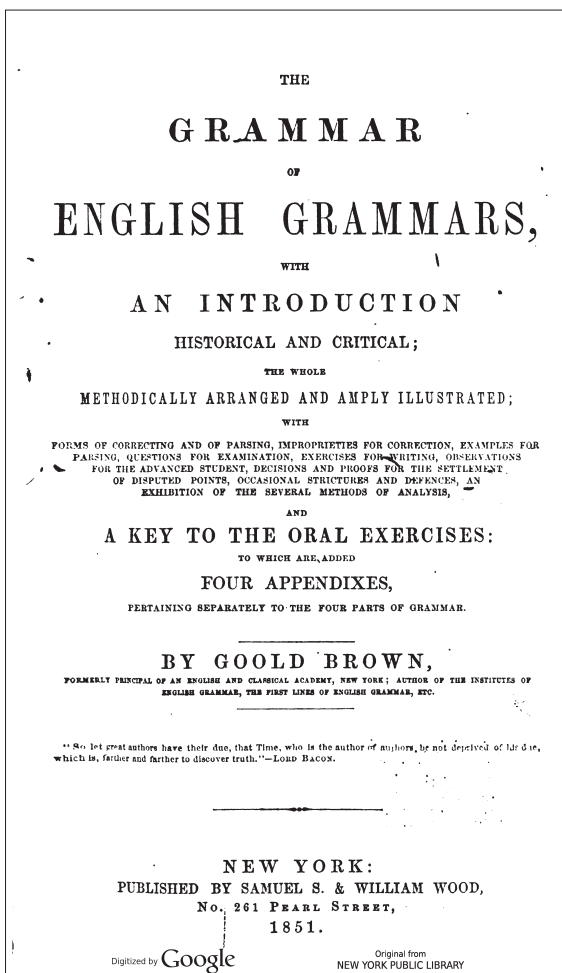


FIGURE 1.

The Grammar of English Grammars tries to create order—invoking grammar as a structure—in the proliferation of published works in what had yet to become a formal field of study about the structure of language. Goold Brown’s text is a monument to both the challenge and the long tradition of collecting information about the scholars who are, in turn, obsessed with presenting structured information about language. Brown’s enormous editions of *The Grammar of English Grammars*, with more than one thousand pages of text, were accompanied by fifteen editions of a slimmer volume (only 325ish pages) titled *Institutes of English Grammar*, intended for use by schools, academies, and private learners, and an even more manageable *First Lines of English Grammar* (six editions between 1826 and 1880). Both *The Grammar of English Grammars* (around p. 820) and *Institutes of Grammar* (around p. 218) arrive at “Prosody” as the fourth and final section of the traditional divisions of the grammar book after “Orthography,” “Etymology,” and “Syntax.” In each “prosody” section (after punctuation, utterance, and articulation) and therefore at the end of the book, we find versification. Brown’s *Grammar of English Grammars* positions him as the ultimate counter of the counters, presenting a compendium of information not only about grammar but about that part of grammar—prosody—that contains versification, or how we measure language in “numbers” that might become poems. Brown’s odd format allows him both to enumerate the various approaches to versification, and to chart a path through these approaches in typographically differentiated sections.

The Grammar of English Grammars went through ten editions between 1851 and 1884 and therefore presents an ongoing attempt to map discourse over time.¹ Or rather, Brown’s reference book reveals the difficulty of mapping sev-

1. According to *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (8:265–66), Goold Brown “was born in Providence, R.I., March 7, 1791, a descendent of the earliest Quaker settlers in New England. . . . [He] was sent to the Friends’ school. . . . At the age of nineteen he began teaching . . . in the Friends’ boarding-school in Dutchess county, N.Y. . . . Two years later he opened an academy in New York City, which he conducted for twenty years, and which gained a large reputation for the thoroughness of its classical and literary training. His early studies made him alive to the imperfections in the then existing text-books in grammar, and his class-work developed new ideas and methods of teaching, which in 1823 he published under the title of ‘Institutes of English Grammar.’ The superiority of his method was at once recognized, and the book was widely adopted as a text-book in the schools. He also prepared an elementary grammar, called ‘First Lines of English Grammar.’ These two books have had an enormous circulation and are in very general use even to this day. In 1851 he finished his masterpiece, upon which his reputation in a large measure rests, ‘Grammar of English Grammars.’ It is the most exhaustive, most accurate, and most original treatise on the English language

eral discourses over time, but that difficulty is particularly pronounced in the section on versification. Despite robust approaches to discourse analysis in sociology, in literary studies we are often trained to think about cultural fields of production only as either literary or artistic—a paradigm that Brown's strange text resists.² The arrangement of accumulated materials in the fluctuating observations and notes sections of Brown's pages form an odd hierarchy; his larger font definitions appear at the top of the page ("definitions and principles") and derive from the authority he displays in the (often overwhelming) observations, which also serve as a kind of annotated bibliography. Even more personal annotations and pronouncements, exceptions, and qualifications,

ever written. The thoroughness with which he performed his task may be judged by the fact that his list of cited grammars and other works on the subject numbers 548, and its preparation occupied a period of twenty-three years. It is the court of last resort on matters grammatical, and will remain a lasting monument to the author's skill and labor. . . . He died in Lyon, March 31, 1857." Not all were as complimentary: a contributor to the *Saturday Review* wrote of *Grammar of English Grammars*, "A very ponderous work, with a title-page unusually elaborate in description, is the tenth edition of Mr. Goold Brown's *Grammar of English Grammar[s]* a treatise on the philosophy, principles, and practical use of grammar, occupying altogether 1,100 pages of large octavo size and rather small type, a sight from which all but the most omnivorous students must turn aghast, and which may well deter the most courageous critic from any attempt at a detailed analysis of its contents" ("Review of *The Grammar of English Grammars* by Goold Brown," 568); and another, in the *American*: "Goold Brown is to grammar what Worcester and Webster are to lexicography, and his 'Grammar of English Grammars' probably contains as much matter as either of the great unabridged dictionaries" ("Publications Received," 60).

2. Dotzler and Schmidgen, *Foucault, Digital*, solidifies the connection that many scholars of digital humanities have already noticed. Dotzler, Schmidgen, and Stein ("From the Archive to the Computer," 3) argue that "all practitioners in the digital humanities should read Foucault." Jussi Parikka has said, about the field of media archeology in relation to Foucault and Kittler in the 1990s, "Temporalities are conditioned by mediatic frameworks. This is where Ernst's particular take on media archeology stems from. The theoretical ideas from German and French theory were filtered into medium-specific ways to develop archaeologies of knowledge into archaeologies of knowledge as media—or media archeology. . . . This archeology starts to think through our mediatic world as the conditions for the way in which we know things and do them—knowledge and power." Parikka, "Introduction," in Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, 6. Though Brown's project might be read as a source text for a knowledge archeology of grammar within a media history of the reference book, we might just as easily see it as a snapshot of the midcentury linguistic power relations within which grammar itself is readable as a social field. The text signals a prehistory to the theories of discourse and communication for authors now squarely associated with literary sociology like Pierre Bourdieu, Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, and Niklas Luhman.

marked by asterisks or daggers, appear in minuscule font at the very bottom (figure 2 and figure 3).³

What kind of reference book is this? The observations and annotations, which are at times footnotes to footnotes, seem to prop up the authority Brown displays in the larger font “definitions and principles” section, but the more closely we read them the more his authority derives not from a masterful ability to present a consensus view, but from his understanding that prosodic discourse has no consensus view. What we learn from Brown, then, is that versification doesn’t align with the prescriptive frameworks that he and others wanted to develop for grammar. Perhaps this is a reason why we haven’t taken historical grammar books seriously as locations of cultural information: we might not expect a definition of poetry to appear in a book about the structure of language. And yet another reason is that the data we find about poetry is literally hard to see—it’s printed in a teeny-tiny font that gets even tinier the further down the page we look. His observations, which proliferate quoted material about versification to the point that it is hard to keep track of which voice is his and which are his interlocutors, are often nearly impossible to read since they are so full of confusing constructions and lists of definitions from a variety of sources, some that we might consider literary (Edgar Allan Poe) and some we might not consider literary at all (*Comstock’s Elocution* or *Webster’s Dictionary*). But these appear together, in parallel, as Brown works through what versification is and how it works.

Brown’s definition of “verses” and his concept of when verses might become “poetry” rely on the modulation of what he will call “*its least parts*,” which are often syllables. Brown’s prescription for poetry differentiates it from the rest of language; it is a special kind of “literary” composition that allows us to see the difference between the mere combination of words according to a rule and what will count as a poem. He wrote, “Versification is the forming of that species of literary composition which is called *verse*; that is, *poetry*, or *poetic numbers*.” Verse, he continues, “is language arranged into metrical lines of some determinate length and rhythm—language so ordered as to produce harmony, by a due succession of poetic feet, or of syllables differing in quantity or stress.” His first step is to define “rhythm,” so that we can understand harmony: “The *rhythm* of verse is its relation to quantities; the modulation of its numbers; or, the kind of metre, measure, or movement, of

3. These three sections signal several intended audiences: those who would recognize his hard-earned authority as someone to be trusted in the newly crowded market for grammar books is its likely primary audience, since this massive tome supports his more popular (and shorter) *Institutes* and *First Lines*.

which it consists, or by which it is particularly distinguished.” After Brown spends one short paragraph defining rhythm, he goes on to spend five trying to define quantity and comes around to defining it as the time it takes to pronounce syllables that have, or do not have, accent, emphasis, stress, energy, or loudness.

“In verse, the proportion which forms rhythm—that is, the chime of quantities—is applied to the *sounds* of syllables,” but if we break rhythm down to “the reduction of its *least parts*,” we “destroy the relation in which the thing consists.” Rather than taking a rigid approach to poetry as a number by which we measure the propriety of a verse, he urges prosodists to think about rhythm as the proportion by which we might apprehend the modulation of sound.

He quotes Poe’s “Notes upon English Verse” extensively in his third and fourth observation: “Versification is *not* the *art*, but the *act* of making verses.” Brown corrects Poe’s parallel of rhythm with meter to mean “the arrangement of words into two or more consecutive, equal, pulsations of time. These pulsations are *feet*. Two feet, at least, are requisite to constitute a *rhythm*; just as in mathematics, two units are necessary to form [a] number.” Poe’s math does not add up. Brown knows that a unit is a number, and that Poe’s translation of the Greek “number” to “rhythm” is a mistranslation: number would be “arithm, as in *arithmetic*.” Rhythm is *not* number, but “modulation, measured tune, or regular flow.” So, what are poetic numbers, to Brown? They are the way we apprehend, via rhythm, the variety in the movement or proportion in the movements of the various parts of the line—neither time nor quantity, but the relation of the parts. This apprehension is both an act and an art. To measure only one part of poetry’s data and not the other is to miss the relation that might make a line into poetry. It is the reader’s apprehension of all the data in relation that makes a poem.

Of course, none of this solves the problem of how to talk about what the reader might be apprehending. Both poets and readers, Brown insists, need to know both how to count and what to count, but that is not all that they can or should know. They also need to see the conversations and debates, places where there has been concurrence and habits formed—likelihood that a definition will be familiar because it has been most taught in schools. Brown’s *Grammar of English Grammars*, and commentaries like his, are shaping a concept of literary authority within prosodic discourse. It is both “literary” and “linguistic” (and we also include it in “Typographically Unique” since its many fonts present challenges to machine reading). But it also helps us to rethink the category of the literary as one that might depend entirely on how you have been trained to measure, or count, what that means.

FIGURE XVI.—ONOMATOPCEIA.

[The following lines, from Swift's Poems, satirically mimic the imitative music of a viola.]

" Now slowly move your fiddle-stick ; Now, tantan, tantantivi, quick ; Now trembling, shivering, quivering, quaking, Set hoping hearts of Lovers aching."	" Now sweep, sweep the deep. See Celia, Celia dies, While true Lovers' eyes Weeping sleep, Sleeping weep, Weeping sleep, Bo-peep, bo-peep."
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CHAPTER IV.—VERSIFICATION.

Versification is the forming of that species of literary composition which is called *verse* ; that is, *poetry*, or *poetic numbers*.

SECTION I.—OF VERSE.

Verse, in opposition to prose, is language arranged into metrical lines of some determinate length and rhythm—language so ordered as to produce harmony, by a due succession of poetic feet, or of syllables differing in quantity or stress.

DEFINITIONS AND PRINCIPLES.

The *rhythm* of verse is its relation of quantities ; the modulation of its numbers ; or, the kind of metre, measure, or movement, of which it consists, or by which it is particularly distinguished.

The *quantity* of a syllable, as commonly explained, is the relative portion of time occupied in uttering it. In poetry, every syllable is considered to be either long or short. A long syllable is usually reckoned to be equal to two short ones.

In the construction of English verse, long quantity coincides always with the primary accent, generally also with the secondary, as well as with emphasis ; and short quantity, as reckoned by the poets, is found only in unaccented syllables, and unemphatical monosyllabic words.*

The quantity of a syllable, whether long or short, does not depend on what is called the long or the short sound of a vowel or diphthong, or on a supposed distinction of accent as affecting vowels in some cases and consonants in others, but principally on the degree of energy or loudness with which the syllable is uttered, whereby a greater or less portion of time is employed.

The open vowel sounds, which are commonly but not very accurately termed *long*, are those which are the most easily protracted, yet they often occur in the shortest and feeblest syllables ; while, on the other hand, no vowel sound, that occurs under the usual stress of accent or of emphasis, is either so short in its own nature, or is so " quickly joined to the succeeding letter," that the syllable is not one of long quantity.

Most monosyllables, in English, are variable in quantity, and may be made either long or short, as strong or weak sounds suit the sense and rhythm ; but words of greater length are, for the most part, fixed, their accented syllables being always long, and a syllable immediately before or after the accent almost always short.

One of the most obvious distinctions in poetry, is that of rhyme and blank verse. *Rhyme* is a similarity of sound, combined with a difference : occurring usually between the last syllables of different lines, but sometimes at other intervals ; and so

* To this principle there seems to be now and then an exception, as when a weak dissyllable begins a foot in an anapestic line, as in the following examples :—

" I think—let me see—yes, it is, I declare,
 As long ago now as that Buckingham there,"—*Leigh Hunt*.
 " And Thomson, though best in his indolent fits,
 Either slept himself weary, or blasted his wits."—*Id.*

Here, if we reckon the feet in question to be anapests, we have dissyllables with both parts short. But some, accenting "ago" on the latter syllable, and "Either" on the former, will call "ago now" a bacchus, and "Either slept" an amphibrach : because they make them such by their manner of reading.—*G. B.*

ordered that the rhyming syllables begin differently and end alike. *Blank verse* is verse without rhyme.

The principal rhyming syllables are almost always long. Double rhyme adds one short syllable; triple rhyme, two. Such syllables are redundant in iambic and anapaestic verses; in lines of any other sort, they are generally, if not always, included in the measure.

A *Stanza* is a combination of several verses, or lines, which, taken together, make a regular division of a poem. It is the common practice of good versifiers, to form all stanzas of the same poem after one model. The possible variety of stanzas is infinite; and the actual variety met with in print is far too great for detail.

OBSERVATIONS.

Obs. 1.—*Verse*, in the broadest acceptation of the term, is poetry, or metrical language, in general. This, to the eye, is usually distinguished from prose by the manner in which it is written and printed. For, in very many instances, if this were not the case, the reader would be puzzled to discern the difference. The division of poetry into its peculiar lines, is therefore not a mere accident. The word *verse*, from the Latin *versus*, literally signifies a *turning*. Each full line of metre is accordingly called a *verse*; because, when its measure is complete, the writer *turns* to place an other under it. A *verse*, then, in the primary sense of the word with us, is, “A line consisting of a certain succession of sounds, and number of syllables.”—*Johnson, Walker, Todd, Boles*, and others. Or, according to *Webster*, it is, “A poetic line, consisting of a certain number of long and short syllables, disposed according to the rules of the species of poetry which the author intends to compose.”—See *American Dict.*, 8vo.

Obs. 2.—If to settle the theory of English verse on true and consistent principles, is as difficult a matter, as the manifold contrarieties of doctrine among our prosodists would indicate, there can be no great hope of any scheme entirely satisfactory to the intelligent examiner. The very elements of the subject are much perplexed by the incompatible dogmas of authors deemed skilful to elucidate it. It will scarcely be thought a hard matter to distinguish true verse from prose, yet is it not well agreed, wherein the difference consists: what the generality regard as the most essential elements or characteristics of the former, some respectable authors dismiss entirely from their definitions of both verse and versification. The existence of quantity in our language; the dependence of our rhythms on the division of syllables into long and short; the concurrence of our accent, (except in some rare and questionable instances,) with long quantity only; the constant effect of emphasis to lengthen quantity; the limitation of quantity to mere dural of sound; the doctrine that quantity pertains to all *syllables* as such, and not merely to vowel sounds; the recognition of the same general principles of syllabication in poetry as in prose; the supposition that accent pertains not to certain *letters* in particular, but to certain *syllables* as such; the limitation of accent to stress, or percussion, only; the conversion of short syllables into long, and long into short, by a change of accent; our frequent formation of long syllables with what are called short vowels; our more frequent formation of short syllables with what are called long or open vowels; the necessity of some order in the succession of feet or syllables to form a rhythm; the need of framing each line to correspond with some other line or lines in length; the propriety of always making each line susceptible of scansion by itself; all these points, so essential to a true explanation of the nature of English verse, though, for the most part, well maintained by some prosodists, are nevertheless denied by some, so that opposite opinions may be cited concerning them all. I would not suggest that all or any of these points are thereby made *doubtful*; for there may be opposite judgements in a dozen cases, and yet concurrence enough (if concurrence can do it) to establish them every one.

Obs. 3.—An ingenious poet and prosodist now living,* Edgar Allan Poe, (to whom I owe a word or two of reply,) in his “Notes upon English Verse,” with great self-complacency, represents, that, “While much has been written upon the structure of the Greek and Latin rhythms, comparatively *nothing* has been done as regards the English,” that, “It may be said, indeed, we are *without a treatise* upon our own versification;” that “The very best” *definition* of versification to be found in any of “*our ordinary treatises* on the topic,” has “*not a single point* which does not involve an error;” that, “A *leading defect* in each of *these treatises* is the confining of the subject to mere *versification*, while metre, or rhythm, in general, is the real question at issue;” that, “Versification is *not the art*, but the *act*,” of making verses; that, “A correspondence in the *length* of lines is by no means essential;” that, “*Harmony*,” produced “by the regular alternation of syllables differing in quantity,” does not include “*melody*;” that, “A *regular alternation*, as described, forms *no part* of the principle of metre;” that, “There is no necessity of *any regularity* in the succession of *feet*;” that, “By consequence,” he ventures to “dispute the *essentiality* of any alternation, regular or irregular, of *syllables* long and short;” that, “For *anything* more *intelligible* or more *satisfactory* than this definition [i. e., G. Brown’s former definition of versification,] we shall look in vain in *any published treatise* upon the subject;” that, “So general and so *total a failure* can be

* “Edgar A. Poe, the author, died at Baltimore on Sunday” (the 7th).—*Daily Evening Traveller*, Boston Oct. 9, 1849. This was eight or ten months after the writing of these observations.—G. B.
† “Versification is the art of arranging words into lines of correspondent length, so as to produce harmony by the regular alternation of syllables differing in quantity.”—*Brown’s Institutes of E. Gram.*, p. 235.

INDEX

Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations.

- Abridgment of Lectures on Rhetoric*, An
(Blair), 84, 85
Academy of American Poets, 65n20
accent, 56–59, 94
Accurate New Spelling Dictionary, An
(Fisher), 57
Agbabi, Patience, 115
Ahmed, Sara, 171
Alden, Raymond Macdonald, 99, 147–48
Algee-Hewitt, Mark, 64
alliteration, 56, 114
Analytic Elocution (Zachos), 116, 117
anthologies, 32n6
aphasia, 78
API (application programming interface),
120
appendixes, 8
Aquinas, Thomas, Saint, 40n22
archival studies, 29, 33, 66
archiving, 9
artificial intelligence (AI), 5–6n4, 128
Art of English Poetry, *The* (Bysshe), 50, 54
Art of Reading and Writing in English, *The*
(Watts), 53, 59
Ascham, Roger, 135
Attridge, Derek, 153

Bailey, Herbert, 159
ballads, 39
Barnes, William, 106
Barthes, Roland, 155n38

Bartleby.com, 65n22
Beattie, James, 93
Bell, Alexander Melville, 78–79
bibliography, 29, 33, 134–67
Bitstreams (Kirschenbaum), 20n20
Blair, Hugh, 79, 84, 93
Blake, William, 53, 63
Blaney, Jonathan, 171–72
blank verse, 89
Blei, David, 71
book history, 29, 33, 109, 110
Book Traces (crowd-sourced project), 120
Booth, Alison, 89
Borgman, Christine, 12, 154
Bourdieu, Pierre, 23n2
Bowker, Geoffrey, 89
Boyce, Raymond, 148n24
Bridges, Robert, 43, 46, 164–65n56
Brin, Sergey, 73–74n37
British Periodicals (ProQuest collection),
42, 43, 46
British Poetry 1780–1910 (hypertext archive),
35
Brogan, Jacqui, 163, 164n55
Brogan, T. V. F., 46; career path of, 135, 168–
69; as compiler, 150–57; *EVRG*’s short-
comings conceded by, 151–52; Fussell dis-
paraged by, 146–47; on “genius,” 103n16;
linguistics viewed by, 13, 141–44, 146, 149,
150, 153; on meter and rhythm, 2, 136,
140–42, 149; *Princeton Encyclopedia of*

- Brogan, T. V. F. (*cont.*)
Poetry and Poetics and, 158–68; thoroughness of, 81; as traditionalist, 149; on versification, 9, 37–43, 80, 88, 134, 137, 139–40, 146–48, 152, 156, 157
- Broussard, Meredith, 74
- Brown, Goold, 22–27, 131
- Brown, Susan, 67
- Browning, Robert, 148n23
- Busa, Roberto, 40n22, 153n30
- Buurma, Rachel Sagner, 15
- Bysshe, Edward, 50, 51–52, 53, 131, 148
- Cable, Tom, 40
- caesura, 63
- capitalization, 112
- Chadwyck-Healey, Charles, 64n18
- Chadwyck-Healey poetry collection, 64–66, 118
- Chamberlin, Donald, 148n24
- Chapman, Alison, 66
- Chapters on English Meter* (Mayor), 148
- ChatGPT, 128
- circulation, of poetry, 4, 6, 17, 29, 30, 39
- Clark, John, 125
- classification: academic depreciation of, 91, 135–36; Dewey decimal, 90; by Library of Congress, 81, 82, 89, 154; in PPA, 83–89
- close reading, 5, 14–15, 30, 60, 63, 66, 87, 88, 107
- Cobb, Lyman, 57
- Cobb's New Spelling Book*, 57
- Cohen, Dan, 103–4, 105
- Cohen, Patricia, 105
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 130
- Colored Conventions Project, 68
- Combe, William, 69–71
- Compleat Spelling-Book* (Watts), 59
- Complete Art of Poetry* (Gildon), 51–52
- Composition and Rhetoric* (Tanner), 84
- computational humanities, 2, 11–14, 44, 46, 62, 64, 66, 122, 125–28, 171
- computational linguistics, 150, 152–53
- Comstock, Andrew, 78
- Comstock's Elocution*, 24
- copyright, 96, 111, 121
- Cordell, Ryan, 44n25, 109, 112, 119
- corpora, 46, 64
- couplets, 53
- Crapsey, Adelaide, 122–23
- critical archival studies, 29, 33, 36
- Critical Pronouncing Dictionary*, A (Walker), 57
- cross-references, 40, 42, 135–36, 149–50, 155
- Culler, Dwight, 51, 52–53
- Culler, Jonathan, 114–15
- Cureton, Richard, 153
- “Danger of Phonetics, The” (Saintsbury), 46, 47
- deconstruction, 160
- Dennis, Scott, 203–4n16
- Dewey, Melvil, 90
- diacritical marks, 57, 100–102, 110, 111, 115
- dialect, 94, 106–7, 110–11, 113, 122
- Dickinson, Emily, 63, 102n15
- dictionaries, 24, 60–62; of rhymes, 51, 53–57
- digital hoarding, 43n24
- digital humanities (DH), 2, 9, 11–15, 29; funding of, 169–70; multiple meanings of, 12
- distant reading, 10, 39, 62, 63, 104, 107–8, 118, 122
- Distant Reading* (Moretti), 45
- Dr. Syntax (racehorse), 69–71, 73, 74
- Dotzler, Bernhard, 23n2
- Dryden, John, 153
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence, 106, 107
- duplication, in data, 85
- Dworkin, Craig, 47–48n30, 107n46
- dysprosody, 78
- Early English Books Online (EEBO), 8, 36
- Early Modern OCR Project (eMOP), 108
- Education Act (1870), 69
- EIDOS: The International Prosody Bulletin*, 150–53

- Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), 8, 36, 52, 87, 157
- Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive, 64–65n19
- Elam, Michele, 128
- Eliot, T. S., 148n23
- elocution, 78–79, 81, 84, 88, 97, 98, 106, 113–17
- Ellis, Alexander John, 56, 98, 99
- emphasis, 10, 56, 58–59
- Endnote (software), 42
- Enfield, William, 78
- English Full-Text Poetry Database, 65
- English Parnassus* (Poole), 51
- English Poetry* (archive), 65
- English Verse* (Alden), 147–48
- English Versification, 1570–1980* (EVRG; Brogan), 37, 42, 80, 88, 138–39, 140, 148, 155, 157; cross-references in, 150; Fussell criticized in, 146; as manifesto, 135; PPA linked to, 165; as relational data structure, 162; shortcomings of, 51–52; table of contents of, 156; writing and publication of, 40n22, 134–37, 139
- eScriptorium, 109
- “Essay on Criticism” (Pope), 58
- Essentials of Phonetics* (Ellis), 98
- expressive use, 19–20, 110–11
- fair use, 111n35, 121
- “false” rhymes, 56
- Feist v. Rural Telephone Services Company* (1991), 121
- Felluga, Dino, 118–19
- feminism, 160
- First Lines of English Grammar* (Brown), 22
- Fisher, Anne, 57
- Flanders, Julia, 66
- Folsom, Ed, 45n27
- “For Better for Verse” (Tucker), 125–26
- Foucault, Digital* (Dotzler and Schmidgen), 23n2
- Foucault, Michel, 23n2, 30n3
- Freedgood, Elaine, 62n14
- From Philology to English Studies* (Momma), 28n1
- front matter, 8
- Fussell, Paul, 142–46, 148, 164
- Fyfe, Paul, 109
- Gabrielson, Arvid, 57
- Gall, Sally, 150, 153
- Gardiner, William, 92, 93–95, 148
- Garth, John, 34–35n10
- gender studies, 160
- Gildon, Charles, 51–52, 131
- Godwin, William, 130
- Google, 121
- Google Books, 8, 11, 39, 69–70, 72–74, 81, 97, 103–4n16
- Google Ngram Viewer, 69, 73, 103–4
- grammar books, 1, 4, 6, 21–27
- Grammar of English Grammars, The* (Brown), 21–27, 131
- Greene, Roland, 164
- Griffiths, Eric, 115
- Guest, Edwin, 56
- Guillory, John, 30n4, 48n31
- Gummere, Frances Barton, 48
- Habermas, Jürgen, 23n2
- Hall, Jason, 125
- Hamill, S. S., 77, 78–79
- Hamilton, James, 106
- handwritten text recognition (HTR), 108–9
- Hansen, Kristin, 126
- Hardison, O. B., 158, 161, 162
- Hartman, Charles, 126
- HathiTrust Digital Library, 8, 39, 52, 80–82, 85, 116, 120–21, 157
- Heffernan, Laura, 15
- Helton, Laura, 89–90
- heroic verse, 53
- Heuser, Ryan, 64, 126, 128
- “hexameter mania,” 42, 69
- Historical Poetics project, 16
- History of English Criticism* (Saintsbury), 51

- History of English Prosody* (Saintsbury), 51, 97
 Hoekzema, Loren, 158, 159
 Hollerith, Herman, 64
 Homer, 69
 Hood, Thomas, 54, 131
 Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 114, 148n23
 Houston, Natalie, 66
 Hughes, Langston, 115
 Human Computer Interaction (HCI), 69n34, 113n38
 humanism, 31n5
Hydra, The (anthology), 34
 hypertext, 41, 155
 iamb, 116
 indentation, 108, 112
Index Thomasticus, 40n22
 information science, 29
 Information Seeking Systems (ISS), 69n34
 inscriptions, 29
Institutes of English Grammar (Brown), 22
 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), 85, 94
 “Introductory Lecture” (Thelwall), 130–31
 Jackson, Virginia, 16n18, 115
 Jespersen, Otto, 12–13n14
 Jockers, Matthew, 72–73n36
 Johnson, Samuel, 85, 157
 Johnston, Ben, 41, 118
 Joint Information Systems Committee, 34
 Jones, Daniel, 46
 Jones, William, 56
 JTAP (Technical Applications Program), 34–35n10
 Karlin, Daniel, 65
 keyword searching, 18, 55, 131–32
 Kiparsky, Paul, 126
 Kipling, Rudyard, 54
 Kirschenbaum, Matthew, 20n20, 75–76, 107n26, 112, 151
 Kittler, Friedrich, 23n2
 kymograph, 145
 Labbe, Jacqueline, 53
 Lamborn, E. A., 113
 Lancaster, Frederick, 154
 Lancelot, Claude, 52, 131
 Landow, George, 36, 155
 Lanier, Sidney, 48
 large language models (LLMs), 76
 Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), 72n36
 Layne-Worthey, Glenn, 64
 Leighton, Angela, 114–15
 Levy, Amy, 65
 Library of Congress (LOC) classifications, 81, 82, 89, 154
 linguistics, 2, 93, 114; in Brogan’s writings, 13, 141–44, 146, 149, 150, 153; literary studies vs., 5, 28; technological impact on, 152
 literary criticism, 19, 28, 47
 literary studies, 5, 28–29
 Liu, Alan, 154
 Logan, John, 164–65n56
 Lowell, James Russell, 106
 Luhman, Nicklas, 23n2
 Mandell, Laura, 108, 119
 Manovich, Lev, 45
 Manwaring, Edward, 52
 MARC (machine-readable catalog) system, 82–83n3, 154
 markup language, 63, 112
 Marsh, George, 56
 Mason, John, 52
 Matthews, Brander, 54, 56
 Mayer, Marissa, 203–4n16
 Mayor, Joseph B., 148
 McGann, Jerome, 9, 33, 35, 63
 McGill, Meredith, 16n18, 106, 111n35
 McKay, Claude, 63
 media studies, 29
 mediation, 3–5, 17, 30; data and archives as, 9, 12

- melodrama, 106
 metadata, 8, 10, 19, 46, 79–80, 83–89, 112, 120, 132
 Metahaven, 75n39
 meter, 5, 11, 63, 89, 122
 Microsoft Word, 151
 Miles, Josephine, 153
 Miller, J. Hillis, 35
 Milton, John, 97–98, 148n23
 Mimno, David, 71–73
 Momma, Haruko, 28n1, 30n3
 Monboddoo, James Burnett, Lord, 93
 Moretti, Franco, 45
 music, 92–95
Music of Nature, The (Gardiner), 92, 93–95

 Naydan, Mary, 86
New Cambridge Bibliography, The, 65
 Newcomer, Alphonso, 56
New English Dictionary, 79
 New Historicism, 160
New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (NPEPP, 1993), 134, 135, 161–63, 168, 169
 n-grams, 69, 73, 103–4
 NLP (natural language processing), 153
 Noble, Safiyah, 74
 “Notes upon English Verse” (Poe), 25
 novels, 35, 53, 62

 OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), 39, 151, 154
 Omond, T. S., 97
 O’Neill, Vathy, 74
On English Homophones (Bridges), 46
 optical character recognition (OCR), 6, 44n25, 108–12, 121
 “Order of Rimes in the English Sonnet, The” (Weeks), 124
 orthoepy, 78
 Orwant, John, 105
 oscillograph, 145
 Osmond, T. S., 40

 Otlet, Paul, 40n22
 Owen Collection, 34–35n10

 Page, Lawrence, 73–74n37, 103–4n16
 page description language (PDL), 161
 Parikka, Jussi, 23n2
 Parker, Andrew, 106
 Patmore, Coventry, 48, 131
Penguin Book of Victorian Verse (1997), 65
 performance, 78–79
 Perloff, Marjorie, 153
 philology, 12n14
 phonemes, 10
 phonetics, 55, 98, 123, 145; in Brogan’s writings, 143, 144; development of, 84, 87, 98, 125; opponents of, 46, 47
 phonetic speech, 58
 phonology, 12–13n14
 Piper, Andrew, 28, 31n5
 Pitman, Isaac, 78–79
 Plotting Poetry (research group), 63–64n17
 Poe, Edgar Allen, 24, 25
Poetic Meter and Poetic Form (Fussell), 142–43, 146, 147
 poetry handbooks, 16
Poetry Magazine, 64–65n19
 Poole, Joshua, 51
 Pope, Alexander, 58, 148n23
 Porter, Dorothy, 90
 Porter, Ebenezer, 78
 PostScript (software), 161
 Pound, Ezra, 148n23
Practical Guide for English Versification (Hood), 54
 prefaces, 8
 Preminger, Alex, 158, 159, 161, 162
 Priestley, Joseph, 93
Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (PEPP), 146, 149, 158–68; *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (NPEPP, 1993), 134, 135, 161–63, 168, 169
Princeton Handbook of Multicultural Poetries, 162, 163–64

- Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, 158, 162, 163
- Princeton Prosody Archive (PPA), 2, 3, 101;
in the academy, 28, 135, 167; aims of, 90;
classifications in, 83–89; deselection in, 61–62; how to cite, 172; human-textual interface structured by, 113, 121–22; methodology for, 10; origins of, 14; outlook for, 18, 172, 173; scope of, 6–9, 94; searching in, 19, 132–33; theory vs. practice in, 12
- Prins, Yopie, 16n18
- print culture, 106
- Project Gutenberg, 44, 64–65n19
- pronunciation, 5, 7, 44, 46, 53, 55–59, 78, 113, 122, 142
- ProQuest, 42, 44, 64n18, 80, 106
- Prosodia Rationalis* (Steele), 97, 132
- Prosodic (program), 126
- prosodists, 39, 100, 104, 139, 150
- prosody: in Brown's grammar books, 22;
classification and, 82–83, 87–88; historical, 5, 10, 11, 15–17, 31–33, 37, 60–61, 119, 122, 128, 147, 151–54; judgment and interpretation linked in, 48–49; in literary studies vs. linguistics, 5, 7; prosodic discourse and, 18–19; renewed interest in, 152, 160; speech therapy and, 78; as versification and pronunciation, 7; versification vs., 40
- Prosody (racehorse), 69–71, 73
- provenance, 7, 44, 49, 65, 83, 85, 87, 173
- Puttenham, George, 56
- Pygmalion* (Shaw), 113
- Quatre traités de poésies, latine, française, italienne, et espagnole* (Lancelot), 52
- reception theory, 160
- recitation, 59, 84–85, 88, 113–14
- reprinting, 6, 39, 61, 85, 106, 131
- Research Collection and Preservation (ReCAP) consortium, 86
- rhetoric, 12–13n14, 76, 113
- Rhymes and Meters* (Winslow), 55
- rhyming dictionaries, 51, 53–57
- Rhyming Dictionary* (Walker), 56, 57–59
- rhythm, 5, 78, 98, 99, 122; “Anglo-Saxon,” 102; in Brogan's writings, 136, 140–42, 149; in Brown's *Grammar*, 24–25; contested meanings of, 128; meter equated with, 101n13; “natural,” 114, 144; physicality of, 144–45; racial ideologies of, 125; Thomson's view of, 99–100; Watts's view of, 59
- Richards, I. A., 75
- Richardson, Samuel, 53
- Rickard, Edith, 153n30
- Riley, James Whitcomb, 106
- Rime as a Criterion of the Pronunciation of Spenser, Pope, Byron, and Swinburne* (Gabbrielson), 57
- Risam, Roopika, 65–66
- Rise and Fall of Meter, The* (Martin), 9, 38
- Romanticism, 130, 131
- Romantic Period Poetry Archive, 64–65n18
- Rosenthal, M. L., 153
- Rossetti Archive, 35
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, 63
- Rowland, Thomas, 69–71
- Rules for Rhyme* (Hood), 54, 131
- Rush, James, 78
- Saintsbury, George, 37, 43, 46–49, 51, 97, 142
- Saussure, Ferdinand de, 12–13n14
- Say, Samuel, 52
- Scandroid (program), 126, 127
- scansion, 31, 99, 123, 145–47; computational, 125; didactic, 101, 111, 126; differing views of, 97–98; interpretive, 39; in modern classroom, 101, 102; subjectivity of, 103, 110; typography and, 115–18, 122, 142, 161
- Schipper, Jakob, 148
- Schmidgen, Henning, 23n2
- Schmidt, Benjamin, 72–73n36
- Scholemaster, The* (Ascham), 135
- searching, 19, 49; finding aid use distinguished from, 68; interfaces for, 69n34;

- by keyword, 18, 55, 131–32; researching vs., 69–71
- Second Tour of Dr. Syntax in Search of Conso-
lation, The* (Combe), 69
- Shakespeare, William, 148n23
- Shechtman, Anna, 20n20
- Siefring, Judith, 171–72
- “Slumber Did My Spirit Seal, A” (Word-
sworth), 32n6
- Smith, Abby, 35–36
- Smith, Courtney Weiss, 130
- Smith, David, 109, 119
- Society for Pure English (SPE), 44, 46
- songs, 29
- sonnets, 122, 124, 126
- spacing, 63, 112
- spelling reform, 57, 94
- SQL (structured query language), 148n24
- stammering, 78
- stanzas, 63
- Star, Susan Leigh, 89
- statistics, 17
- Stauffer, Andrew, 118, 120
- Steedman, Carolyn, 65
- Steele, Joshua, 52, 97, 131, 132
- Stein, Benno, 23n2
- Stoler, Ann Laura, 65
- Study in English Metrics, A* (Crapsey), 123
- Study of Metre, A* (Osmond), 40
- Study of Versification* (Matthews), 54
- Sweet, Henry, 12–13n14, 78–79
- Swidzinski, Joshua, 130
- syllabification, 19, 24–25, 52
- tagging, 63
- Tanner, William, 84
- Teaching Archive* (Heffernan and Buurma),
15
- Technical Applications Program (JTAP),
34–35n10
- Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson, baron, 148n23
- Terras, Melissa, 108–9
- Text-Encoding Initiative (TEI), 45, 63
- textual criticism, 33
- Thelwall, John, 78, 97–98, 129, 130–31, 148
- Third Tour of Dr. Syntax in Search of a Wife,
The* (Combe), 69–70
- Thomson, William, 99–100
- Tooke, Horne, 130
- topic modeling, 71
- Tour of Doctor Syntax in Search of the Pictur-
esque, The* (Combe), 69, 70, 71
- Toward Paperless Information Systems* (Lan-
caster), 154
- Transkribus, 108
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, 65
- Tsur, Reuven, 153
- Tucker, Herbert, 125
- typography, 7, 19, 72–73n36, 96–128
- Underwood, Ted, 11, 68, 105n18, 154
- Unicode, 7, 19
- Universal Bibliography, 40n22
- University Microfilms (UMI), 151
- van Leeuwen, Steven H., 65n22
- Verseform* (Brogan), 149–50
- versification, 4, 9, 10, 13, 51, 54, 84, 114, 122;
in Brogan’s writings, 9, 37–43, 80, 88, 134,
139–40, 146–48, 152, 156, 157; in Brown’s
grammar books, 22–25; differing ap-
proaches to, 40–41, 43, 94, 102; in elocu-
tion movement, 78; history of, 29, 31, 32–
33, 40, 87, 139, 147, 155; measurement of,
37; prosody distinguished from, 40; pros-
ody equated with, 5, 7
- Versification* (journal), 37, 155, 157
- Victorian Web*, 36, 155
- Walker, John, 53–59
- Warnke, Frank J., 158, 161, 162
- Watson, Thomas, Sr., 40n22, 64n18
- Watts, Isaac, 53, 59
- Weber, Max, 23n2
- Webster, Augusta, 65
- Webster’s Dictionary*, 24
- Weeks, L. T., 123, 124
- Whitman, Walt, 63, 65n22

- | | |
|--|---|
| Wickenden, Alice, 44n25 | <i>Works of the Poets</i> (Johnson), 85 |
| Wilson, Meagan, 85 | Wythoff, Grant, 80, 89 |
| Winslow, Horatio, 55 | |
| word lists, 19, 53, 55–57, 60–62, 67, 70, 86 | Yee, Capella, 157n40 |
| WordPerfect, 151 | Yokoyama, Setsuko, 126 |
| WordStar (software), 151 | |
| Wordsworth, William, 32n6, 130, 148n23 | Zotero (software), 42 |