

## The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited

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THE POPULARITY OF ENGLISH RENAISSANCE PRINTED PLAYS declined dramatically in 1997. For most of the twentieth century, scholars had asserted that plays were a successful portion of the book trade, yielding a predictable profit for publishers. Ronald B. McKerrow, for example, saw plays as “popular books of which a ready sale was expected”; H. S. Bennett thought that plays “made for quick sale” because “in the first decade of the seventeenth century over one hundred editions were printed”; and Leo Kirschbaum likewise believed they made for a “good sale . . . that would give profit to publisher and bookseller.”<sup>1</sup> Since 1997, however, Shakespeareans have tended to argue a position just the opposite of this received wisdom. Printed plays, it is now maintained, were “risky business ventures” in which publishers, who “in most cases had little or nothing to gain from playbooks,” were “understandably reluctant” to invest.<sup>2</sup> “In the early-seventeenth century expectations to make a profit with a newly published playbook would have been particularly low.”<sup>3</sup> Playbooks “were in limited demand,” and “very few of them were so popular as to justify editions after the first.”<sup>4</sup> Recognizing the “precarious economics of

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<sup>1</sup> R. B. McKerrow, *An Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 134; H. S. Bennett, *English Books & Readers, 1603 to 1640: Being a Study in the History of the Book Trade in the Reigns of James I and Charles I* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970), 195; and Leo Kirschbaum, *Shakespeare and the Stationers* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1955), 202. See also Evelyn May Albright, *Dramatic Publication in England, 1580–1640: A Study of Conditions Affecting Content and Form of Drama* (1927; New York: Gordian, 1971), 284; and Charlton Hinman, prep., *The Norton Facsimile: The First Folio of Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), x. A. W. Pollard noted, however, that “many of those [plays] we think the best were never reprinted at all,” and that “many plays never reached a second edition” (*Shakespeare’s Fight with the Pirates and the Problems of the Transmission of His Text*, rev. ed. [1920; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1937], 36, 40).

<sup>2</sup> David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 35; and Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 127. See also Edward Pechter, “What’s wrong with literature?” *Textual Practice* 17 (2003): 505–26, esp. 518–19.

<sup>3</sup> Lukas Erne, “Shakespeare and the Publication of His Plays,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53 (2002): 1–20, esp. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book, 1480–1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 33; and T. H. Howard-Hill, “‘Nor Stage, Nor Stationers Stall Can Showe’: The

play publication,” publishers “hardly bothered with them” at all, because “readers generally seem to have preferred other kinds of books.”<sup>5</sup> In previous articles, we ourselves claimed that “play publication was a decidedly risky enterprise,” as shown by “the low rates of success for printed plays.”<sup>6</sup>

This shift in scholarly thinking can be dated to Peter W. M. Blayney’s landmark article, “The Publication of Playbooks,” cited by all of the authors quoted above.<sup>7</sup> It is rare that a single essay transforms a field so immediately and so thoroughly, and we want to stress here that Blayney’s piece concerns much more than the popularity (or lack thereof) of early modern playbooks. His overriding aim is to provide a new history of the conditions of book production in early modern England, focusing especially on “the neglected subject of publication” in order to explain in detail all that “had to happen both before and after a playbook was actually printed.”<sup>8</sup> In the process, Blayney challenges what he calls Alfred W. Pollard’s “stirring melodrama” of the fight between acting companies and those “pirate” stationers who wanted to publish plays without the players’ consent.<sup>9</sup> Pollard believed that he “could distinguish two different kinds of ‘irregularity’ in the [Stationers’] registers”—plays that were never entered in the registers and plays that were published by someone other than the stationer who first entered them—and that such “irregular” entries distinguished “bad” quartos from “good.”<sup>10</sup> From this foundation, Pollard went on to construct his “melodrama in which Good players, with occasional help from Good stationers, struggled against a few Bad stationers and usually won.”<sup>11</sup> Blayney’s analysis demonstrates that these perceived “irregularities” were not so irregular after all and cannot be taken as evidence of “some kind of skullduggery”: lack of entrance “is *never* sufficient reason for suspecting anything furtive, dishonest, or illegal.”<sup>12</sup>

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Circulation of Plays in Manuscript in the Early Seventeenth Century,” *Book History* 2 (1999): 28–41, esp. 37. See also Andrew Murphy, *Shakespeare in Print: A History and Chronology of Shakespeare Publishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 29.

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 217n; Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 115; and Peters, 33. For a demurrer to this general consensus, see Douglas Bruster, “The Birth of an Industry” in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume I: Origins to 1660*, Jane Milling and Peter Thomson, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 224–41.

<sup>6</sup> Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, “Vile Arts: The Marketing of English Printed Drama, 1512–1660,” *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 39 (2000): 77–165, esp. 79; and Zachary Lesser, “Walter Burre’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 29 (1999): 22–43, esp. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Peter W. M. Blayney, “The Publication of Playbooks” in *A New History of Early English Drama*, John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan, eds. (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 383–422.

<sup>8</sup> Blayney, 415, 416.

<sup>9</sup> Blayney, 383.

<sup>10</sup> Pollard, 26–52, esp. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Blayney, 383.

<sup>12</sup> Blayney, 403, 404.

Through his detailed investigation of the workings of the Stationers' Company and the processes of prepublication allowance, license, and entrance in the Register, Blayney finally puts to rest the narrative of piracy that has maintained such a hold on the imagination of twentieth-century Shakespeareans. By keeping the focus firmly on stationers and their decisions about printing, publishing, marketing, wholesaling, and retailing books, Blayney reveals the anachronisms of the piracy myth and offers the most persuasive account to date of early modern publication.

Now that critics need no longer search for fictional pirates, thanks to Blayney and such scholars as Paul Werstine, Laurie E. Maguire, and Roslyn L. Knutson, and now that Blayney has himself provided the necessary historical background for a proper assessment of popularity in the book trade, we want to focus here on the component of his argument that has probably been the most influential with Shakespeareans—his revolutionary contention that plays were an insignificant and unsuccessful portion of the market for books in early modern England.<sup>13</sup> Blayney criticizes those scholars who, assuming “that their own attitudes toward highly valued texts were shared by the public for whom those texts were first printed,” believed that “plays in quarto . . . must have sold like hot cakes.”<sup>14</sup> He argues instead that new plays “never accounted for a very significant fraction of the trade in English books,” comprising between 1.2 percent and 1.6 percent of the entries in the *Short-Title Catalogue* from 1583 to 1642.<sup>15</sup> Not only was the overall market share of new playbooks unimpressive, he writes, but those plays that did reach print rarely sold well. An examination of the rates of reprinting of these plays convinces Blayney that “the facts bear little resemblance to the myth” that printed plays were in high demand.<sup>16</sup> From 1583 to 1602, “only” 48 percent of first editions were reprinted within twenty-five years; from 1603 to 1622, the figure is just over 50 percent; from 1623 to 1642, less than 29 percent.<sup>17</sup> “Fewer than 21 percent of the plays published in the sixty years under discussion reached a second edition inside nine years”; this

<sup>13</sup> Blayney's assertion that plays were not in high demand forms a central part of his attack on the piracy myth. Indeed, he writes that the belief that plays were extremely popular may be the “principal fallacy on which [the piracy narrative] depends” (384). While we argue here that plays were in fact far more successful and popular than Blayney contends, we are not trying to revive earlier ideas about piracy. Even if plays were highly popular commodities, Blayney's analysis of the workings of the book trade—the other crucial component of his argument—in itself refutes the piracy thesis. See also Paul Werstine, “Narratives About Printed Shakespeare Texts: ‘Foul Papers’ and ‘Bad’ Quartos,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 65–86; Laurie E. Maguire, *Shakespearean suspect texts: The “bad” quartos and their contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996); and Roslyn L. Knutson, “The Repertory” in Cox and Kastan, eds., 461–80, esp. 469–70.

<sup>14</sup> Blayney, 384.

<sup>15</sup> Blayney, 385, 417n.

<sup>16</sup> Blayney, 387.

<sup>17</sup> Blayney, 387.

means, he argues, that “no more than one play in five would have returned the publisher’s initial investment inside five years.”<sup>18</sup> No play sold well enough to appear on Blayney’s list of some of the period’s best-sellers, a list topped instead by Sternhold and Hopkins’s *The Psalms in English Meter*, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Bible, along with several sermons, books of piety, and religious treatises.<sup>19</sup> For all these reasons, Blayney writes, we can no longer “evade one inescapable fact about printed plays—namely, that they were not the best-selling moneyspinners that so many commentators have evidently believed they *should* have been.”<sup>20</sup>

Blayney’s conclusion about the “myth” of playbook popularity has inspired renewed debate and basic reevaluations of such issues as the transition of plays from stage to page; the transformation of drama from popular entertainment to literature; the canonization of early modern drama, especially plays by Shakespeare; and, most fundamentally, the place of drama (especially printed drama) within early modern culture. Indeed, Blayney’s essay has had such an impact on theater-history scholarship—for which it won the 1997 Sohmer-Hall Prize—as well as on bibliography, Shakespeare studies, book history, the history of reading, and the history of popular culture that his conclusion seems already to have hardened into scholarly dogma. While we introduce new evidence here suggesting that this conclusion was mistaken, our work has been deeply influenced by his and would not have been possible without it. Like all great scholarship, Blayney’s essay contains the methodology needed to critique it, and we see our revisionist study of the popularity of playbooks as a continuation of his important project.

Whereas much early-twentieth-century bibliographic scholarship was impressionistic and based on *a priori* assumptions about the popularity of printed drama, Blayney provides a detailed statistical analysis of the market for printed plays as evidence against the “myth” of the popularity of playbooks. But, like all previous arguments about the popularity of playbooks, Blayney’s is flawed at a fundamental level because it does not systematically compare the market performance of playbooks to that of other kinds of books. Without this comparative context, any discussion of popularity will inevitably remain incomplete at best, and misleading at worst, because *popularity* is *ipso facto* a relative term. Using the same four criteria that Blayney employs—total number of editions, market share, frequency of reprinting, and profitability—but extending his research to include comparisons with other kinds of books, we will argue that playbooks were, in fact, far more popular than Blayney contends. While the myth of piracy is false, the “myth” of playbook popularity happens to be true.

<sup>18</sup> Blayney, 389.

<sup>19</sup> Blayney judges best-sellers by total number of editions within twenty-five years of first publication (388).

<sup>20</sup> Blayney, 416.

Exactly what *popularity* means, however, needs to be refined in relation to these four criteria, for they actually measure slightly different aspects of the commercial performance of books. We must consider them all together—must understand what we will call the “structure of popularity”—if we want to know how eager early modern Londoners were to buy and read plays. The first criterion—the total number of editions published per year—tells us about fluctuations within the playbook market that suggest changes in the supply of and demand for plays, but it does not tell us whether these fluctuations were merely the result of corresponding fluctuations in the publication of all books. Nor does the total number of editions by itself reveal the prevalence of playbooks within the book trade as a whole. To assess this measure of popularity, we must turn to the second criterion, market share, which traces the proportion of playbooks among all other kinds of books—that is, the frequency with which stationers chose to publish plays. We must exercise some care, however, in defining the overall market; as we will argue, the *Short-Title Catalogue* (STC) in its entirety is far too broad to serve this function.<sup>21</sup> And while market share does give us some indication of the popularity of playbooks as investments for stationers, it may also have been affected by the availability of playtexts in any given period, making market share an inexact measure of demand among publishers; a low market share, for instance, may point to stationers’ lack of interest in plays, but may just as readily point to a limited number of plays available for publication. Even more important, market share alone cannot tell us about customers’ interest in the playbooks that stationers chose to publish; stationers, after all, could have repeatedly misread consumer demand.

The criterion that brings us closest to consumer demand is the rate of reprinting of playbooks, since a publisher’s decision to reprint can usually be assumed to indicate both that the previous edition had sold out (or was about to sell out) and that the publisher anticipated continued demand for the book. By comparing playbook reprint rates to those for other classes of books, we can learn a great deal about the popularity of playbooks with book-buyers—can learn, that is, how often they bought up whole editions of new plays. Admittedly, reprint rates tell us neither the number of individual copies bought and sold nor the total capital invested in or profits earned from the sale of plays; without access to a comprehensive balance sheet for every early modern publication, this information cannot be known.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, eds., *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, & Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640*, 2d ed., rev. W. A. Jackson, F. S. Ferguson, and Katharine F. Pantzer, 3 vols. (London: Bibliographical Society, 1976–91), hereafter cited as STC.

<sup>22</sup> For an impressive analysis of the book trade, with an attempt to deduce these figures, see Mark Bland, “The London Book-Trade in 1600” in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, David Scott Kastan, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 450–63.

We can, though, estimate profitability, as we do later in the essay, by using sheet lengths as a gauge for comparing the likely profits of a typical playbook with those of other kinds of books. Used in conjunction with profitability estimates, market share, and total editions, reprint rates can provide our best indication of the kind of popularity in which most of us are interested—the popularity of books with customers.

Judged by reprints, plays sold much better than the average book in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, much better even than sermons—a class of book that appears on Blayney's best-seller list and that is widely considered one of the most popular in the early modern book trade. Plays were, in fact, among the most successful books in which an early modern stationer could choose to invest. They turned a profit more reliably than most other types of books, and this profit would not have been paltry, as many have claimed, but rather would have been fairly typical for an edition of books. Later, in Caroline England, the trade in printed plays was fundamentally transformed: plays were reprinted much less frequently, yet more editions were published than ever before. While we do not have space to examine in detail this "Caroline paradox"—in which plays seem to have become less popular by one standard and more popular by another—we will suggest that it points toward the development of a division in the playbook market between new plays and "classic" plays, a division that signals the emergence of an early modern canon of printed drama. First, however, we will consider the history of play publication in early modern England—a history that has at its center the popularity of playbooks.

#### THE CREATION OF THE MARKET FOR PRINTED PROFESSIONAL DRAMA

In order to assess this popularity, we must begin by acknowledging the dynamism of the playbook market.<sup>23</sup> Like most markets, the trade in playbooks experienced periods of expansion and contraction. This dynamism characterized the market both for playbooks in general and for "professional" plays—that is, plays from the professional London theaters, as opposed to other forms of drama, including masques, Lord Mayor's pageants, and university or closet drama.<sup>24</sup> Our focus in this essay is on professional plays, and in that market we see the same patterns of expansion and contraction for new plays (first editions) and for reprints (second or

<sup>23</sup> In constructing our analysis of the playbook market, we have examined every entry in W. W. Greg's *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration*, 4 vols. (London: Bibliographical Society, 1939–59), and every entry for a dramatic publication in the revised STC.

<sup>24</sup> In our earlier essay, "Vile Arts," we used the terms *commercial* and *noncommercial* to denote this boundary. The two sets of terms describe precisely the same categories, but *commercial* seems too ambiguous for our purposes here, since it may be confused with the commercial publication of books, as opposed to, for example, the publication of books on command from the Crown or for propagandistic purposes.

later editions, which we will call “second-plus” editions).<sup>25</sup> Further, our focus is also of necessity on *extant* plays only. While some entire editions of playbooks must have been lost to history, and while we can thus never know with absolute confidence the precise number of playbooks (or of any kind of book) published in a given year, a comparison of Stationers’ Register entries with the extant archive makes clear that lost plays are unlikely to affect our arguments about trends in play publication, since lost plays probably amounted to fewer than one edition per year (see Methodological Notes, “Loss Rates”).

Figures 1 and 2 show that the trends in the publication of printed professional plays divide that market into six distinct periods:

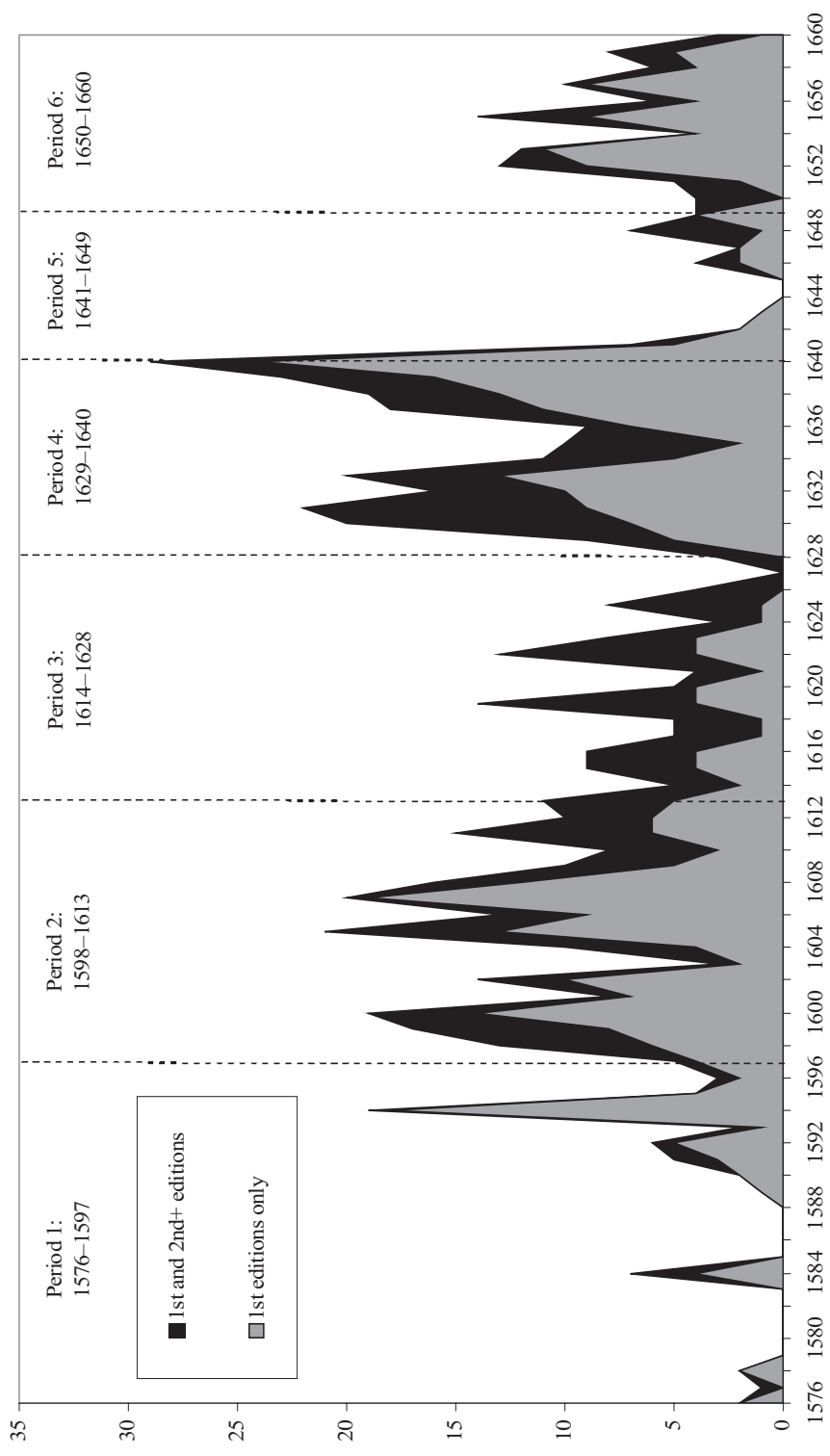
- 1576–1597: an initial period of low production (48 first editions, 11 second-plus editions)
- 1598–1613: a boom followed by sustained high production (129 first editions, 79 second-plus editions)
- 1614–1628: a gradual contraction, with production levels generally still above those of 1576–1597 (31 first editions, 65 second-plus editions)
- 1629–1640: a second boom (122 first editions, 84 second-plus editions)
- 1641–1649: a sharp contraction, with only one play published from 1643 to 1645 (17 first editions, 10 second-plus editions)
- 1650–1660: an expansion to levels slightly above those of 1614–1628 (58 first editions, 27 second-plus editions)

In the initial period—approximately the first two decades of regular public playing in London—very few plays were printed. Indeed, for the first thirteen years after the building of the Theatre, there was essentially *no* market for printed professional plays, with eight of those years seeing no entries in the Register and no printed editions (barring the odd lost, unentered play). Stationers did start publishing professional plays regularly around 1589, but only in small numbers, the exception being an aberrant one-year increase in 1594, a “boomlet” caused by a sudden flood of eighteen new plays. Blayney’s explanation of this flood—that companies were advertising the reopening of the theaters after a period of plague—seems logical, but this spike did not immediately lead to an expansion of the market as a whole, as play publication thereafter reverted to its earlier levels.<sup>26</sup> The 1594 boomlet thus appears as a brief anomaly in a period of low production, a one-year surge that did not result

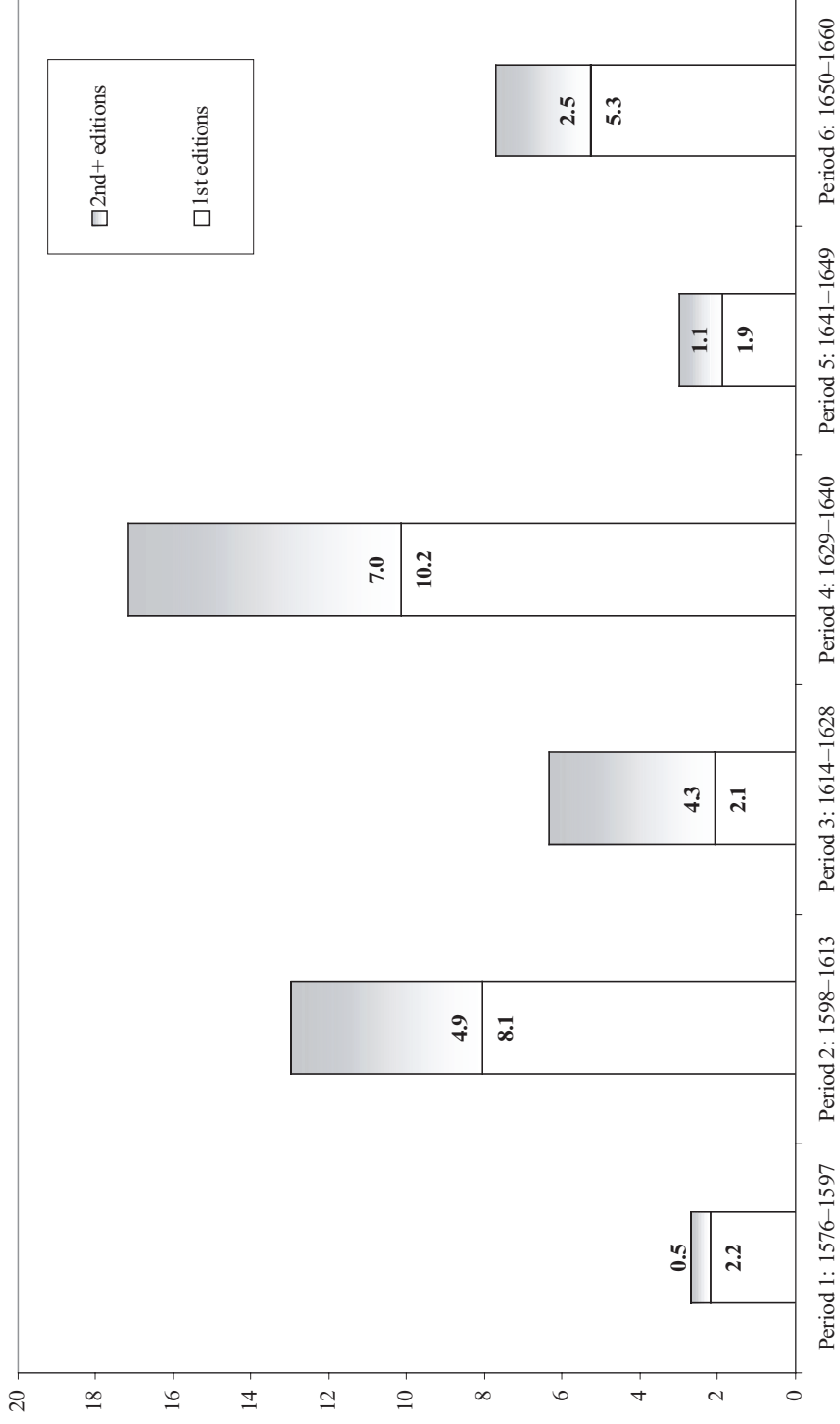
<sup>25</sup> Reprint editions have been strangely absent from many earlier analyses, largely because these accounts were more concerned with how plays reached the market—with proving or disproving theories of piracy or memorial reconstruction, for example—than with the market itself. But reprints were a major component of the market for playbooks; from 1576 to 1660, second-plus editions accounted for 37 percent of all printed plays, and 40 percent of all printed professional plays.

<sup>26</sup> Blayney, 385–86.

**Figure 1: Number of Professional Plays Published Each Year, 1576–1660**



**Figure 2: Expansions and Contractions in the Market for Professional Plays**  
 Average number of first editions and second-plus editions published per year



in an increased market for printed professional drama. We tend to take the printing of plays for granted—after all, without such printing we would not have the texts of our greatest plays—but the market for playbooks had to be created, and there was nothing inevitable about this creation. Stage success did not guarantee print success, for theaters in London were thriving long before playbooks were selling in bookstalls in any real numbers.

Stationers began publishing large numbers of new plays only when printed playbooks began to prove themselves in bookshops. From 1598 to 1613, publishers brought out almost five times as many plays per year as they had done earlier; and, as figure 1 indicates, this first extended boom was initially driven by a rapid increase in second editions, not new plays. Of the forty new playbooks printed from 1589 to 1597, only three had been reprinted before 1598: 1 and 2 *Tamburlaine*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and *The Taming of A Shrew*. But in 1598 and 1599 alone, eleven more of those forty playbooks were reprinted, plus another edition of *The Spanish Tragedy* and immediate reprints of two plays first published in 1598 (*1 Henry IV*) and 1599 (*The Two Angry Women of Abingdon*). Plays were suddenly selling very well, and stationers apparently perceived enough demand that they were willing to invest in second and third editions of these plays—editions that, as Blayney demonstrates, involved lower production costs than a first edition and so yielded higher profits.<sup>27</sup>

This trend continued in 1600, when another five second-plus editions were printed; but in that year, publishers also brought out fourteen first editions of professional plays. What seems to have happened is that, as earlier plays were being reprinted in greater numbers, stationers began to see professional plays as books that stood a sound chance of selling out and justifying further editions. As a result, they started investing in more and more new plays.<sup>28</sup> Earlier critics, focused on stationers' supposed piracy, sought reasons for the increased supply of playtexts at this time. Some have looked to the economic hardship inflicted on playing companies by a Privy Council order of June 1600 that restricted the number of outdoor theaters to two and performances to twice a week;<sup>29</sup> others have looked to the heightened competition among players after the establishment of boy companies at St. Paul's

<sup>27</sup> Blayney, 410–13.

<sup>28</sup> Further, more and more stationers started entering the market for printed professional drama. From 1600 to 1602, 71 percent of first editions were produced by stationers who had never previously published a single play. Before then, play publication had been concentrated among relatively few stationers, with stationers new to professional drama bringing out only 20 percent of the first editions printed from 1595 to 1597, and only 36 percent of those printed from 1598 to 1599. The boom thus resulted in a widening, not merely a deepening, of stationer interest in playbooks.

<sup>29</sup> Pollard, 42; and Albright, 266–69. For a new analysis of Privy Council orders such as this one, see Andrew Gurr's essay in this issue of *SQ*.

and Blackfriars.<sup>30</sup> But by focusing on supply, these theories neglect demand, both among stationers and, implicitly, readers. Playing companies (or anyone else) may have wanted to sell their plays to publishers, but stationers were not obligated to buy them; as our analysis shows, before the late 1590s, publishers may not have had much interest in doing so.

The surge in first editions from 1600 to 1602, therefore, probably indicates rising demand among stationers for professional plays after it became clear in 1598 and 1599 that book buyers' interest justified second and third editions. Shakespeare plays led the development of this market: six of the sixteen reprints in 1598 and 1599 were of Shakespearean drama, as were five of the fourteen first editions in 1600. Indeed, a quarter of all first editions published from 1594 to 1600 were plays by Shakespeare (fourteen of fifty-six), and eight of these were reprinted within six years. Not only was Shakespeare England's first best-selling playwright, then, but the success of the printed editions of his plays also helped to establish the playbook market itself.<sup>31</sup>

While playtexts had long been valuable to theater companies, it was only when they became viable economic investments for stationers that the market for printed drama began to take off. Numerous prefaces confirm that theatrical popularity was always one element of print popularity, and publishers often advertised a play's performance history on its title page.<sup>32</sup> But while box-office success may have attracted customers to a new playbook, perhaps helping it to a second or even a third edition, it also seems clear that printed drama was not merely parasitic on theatrical popularity. When *The Spanish Tragedy* or *Richard II* was reprinted multiple times, at regular intervals over several decades, these re-publications testified at least as much to the steady sales of these plays as printed books—that is, to the ongoing desire to read these plays—as to the possibility that they remained favorites in the theatrical repertory.

The ensuing period of market contraction for printed plays underscores the relative independence of print from the stage. From 1614 to 1628, publishers brought

<sup>30</sup> Blayney notes Gary Taylor's suggestion to this effect (417n).

<sup>31</sup> When we include second-plus editions, Shakespeare's plays occupy an even larger share of the overall market (twenty-three of eighty playbooks, or 29 percent). Shakespeare's closest competitors during this seven-year period lag far behind: Robert Greene (nine playbooks) and Christopher Marlowe (five playbooks). We should point out, however, that Shakespeare was named on only nine of these title pages, which is hardly surprising given that authors in general appeared on only 36 percent of all play title pages during this period. These figures do not include the 1595 edition of *Lochrine*, attributed on its title page to "W.S." On the popularity of Shakespeare's plays in the early modern period, see also David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 21.

<sup>32</sup> See Richard Jones's preface to *Tamburlaine* (1590), Thomas Middleton's to *The Familie of Love* (1608), Thomas Heywood's to *Greenes Tu quoque* (1614), and Richard Hawkins's to *Philaster* (1628). On the marketing of theatricality on title pages and in prefaces, see Farmer and Lesser, "Vile Arts," 82–95; and Douglas A. Brooks, *From Playhouse to Printing House: Drama and Authorship in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 14–65.

out only about half the number of professional plays as they had produced during the first expansion period.<sup>33</sup> But this steep decline is accounted for almost entirely by a plunge in first editions from 8.1 to 2.1 per year. Indeed, according to the extant archive, from 1626 to 1628 not a single new professional play reached print, the first time such a suspension of play publication had occurred since 1588. The publication of second-plus editions, by contrast, hardly changed at all, decreasing only slightly from 4.9 to 4.3 editions per year.

We can suggest two possible (and overlapping) explanations for the contraction from 1614 to 1628 and for the internal dynamics of this contraction, in which the publication of first editions declined sharply but the publication of second-plus editions remained roughly the same. The first explanation posits that the *demand* for playbooks fell in this period (although we can offer no reason for why this might have occurred). If readers were less interested in purchasing plays, stationers would naturally have been less inclined to publish new drama (and entries of plays in the Stationers' Register also decline sharply in this period); stationers may, however, have continued to invest in proven plays that had already gone through at least one successful edition and might therefore be expected to succeed in another. What seems at least as likely, however, is the second possible explanation—namely, that consumer demand for playbooks held steady while the *supply* of new plays declined. A decrease in supply would explain why the contraction in publication is limited to first editions. Most tellingly, the percentage of printed plays that reached a second edition actually increased somewhat in this period, indicating that customers were still buying the new plays that were made available to them. Perhaps publishers were simply unable to acquire manuscripts of new plays as often as in the boom period.

Some combination of changes in both supply and demand probably underlies the contraction, but what both hypotheses reveal is the centrality of reprints to the market for printed drama. If the contraction was triggered by falling demand, we can see stationers nonetheless continuing to invest in second-plus editions at about the same levels while reducing their investment in new plays; if instead the decline was in the supply of new plays, we can see stationers turning to reprints as an always-available corpus of plays to publish. And second-plus editions were an extremely safe investment, for they almost always sold well enough to be printed in yet another edition; from 1576 to 1625, a whopping 72 percent of second-plus editions were reprinted within twenty years, and nearly six in ten were reprinted with-

<sup>33</sup> Although we chose to locate the beginning of the contraction in 1614, the contraction itself was gradual, and so we could have chosen as its beginning any of several years after 1607. We selected 1614 because in the preceding five years, an average of 10.8 plays were published per year, whereas in the ensuing five years, the average fell to 6.6.

in ten years. Reprints, which were surely less dependent on theatrical popularity than first editions, formed the backbone of the trade in printed plays.<sup>34</sup>

Critics have most often attributed the relative independence of the market for printed drama to the appearance of the 1616 Jonson and 1623 Shakespeare folios. But neither of these books seems to have jump-started the market in the way that the burst of second-plus editions did after 1598. Not until 1629—thirteen years after the Jonson folio and six years after the Shakespeare folio—did the market for first editions pick up again. In fact, in the five years after the Shakespeare folio only two new plays were published, the nadir of play printing since the 1580s. However much the Jonson and Shakespeare folios may have elevated the cultural value of drama, they seem to have had little or no effect on its economic value. Instead, what created that economic value and finally established the market for printed drama was not these imposing folios but rather the more humble quarto reprints from the end of the 1590s.

#### PLAYBOOK POPULARITY AND MARKET SHARE

Once the market for printed professional plays had been created, just how significant was it? Blayney estimates that new plays accounted for 1.2 percent to 1.6 percent of all entries in the *STC* from 1583 to 1642.<sup>35</sup> We would argue that these figures do not properly reflect the significance of playbooks in the book trade. For one thing, Blayney here includes only new plays, which is understandable given his concern with the issue of piracy and thus with how publishers acquired playtexts. But if one wants to assess the impact of playbooks as commodities in the book trade, one needs to consider *all* playbooks, not least because four out of every ten professional playbooks were reprints.<sup>36</sup>

More important, by setting the number of plays against the total number of entries in the *STC*, Blayney's figures compare apples and oranges. Although the *STC* presents the best picture we have of the mass of printed material circulating in early modern England, a fair number of entries, as Blayney himself notes, do not represent separate editions at all but are instead merely variant issues or states of a single edition.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, many entries are for what we would call "non-speculative"

<sup>34</sup> See John Barnard, "Introduction" in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume IV, 1557–1695*, John Barnard, D. F. McKenzie, and Maureen Bell, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 1–25, esp. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Although the *STC* ends in 1640, not 1642, Blayney has derived his estimate "by counting items in every fifth year from 1584 and calculating the intervening years from the average number of items per line" (416n).

<sup>36</sup> In addition, Blayney deals with playtexts, not playbooks, and so includes twenty-nine plays published only in collection and not as separate books. For other important differences between Blayney's methodology and our own, see Methodological Notes, "Reprint Parameters."

<sup>37</sup> Blayney, 385.

books. While all playbooks were “speculative,” meaning that publishers decided to invest in them based on their assessment of potential consumer demand, not all books carried this element of risk. When stationers produced state proclamations, visitation articles, or university act verses and theses—to take just a few frequent examples—they were not making decisions about the commercial viability of these items; rather, they were paid in advance and printed them on command. Other non-speculative books (such as those from the secret English Catholic presses) were published propagandistically with little regard for the market, while still others were printed at the author’s charge. In all these cases individual stationers were not speculating about future sales of the books. Yet this question of speculation is crucial if we want to use market share to assess popularity. Otherwise, to take a modern analogy, we might mistake the huge number of copies of the phone book circulating in New York City for evidence of New Yorkers’ desire to buy and read the yellow pages.

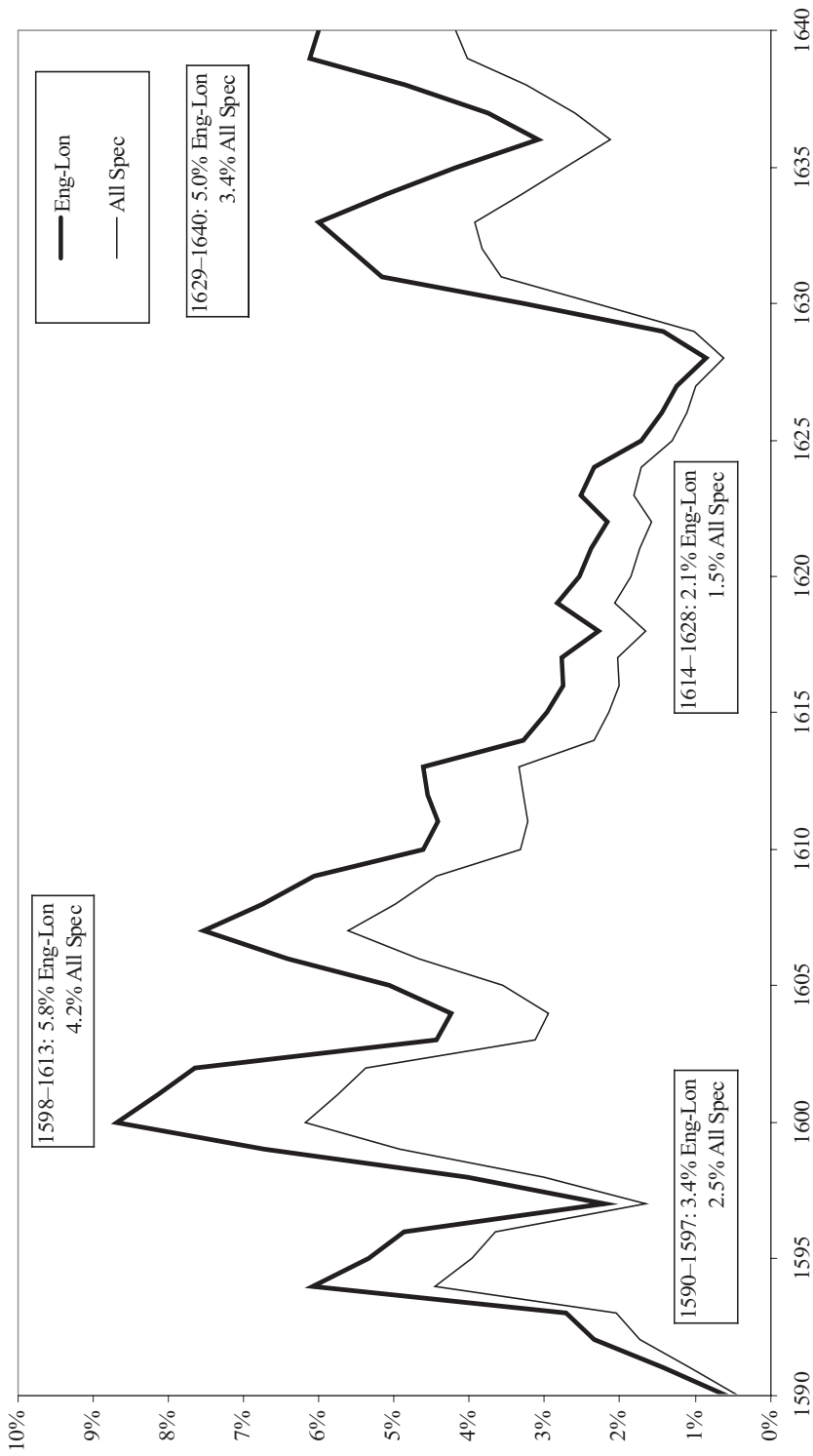
In order to determine more accurately the proportion of playbooks within the relevant segment of the book trade, we produced a sample of the *STC* from 1590 to 1640 by selecting six discrete years (1590, 1600, 1610, 1620, 1630, 1635) and examining every entry listed for those years, excluding variant issues and non-speculative books of the kinds discussed above. Where cases seemed borderline, we erred on the side of inclusion, so as not to skew the data in favor of playbooks. The *STC* includes 3,130 entries for these six years; of these entries, just over 8 percent are for variant issues or states, and about 13 percent are for non-speculative publications; thus, approximately 79 percent are for speculative publications—a percentage that, given our sample size, is a reliable estimate of the *STC* as a whole from 1590 to 1640 (see Methodological Notes, “*STC* Sample”). We then calculated the number of speculative books in each year of the 1590–1640 period by multiplying John Barnard and Maureen Bell’s figures for the total number of entries for each year of the *STC* by our “speculative rate” of 79 percent.<sup>38</sup> Using these numbers, we assessed the proportion of plays among all editions in the speculative-book market.

As the lower line on figure 3 shows, printed plays constituted a much larger market share than previously thought; indeed, in periods of expansion, that share was three times larger than Blayney’s figures show.<sup>39</sup> Blayney estimates that roughly one in every seventy-seven editions was a new play; by our analysis, during the first expansion of the market, about one in every twenty-four speculative editions was a

<sup>38</sup> John Barnard and Maureen Bell, Appendix 1, Table 1, in Barnard, MacKenzie, and Bell, eds., 4:779–84; the counting methods used to produce this appendix are elaborated in Maureen Bell and John Barnard, “Provisional Count of *STC* Titles 1475–1640,” *Publishing History* 31 (1992): 48–64.

<sup>39</sup> In graphing play-publication data and *STC* entries, figure 3 uses three-year running averages, a method that favors three-year trends over year-to-year variations, thereby yielding a more comprehensible picture of the relative size of the market for printed drama.

**Figure 3: The Market Share of Professional Playbooks**  
 Estimated percentage of professional playbooks among all speculative books (All Spec)  
 and among non-monopolistic speculative books in English printed in London (Eng-Lon),  
 1590–1640 (three-year running average)



professional play; from 1629 to 1640, the figure is about one in every twenty-nine. And in their peak years, professional plays made up 6.2 percent of the overall speculative market, or one in every sixteen speculative editions. While certainly not the dominant segment, playbooks were hardly marginal. Figure 3 also confirms that changes in the market for plays were not simply responses to changes in the book trade as a whole; rather, the expansions and contractions in the total number of printed plays were also expansions and contractions in their market share.

These figures give the best indication of the proportion of playbooks among all the editions printed for the retail book trade in England, although the figures are still bedeviled by the problem of "loss rates" (that is, the rates at which entire editions of books may have disappeared). These rates are disproportionately high for short, inexpensive publications, such as ballads, and for books that, like almanacs and primers, were frequently printed but often destroyed with use. If we could account for all these lost editions, the market share of printed plays would surely be somewhat lower than our figures.<sup>40</sup> Further, these figures do not tell us the proportion of individual copies of printed plays among copies of all books, since we lack evidence for the press runs of most editions. Nor do they tell us the total capital invested in and revenue generated by playbooks compared to other classes of books. To derive those figures, we would need to know not only press runs but also each book's cost of production and retail price. Without this evidence, we will never be able to ascertain precisely the "popularity" of various kinds of books in early modern England, if by popularity we mean something like the modern best-seller lists or a publishing firm's "bottom line."

It is nonetheless obvious that, in terms both of total copies sold and of total investment and profits, the dominant force in the early modern speculative book trade was a select group of titles protected by royal patents or by the English Stock monopoly. These include almanacs, Bibles, catechisms, and school books. Almanacs, for instance, were printed in huge runs of ten or twenty thousand copies during the 1660s, with as many as four hundred thousand total copies printed per year.<sup>41</sup> Neither playbooks nor any other non-patented, non-monopolistic books were produced in such quantities, not least because guild regulations set a maximum press

<sup>40</sup> See D. F. McKenzie, "Printing and publishing 1557–1700: constraints on the London book trades" in Barnard, MacKenzie, and Bell, eds., 553–67, esp. 559–60; Bland, 458; and Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 42.

<sup>41</sup> Cyprian Blagden, "The Distribution of Almanacs in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century," *Studies in Bibliography* 11 (1958): 107–16. For the press runs of other patented books, see John Barnard, "The Survival and Loss Rates of Psalms, ABCs, Psalters and Primers from the Stationers' Stock, 1660–1700," *The Library*, 6th ser., 21 (1999): 148–50; and John Barnard, "The Stationers' Stock 1663/4 to 1705/6: Psalms, Psalters, Primers and ABCs," *The Library*, 6th ser., 21 (1999): 369–75.

run of 1,250 to 1,500 copies for most editions.<sup>42</sup> While patented and monopolistic books comprise only about 11 percent of the total entries in our *STC* sample, that figure understates their importance, for not only were these books produced in greater press runs, but some, such as almanacs and primers, have higher loss rates as well. If we were to adjust for these factors, patented and monopolistic books would comprise much more than 11 percent of the individual copies of printed speculative books and of the total investment and profits in the book trade.<sup>43</sup> Such books were clearly among the trade's most successful and profitable titles, a fact that explains why stationers sought these patents and monopolies in the first place.

Nevertheless, in a comparative study of playbooks in the marketplace, there are good reasons for narrowing the market to those books that were, like playbooks, both speculative and non-monopolistic, a group that represents a full 68 percent of all *STC* entries in our sample. Most important, patented books were produced under fundamentally different economic conditions than other books, not only because these monopolies eliminated competition for entire classes of books but also because many copies of these books were sold to captive audiences, such as students, lawyers, or parish churches. Because non-monopolistic books entailed greater financial uncertainty, stationers had to decide whether to invest in them by assessing consumer demand, which was, for most patented publications, a minimal risk factor. Isolating the market for non-monopolistic books thus tells us more about stationers' evaluations of uncertain demand than does an analysis that lumps together risky non-monopolistic books with constantly reprinted monopolistic titles.

Further, by examining only the market for non-monopolistic books, we can compare stationers' judgments about the profitability of playbooks with their judgments about all the other kinds of books in which they actually had the option to invest. Few individual stationers were ever presented with the choice of publishing a playbook instead of an almanac or a Bible, since they were generally barred from producing these latter two classes of books. If we want to understand not which books were the most important financially to the book trade as a whole but rather how attractive playbooks were as investments, then we need to determine how often stationers chose to publish plays rather than other kinds of books available to them.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London: 1554–1640 A.D.*, ed. Edward Arber, 5 vols. (1875–94; rpt. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1967), 2:43; 2:883; McKerrow, 132, 214. In 1635 the maximum seems to have been raised; see Arber, 4:22.

<sup>43</sup> Bland, 452–53.

<sup>44</sup> The figures for non-monopolistic publications are, in one important sense, more accurate than those for all speculative books. Because Stationers' Company regulations limited the press runs of non-monopolistic books (see note 41 above), we can be a bit more certain that these books show greater similarity in their press runs than do all speculative books taken together.

By including all speculative books, both monopolistic and non-monopolistic, the lower line on figure 3 thus uses the *broadest* reasonable definition of the overall market. The upper line shows the share of playbooks within what we see as the *narrowest* reasonable definition of the market by restricting it to those books not covered by a patent or monopoly, as well as to those printed in English (as were all professional playbooks) and published in London (as were 99 percent of professional playbooks). In the first expansion period, professional plays constituted 5.8 percent of this market, or about one in every seventeen editions; in the second expansion, they made up 5.0 percent of the market, or about one in every twenty editions. In peak years, about one in every eleven editions in this market was a professional play.

Whether these figures seem high or low is to some degree a subjective measure. Both the “maximal” and the “minimal” market shares presented in figure 3 certainly suggest that playbooks were much more prevalent than recent scholarship has supposed, but whether they demonstrate the popularity of playbooks is a determination that can be made only after further studies produce the corresponding figures for other classes of books (poetry, travel, or medicine, for instance). In the following section, we will compare playbooks to printed sermons, but without more such analyses, it is not possible to establish clearly the relative popularity of playbooks in terms of market share. What is certain, however, is that printed plays sold very well indeed compared to other kinds of books.

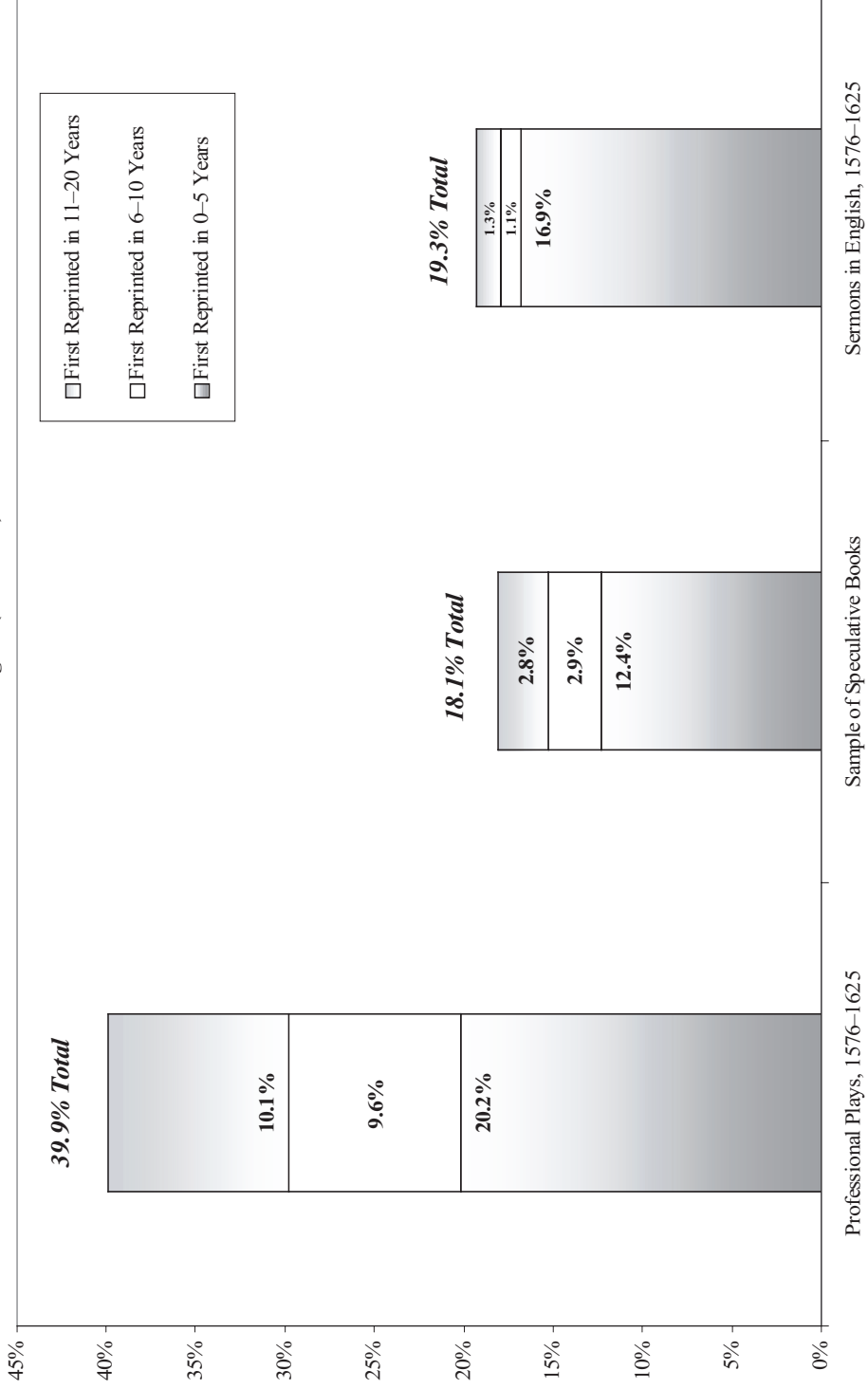
#### PLAYBOOK POPULARITY AND REPRINT RATES

While market share tells us something about stationers’ investment decisions, the reprint rate for playbooks is a more direct sign of their sales. Here we will discuss the reprint rates for plays printed in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, deferring discussion of the Caroline period, when playbook publication seems to have undergone a sea change. Blayney gives the most precise assessment of Elizabethan/Jacobean rates, pointing out that of the ninety-six professional plays first printed from 1583 to 1602, “only 46 (just under 48 percent) were reprinted inside of twenty-five years,” while from 1603 to 1622 the proportion rises to “just over 50 percent.”<sup>45</sup>

Blayney’s figures are accurate, although they will differ somewhat from our own because of methodological differences outlined in our Methodological Notes, “Reprint Parameters.” The problem, then, is not with these figures *per se* but with the fact that, because popularity is a relative concept, one cannot determine whether Blayney’s data indicate the relative *unpopularity* of playbooks (as he claims) or the relative *popularity* of playbooks, unless one knows how they compare to the reprint rates of other books. Figure 4 gives that necessary information, comparing the reprint rates for first editions of playbooks printed from 1576 to 1625 with the rates

<sup>45</sup> Blayney, 387.

**Figure 4: Outperforming the Market**  
 Reprint rates for first editions of professional plays (1576–1625), sample of speculative books, and sermons in English (1576–1625)



for two different groups of books: first, all speculative STC first editions in our six-year sample (including patented and monopolistic books, but excluding professional plays themselves); and, second, all first editions of sermons in English printed from 1576 to 1625. Once we make these comparisons, it turns out that Blayney's figures actually point quite impressively toward the popularity of playbooks.

Plays during this period might well be said to have "sold like hot cakes,"<sup>46</sup> for, as figure 4 shows, from 1576 to 1625 they were reprinted at *more than twice* the rate of speculative books in general (39.9 percent versus 18.1 percent).<sup>47</sup> Thus, with a play, a publisher stood a far greater chance of earning the increased profits accruing from reprints than he did with the average speculative book. And these reprints were themselves extremely popular, with almost three-quarters of all second-plus editions reaching a further edition. This is not to say that all publishers wanted to publish plays, nor that every play was of equal interest to those publishers; early modern stationers tended to specialize in the kinds of books they published, playbooks included. Some stationers seem to have refused to deal with plays at all, whether because of personal moral objections, as was apparently the case with Nicholas Bourne, or because they felt that plays did not fit their specialty and so would not sell well *for them*, regardless of the demand for plays in general.<sup>48</sup> And even those stationers who did deal in plays did not simply publish every play that became available to them: Thomas Archer specialized in plays on the "woman question," for example, and Walter Burre in printed drama seen as too sophisticated for what he called "vulgar" theater audiences.<sup>49</sup> In the book trade overall, however, playbooks

<sup>46</sup> Blayney, 384.

<sup>47</sup> More accurately, given the margin of error, the twenty-year reprint rate for speculative books is 18.1 percent ( $\pm 2.0$  percent). This reprint rate did not change substantially between 1590 and 1640. In order to prevent skewing our sample in favor of plays, we have excluded from our control sample of reprint rates all serial newsbooks (seven editions total), as well as almanacs (seventy-two editions total), because these books are almost "definitionally non-reprintable" due to their built-in expiration dates.

<sup>48</sup> On publisher specialization and its implications for our understanding of plays, see Zachary Lesser, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication: Readings in the English Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004). In 1646 Nicholas Bourne's former apprentice and employee John Bellamie wrote that "neither my selfe, nor any of my fellow Servants did sell any Play-books, or other books in that nature; and our not selling these, was by my Masters [Bourne's] owne order and direction" (John Bellamie, *A Iustification of the City Remonstrance and its Vindication* [1646], sig. D2<sup>r</sup>). Bourne was in fact involved in the publication of one play, acting as the wholesale bookseller for a facing-page translation of Terence's *The Eunuch* in 1629 (STC 23898). But this book, the title page of which notes that it is "Claused for such as would write or speake the pure Language of this Author" (i.e., broken down typographically into grammatical components), appears to be less a playbook than a Latin grammar, or so at least Bourne seems to have thought. In addition, in 1616 Henry Rocket transferred *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* to Bourne, who never published the play and subsequently transferred his interest in it to George Edwards Jr. in 1636 (Greg, 3:1497).

<sup>49</sup> Walter Burre, "To His Many Waies Endeered friend Maister Robert Keysar," *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1613), sig. A2<sup>r</sup>; on Burre's and Archer's publishing specialties, see Lesser, *Renaissance Drama*, chaps. 2 and 4.

were clearly in high demand. At least for this first fifty years of professional-play printing, we can no longer accept the notion that playbooks were an unsuccessful or unpopular segment of the early modern book trade.

Playbooks compare very well not only to a representative sample of all speculative books but also to the entire extant archive of one class of books, sermons in English, often considered one of the more successful segments of the early modern book trade (see Methodological Notes, “Sermon Archive”). According to H. S. Bennett, not only were “great numbers of new sermons” readily purchased by readers, but these readers “constantly called for reprints of old.”<sup>50</sup> Bennett’s impression seems borne out by Ian Green’s study of religious “best-sellers and steady sellers,” in which sermons rank second, behind only treatises, in his list of the period’s most popular religious titles.<sup>51</sup> As early as 1616 the preacher Samuel Ward complained about the profusion of printed sermons, observing that “euen Printers themselues complaine, that the Presse is oppressed with them.”<sup>52</sup> And judging by market share, sermons do indeed appear to have been more popular than playbooks. During the period of their highest production (1606–1640), printed sermons averaged just over forty-two editions per year, comprising 9.8 percent of the speculative market (or 11.4 percent of the non-monopolistic speculative market), more than twice the market share of professional plays during their two highest periods.

But if we assess sermons by reprint rates, their relative popularity begins to dim: 19.3 percent of sermons first printed from 1576 to 1625 were reprinted inside twenty years, almost exactly the rate for speculative books in general. Even during the period of their peak reprint rates—29.9 percent from 1591 to 1606—sermons were reprinted much less frequently than were professional plays. As figure 4 shows, professional plays were reprinted during the pre-Caroline period more than twice as often as these “constantly reprinted” religious “best-sellers.”

Of course, stationers were interested in more than a second edition; all publishers were hoping for a hit that could be reprinted again and again, the next *Mucedorus* or Arthur Dent’s *Sermon of Repentance*. *Mucedorus*, the period’s best-selling play, went through fifteen editions by 1642, while Dent’s best-selling sermon went through at least thirty-nine editions.<sup>53</sup> We might therefore assume that, even if plays were more likely than sermons to reach a second edition, they were less likely to become

<sup>50</sup> Bennett, *1603 to 1640*, 107–17, esp. 107.

<sup>51</sup> Green, 194–216. See also Bennett, *English Books & Readers, 1558 to 1603: Being a Study in the History of the Book Trade in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1965), 148–56.

<sup>52</sup> Samuel Ward, *Balme from Gilead* (1617), sig. A3<sup>r</sup>, emphasis removed.

<sup>53</sup> For a newly discovered edition of *Mucedorus*, see Richard Proudfoot, “‘Modernizing’ the Printed Play-Text in Jacobean London: Some Early Reprints of *Mucedorus*” in *“A Certain Text”: Close Readings and Textual Studies on Shakespeare and Others in Honor of Thomas Clayton*, Linda Anderson and Janis Lull, eds. (Newark: U Delaware P; London: Associated University Presses, 2002), 18–28.

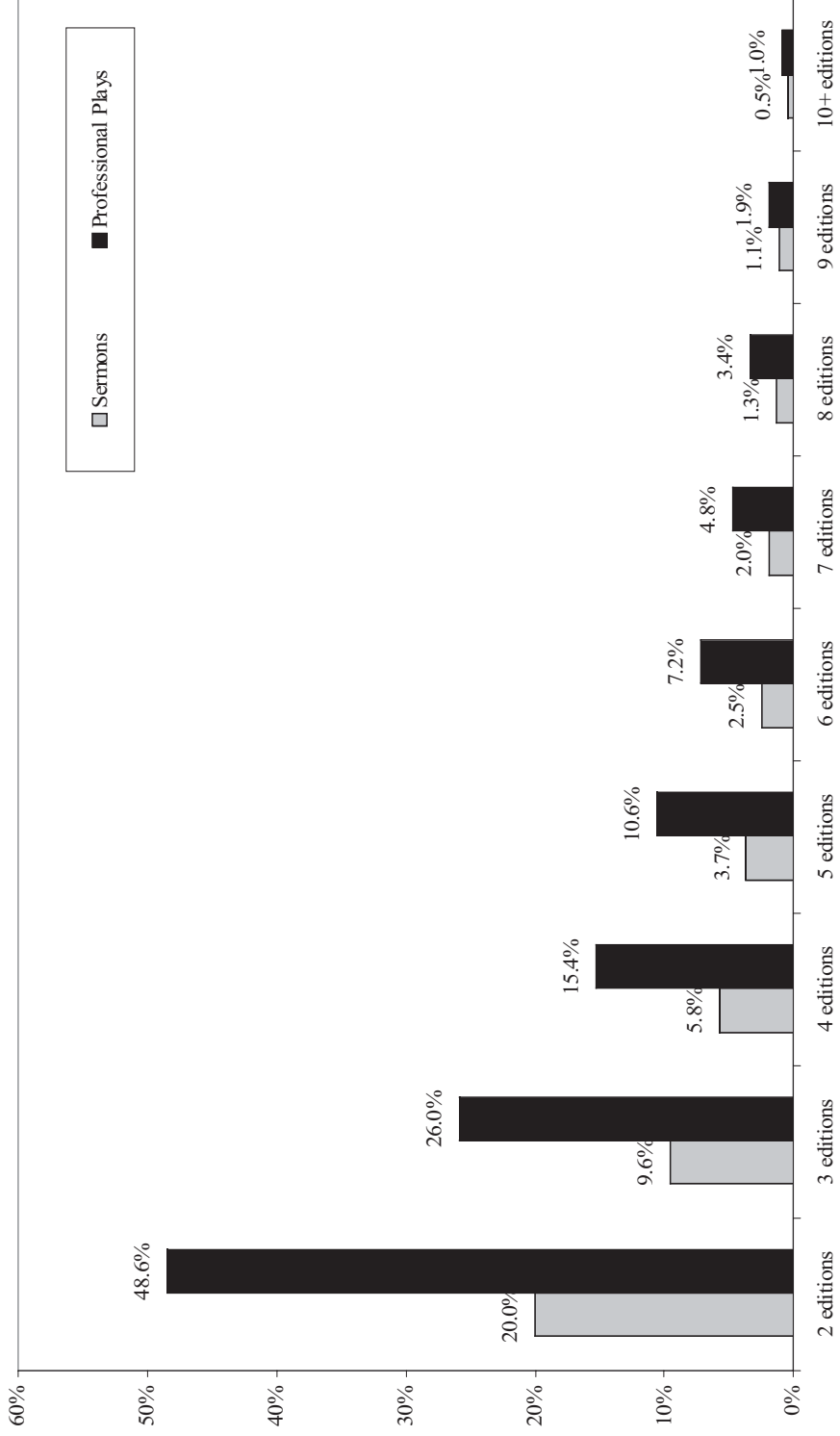
best-sellers. But this assumption would be wrong. Figure 5 shows the percentage of all professional plays and sermons first printed from 1576 to 1625 that reached two editions, three editions, and so on through ten or more editions by 1660. At each level, playbooks outperform sermons, confirming William Prynne's bitter remark in 1633 that "Play-books" were "now more vendible than the choycest Sermons."<sup>54</sup> What Prynne did not realize was that playbooks were not simply "now more vendible" but had been so for forty years. In fact, playbooks were more likely to reach a *third* edition by 1660 (26.1 percent) than the average English sermon was to reach a second (20 percent). Therefore, unless the combined press runs of a play's first two editions were regularly smaller than the press run of the first edition of a sermon (and this seems highly improbable), then the typical playbook must have sold more total individual copies than the typical sermon.<sup>55</sup> All else being equal, a stationer deciding where to invest and hoping for a best-seller would have been well-advised to publish a professional play rather than a sermon.

Playbooks outperformed sermons partly because plays were, in one important sense, less ephemeral than sermons. If a sermon was not reprinted within five years of its initial publication, it was highly unlikely ever to be reprinted. Once this five-year window passed, only 2.4 percent of all first-edition sermons (twenty-four of 973) reached a second edition inside twenty years. Speculative books in general do not look much different, as figure 4 shows. Professional plays, on the other hand, continued to thrive even beyond the five-year window: 19.7 percent reached a second edition between six and twenty years after initial publication. In other words, playbooks were just as likely to be first reprinted *after* five years as *within* five years. And even within the five-year window, the reprint rate for professional plays (20.2 percent) outpaces the entire twenty-year rate for speculative STC books and for sermons. Finally, if we include plays first reprinted outside the twenty-year limit—since this long "shelf-life" is a special characteristic of printed plays—their reprint rate jumps from 39.9 percent to 48.6 percent; nearly half of all professional plays first printed from 1576 to 1625 reached a second edition by 1660. We know of no other category of speculative, non-monopolistic book that can boast such a record.

<sup>54</sup> William Prynne, *Histrion-mastix* (1633), sig. \*3<sup>r-v</sup>. Therefore, although in this period there were certainly more second-plus, third-plus, . . . tenth-plus editions of sermons printed than of plays, this disparity is merely the result of the larger overall size of the sermon market, not an indication that sermon-books were more likely than professional plays to reach high edition totals.

<sup>55</sup> Little hard evidence exists for the size of press runs, but one law case (Corporation of London Records Office, Mayor's Court 1/38, sub. 38, attached schedule) mentions that the second quarto of *Philaster* was printed in an edition of 1,500 copies (Blayney, 422n). In 1639 John Benson requested permission from the Court of the Stationers' Company to print a second edition of William Davenant's *Albovine* and was granted "leau to print an Impr[e]ssion of 1500" copies (*Records of the Court of the Stationers' Company 1602 to 1640*, ed. William Jackson [London: Bibliographical Society, 1957], 325).

**Figure 5: Best-Seller Playbooks, "more vendible than the choicest Sermons"**  
 Percentage of professional plays and sermons in English first printed from 1576 to 1625  
 that reached 2, 3, 4 . . . 10+ editions by 1660



Plays not only repaid their publishers' investments more quickly than other books, but they also remained profitable far longer.

#### PLAYBOOK POPULARITY AND PROFITABILITY

The reprint success of playbooks, however, may give rise to the question of why more weren't published if they were such a good investment for stationers. Although, as we have shown, the actual market share of playbooks was significantly higher than previously estimated, the 221 new professional plays that reached print from 1589 to 1625—an average of just under six per year—has nevertheless seemed quite a low number to most recent scholars.<sup>56</sup> One theory, suggested by Blayney, is that stationers did not bring out more plays because playbooks yielded small profits: “if the real profit margins [of £6 or £7 per play] make it difficult to understand why a stationer would bother to take the risk at all, we should remember that during the sixty years on which I have focused it was, on average, only half a dozen times a year that anyone *did* bother.”<sup>57</sup> Given the economics of book production, shorter books cost less to produce but also generated lower profits, while longer books required greater investment, hence greater risk, but also offered the possibility of greater rewards. Blayney argues that because play scripts, when printed, yielded short, inexpensive books, publishers generally chose not to risk dealing with such low-profit wares.

Yet, there is no evidence that publishers shied away from small-profit wares or deliberately avoided books of nine-and-a-half sheets, the typical (median) length of a professional playbook, merely because they considered such books too short. Nor is there any economic reason to assume that books yielding a smaller profit per edition would necessarily have been less attractive investments, especially since playbooks turned a profit far more reliably than most other books. An edition of a ballad (one-half to one sheet), for instance, would have produced an even smaller profit than a playbook, but far more ballads were printed than plays.<sup>58</sup> The same is true of sermons, which typically ran to six-and-a-half sheets.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Because of the Shakespeare First Folio, 1 and 2 *Tamburlaine*, 1 and 2 *Troublesome Reign of King John*, 1 and 2 *Edward IV*, and *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron*, these 221 plays represent only 200 first-edition playbooks.

<sup>57</sup> Blayney, 412. Blayney does point out that profits from reprint editions, with lower production costs and higher press runs, could be much greater, even approaching £20 (410–13). Since a full 40 percent of all playbooks fell into this category, playbooks as a class averaged higher profits than did first-edition playbooks alone.

<sup>58</sup> According to Tessa Watt, about 3,000 distinct ballads, retailing for a halfpenny to a penny each, were published from 1550 to 1600 (11–12). Even if produced at the maximum press run of 1,500 copies, then, a ballad edition would have grossed at most £6 5s., well below Blayney's estimate for his hypothetical playbook, which grosses about £16 in a press run of 800 copies (412).

<sup>59</sup> To determine the lengths of early modern books, we used the page numbers and collations from ESTC (the *English Short Title Catalogue* online database developed by RLG) and *Early English Books Online* <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>>.

And, as a matter of fact, playbooks were not the particularly short or inexpensive books that scholars have assumed they were. They actually appear to have been fairly ordinary in length. In the years 1609 through 1611, for example, publishers brought out 1,016 speculative editions of books (including patented books); of these, we have been able to deduce the sheet-length of 987 titles. While the average length of these books is a little over thirty sheets, far longer than a play quarto, this average is skewed by a few extremely long books, including Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, an eight-volume edition of Chrysostom's works, and multiple editions of the Geneva Bible; the sixty-four longest books, in fact, accounted for over half the sheets composed for speculative publications in these three years. But such books do not accurately represent the length of books ordinarily published by stationers. The median (rather than the average) length of these 987 titles was only ten-and-a-half sheets, meaning that a little more than half of all the editions published in these years were longer than the typical play, and a little less than half were shorter. And given that the shortest books have the highest loss rates, the actual median length of all books published from 1609 to 1611 was probably even lower. Clearly publishers did not turn up their noses at the profits to be earned from books even shorter than plays.

Because playbooks were fairly typical in length—and therefore in price and potential profits—and, at the same time, were far more likely to sell out than other books, many publishers must have found them attractive investments. In contrast to the low-cost, low-profit, higher-risk publications that recent scholarship has taken them to be, playbooks were in fact middling-cost, middling-profit, lower-risk publications—an appealing profile for speculators.

If the seeming paucity of playbooks cannot be attributed to low demand—either from consumers (judging by reprint rates) or from stationers (judging by their profit profile)—then perhaps we should investigate supply. As we noted at the outset, scholars once argued that it was companies that restricted the supply of plays. Such protectionism was thought to derive from the players' fears that if a play was available in print, customers would no longer pay to see it in the theater; or, that if a play was printed, other companies might poach it for their repertories.<sup>60</sup> As noted above, both of these theories have been challenged in recent years by Blayney, Werstine, Knutson, and others; and we are not suggesting a return to the myths of stationer piracy and "poaching" that these scholars have convincingly refuted.

Rather, we are concerned with a far more basic restriction on supply: because of the economics of the theater, there were simply fewer professional plays being cre-

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), 3:184; Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time, 1590–1642* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1971), 261–62.

ated than sermons, ballads, or some other kinds of texts, a fact that inevitably decreased their availability to stationers.<sup>61</sup> In this sense, the relative independence from the stage of the drama's print market reaches its limit, for stationers necessarily had to rely on theaters to produce the plays that they could then print and sell. Before a stationer could purchase the manuscript of a professional play, a playing company had to pay for the script and, usually, invest considerable money in mounting the production, which a company did only for a limited number of play scripts in any given year. The same logic obtains today in the film industry. In 2004, Hollywood studios released 199 new films, a number limited by the high costs of production; however great the demand among readers, no more than 199 screenplays of Hollywood films from that year could be sold as books, while a far greater number of novels, self-help books, or children's books, for example, were available for publication.<sup>62</sup> So, too, early modern playing companies made their decisions based on their own economic interests, not on the interests of stationers. And as theatrical repertoires became more established in the seventeenth century, companies required fewer new plays each year, "liv[ing] in large part on their old repertoires."<sup>63</sup> Perhaps stationers would have published more plays had they been as plentiful as other texts. What all of this suggests is that basic issues—how plays reached print, how often they did so and under what conditions, how stationers decided whether to publish them—need to be reevaluated in light of this new evidence for the popularity of playbooks.<sup>64</sup>

Such a reevaluation should, moreover, lead us to recognize a crucial aspect of popularity in the early modern book trade. Contrary to what one might have assumed, a higher market share did not always correlate with a higher reprint rate.

<sup>61</sup> For ballads, see Watt, 11, 42. For sermons, see Bennett, *1558 to 1603*, 150–54; Bennett, *1603 to 1640*, 16–17, 109, 115–17; Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1992), 388.

<sup>62</sup> Motion Picture Association Worldwide Market Research, *U.S. Entertainment Industry: 2004 MPA Market Statistics*, 14 <<http://www.mpa.org>>, accessed 17 March 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Bentley, *Profession*, 221–24, esp. 221; Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941–68), 1:101–8; Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 84, 86; Martin Butler, "Literature and the theatre to 1660" in *The Cambridge History of Early Modern Literature*, David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 565–602, esp. 593.

<sup>64</sup> Another possible explanation for the limited number of plays printed would focus not on supply but rather on how stationers selected which plays they wanted to publish. As suggested above, simply because playbooks as a class sold well does not mean that each and every printed playtext would sell well, nor that stationers would always want to acquire every possible play. Playbooks may have been reprinted more often than other classes of books because publishers were more adept at selecting which plays to publish than they were at selecting other kinds of books. Unlike most texts, after all, professional plays had already been tested in another market; even allowing for the differences between stage and print popularity, a play's performance in the theatrical market would likely have provided the stationer with additional information useful in determining whether to invest in printing a particular play.

Sermons, for example, claimed a much greater share of the speculative market, but playbooks were far more likely to reach a second edition; so which class of books was more “popular”? After all, both sermons and playbooks seem to have been relatively popular compared to other kinds of books, but according to different criteria. For reasons both cultural and economic, different kinds of books may have sold in different ways, may have had different *structures of popularity*. We have provided here an analysis of the structure of popularity for plays, and we need similar analyses of other kinds of books, for such structures tell us not only about the economics of the early modern book trade but also about the culture of early modern England. To demonstrate the possibilities of this approach to book history, we turn briefly to the Caroline period, when the trade in playbooks, which had long functioned according to one structure of popularity, now fissured into two. The division would have lasting effects on the cultural status of Renaissance drama.

#### THE CAROLINE PARADOX

In Caroline England the structure of popularity for playbooks changed radically, as first editions were no longer reprinted at anything like the rate they had been in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Of the 122 professional plays first printed from 1626 to 1640, only 11 (9 percent) were reprinted within twenty years, a rate less than a quarter of that for pre-Caroline professional plays and only half that of speculative books in general. Should we therefore conclude that printed plays became less popular in the Caroline period? Not if stationers’ own investment decisions are any guide to popularity. Based on the total number of editions published, early modern English printed drama reached its apex in the years between 1629 and 1640, when play publishers nearly tripled their output compared to the preceding fifteen years, with both first editions and second-plus editions per year reaching their highest levels for the period (see figure 2). Furthermore, playbooks were also rising rapidly as a proportion of the entire trade; their market share more than doubled from the previous fifteen-year period and approached the highest levels of the first boom. We are thus left with a seeming contradiction: if judged by reprint rates, plays seem to have become less popular in the Caroline period, yet according to two other indices of popularity—editions per year and market share—plays were at least as popular as ever. How can we explain this “Caroline paradox”?

Here we can only sketch the outlines of an explanation.<sup>65</sup> Reprint rates seem to have been depressed because of an unprecedented division between the structures of popularity for first and second-plus editions. Where once both kinds of editions

<sup>65</sup> For a fuller analysis, see Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, “The Caroline ‘Classic’ and the Modern Canon” in *Localizing Caroline Drama*, Alan B. Farmer and Adam Zucker, eds., forthcoming from Palgrave.

had been reprinted at very high rates, in the Caroline period new plays were almost never reprinted, while second-plus editions continued to be reprinted at roughly the same rate. And not only did these two types function differently when they went on the market, but they also took different paths to get there. The market for first editions was dominated by one group of publishers, and that for second-plus editions by a different group of publishers, with very little overlap between the two.

In terms of both consumption and production, the Caroline book trade was thus fundamentally split. The market for first editions seems to have been driven by customers' desire for novelty, for the newest playbook in the stationer's shop from the latest play performed in the theater, a desire that was temporary and quickly superseded by other new playbooks. The market for second-plus editions, on the other hand, depended on customers' attachment to particular "classics," most of them dating from around the turn of the century. This division in the playbook market both signaled and contributed to the development of an early modern dramatic canon. This Caroline canon looks rather different from our modern one, most notably in that it was defined not by a select group of *authors* but rather by a select group of *titles* popular with booksellers and book-buyers. And yet the Caroline canon of classic plays did help to shape our modern canon, which has overwhelmingly favored the Elizabethan and Jacobean while neglecting the Caroline stage.

The structure of popularity for playbooks was thus significantly different in the 1630s than in earlier decades, but it is clear that, overall, plays were a highly successful portion of the early modern book trade. Indeed, playbooks in Elizabethan and Jacobean England were reprinted more than twice as often as speculative books in general and English sermons in particular. Assuming they could identify which publications were popular with their customers, stationers interested in books offering reasonable profits with unusually low risk must have been eager to acquire and publish plays. Blayney's groundbreaking work has led scholars to reevaluate the place of playbooks not only within the early modern book trade but also within early modern culture more widely, and this reevaluation must continue. It should now begin, however, by recognizing the popularity of playbooks.

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

*Loss Rates:* While we can never calculate the exact loss rate for printed plays, we can begin to estimate how significant that loss might be. We will start by estimating an upper limit for lost first editions and then propose a more likely range; finally, we will suggest how many second-plus editions may have been lost. The Stationers' Register contains thirty-six entries for manuscripts that may have been professional plays but for which there is no corresponding extant printed text.<sup>66</sup> But not all books were entered before they were printed, and so there may be even more lost first editions than these thirty-six. From 1576 to 1640, about four-fifths (78 percent) of all extant first-edition playbooks were entered in the Register. If we make the key assumption that entrance or non-entrance did not affect the survival of plays, we can then project that the thirty-six entries represent only 78 percent of all lost first editions.<sup>67</sup> We are thus left with an upper limit of forty-six lost first editions, which corresponds to less than one playbook per year. It is most unlikely, however, that all thirty-six entries were in fact for professional plays and did ultimately result in a printed playbook. W. W. Greg, for instance, believed that only one of these titles (George Peele's *The Hunting of Cupid* [entered 1591]) was certainly printed, and that thirteen entries may not have been for plays at all. Seven of the remaining entries occur in 1640, and these may never have been printed due to the steep decline in play publication caused by the Civil War. All told, then, these entries probably translate into somewhere between one and twenty lost first editions.

A crucial quantity that remains unknowable, however, is the number of extant plays for which the true first edition has been lost, as probably occurred with *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Love's Labor's Lost*. Among those playbooks entered in the Register from 1576 to 1640, nearly all (91 percent) were printed within a year of their entrance, and the average gap between entrance and a first edition was less than a year. In contrast, the average gap between a first and second edition was about ten years. The discrepancy here is suggestive: the number of years between a play's entrance and first edition is much smaller than the number of years that typically elapsed between a play's first and second editions. Simply put, this difference in time frames suggests that there is unlikely to be a large number of lost first editions of extant plays; cases like *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Love's Labor's Lost*—that is, highly successful plays that seem to have gone through two editions almost immediately, but of which the true first edition seems to have been lost—are probably unusual.

<sup>66</sup> Greg, 2:965–77.

<sup>67</sup> We make this assumption partly on the basis of Blayney's analysis of entrance (400–405), which disputes the older notion that lack of entrance indicates surreptitious printing.

Cases like these do introduce an irreducible element of uncertainty into our calculations, since they not only add to the total number of lost first editions but would also then have to be taken into account when extrapolating (as we do below) the number of lost second-plus editions. Nevertheless, since only a fraction—perhaps a small fraction—of the thirty-six entries for “lost” plays likely resulted in a printed playbook from the professional theater, it seems highly doubtful that the arguments in this essay would be greatly changed by lost first editions.

Because reprints were rarely entered in the Register, there is no analogous method by which we might calculate the loss rates for second-plus editions. One way to estimate these losses, however, would be to assume that second-plus editions survived at much the same rate as first editions. Toward the upper end of the spectrum, we could then project that from 1576 to 1640 about thirty-four second-plus editions may have been lost, less than one edition per year. Basing our calculations on the more likely range of lost first editions yields between one and fifteen lost reprints. These estimates again suggest that lost plays would not cause us to change our argument.

*STC Sample:* We cannot assume that the “speculative rate” for our six-year *STC* sample (79 percent) automatically matches that for the entire fifty-one-year period of 1590 through 1640, so we must therefore acknowledge the potential margin of error, which in this case is  $\pm 1.4$  percent. We restrict our estimate to this period because before 1590 almost no professional plays were published, while after 1640 the market for printed books expanded enormously. Barnard and Bell list 2,034 titles in 1641, and 3,666 in 1642, compared to just 848 in 1640;<sup>68</sup> we therefore consider it unwise to assume that the speculative rate during the period before the Civil War stayed the same in the volatile publishing environment of the 1640s.

We have chosen for our *STC* sample six years—1590, 1600, 1610, 1620, 1630, and 1635—that, due to *STC* cataloguing practices, contain a higher than average number of entries with inferred dates, which “occur disproportionately in . . . years ending in ‘0’ and ‘5’.”<sup>69</sup> We have thus included more editions with questionable dates; but had we selected years not ending in 0 or 5, our sample would likely have *undercounted* editions with questionable dates. In any event, our argument is concerned not with the total number of entries in any given year but rather with the percentage of all entries that are for speculative editions, and with the percentage of all speculative first editions that were reprinted within twenty years. For these purposes, statistical tests demonstrate that entries with inferred dates are not inconsistent with all other entries in these years.

<sup>68</sup> Barnard and Bell, Appendix 1, 783.

<sup>69</sup> Bell and Barnard, “Provisional,” 56–58.

*Reprint Parameters:* Our methodology differs from Blayney's in four key ways. First, Blayney uses a twenty-five-year window for reprints, while we use a more conservative twenty-year window. Second, he designates the year of publication as Year 1, while we count it as Year 0. As a result, if a play was first printed in 1600 and then reprinted in 1625, Blayney would exclude it from his twenty-five-year reprint totals; if that same 1600 playbook was reprinted in 1620, we would include it in our twenty-year reprint totals. The last two differences result from our focus on playbooks from the professional theaters. Although Blayney primarily discusses professional drama, he has also included several university plays that we have not. Lastly, in computing his reprint rates, Blayney tracks plays first printed in collections separately from the collection as a whole: for example, he considers each of the plays in the First Folio of Shakespeare's works to have been reprinted in the Second Folio, whereas we are interested in reprints of playbooks, not playtexts, and so consider F2 as a single book and a single reprint of F1. Similarly, Blayney considers a play first published individually to have been reprinted if it is later published in a collection, whereas we do not. Blayney's reprint totals therefore include, for example, the republication of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600) and *2 Henry IV* (1600) in the First Folio, whereas ours do not because neither 1600 *playbook* was ever reprinted.<sup>70</sup> (Both approaches have merit: Blayney's method acknowledges the added profits a stationer would usually enjoy when one of his plays was printed in a collection, even if only in the form of payment from another stationer for the temporary rights. Our method measures the demand for and the popularity of particular playbooks: the reprinting of *Much Ado* in F1 tells us very little about the sales of the 1600 quarto.) Applying our parameters to the periods analyzed by Blayney but extending our reprint window to twenty-five years to match his yields reprint rates of 42.7 percent (thirty-eight of eighty-nine) for 1583–1602, 43.1 percent (forty-seven of 109) for 1603–22, and 15.6 percent (twenty-one of 135) for 1623–42. Since Blayney's figures turn out to be *higher* than ours, our argument about the popularity of playbooks remains unaffected.

*Sermon Archive:* Our sermon archive includes all known editions of sermons in English first printed from 1576 to 1640. We compiled this archive by searching in the STC and ESTC, and by consulting the following works: Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000); Peter E. McCullough, *Sermons at Court: Politics and religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean preaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998); Millar MacLure, *Register of Sermons Preached at Paul's Cross, 1534–1642*, rev. Jackson Campbell Boswell and Peter Pauls (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1989); and Alan Fager Herr, *The Elizabethan Sermon, A Survey and a*

<sup>70</sup> See Blayney, 387, 416n, 417n, 418n.

*Bibliography* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1940), 117–69. Using the same methods that we applied to playbooks, we have counted only editions of sermon-books, not sermons as texts; therefore, if a sermon was first printed in its own edition and then later reprinted in a collection with other sermons, we have not counted the collection as a reprint of that sermon. In addition, following the distinction between sermons and treatises usefully laid out by Ian Green, we have excluded treatises originally delivered as sermons but then revised into longer works.<sup>71</sup> We were left with a total of 1,968 sermon-books printed from 1576 to 1640 (1,366 first editions and 602 second-plus editions).

We should also mention some key differences between sermon-books and playbooks. First, unlike plays, a large proportion of sermon-books were collections (39 percent), which usually included two to ten sermons but on occasion more than a hundred. However, although it has often been claimed otherwise, most sermon collections did *not* bring together previously published sermons; those like Lancelot Andrewes's *XCVI Sermons* (1629) and John Donne's *LXXX Sermons* (1640) were more the exception than the rule.<sup>72</sup> Second, and in large part because of collections, sermon-books exhibited greater variability in their length than did playbooks, ranging from a single sheet to 351 sheets (*The Sermons of M. John Calvin vpon the Fifth Booke of Moses called Deuteronomie* [1583]). Third, within the category of sermon-books, there exist several different types of sermons, including court sermons (some printed by command of the monarch), funeral sermons, topical or controversial sermons, not to mention sermons associated with various religious groups (Catholic, "puritan," Laudian, etc.). We have not attempted to classify every sermon in our archive and thus have not attempted to derive the reprint rates of all the different types of sermon-books, though such a project might well produce interesting results.

<sup>71</sup> Green, 216–22.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Bennett, *1603 to 1640*, 107.