

Notes

Structures of Popularity in the Early Modern Book Trade

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We are grateful to the editors of *Shakespeare Quarterly* for the opportunity to reply briefly to Peter W. M. Blayney's response to our article, "The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited," both of which appeared in the spring 2005 issue of this journal.¹ Many of Blayney's remarks concern differences between his preferred methods of counting and our own. Fortunately for readers not wishing to get bogged down in methodological detail, in every case of importance our respective analyses yield almost exactly the same results. Blayney calculates that 78.7 percent of all *STC* entries are for speculative books; our figure is 79.0 percent (± 1.4 percent).² Since our calculation is derived from a sample while Blayney's is based on an examination of every entry in the *STC* from 1583 to 1640, his figure is likely the more accurate (and therefore the one that we ourselves plan to use in future studies), although the difference is obviously negligible.³ Because our "speculative rates" match, so do our calculations of the market share of playbooks among all speculative books; as Blayney writes, he "cannot fault either the approach or the results."⁴ With reprint rates, too, our calculations track closely; as Blayney writes, "the overall picture . . . is

¹ See Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, "The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56 (2005): 1–32, hereafter cited as "Revisited"; and Peter W. M. Blayney, "The Alleged Popularity of Playbooks," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56 (2005): 33–50, hereafter cited as "Alleged." See also 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, hereafter cited as "Publication." As in "Revisited," we here discuss *professional* playbooks only—that is, printed editions of plays from the professional theaters—and sermons printed in English only.

² See Blayney, "Alleged," 37; and Farmer and Lesser, "Revisited," 14.

³ Blayney includes vanity publications and black-market books from the secret Catholic presses among speculative books ("Alleged," 36), whereas we exclude them as primarily non-speculative. These books make up such a tiny proportion of our sample of the *STC* (four out of every thousand entries) that they make no real difference, as is shown by our nearly identical figures for the "speculative rate." One other minor difference is that while we focus exclusively on playbooks from the professional theater, Blayney includes several (apparently over thirty) unidentified university playbooks ("Alleged," 34).

⁴ Blayney, "Alleged," 37; compare Blayney's calculations there to our Figure 3 (Farmer and Lesser, "Revisited," 15).

much the same" in both our analysis and his.⁵ Given the difficulty of counting such large sample sizes repeatedly and in multiple ways, we were happy to see our own calculations independently confirmed.⁶

So the debate centers not on facts or figures but rather on a more fundamental issue: how to theorize the meaning of *popularity* in the book trade and, specifically, how to interpret the relationship between market share and reprint rates when assessing popularity. We developed the concept of *structures of popularity* because we believe that these two criteria should be considered in dynamic relation to each other, to total number of editions, and to profitability.⁷ Blayney, on the other hand, argues that the total number of editions (and thus the market share) of sermon-books "completely vitiates" the usefulness of playbooks reprint rates as an index of popularity.⁸ In the 1997 article that inspired our own study, however, Blayney wrote that "there is more to the question of popularity than the annual number of new works in a genre, and we need also to look at the frequency of reprinting."⁹ We believe Blayney was correct in 1997: if we want to understand popularity in the

⁵ Blayney, "Alleged," 43; compare Blayney's calculations there to our Figure 4 (Farmer and Lesser, "Revisited," 19).

⁶ A recurring methodological difference involves the issue of periodization. When calculating reprint rates, Blayney combines the two distinctive periods for playbooks publication, 1576–1625 and 1626–1640 ("Alleged," 43), which we argue should be kept separate due to the "Caroline paradox" ("Revisited," 18). When calculating market share, we begin our analysis in 1590, the year in which professional plays began to be published regularly ("Revisited," 30), while Blayney begins in 1583 ("Alleged," 37), thereby including seven years during which, as we noted, "there was essentially no market for printed professional plays" ("Revisited," 7).

⁷ Our argument about profitability ("Revisited," 24–27) can be summarized as follows: Among all books published from 1609 to 1611, playbooks were of median length; in other words, about half of all books published in those years were shorter than playbooks, and about half longer. Since profitability was tied to sheet length, it cannot be true that publishers shied away from playbooks because they did not have the potential to generate high enough profits, as Blayney implied in 1997 and as many have subsequently asserted. In his response to this part of our argument, Blayney claims that we were "ready to discount" data in order to reach a desired outcome ("Alleged," 45). He writes, first, that we "assume[d] that the largest books of those three years [1609 to 1611] were so atypical that they had to be disqualified," and, second, that we "calculate[d] an agreeably low mean instead of an undesirably high average" ("Alleged," 45). Neither statement is correct. We calculated the *median*, not the *mean*; the two are entirely different functions. The median is "the midpoint of a set of values, such that the variable has an equal probability of falling above or below it" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "median," n.² and a.², 3), while the mean is the average. Further, both the median and the mean are operations performed on *all* items in a population, in this case from the very shortest to the very longest book; neither involves disqualifying any items. *Median* and *mean* do answer different questions, though; since we wanted to determine whether playbooks were shorter or longer than the majority of books published, median was (by definition) the correct function.

⁸ Blayney, "Alleged," 43.

⁹ Blayney, "Publication," 387.

book trade, we need to consider both total number of editions and frequency of reprinting, as well as market share and profitability. No single one of these four measurements by itself equates directly to popularity in the book trade; each addresses different questions about the market performance of books, and each points to a different aspect of both supply and demand.

Why do reprint rates matter? Because they provide the best available criterion for answering such questions as: *How eager were customers to buy the playbooks that were for sale in bookshops? Was a playbook a good publishing investment? Did playbooks reliably turn a profit?* These questions cannot be answered simply by looking at market share, which tells us how many editions overall were published for the speculative book trade but conveys less about the economic performance of those editions once they were on the market. Reprint rates, by contrast, provide a more direct measure of this sort of economic performance, because a reprint indicates that the previous edition had sold out (or was about to sell out) and that the publisher anticipated enough continuing demand to justify a further edition. The reprint rate for an entire class of books tells us how frequently a given title within that class achieved this type of economic success and, consequently, how often a publisher had the chance to enjoy the increased profits possible with reprint editions. Reprint rates, therefore, allow us to gauge both the demand among retail customers for certain classes of books and the investment risk faced by speculating publishers.

When we look at actual reprint rates, we find that about 40 percent of playbooks first published from 1576 to 1625 were reprinted within twenty years, compared to about 19 percent of sermon-books during that period and about 18 percent of all speculative books, the crucial benchmark for the market.¹⁰ These comparative reprint rates indicate that, through 1625, any given new playbook was more than twice as likely to sell out and be reprinted as a speculative book in general or a sermon-book in particular. Furthermore, playbooks were more likely than sermon-books to reach third, fourth, and higher editions, and were reprinted more often than other books both in the short term (within five years of initial publication) and in the longer term (within six to twenty years).¹¹ If Shakespeareans want to know (as Blayney asked in 1997) “why a stationer would bother to take the risk [of publishing a playbook] at all,”¹² the answer is simple: the risk of publishing a playbook was much lower than for other speculative books because playbooks were far more likely to turn a profit and lead to a reprint. This lower risk had everything to do with the popularity of playbooks among those who mattered most to publishers: retail

¹⁰ See Figure 4 in Farmer and Lesser, “Revisited,” 19.

¹¹ See Figures 5 and 4 in Farmer and Lesser, “Revisited,” 23 and 19.

¹² Blayney, “Publication,” 412.

customers, who were apparently very interested in buying the playbooks that were available for sale in bookshops.

The kinds of popularity that reprint rates address are of little consequence in Blayney's latest analysis. For Blayney, any type of book with more editions than another was, by definition, the more popular. For this reason, while he does admit that "it is perfectly legitimate" to compare reprint rates if they are "percentages of similar numbers," he thinks the disparity in total editions between sermon-books and playbooks makes a comparison of their reprint rates pointless.¹³ But how do we know whether edition totals are "similar" enough to justify taking account of reprint rates? When exactly *can* we be confident that the difference between the reprint rates of two kinds of books with differing market shares represents a meaningful measure of their comparative performance in the book trade? As we discussed in our previous essay, many more sermon-books were published than playbooks, and yet a higher proportion of playbooks reached a second edition.¹⁴ Because edition totals and reprint rates of almost any two classes of books will inevitably differ, what we need is not a subjective judgment of whether edition totals are "similar," but rather a sound method for evaluating the statistical significance of reprint rates for distinct classes of books in relation to their edition totals. To take the extreme case that Blayney cites in order to question the very notion of comparing reprint rates, what should we make of the difference in reprinting between Shakespeare's many plays and those few by Edward Sharpham or Thomas Tomkis?¹⁵

There is a standard statistical test applied in situations exactly like this one: the chi-square test, which we employed repeatedly in the course of our research for "The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited." Although it may be unfamiliar to most literary critics, this test is routinely used in fields that rely on statistical measurements of data.¹⁶ The test's primary purpose is to ascertain whether the variation in a particular characteristic between two groups is significant in light of the different sizes of those groups. The chi-square test therefore allows us to determine whether a difference in reprint rates for two classes of books with differing edition totals is meaningful or is perhaps due simply to chance.

¹³ Blayney, "Alleged," 43. Blayney asks, "If reprinting denotes popularity, what should we conclude from the uncontested fact that more than twice as many sermon-books as playbooks went into at least a second edition?" ("Alleged," 43). The problem with ignoring reprint *rates* (percentages) and focusing only on total numbers is that we might just as easily ask, "If lack of reprinting denotes unpopularity, what should we conclude from the uncontested fact that almost *five times* as many sermon-books as playbooks were *never* reprinted?"

¹⁴ See Farmer and Lesser, "Revisited," 21, 27.

¹⁵ See Blayney, "Alleged," 44.

¹⁶ Readers interested in how the chi-square test is performed can consult <http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/webtools/web_chi.html> or any introductory statistics textbook.

In these two cases—playbooks versus sermon-books, and Shakespeare versus Sharpham or Tomkis—the results of chi-square tests are unambiguous. For playbooks and sermon-books, we can be extremely confident that the difference in reprint rates is statistically significant. For the much smaller sample of plays by Shakespeare, Sharpham, and Tomkis, the opposite is true: the difference in their reprint rates is *not* statistically significant. Rather than invalidating the use of reprint rates, then, Blayney's example simply highlights the importance of having population sizes large enough to support the claims one wants to make. And in the case of playbooks and sermon-books, the population sizes are indeed large enough to conclude that their reprint rates indicate a real difference in their comparative market performance. Ultimately, it is this "arithmetical truism" that matters, not total number of editions in itself.¹⁷

This is certainly not to say that market share is unimportant or irrelevant. As we explained in "Revisited," market share (along with profitability and, if we only knew them, press runs) is perfectly suited for answering other key questions related to popularity, such as: *Which books were most prevalent in the book trade as a whole? Which classes of books participated in the greatest number of retail sales transactions? In which classes did publishers invest the most capital and earn the most profits in terms of pounds, shillings, and pence?* These are the questions that most interest Blayney. He is concerned, for instance, to point out how much larger the market share of all religious titles was than that of playbooks, and he reasonably infers that "[c]ustomers in early modern bookshops chose to spend far more of their money on religious books than they did on playbooks."¹⁸ While we did not discuss the class of *all* religious books in our essay, we would certainly never disagree with the assertion Blayney makes here, especially since we showed that playbooks had a lower market share than sermon-books, a subset of all religious publications. Our argument in fact depends on this very point, since we developed the theory of structures of popularity to deal with precisely this sort of situation, in which the indices of popularity point in different directions:

Contrary to what one might have assumed, a higher market share did not always correlate with a higher reprint rate. 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*.¹⁹

¹⁷ Blayney, "Alleged," 43. We thank statisticians Andrew Gelman (Columbia University) and Doug Noe (University of Illinois) for their helpful discussions with us of these issues.

¹⁸ Blayney, "Alleged," 47.

¹⁹ Farmer and Lesser, "Revisited," 25–26.

What the comparison of playbooks and sermon-books reveals is that neither market share nor reprint rates tells the entire story of “popularity.”

Thus while we agree with Blayney about the facts concerning the market shares of sermon-books and playbooks, we differ over the interpretation of how those facts relate to reprint rates and to “popularity” in the book trade. We also disagree with his conceptualization of “the market.” There is no single entity called “the market,” only different ways of defining it; and these definitions will vary with the specific questions scholars want to answer. In any assessment of market share, one first needs to decide on the relevant “universe” of books in which to place a single class such as playbooks, and this decision will necessarily depend on one’s scholarly interests. Blayney prefers what we call the “*broadest* reasonable definition”—that is, the entire speculative *STC*—and we certainly agree that this will often be the most important universe to consider.²⁰ This is why it is the primary universe in “Revisited.” We also then consider another universe of books *within* all speculative books, the “*narrowest* reasonable definition” of the market for our purposes—namely, non-monopolistic books printed in English and in London, books that we believe share important characteristics with playbooks.²¹ Figure 3 in “The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited” shows the market share of playbooks within both of these universes, thereby displaying a *range* between which many other calculations of market share, based on other definitions of “the market,” would probably fall.²² But if one were asking different questions, one might easily be interested in a much larger universe (say, all books published in Western Europe) or a much smaller one (all books published by stationers in Paul’s Churchyard). Or one might choose to compute market share in an entirely different way, by counting sheets rather than titles—a method that, as Mark Bland has argued, provides the best measure of the total capital invested in various types of books.²³

The questions that market share addresses—the questions that interest Blayney above all others—clearly have an important relation to publisher demand and (implicitly) to consumer demand, and our theory of structures of popularity

²⁰ Farmer and Lesser, “Revisited,” 18; see Blayney, “Alleged,” 38–42.

²¹ Farmer and Lesser, “Revisited,” 18.

²² Blayney calls our reporting of evidence about market share “selective . . . biased and misleading” (“Alleged,” 37), whereas, in fact, the graph in Figure 3 provides all of our data for the market share of playbooks. We highlight the market share for each of our periods—both expansions and contractions—by putting them in boxes on that graph. Furthermore, we discuss the period of market contraction at considerable length (“Revisited,” 11–13). As we noted, the market for playbooks was dynamic, not static; thus it is useful to examine not merely their overall market share but also their market share within distinct periods. Far from hiding the contraction from 1614 to 1628, then, we are (so far as we know) the first to call attention to it.

²³ Mark Bland, “The London Book-Trade in 1600” in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, David Scott Kastan, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 450–63.

requires that we answer such questions, as we did for playbooks and sermon-books. The main goal of our discussion of market share was to demonstrate that “printed plays constituted a much larger market share than previously thought,”²⁴ and both our analysis in “Revisited” and Blayney’s in “Alleged” show that the market share of playbooks among all speculative books was two to three times higher than his 1997 estimates. But while counting the total number of editions and calculating their proportion of the overall market is, of course, a necessary *first* step in assessing the demand for (or popularity of) any class of books, it should never be the *only* step, as it seems to be for Blayney. This is because market share is affected not only by demand, but also by supply.²⁵ The availability of different kinds of texts to publishers could vary widely, whether due merely to the numbers in which different kinds of manuscripts were produced or to the ease with which publishers could procure them. There could never have been anywhere near as many playscripts from the professional theater as there were texts of sermons or treatises, simply because playing companies did not stage plays in such numbers; for similar reasons, manuscripts of royal entrance narrations, court masques, and Lord Mayors’ pageants must have been in short supply. We simply do not know how many more playbooks stationers would have published if theaters had produced plays in the same quantities that preachers produced sermons or divines produced treatises (although the high reprint rates for playbooks seems a good clue). To ignore such fundamental issues of supply would be naïve. Therefore, if we want to investigate the popularity of any class of books in a way that recognizes the complex relationship between supply and demand, we need to examine not only their relative abundance in the market (total editions and market share) but also their market performance once they were available for retail sale in whatever numbers (reprint rates and profitability).

This is the central point of “The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited.” We are most interested in advancing a new theory of what *popularity* means in the book trade, a theory based on what we call “structures of popularity,” which take account of the entire nexus of total number of editions, market share, reprint rates, and profitability. Different types of books had different structures of popularity; they sold in different ways and elicited different strategies from publishers. To understand these structures, one must assess all four indices of popularity in relation both to relevant overall markets and to other types of books, because these indices tell different stories, illuminate distinct aspects of popularity, and do not always neatly align, either across classes of books or across time periods for a single class. Coranto

²⁴ Farmer and Lesser, “Revisited,” 14.

²⁵ For a lengthier discussion of how market share is affected by supply, see Farmer and Lesser, “Revisited,” 5, 24–26.

newsbooks, for example, were highly topical publications that could never be sold in the same way as most other books. They were *never* reprinted and had a low profit per copy (at only two-to-three sheets in length), and yet from 1622 to 1632 they had an edition total and a market share much closer to sermon-books' than to playbooks'.²⁶ Their popularity as a class clearly must have depended on factors other than reprinting.

As this example shows, books could be in high demand even though their reprint rate was low. Likewise, books (such as ballads) could be in high demand even though their profitability per copy was low. And, as seems to have been the case with plays, books could be in high demand even though their market share was low. For these reasons we were careful *not* to suggest that either sermon-books or playbooks were more popular than the other in any absolute sense; the more productive and economically sensitive approach is to understand their different structures of popularity. Playbooks were reprinted frequently but remained, necessarily, in limited supply (to both publishers and their customers); sermon-books were reprinted at about the market average but were a high-volume class in plentiful supply.

An approach based on structures of popularity thus attempts not merely to measure comparative popularity but also to explain why and how different kinds of books were published. Structures of popularity have much to tell us about the book trade and the culture of early modern England. We gesture toward the payoff from this concept in the brief discussion of the Caroline paradox that concludes our previous article, and we plan to elaborate on that analysis in a forthcoming volume.²⁷ In "The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited," we used this theory to reveal that, contrary to conventional wisdom since Blayney's 1997 essay, playbooks were not "low-cost, low-profit, higher-risk publications"; rather, they were "middling-cost, middling-profit, lower-risk publications—an appealing profile for speculators."²⁸ Employing this theory, we also demonstrated that, again contrary to conventional wisdom, playbooks were in demand with book-buyers; the reasonable conclusion to draw from playbooks' high reprint rates is, in fact, that "retail customers snapped them up in the bookshops."²⁹ By emphasizing structures of popularity, then, we have tried not simply to establish the popularity of playbooks but also to theorize the very meaning of *popularity* in the early modern book trade.

²⁶ Folke Dahl, *A Bibliography of English Corantos and Periodical Newsbooks 1620–1642* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1952); for this period, there are 196 extant editions of corantos, but we know there were about 400 actually printed, since we can fill in lost editions from missing serial numbers.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Farmer and Lesser, "Revisited," 25.

²⁹ Blayney, "Alleged," 33.