

Rediscovering the 1890s: A Norwegian Poetry Corpus^{*}

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Abstract

What language was used most for written poetry in the 1890s in Norway? What was the gender distribution of published poets in that decade? To what degree does the lyrical subject "reveal" itself, explicitly or implicitly, in the poems? This article presents answers to these questions in relation to corpus of poetry written by Norwegian and Danish poets, published between 1890 and 1899. The corpus contains 3,440 poems from 81 books, encoded in TEI XML, and annotated with author and publication metadata, as well as lyrical features such as rhyme schemes and presence of the lyrical subject. The objective of constructing this corpus is to fill a resource gap for research on Norwegian poetry. It provides empirical data for investigating historical claims about the literary period, and comparing findings from both close and distant readings of the data. It is structured in a well-known format (TEI) that enables testing and development of automatic poetry analysis tools, as well as the addition of further annotations. We have published the data in a public repository, making it easily findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable (FAIR).

Keywords

poetry, corpus construction, Norwegian literary history, computational literary analysis, rhyme

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a new corpus of digitized poetry published between 1890 and 1899 by Norwegian and Danish poets for a Norwegian audience. The construction of this specific dataset is part of the research project Norwegian Romantic Nationalisms (NORN) at the University of Oslo, aiming to model nineteenth century literature.¹ NORN Poems is a corpus that encapsulates many different linguistic and genre-specific features from a decade with a large literary production in Norway. While previous literary research on the period has mainly focused on a few canonized authors, this corpus enables research on lyrical features both as a cultural trend and as a marker of its time of production.

There are two goals connected to this material. The first and main goal is to use computational approaches to examine genre-specific trends in a wide variation of poems, produced


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¹<https://www.hf.uio.no/iln/english/research/projects/norn-norwegian-romantic-nationalisms/index.html>

during a historical period that existing literary studies claim to be influential for modern Norwegian poetry. Previous studies has mainly focused on a handful of canonized terms and poets, while this corpus will enable comprehensive investigations of the genre as a whole during the 1890s. The second goal is to explore new analytical methods and fill a gap of Norwegian-specific digital tools for literary studies.

We describe this gap in section 2, and the data selection process and the curation of the corpus metadata in section 3. The process of extracting the poems and encoding them in TEI is summarized in section 4. Section 5 presents some key features and distributions of the corpus metadata that help us answer our overarching questions about the 1890s poetry scene. Section 6 describes the annotation and distribution of lyrical features in the text data. We conclude the corpus construction work in section 7 and outline planned future work.

2. Background

De Sisto et al. (2024) present an overview of existing digital tools and data for automatic poetry analysis, focusing on resources for European languages. [7] Among the 57 described resources, none were developed for any of the Scandinavian languages. The Corpus of Czech Verse and The Diachronic Spanish Sonnet Corpus (DISCO) are most similar to the corpus we present in this article in terms of annotations and size respectively. The Corpus of Czech Verse is impressively large with close to 80 000 poems, and is annotated extensively on the token and verse level. [14] Most of the annotations are closely linked to linguistic particularities of the Czech language, and the wide selection of annotation types allows for many different statistical analyses.

DISCO is a smaller corpus, containing 4,085 Spanish-written sonnets from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. [18] Annotations include author information, metrical encoding and enjambment. The diachronicity of the data lends itself to time series analyses, and enable comparisons of features over time.

These two corpora provide empirical data for poetry analysis in their respective languages and for their respective literary histories, and the lack of such a resource for Norwegian led us to create NORN Poems. Like Czech Verse, our corpus include phonemic transcriptions for each verse line, as well as a rhyme tag, and a collated rhyme scheme for each stanza. Like DISCO, we encode our corpus in TEI and share it in public repositories on widely used platforms.² The corpora are similar in size and enable many of the same analyses and discussions. However, DISCO is made exclusively out of sonnets which streamlines the computational analyses in some ways while NORN Poems is composed of a wider variation of poems.

This lyric type variation in NORN Poems enables more comprehensive literary analyses of the genre as a whole in the given time period: What was the gender distribution among published poets? What language did they write poetry in, after almost half a century of discussions about what written Norwegian should look like? What does the distribution of works by canonical authors look like, compared to non-canonical? Can we find non-canonical authors that were popular in their own time, only to be forgotten by the literary histories?

²<https://github.com/norn-uio/norn-poems>

3. Data Selection

There are 22,591 books published between 1800 and 1899 that have been digitized by the Norwegian National Library. Researchers from the Norwegian literary research project *ImagiNation* has manually annotated 489 books of poetry from the nineteenth century, published between 1814 and 1905.³ [11] Out of these, the corpus we present here is made up of the 81 first edition books of poetry published in Norway and Denmark from 1890 through 1899, in their original language.⁴ The total number of digitized publications of poetry from this decade is 135, however these books include re-publications of older poetry. We have left these out in order to establish the qualities the new poetry from the 1890s shares; this allows us to discuss the labels and features of the decade as identified in literary histories.

There are several reasons for limiting the corpus to these 81 books of poetry. Firstly, according to many literary historians, this decade allegedly marks significant changes in the lyric genre. Something "new" happens when poetry supposedly reappears after a downturn in the 1870s and 1880s. [2, 4, 9, 12] Secondly, the critical reception suggests that this new wave is an expression of decadence, symbolism, neo-romanticism, and early modernism. These four terms have been connected to the lyric genre in different ways, but there are discrepancies and loose ends. We hypothesize that this corpus can provide empirical data for the claims made by literary studies.

Finally, for practical reasons the corpus had to be small enough to easily toggle analysis methods. At the same time, it should be large enough to ensure that statistical patterns and analyses are generalizable to the lyric genre of the period, and not skewed too much by outliers and discrepancies.

4. Corpus Construction and Data Processing

All the poems in our corpus were originally printed in books, and digitized and made available by the National Library of Norway.⁵ One of the main challenges in this project was structuring the dataset with the poem as the main object of study, instead of the book. The process involved several manual steps, including listing the title of each poem, identifying the pages each poem was located on, and assessing each split.

We received a collection of Alto XML files from the National Library's DH-lab, containing the optical character recognised (OCR) text from the 81 handpicked, scanned books of poetry.⁶ We extracted the individual poems and indexed them. A thorough manual cleaning process was conducted on the resulting text files. We corrected line breaks and indentations, fixed OCR errors, and removed unwanted artifacts such as page numbers, stamp text, and page breaks. For data analysis and processing, as well as preservation and sharing, we structured the poem

³ImagiNation: <https://www.ntnu.edu/isl/imagination>

⁴Although the majority of the literary production in Norway was published in Norwegian and in Norwegian cities, there were still a large influence by the Danish literary scene. Most major Norwegian writers were published in Denmark until the turn of the century.

⁵The National Library of Norway's online library: <https://www.nb.no/search>

⁶The DH-lab: [dh.nb.no](https://www.dh.nb.no)

texts and metadata in the TEI format.⁷ The hierarchy of textual elements in each poem consists of stanzas, verses, word tokens, and syllables. Additionally, rhyme schemes are encoded with the TEI attribute @rhyme on the stanza text elements.

5. Corpus Overview

We have encoded certain key features in the metadata of the corpus which will enable further investigations. Easily quantified measures include gender and language distributions. A more interpretive feature is whether or not the poets are canonized in literary historical accounts of the period. We have encoded canonization of an author in three ways:⁸

1. Whether or not an article is written about them in the main online Norwegian Encyclopedia, *Store Norske Leksikon*.⁹
2. The amount of times they are mentioned in any of the six most prominent Norwegian literary histories of the twentieth century: Elster (1934), Winsnes (1937), Beyer (1952), Dahl (1984), Beyer and Beyer (1996), Andersen (2012).
3. The number of times they are mentioned in any of the articles published in the most prominent Norwegian journal for literary studies, *Edda*.¹⁰

5.1. Language

The NORN Poems are written in three different languages: Danish, Landsmål and Riksmål. While Danish had been the standard written language in Norway for many centuries, the nation-building project of the 1800s included debates about the development of a standardized Norwegian language. These debates resulted in the establishment of two new written languages: Landsmål, based on Norwegian dialects, and Riksmål, based on orthographic modification of Danish, today known as Nynorsk and Bokmål.

Riksmål is overrepresented in the corpus with 60 of the 81 publications, while 16 books are written solely in Landsmål. Two books alternate between Landsmål and Riksmål for each poem, and only three of the publications are written in Danish. The distribution is visualized in Figure 1. The three languages pose a linguistic challenge for the project, both in terms of inconsistencies in the optical character recognition that generated the digital text, as well as the linguistic features and vocabularies.

5.2. Gender

From the ImagiNation corpus as a whole, we have manually identified fifteen female poets of lyric poetry in the nineteenth century.[11] Four of these female poets are represented in our corpus. 56 authors are male, bringing the total to 60 poets in our poetry selection from the

⁷TEI P5: <https://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/VE.html>

⁸A full overview can be found in appendix A.

⁹<https://snl.no>

¹⁰<https://www.idunn.no/journal/edda>

1890s.¹¹ One of the female poets stands out in quantitative terms: Karen Nilsen is represented with four books in this corpus. She wrote another during the same time period, which has not been digitized and is therefore not included here. These five books make her one of the most productive poets of this decade, only matched by Vilhelm Krag.

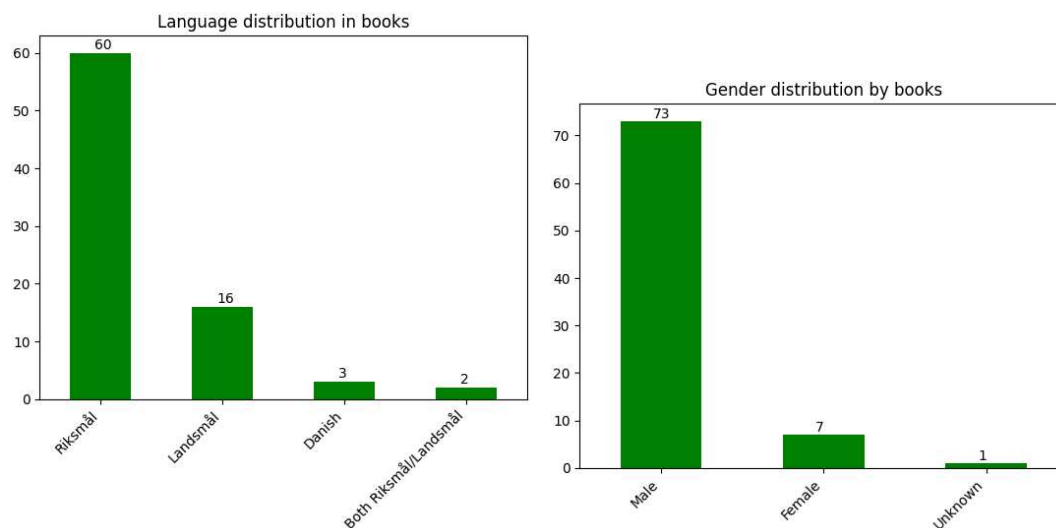


Figure 1: The poetry in the corpus is predominantly written by male authors in Riksmål.

5.3. Canonization

Sigbjørn Obstfelder is by far the most frequently mentioned poet in the six canonical literary histories, as can be seen by the overview in table A. At the same time, there are 11 poets that are not mentioned anywhere in the literary reference works. The 48 other poets in the corpus are either mentioned a handful of times, or with a frequency of double digits. There is not necessarily a connection between the number of produced works and their position in literary history. For instance, it is interesting to note that Vilhelm Krag is one of the most prolific authors, but is mostly remembered by a single poem, "Fandango". Meanwhile, Sigbjørn Obstfelder published only one book of poems in his lifetime, which includes the poem "Jeg ser" which has become emblematic for the entire decade.

Karen Nilsen is not mentioned in any of the canonical literary histories before 2012, and was first described explicitly in 1988 in *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* [12]. According to Steinar Gimnes, Karen Nilsen must have been one of the most read authors at the time. [12, p. 141] Her first book was printed three times and her second book was published in an ornamental edition, which indicates that she had many interested readers.

¹¹This number does not include one poetry collection called "Første greb på lyren: digte udgivne af gymnasialsamfundet 'Fram' (1883-1891)" made up by numerous anonymous authors, all connected to the same school.[1]

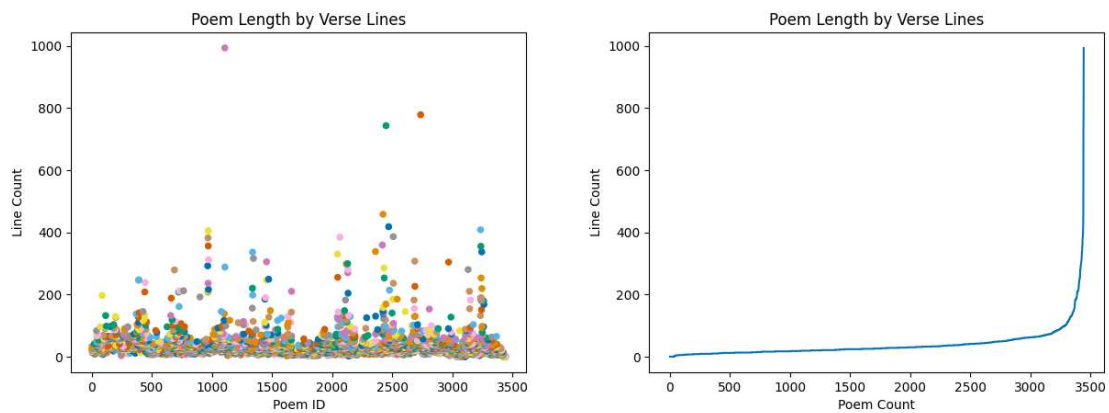
6. Data Exploration

The field of lyric theory has generated a number of different definitions of the lyric genre. Many of the most prominent features of modern genre theory, can be difficult to operationalize. However, some genre features from the nineteenth century still hold a place in Western lyric traditions. The features include that the poems are relatively short, often separated into stanzas with a certain pattern, and often contain the presence of a lyric speaker. [5, p. 89] In these preliminary explorations of NORN Poems, we want to examine how these three traditionally important lyric features appear in the corpus.

6.1. Poem Length

By means of counting verse lines in NORN Poems, we can confirm that the majority of the poems are short. We find only a couple of outliers with closer to 1000 lines as shown in Figure 2. More than 75% of all poems are shorter than 42 lines. Additionally, 50% of the corpus have 26 lines or shorter, which confirm the claim that poem length is a distinctive genre feature in NORN Poems.

Poem length is also a distinctive feature within the longest poems in the corpus, although these include greater variety in form. The 25% longest poems span between 42 and 993 lines, and only 55 of the poems are longer than 200 lines, as illustrated by Figure 2. However, the 55 longest poems are written by 22 different poets, which can indicate an interest in playing with the poem length tradition. These long poems have a large variation in line length, stanza length, and whether they are even stanzaic, which confirms the claim that the long poem as a concept is "a generic hybrid". [10, p. 2]



(a) The majority of the poems are short.

(b) Exponentially increasing poem length by lines.

Figure 2: The two plots illustrate how the vast majority of poems are below 200 lines.

Table 1

Example of annotated rhyme schemes for the poem "Introduction" by Hjalmar Meidell in *Ranker: et bundt Digte*. The orthographic text of each of the stanza's verses are listed alongside the phonemic transcription of the last stressed syllable(s) with IPA notation: periods mark syllable boundaries and the preliminary ticks mark stress and toneme.

Stanza	Transcription	Scheme
Jeg vil binde mit sinds, de tunge tanker.	ˌtɑ.kər	a
og hefte dem sammen til blomsterranker.	ˌrɑ.kər	a
Og alle de blomster – med bladene mørke –	ˌmʁ.kə	b
som spirte i regn, og som vokste i tørke,	ˌtr.kə	b
dem tager jeg med i de blomsterranker,	ˌrɑ.kər	a
som jeg vil binde af mine tanker.	ˌtɑ.kər	a

6.2. Rhyme Schemes

Rhyme and rhythm (as sound patterning) play a crucial role in the lyric genre's aural dimension. Jonathan Culler claims that "[s]uch patterning is highly seductive, which is in part to say that a given sequence of sounds does not have some fixed, necessary effect, but invites readers to an experience." [5, p. 134] One of our objectives is to annotate the NORN Poems with end rhyme schemes, because we are interested in recurring patterns in stanzaic poems, and we want to examine the distribution of end rhyme schemes. The annotations will later serve as training data for automatic poetry analysis tools as well.

Reddy and Knight (2011) trained a generative model on data with pre-annotated rhyme schemes, without any phonetic information.[15] They relied on aggregating rhyming word pairs that occurred frequently in their training data, but limited the model's possible rhyme scheme output to the annotations that already existed in their dataset. Petr Plecháč (2018) developed further on Reddy and Knight's idea with a generative model, and trained a collocation-driven rhyme tagger which identifies rhyming word pairs by aggregating the frequencies that end-of-line-words occur within the same stanza. [13]

Both Reddy and Knight (2011) and Plecháč (2018) disregard phonetic information, either due to lack of resources or the possible discrepancies in pronunciations over time. They both make use of large datasets that have already been annotated with rhyming patterns, and no such dataset previously exists for Norwegian poetry.

However, there are two recently developed resources for Norwegian pronunciation: one multialectal pronunciation dictionary and grapheme-to-phoneme models for the written standard Bokmål.[17, 16] With this phonemic information we segment verse lines into syllable sequences, identify the last stressed syllable, and compare end rhymes across verses within a stanza, exemplified in Table 1. Our approach is rule based and naively annotates any list of lists with letter sequences.¹² In future work, we will explore whether using modern pronunciation information works better than not using it at all for the initial rhyme scheme annotation.

¹²Link to <https://github.com/norn-uo/poetry-analysis>

6.3. The Presence of a Lyric Subject

Lyric poetry is often recognized by the presence of a speaker in the poem, and this subject can either point inwards through a subject, or outwards through a lyric address. Throughout the nineteenth century, the subject is often understood as an expression of the poet, which establishes the lyric genre as a specifically private genre. With the development of New Criticism in the mid-twentieth century, the lyric subject is understood not as an act of the poet, but as the "speech of a persona".[5, p. 84]

The lyric subject may be present without an explicit mark by personal pronoun, which emphasizes the experience of a speaker in the poem. In order to explore the presence of the lyric subject in NORN Poems, and annotate unambiguously, we defined four groups of words that all indicate that the speaker is present in the poem's context, and assigned labels for the type of lyric speaker: Explicit subject, explicit object, implicit subject, and deixis. Table 2 lists all the search terms that we used to probe the poems for different ways that the lyric subject appears. The "Indicating words" also illustrate the subtle differences in spelling between the three languages in NORN Poems.

The search results displayed in Figure 3 show that every poem in NORN Poems contains a reference to the lyric subject by use of one of the indicating words. The distribution plot confirms that the lyric subject is a prominent genre feature in this corpus. On its own, it is interesting to note how omnipresent the lyric subject is during this decade. However, further investigations on how the speaker is conveyed and how it acts in the poems will be best explored through close reading.

Table 2

Categories of lyric subject. Given the presence of any of the indicating words, the category label is assigned to the poem. The definition specifies the linguistic features that are shared among the indicating words.

Category	Indicating words	Definition
Explicit subject	jeg, eg	First person singular subject pronoun
Explicit object	mig, meg, mine, min, mitt, min, mi	First person singular object + possessive pronouns
Implicit subject	vi, oss, vaar, vår, vaare, våre, du, deg, dig, din, dine, ditt, dere, deres	First person plural + second person singular and plural + possessive pronouns
Deixis	her, hit, nå, naa, nu, i morgen, i morgon herfra, i går, i gaar, i kveld, i fjor, i aar, i år	Locative and temporal adverbs

7. Conclusion

This article presents the corpus NORN Poems that enables further research into literary and linguistic features of poetry published for Norwegian readers in the 1890s. We have highlighted

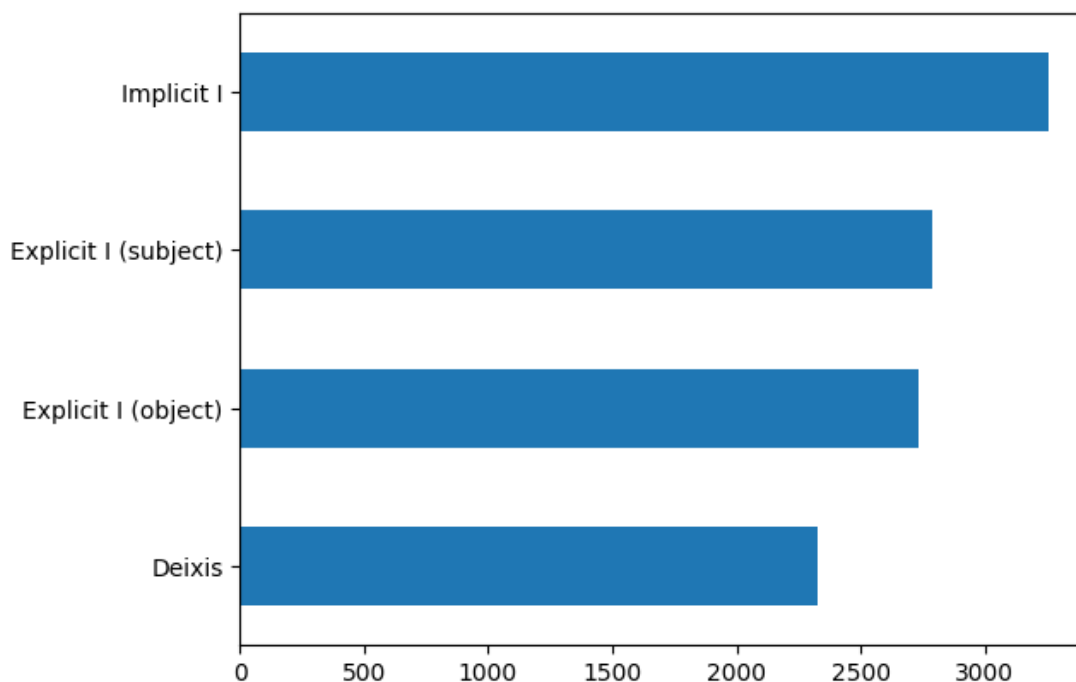


Figure 3: The lyric subject is present in all the NORN Poems, most notably marked by the Implicit subject.

three contextual features among the encoded metadata in Section 5, which enable relevant data partitioning, selection, and exploration. We explored more poem specific qualities in Section 6, and ways to operationalize features of the lyric genre.

Going forward, we aim to investigate other lyric features such as alliteration, anaphores, enjambment, themes and topics, and connections between poets and their poetry. A poetry analysis tool for Norwegian, both for annotating and visualizing the poems is also in development.

Acknowledgments

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A. Author Canonization

Table 3: Overview of author names mentioned by various literary reference works. Author names are listed in the index. Reference works are indicated by the column headers. Two authors are listed here with their real names and an asterisk, whereas the works in the NORN poems corpus were published with pseudonyms: Olaf Berg went by the name of "Martin Kvænnavika", and Sofie Sigurdsen wrote as "Edith". The row values show how often a poet is mentioned in a given literary history, whether an article is written about the poet in SNL (denoted in binary values by 1 or 0 regardless of how many times the name is mentioned), and the hit result when searching for the poet's name in Edda's archive search. The highest value in each column is formatted in boldface.

Author	1934	1937	1952	1984	1996	2012	SNL	Edda
Andersen, Tryggve	14	50	12	15	18	26	1	30
Berg, Olaf*	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Blaumüller, Edvard	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Boye, Eyvind	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brandes, Georg	0	80	11	2	20	14	1	292
Brænden, Lars	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bull, Jacob Breda	2	2	1	6	2	3	1	2
Caspari, Theodor	4	6	1	0	1	0	1	11
Christensen, Halfdan	0	0	0	4	0	0	1	4
Dahl, Jonas	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	5
Dahl, Niels A.	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Drachmann, Holger	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	39
Enger, Inger M.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Eskeland, Lars	0	1	1	0	2	0	1	6
Garborg, Arne	15	51	7	34	10	41	1	128
Grimstvedt, Abraham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grønvold, Didrik	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Halmrast, Johan	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Hougen, Engebret	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	6
Hovden, Anders	3	13	3	0	1	2	1	7
Janson, Kristofer	0	13	5	0	4	1	1	32
Jensen, Gustav	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
Johnsen, Peter Rosenkrantz	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jaastad, Lars	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	0
Klaveness, Thorolv	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Koren, Wilhelm Fr.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Krag, Vilhelm	8	59	7	9	11	5	1	40
Kringen, Olav	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2

Table continues on the next page

Continuation of Table 3								
Author	1934	1937	1952	1984	1996	2012	SNL	Edda
Lie, John	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	1
Lie, Mons	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Lofthus, Olav	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Meidell, Hjalmar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Monrad, Marcus Jacob	0	4	1	0	4	0	1	17
Moren, Sven	0	16	4	10	9	5	1	5
Mortensson-Egnund, Ivar	0	1	1	1	7	3	1	4
Nicolaysen, Emil	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Nielsen, Wilhelm	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nilsen, Karen	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Nybø, Lorentz	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Obstfelder, Sigbjørn	20	43	15	22	29	42	1	70
Olsen, Adolescentulus	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	0
Paulsen, John	0	15	1	0	2	1	1	27
Pedersen, Johannes Lockert	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pettersen, Wilhelm	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Randers, Kristofer	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	9
Rysstad, Gunnar	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Schøyen, Carl	5	5	1	0	4	0	1	3
Scott, Gabriel	9	15	3	7	9	7	1	21
Sigurdson, Sofie*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sinding, Otto	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Sivle, Per	2	15	3	10	6	2	1	20
Skjeflo, Peter A.	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Smedsrud, Peder	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sæter, Ivar	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Vassbotn, Anders	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Vislie, Vetle	2	10	2	2	3	2	1	15
Vogt, Nils Collett	17	62	15	7	21	7	1	38
Wexelsen, Gunhild	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aabel, Andreas	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Aagaard, Gustav	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0