

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Literary Fiction and Social Reality

Where does fiction begin and reality end? While the myriad intersections of literature and society have traditionally been at the core of literary scholarship,<sup>1</sup> it is hard to draw clear-cut boundaries between stories and the social, historical, economic, and cultural environments in which they function and were created. It seems obvious to point out that literary fiction does not exclusively exist in the space between the front and back covers of a book. Not only are the fictional worlds depicted within its pages often modeled on the world “outside” the story, but they also have the potential to shape, influence, distort, or provoke the norms, values, customs, and beliefs of a time and a place. But although the boundaries between fiction and reality are evidently fluid and porous, one of the most foundational concepts of literary theory assumes a binary opposition between the two. From Plato onward, the term *mimesis* has invoked numerous juxtapositions between the two seemingly (in) separable domains of fiction and reality, literature and society, art and life.

This Element sheds new light on this ubiquitous yet complex notion of mimesis. By systematically comparing the social dynamics of the Dutch population at a given time with the social dynamics of characters in Dutch literary fiction published in the same period, it aims to pinpoint the ways in which, and the extent to which, literary fiction mirrors or shapes the societal context from which it emerged. While close-reading-based scholarship on this topic has been limited to qualitative interpretations of allegedly exemplary works, the present study uses data-driven tools of social network analysis to systematically assess the imitative elements of the social dynamics of characters within larger-scale, representative collections of books.

Showcasing some of the potential uses of social network analysis for the study of fictional worlds, this Element operates at the intersection between sociological and literary methods. In a benchmark article on the various forms that sociologies of literature have adopted in the past, James English (2010) has argued that the essence of sociological methods is *description*, whereas literary methods are often geared toward *critique*. The methodological claim of the present study is that social network analysis of literary characters contributes to

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<sup>1</sup> Not only in the narrow sense of “symptomatic” forms of scholarship that considers literary texts as symptoms of deeper societal issues (cf. the discussion of this field in e.g. Felski 2015), but also in the broader sense of historicist approaches in which literature is studied in relation to its various – social, economic, cultural, and so on – historical contexts (e.g. Greenblatt 2005). Although some branches of literary studies have been famous for their text-centric approach (e.g. New Criticism or Russian formalism), it is safe to say that literature is only very rarely studied in complete isolation from the society in which it emerged or operates.

descriptions that can be used as a basis for close-reading-based critiques of fictional social dynamics. For discussions on mimesis and literature, a mixed-methods framework based on both description and critique is particularly useful. In order to pinpoint the complex relation between the fictional worlds of literary characters and the social reality of a society at a given time and place, this study uses social network analysis to describe statistically the encounters of characters in books and also uses the critical methods of cultural analysis to reflect on how these descriptions confirm or question theoretical claims on mimesis and literature. Whereas the statistical descriptions provided by social network analysis are necessary for systematic comparison between the social worlds of fictional characters and the social worlds of people, these descriptions evoke fundamental questions about the nature of literary fiction and its intersections with social reality that should be discussed with the critical tools of cultural analysis. Building on critical mimesis theory, this Element thus pays special attention to abstract, elusive notions such as “real,” “fictional,” and “reflection.” What does it mean for a societal phenomenon to be reflected, mirrored, echoed, or reproduced in the dynamics between fictional characters?

Section 1.2 situates the present study within a long-standing discussion on the concept of mimesis. It does so by distinguishing between the two extremes in this debate: a reflection theory of mimesis stating that fiction *reflects* social reality and a control theory of anti-mimesis stating that fiction *shapes* social reality. While the various arguments for or against both theories have been expressed in unequivocal terms by proponents on both ends of the spectrum (respectively Plato and Oscar Wilde), the truth – as always – lies somewhere in the middle. It seems, furthermore, that most literary scholarship implicitly adheres to a more nuanced, gradual theory of mimesis in which literary works have the potential to both reflect and shape certain aspects of social reality up to a certain extent. I will use Caroline Levine’s *Forms* (2015) as a theoretical vantage point from which to interpret the results of my analyses in light of this gradual spectrum. In Section 1.3, I will formulate the main research questions and hypotheses and outline the structure of the Element.

## 1.2 From Plato to Oscar Wilde: Mimesis versus Anti-mimesis

Mimesis is among the oldest and most fundamental concepts of literary theory. For that very reason it is particularly hard to outline its historical development without falling prey to a schematic representation of affairs.<sup>2</sup> Without any

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<sup>2</sup> Trying to make sense of the “very long, and in many respects confused” history of imitation in literary theory, Colin Burrow contends that the concept of mimesis was “extremely complex in sense from its earliest recorded occurrences” (cited in Gregory 2020, 27).

intention of providing an all-encompassing overview of the various meanings the term has taken on throughout the ages, I briefly sketch the dynamic between Plato's earliest writings on mimesis and later Romantic attitudes toward the term.<sup>3</sup> This dynamic will serve as a theoretical point of departure that is unavoidably schematic but also provides a practical means to computationally operationalize questions about the ways in which literary fiction realistically reflects societal trends of a time and a place.

Since Plato's introduction of the term "mimesis" in the *Republic* it has continued to exert influence over theories of artistic representation. Derrida contended that "the whole history of the interpretation of the arts and letters has moved and been transformed within the diverse logical possibilities opened up by the concept of *mimesis*" (cited in Potolsky 2006, 2; emphasis in original text). At first glance, the idea that literature imitates life makes sense as authors often seem to write about the world around them. The history of literary theory has, however, witnessed a diverse range of attitudes toward this seemingly clear idea. While both Plato and Aristotle take their cue from the belief that art mirrors reality, they draw different conclusions as to the moral aspects of artistic representation. For Plato, the imitative nature of literature is a reason to ban poets and artists from the perfect city. As a mere copy of a copy ("twice removed from reality"), literature is illusory and deceptive. By contrast, Aristotle sees artistic imitation as perfectly "natural, rational and educational" and even "beneficial" (Potolsky 2006, 46). It does not merely copy the real; it has the potential to reveal universal truths and produce cathartic effects in human beings.

From Plato and Aristotle onward, writers, scholars, and critics from various disciplinary backgrounds have exploited the term for their own ends. The concept took on a life on its own far outside the realm of the arts and the humanities. In recent times, there has been an increasing interest in mimesis within both the social and natural sciences.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of clarity, I will stick to discussions on mimesis within the arts and the humanities – and more specifically to discussions on literary representation – without excluding the possibility that my findings are relevant outside the disciplinary boundaries of literary and cultural studies. Thus, while mimesis has been studied from a wide variety of research angles and fields (for an overview, see Gebauer & Wulf 1995; Potolsky 2006), this

<sup>3</sup> It is worthwhile noting that Plato discusses mimesis primarily in philosophical terms, while Romantic authors (like Oscar Wilde) did so primarily in terms of writing practices. Although the focus of these discussions is different (either scholarly or artistically), I will not make a fundamental distinction between the two because both types of discussions have equally shaped the intellectual discourse on mimesis.

<sup>4</sup> For an overarching, transdisciplinary view on mimesis, see the ERC-funded project *Homo Mimeticus* led by Nidesh Lawtoo at KU Leuven ([www.homomimeticus.eu/](http://www.homomimeticus.eu/)).

Element narrows it down to mimesis in the sense of literary realism. To narrow it down even further, this Element does *not* address the mimetic processes of *imitatio* (how artists copy their role models) and theatre and theatricality (how audiences are influenced by art); instead it focuses specifically on the ways in which literature realistically depicts the world it was produced in.

The idea that literature reflects life, reality, or society in one way or another runs like a red thread through theories about literary representation from antiquity onward, although Plato's radical conclusion that literature therefore is deceptive and dangerous is only rarely repeated in later centuries. As of today, the seminal work of literary theory reflecting on this tradition is still Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946 [2003]). Starting from the assumption that there is a relation between the rhetorical style of a literary work and the sociopolitical context of that time, Auerbach argues that each period in Western cultural history has its own particular way of "articulating reality" in literary form (2003; foreword by Said) by demonstrating this in works ranging from Homer's *Odyssey* (c. eighth century BC) to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Whereas Auerbach's study theorizes the relation between literary works and social reality explicitly in terms of mimesis, most modern literary scholarship assumes that there is such a relation – whatever form that may take – without emphasizing its particular dynamics.<sup>5</sup>

The conventional narrative states that theories arguing against the Platonic assumption that literature is a reflection of reality emerge mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onward (e.g. Potolsky 2006). Famous in this respect is Oscar Wilde's anti-mimesis essay *The Decay of Lying* ([1889] 1891) for its *l'art pour l'art* claims that art only expresses its *own* contents and that life is not reflected in art but rather the other way around – that life imitates art. Wilde's theory is exemplary of the anti-mimesis paradigm shift within the Romantic period that was first described by M. H. Abrams in his seminal work *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953). The metaphor in the book's title serves to illustrate the rupture in literary history that allegedly took place in the Romantic period: whereas earlier writers tended

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<sup>5</sup> Ideological approaches to literature, for instance, tend to assume that literary works are products of their environments without making explicit how the dynamics between literary fiction and social reality are manifested. A recent example is *Affectieve crisis; literair herstel* (2021; *Affective crisis: Literary recovery*) by Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse, in which the authors analyze how millennial literature reflects, for instance, a particular response to present-day capitalist societies.

to view literature as a mirror of reality, Romantic writing was like a lamp illuminating the world and bringing color to gray social realities.

It seems safe to say that discussions on literary representation along the lines of Auerbach's and Abrams' seminal studies are prone to the classic "chicken or egg problem." Like most phenomena, literary representation as (anti-)mimetic is not an either/or issue but rather exists on a spectrum: it is fairly possible for a literary work to both reflect certain aspects of social reality and shape that same reality in other ways. For the field of Dutch literature, Jacob Jan Cremer's *Fabriekskinderen* (Factory children) (1863) exemplifies how literary works simultaneously reflect and shape social reality. Commissioned by a government official to help further legislation on child labor, the popular Dutch author visited a textile factory in the city of Leiden where children were put to work, after which he wrote an all-revealing novella that reflected the harsh realities these children were facing. This book is commonly regarded as having greatly influenced Dutch public opinion on child labor, which eventually resulted in legislation – the so-called "kinderwetje Van Houten" (1874) – that abolished labor for children below twelve years of age in the Netherlands. By means of a realistic literary depiction of children's working conditions, Cremer's book contributed to a shift in the societal debate on the issue. As such, *Fabriekskinderen* first reflected and then influenced social reality.

While Western literary history, at least since the upsurge of realism and naturalism, has witnessed a wide variety of other books that are known to have shaped social reality by realistically reflecting the (harsh) conditions of particular social groups,<sup>6</sup> the dynamic relation between fiction and reality for most literary works is probably not so crystal clear as it is in such examples. For the multitude of the less obvious cases, a tradition of literary criticism that prevailed between the 1930s and the 1950s seems particularly suited to grasping the gradual nature of (anti-)mimetic literary representations. Often working with relatively large corpora, these scholars systematically studied how societal trends (e.g. female employment, national norms and values, divorce) were reflected in literary fiction at a given time (e.g. Inglis 1938; Berelson & Salter 1946; Barnett & Gruen 1948; Albrecht 1956). In 1938, for example, Ruth A. Inglis wrote an article with the ambitious title "An Objective Approach to the Relationship between Fiction and Society," in which she quantitatively compares the increasing female employment in the late 1930s in America

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<sup>6</sup> To name just a few of the most famous ones from the nineteenth century: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) influenced political thought on slavery by depicting the harsh reality of slaves; and Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878) shaped discourses on gender hierarchies by realistically describing the social position of women around the time of their publications.

with the employment of female characters in 420 American short stories over a period of thirty-five years. This is her methodological point of departure:

First, the heroine is statistically a simple, tangible unit of measurement which is comparable to the members of the feminine population at large. Feminine attributes have been a focal point in social change of late. Socially, politically, and economically women have entered new fields of activity. Increasingly large numbers of women have left their homes to work in offices or factories. Meanwhile, what was happening to the heroines of fiction? What percentage of them were gainfully employed? If there was an increase since 1900, did it precede or follow the actual increase in employed women? An increase in the number of women gainfully occupied followed by an increased number of employed heroines would constitute substantial evidence for the reflection theory. If the order of events were reversed, it would support the control theory, even admitting there were other factors than literature involved in the actual social change. (Inglis 1938, 527)

Does literary fiction precede or follow societal trends? The present study aims to take this seemingly simple yet complex question to the next level by applying cutting-edge methods of social network analysis to fictional worlds of characters (e.g. Labatut & Bost 2019; Smeets 2021). Such data-driven, statistics-based techniques can help to formalize the approach to literary representation as suggested by Inglis and her contemporaries. Following the basics of its methodological framework, this Element explores the two general hypotheses that Inglis uses as her point of departure:

1. literature reflects societal trends (the reflection theory); and
2. literature shapes or incites societal trends (the social control theory).

Although these hypotheses are of course extremely schematic (it is not *either* reflection *or* control), they nonetheless serve as a means to gain insight as to where literary works should be plotted on the reflection–control spectrum.

Unlike Inglis and others working in this tradition of literary study, however, I want to avoid the impression that this is an either/or issue. In the data-driven analysis presented in Section 1.3, I start by using the techniques of social network analysis to pinpoint where and how elements of both reflection and social control seem present in the dynamics between Dutch literary fiction and society. This is the phase of *description*, which James English (2010) considers characteristic for sociological methods (see Section 1.1). As a framework for this phase of the research, the binary logic of the reflection and control theories are perfectly suited, since the goal here is to indicate the extent to which fictional social networks converge with certain societal trends. The simple question that is central in this phase is: how (dis)similar are networks in fiction to real-world networks?

For the next phase of *critique*, however, this question falls short of capturing the subtle meanings of these observed (dis)similarities between fiction and society. What does it mean if networks of fictional characters differ from or correspond with networks of people? And what does it tell us about mimesis?

Caroline Levine's *Forms* (2015) provides a theoretical vantage point from which to make sense of such questions. Although she does not focus specifically on the concept of mimesis, her book's ambition is to move beyond the deadlock that seems to have been reached in discussions between formalist and historicist literary scholars. While it seems obvious that it is not solely the content of a work nor only its historical contexts that ascribe meaning to it, various approaches to the study of literature typically foreground one of these two aspects. While, for instance, historicist approaches such as Greenblatt's New Historicism emphasize how literary works are products of their environment, formalist approaches such as New Criticism discuss literature on its own terms. Theoretical discussions on mimesis are also about what comes first: the literary work (e.g. Wilde) or the environment it is part of (e.g. Plato). Levine's work serves as an inspiration to get out of this deadlock in three ways. First, she proposes a wider definition of the term "form" that also includes sociopolitical experience. Forms, in her view, are everywhere. Form is not restricted to the aesthetic content of cultural objects (e.g. narrative structure, themes, style); formal arrangements are also found in, for instance, workplaces, households, politics, social events, and so on. Second, no form is a priori dominant. While, for instance, historicizing Marxist approaches tend to regard sociopolitical mechanisms as a base structure organizing everything including artistic expressions, Levine does not assume that either the social or the aesthetic is the root cause for the other. Third, forms can travel across domains and collide in many ways. Forms like the gender binary, for instance, are present in a variety of domains, both social and aesthetic. And while their arrangement will be influenced by the specific contexts they are manifested in (e.g. gender binaries might be hierarchically organized differently in Dutch politics than in Dutch fiction), forms, at their essence, exist on their own terms.

In short, Levine's new formalism is a promising theoretical point of departure for a study on mimesis and fiction because it moves beyond the binary logic of reflection and control theories. As such, it provides a less schematic, more subtle terminology with which to make sense of the statistical results that will be presented in the next sections. In a practical sense, however, Levine's approach is rather vague when it comes to operationalization. Although her analyses of case studies are well-argued and thought-provoking, it is unclear how to transpose them to other examples. In order to provide a more clearly outlined technique that can be used to apply Levine's ideas in scholarly practice more broadly, this

Element uses statistics-based character network analysis to study the encounters, collisions, and clashes between both social and aesthetic forms.

### 1.3 Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Outline of the Element

The central focus of this Element is the formal arrangement of the network, more particularly social networks of both fictional characters and people. For the sake of convenience, it takes literary fiction published in the Dutch language as its research object (because I am a specialist in this field), but its approach could easily be transposed to other language areas.

In the remainder of this Element, I use the term “Dutch literature” broadly to refer to works of literature written in the Dutch language. Although the Dutch language area is not restricted to the Netherlands and Flanders,<sup>7</sup> the corpora analyzed in the next sections exclusively contain works from authors born or living in these geographical areas. In terms of its potential readership and number of publications, Dutch literature is one of the minor European literatures.<sup>8</sup> But while Dutch literature, like all literatures, has a history specific to its own social, cultural, and economic contexts, its development conforms to broader cultural trends.<sup>9</sup> Romanticism, for instance, emerged relatively late in Dutch literature compared to other European countries, but it has undoubtedly left its mark on the literary field.<sup>10</sup> Also, in the last two decades or so it has

<sup>7</sup> Dutch also has an official status in other constituent countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, such as Aruba, Curacao, and Sint Maarten, as well as in Suriname, which is a former colony.

<sup>8</sup> For a reflection on the status of Dutch literature in a broader transnational context, see Elke Brems, Theresia Feldmann, Orsolya Réthelyi, and Ton van Kalmthout (2020), “The transnational trajectories of Dutch literature as a minor literature: A view from world literature and translation studies,” *Dutch Crossing* 44, no. 2: 125–135, DOI: 10.1080/03096564.2020.1747005.

<sup>9</sup> See the nine-volume series on Dutch literary history *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur*, published between 2006 and 2017. See also Willem van den Berg and Piet Couttenier, *Alles is taal geworden: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1800–1900* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2009); Jacqueline Bel, *Bloed en rozen: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1900–1945* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2018); Hugo Brems, *Altijd weer die vogels die nesten beginnen: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1945–2005* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2013); Frits van Oostrom, *Stemmen op schrift: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2006); Frits van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1300–1400* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2013); Herman Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1400–1560* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2007); Karel Porteman and Mieke Smits-Veldt, *Een nieuw vaderland voor de muzen: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1560–1700* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2008); Inger Leemans and Gert-Jan Johannes, *Worm en donder: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1700–1800: de Republiek* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2013); and Tom Verschaffel, *De weg naar het binnenland: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1700–1800: de Zuidelijke Nederlanden* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Marita Mathijssen, *Nederlandse literatuur in de Romantiek* [Dutch Romantic literature] (Nijmegen: Van Tilt: 2004).



become commonplace to accuse Dutch writers of an inward focus and navel-gazing,<sup>11</sup> which, however, seems to be part of a more global cultural trend that foregrounds affectivity (Demeyer & Vitse 2020). While some of the findings presented in the next sections are thus specific to the Dutch literary field, there is no fundamental reason to assume that Dutch literature exists in isolation from other literatures. It would be, furthermore, worthwhile to test in further research whether similar results would be generated for literature from other language areas.

While “fiction” and “literature” tend to be used as umbrella terms in discussions on mimesis (see Section 1.2), they are broad categories that encompass a variety of media and genres with their own histories and institutional contexts. Without suggesting that other media and genres are less relevant, I will narrow down these categories to the medium of the novel and more particularly the genre of highbrow literary fiction. The reason for this is twofold. First of all, I focus on the novel because there are various scholars claiming that this medium has played a pivotal role in the development of modern societies. Perhaps most famously, Lynn Hunt has argued in *Inventing Human Rights* (2007) that novels such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) have been crucial for the emergence of human rights because of their appeal to the reader’s empathy. Others have put forward similar arguments about the historical function of the novel in modern societies.<sup>12</sup> In order to assess the dynamics between aesthetic and social form, the present study takes these theories as a vantage point for an empirical comparison of novels to their sociohistorical contexts. Second, as such theories tend to rely on a range of canonical, highbrow authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Harriet Beecher Stowe, I will equally focus on novels within the category of highbrow literary fiction. While being fully aware of the potential differences between low-, middle-, and highbrow forms of fiction,<sup>13</sup> the present study targets novels that are traditionally held in higher esteem than other forms of literary fiction for the very reason

<sup>11</sup> For a reflection on this accusation, see Saskia Pieterse, “Het hoogopgeleide navelstaren [The higher-educated navelgazer],” *De Groene Amsterdammer* October 31, 2018 ([www.groene.nl/artikel/het-hoogopgeleide-navelstaren](http://www.groene.nl/artikel/het-hoogopgeleide-navelstaren)).

<sup>12</sup> Ian Watt, for instance, emphasizes in *The Rise of the Novel* (1960) how the novel contributed to the changing societal position of women. And in a similar vein as Lynn Hunt (2007), Martha Nussbaum (2010), and Bas Heijne (2011) foreground the ways in which novels strengthen our empathy and moral involvement.

<sup>13</sup> In “The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception” (1947/2017), Horkheimer and Adorno famously conceptualized the division between “popular” or lowbrow and “literary” or highbrow forms of fiction by stressing their different social dimensions. In discussions about the middlebrow in Dutch literary fiction, it is argued that works in this category have a different relation to societal trends than do other types of fiction (e.g. Van Boven 2011).

that these are often the examples on which literary theory is based. The analyses in the next sections should be seen as a first step toward a systematic comparison of literary fiction and social reality – the goal is to carry out cross-genre and more extensive cross-period analyses on the same topic. Furthermore, there is a pragmatic reason to narrow down this Element’s scope to one medium (the novel) and to one genre (highbrow literary fiction). As it is particularly hard to distinguish between genres computationally,<sup>14</sup> it was convenient that I could rely on an external criterion for the compilation of the Libris 2013 corpus (analyzed in Sections 2 and 3). All 170 novels in that corpus were submitted to the bulk list of the most prestigious literary prize in the Dutch language area and therefore made an appeal to the highest literary recognition possible. And although these kinds of literary prizes did not exist in the 1960s, I made an effort to compile a comparable collection of texts for the Sanders 1960s corpus (analyzed in Section 3). More information on the corpus collection and data extraction will follow in the methodological frameworks of the next sections.

The Element is divided into two complementary parts, the first of which takes a synchronic approach, focusing on one year of literary production, and the second a comparative approach, studying the changes between two periods of literary production. Here I will briefly introduce the research questions and hypotheses that will be assessed in the next two sections.

1. How similar are social networks of fictional characters to social networks of people at a given time and place?

In Section 2, I will compare a sample of network data from the Dutch population with a sample of character network data from Dutch literary fiction in the same period. Before doing so, I will first describe various computational techniques that can be used to extract character networks from literary texts and provide some arguments for the technique I developed earlier (Smeets 2021). Afterward, I will use this technique to compare social networks of 1,069 people within contemporary Dutch society with social networks of 2,137 characters in 170 literary novels written in the Dutch language. Two representative samples of data are used for this comparison that have been used in previous sociological and literary studies: the Survey of the Social Networks of the Dutch (SSND) and a heavily annotated collection of metadata on all identified characters in the Libris 2013 corpus (e.g. van der Deijl et al. 2016; Volker & Smeets 2019; Smeets 2021).

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Ted Underwood, “The life cycles of genres,” *Cultural Analytics*, May 23, 2016. DOI: 10.22148/16.005.