

The background of the cover is a deep blue with numerous bright, white, and light blue light trails or streaks that appear to be falling or radiating from the top, creating a sense of dynamic movement. In the center, there is a glowing, rectangular object that resembles an open book or a tablet, emitting a bright white light. The overall effect is ethereal and high-tech.

ROUTLEDGE



The Elizabethan Top Ten

**Defining Print Popularity in
Early Modern England**

Edited by
**Andy Kesson
and
Emma Smith**

THE ELIZABETHAN TOP TEN

Material Readings in Early Modern Culture

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The Elizabethan Top Ten

Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England

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and

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Introduction: Towards a Definition of Print Popularity

Andy Kesson and Emma Smith

The Crown of Laurel on Bad Art?

After some months dominated by J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, *The New York Times Book Review* announced a change in policy for its famous book best-seller listings. Their new list of 'trade paperback fiction ... gives more emphasis to the literary novels and short-story collections reviewed so often in our pages'.¹ The aim is clear: to exclude some – in fact, the very top – bestsellers from the best-seller list in order to make space for books whose value was signalled more by their presence in the paper's review pages than by their sales figures alone. Six months later the paper attempted again to explain the rationale for its decision, but served to further confuse the distinction between 'trade' and its tautological formula of 'mass-market' bestsellers. In March 2008 Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* was in both charts, ranked 8th and 17th, respectively.

'You may still wonder', the paper wrote, 'why we decided to separate the mass-market and trade best-seller lists. The reason is that mass-market books – no surprise – tend to sell in larger numbers than trade. A list based on the number of copies a paperback sells will usually be dominated by mass-market'. One might expect that a list headed 'bestsellers' would indeed register those books that sold the highest number of copies, but here this is in conflict with a different measurement of value: trade books 'are the novels that reading groups choose and college professors teach'.² 'Best-selling' is here in an uneasy relationship with other, less quantifiable indices of value, or, to put it another way, the hyphenated term 'best-selling' is under some strain, as 'best' starts to serve less as an adjectival modifier to 'selling' and more its ideological opposite. Oscar Wilde's aperçu in his 'Lecture to Art Students' seems relevant here: 'popularity is the crown of laurel which the world puts on bad art. Whatever is popular is wrong'.³

This uncomfortable compromise between quantitative and qualitative indicators of value is not confined to newspaper bestsellers. Annual lists revealing which authors are most borrowed from UK public libraries, or the metrics by which Top Ten music charts are calculated have been subject to similar caveats and recalibrations, and indeed the BBC felt itself forced to censor its weekly

¹ *The New York Times Book Review*, 23 September 2007.

² *Ibid.*, 16 March 2008.

³ Oscar Wilde, *Essays and Lectures* (London: 1909), 201.

chart show in the week of Margaret Thatcher's funeral in 2013.⁴ For various reasons, it seems that we want to elide quantitative and qualitative measures. True 'bestsellers' are just slightly regrettable, an attitude perhaps still bearing the residual anxiety of what J.W. Saunders influentially dubbed 'the stigma of print'.⁵ Popularity is itself suspect. We want the best-seller list to be the same as that list authorized by reading groups and college professors, and when it isn't, we tweak the arrangement to get a more satisfactory result.

Saunders identified the stigma of print as a specifically Tudor problem. If methodological and ideological questions dog contemporary best-seller lists, where publication and sales data are relatively robust, they are multiplied when turning to the question of print popularity in the Elizabethan period. This book attempts to raise, rather than elide, the practical and methodological challenges of defining print popularity, and, in particular, the interpretative difficulties for literary critics and cultural historians when our sense of what ought to have been a bestseller – because it is what college professors now teach – turns out not to have been. Our title, 'The Elizabethan Top Ten', is self-consciously anachronistic. We have not, for reasons discussed below, tried to tabulate a 'Top Ten' on print editions alone (although if we had, the *Book of Common Prayer*, discussed in Brian Cummings's chapter, and Sternhold and Hopkins's psalm translations, discussed in Beth Quitslund's, would have been there). Rather, we have invited contributors to our Top Ten to either propose a particular popularity case study within a genre – sermons or plays, for instance – or survey a particular aspect of the print market, with an eye to how their focus might form a local contribution to broader issues about writing, publishing and consuming print in the early modern period.

We actively encourage disagreements about what has been left out. We'd be delighted, for instance, if someone angrily proposed another sermon in place of *The Trumpet of the Soule*: for all the recent revival in sermon studies in the past decade, no sustained 'top ten'-type argument has broken out. We haven't got a section on ballads, for instance, despite Adam Fox's startling estimate that 'three or four million broadside ballads were printed in the second half of the sixteenth century alone'.⁶ We might have included something else on the range of ephemeral literature, including chapbooks, playbills and forms: Juliet Fleming uncovers early wallpaper as an unexpected representative of this wide and diverse category. We chose to take Shakespeare as our example of literary canonization because the stakes are so high for our own contemporary disciplinary practice: the case of John Lyly, whose 11 print works went through at least 46 editions in

⁴ BBC News Entertainment & Arts, 'Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead enters chart at two', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22145306> (accessed 24.04.13).

⁵ J.W. Saunders, 'The Stigma of Print: A Note on the Social Bases of Tudor Poetry', *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1951): 139–64.

⁶ Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: 2000), p. 15. On ballad popularity see Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: 1991).

60 years, might have given a different shape to the story. Above all, our aim has been to stimulate debate, including disagreement. Our contributors seek to further a dialogue about notions of popularity and about the relative roles of quantitative and qualitative methodologies for judging and interrogating popularity in the past. This volume brings together book history and literary criticism not merely to nominate or enumerate bestsellers, nor even to problematize them, but rather to try to understand their hold on the market, and with that, the gap between our own literary assessments and those of the past we seek to understand.

‘A Pop-holy generation’

Popularity in the early modern period has prompted extensive discussion, not least because the word itself was highly topical in the last decade of Elizabeth’s reign. The exorcist or spiritual healer John Darrell was well placed to experience and contribute to the evils of popular opinion at this time. In 1597 Darrell became mixed up in a notorious case of possession and exorcism in which several people were arrested as witches. Initially a scandal limited to Nottingham, the case was retried in London and the resulting controversy produced at least 12 books in as many months. Darrell replied to his very public condemnation by likening the ongoing debate to the massacre of Protestants in 1570s Paris, caused by the ‘credulous popularitie of that countrie’.⁷ The ‘poore weomen and sily multitude [of France], neuer requyringe nor examining the matter any farther, fell straight to a kinde of hissing & clapping their hands’. This instinctive, thoughtless mob, defined by their poverty and gender, reminded Darrell of the credulous popularity he now found himself confronting: ‘Now even thus good reader’, he explained, ‘fareth it with me at this instant’. His good-intentioned part in an exorcism (as he saw it) had brought him the most negative kind of popularity, and those who engaged in his public demolition were as bad as a murderous Catholic rabble. Indeed, Paris’s Catholic authorities are described as ‘that deuoute and Pop-holy generation’: originally a late medieval phrase for sham piety, ‘Pop-holy’ became a particularly useful term for denouncing Roman Catholicism in Reformation England. Darrell’s elision of the early modern Pop(e) and the ‘credulous popularitie’ of this ‘generation’ allows us to see the ways that popularity and religious and political sectarianism fused together in early modern England.

If popularity can sometimes be a negative term in modern discourse, it is a downright seditious one in the early modern period. It is a definitively Elizabethan word, coming into use through Elizabeth’s reign to designate a dangerous privileging of ordinary people, an emergent democratization of thought, speech and action. As William Cornwallis put it in 1601, ‘Princes hate competitors, and popularitie in subiects seemes to bandy with the Prince in power, of which if Princes be suspitious, and carefully remoue the cause of their suspition, they are

⁷ John Darrell[?], *A Detection of that Sinful, Shameful, Lying, and Ridiculous Discourse, of Samuel Harshnet* (London: 1600), sig. A1.

not to bee blamed'.⁸ Popularity is suspicious and seditious, a mechanism for power on the part of the apparently powerless. As Cornwallis explained elsewhere, in an essay 'On popularitie':

the cunning of Popularitie, is like that of Iuglers, the cunningest of which can cast mists before mens eyes, but here is their neerest resemblance, Iuglers trickes goe most inuisibly by Candle light; men popular, with those heads that come no neerer the strength of vnderstanding, then candle light the light of the sunne[.]⁹

The earliest use of the term in English appears to be in William Bavand's 1559 translation of Joannes Ferrarius Montanus's *De republica bene instituenda*, addressed directly to Elizabeth. Less than one year into her reign, she is warned of magistrates that 'pretende a colour of popularitie and gentlenesse', which 'be onely cautelles and mistes', 'entrapmentes, to bryng soche as beleue the same into the snare, and daunger of their liues'. 'Besides this', Bavand continues, 'Cato Vticensis was wounte to saie, that there was nothyng so hurtfull, nothyng so vnconstaunt, as was the peoples fauour, thenheritaunce wherof was ever pernicious to their posteritie'.¹⁰ 'Popularity', then, was a term equivalent with Elizabeth's reign, designating the views of the people, views which were intrinsically and paradoxically dangerous to the people.

Ten years later, Thomas Norton blamed the Northern Rebellion on 'popularities and hanginges by the wayne ayre', which 'are not auancements but precipitations' to 'raise' great men's minds 'to a wrong way of climing'.¹¹ By 1579, the word was being casually listed amongst inauspicious semantic company, when John Jones counselled 'Rulers, Potentates, Prelates and Preachers' to avoid 'popularitie, mutinie and sedition'.¹² This helps to explain why Francis Bacon would describe Essex's rebellion in 1601 in terms of his 'points of popularitie which euery man tooke notice and note of, as his affable gestures, open doores, making his table and his bed so popularly places of audience to suters'. This double kind of popularism was 'either the qualities of a nature disposed to disloyaltie, or the beginnings and conceptions of that which afterwards grewe to shape and forme': attempted regicide.¹³ The people's thoughts were considered to be anti-establishment at a time when the establishment defined itself by its ability to keep the people safe.

⁸ William Cornwallis, *Discourses upon Seneca the Tragedian* (London: 1601), sig. F1.

⁹ William Cornwallis, *Essayes* (London: 1600–1601), Essay 30, sigs. S3–S3v.

¹⁰ *A Woorke of Ioannes Ferrarius Montanus, Touchyng the Good Orderynge of a Common Weale* (London: 1559), fols. 171–171v.

¹¹ Thomas Norton, *A Warning Agaynst the Dangerous Practises of Papistes and Specially the Parteners of the Late Rebellion* (London: 1569), sigs. G4v–H1.

¹² John Jones, *The Arte and Science of Preseruing Bodie and Soule in Healthe, Wisedome, and Catholike Religion* (London: 1579), sig. N2.

¹³ Francis Bacon, *A Declaration of the Practices & Treasons Attempted and Committed by Robert late Earle of Essex* (London: 1601), sig. Bi.

When early modern scholars employ the term ‘popular’, however, they often have very different kinds of popularity in mind. Peter Burke has recently defined popular culture as ‘the culture of the non-elite – in a negative way as unofficial culture, the culture of the non-elite, the “subordinate classes” as the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci famously called them’. Burke further defines the non-elite’s ‘most prominent’ members as ‘craftsmen and peasants’.¹⁴ Mary Ellen Lamb illustrates the diversity of the popular by appealing to the ‘householder’, ‘a morris dancer’, ‘A London laundrymaid of a Calvinist persuasion’ and ‘boisterous miners from Wales’.¹⁵ These are not quite the Italian women, French Catholics or English mutineers that early modern writers had in mind, and the various groups, real or imagined, which scholars enthusiastically recuperate as popular were perceived by early modern commentators as a terrifying, potentially revolutionary force. Thus the *OED*’s apparently innocuous definition, ‘liked or admired by many people’, glosses an early modern idea which is threatening, potentially deadly.

As Lamb reminds us, our models for the popular, as with any other form of lived experience and imagined communities, need to acknowledge the contradictory and multiple ways in which people worked. Lamb herself proposes a model of popular culture as ‘a simulacrum existing in early modern imaginaries created from cultural materials assembled from various lower status groups’.¹⁶ The current volume continues and challenges many of these debates by pursuing concepts of popularity via the Elizabethan printed forms which appear to have provoked unusual levels of demand, thus apparently inciting but also reflecting forms of popularity.

The idea of popularity has odd and unexpected implications for the canon. Clive Bloom complains that ‘the Jacobean period was *the* great period of English literature and thought – the moment when the medieval gave way to the modern’, but has been superseded by ‘a mythicised Elizabethan golden age ... and an equally mythicised era of struggle between king and Parliament’.¹⁷ In this reading, the recent popularity of the Elizabethan period itself (amongst academics and, more widely, in films such as Shekar Kapur’s *Elizabeth* [1998]) has had consequences for the way we represent and experience early modern literary history. In the 1980s, scholars of popular culture still felt the need to negotiate their subjects’ scholarly worth: John Simons hoped to go ‘some way towards establishing the validity of work on popular texts as an aspect of literary criticism rather than of social history’, suggesting that, for his readers, the popular was inevitably non-canonical. For Simons, such texts challenge literary criticism’s concern with ‘the

¹⁴ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd ed. (1978; Farnham: 2009), p. xiii.

¹⁵ Mary Ellen Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson* (London: 2006), p. 2; p. 10.

¹⁶ Lamb, *Popular Culture*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Clive Bloom (ed.), *Jacobean Poetry and Prose: Rhetoric, Representation and the Popular Imagination* (Basingstoke: 1988), p. 1.

evaluation of what is perceived as “best” in the range of literary production’ by confirming that the canon ‘represents the cultural interests of dominant social groups’. Texts excluded from this canon go further by offering ‘a breach of the protocols of periodisation’ (between medieval and Renaissance, in the first instance) and provocatively refuse to demonstrate ‘the vision of smooth and harmonious social development’ represented by ‘a notion of the Renaissance which runs from Sidney and Spenser to Milton via Donne’.¹⁸ Our Top Ten chapters do not construct a narrative of development, nor even a counter-canon. Instead, our case studies toggle between Franco Moretti’s ‘distant reading’, which uses quantified data to provide ‘abstract models for literary history’, and the old disciplinary procedure of ‘close reading’, in which the specific instantiation of the literary is irreducible and unreplicable. Martin Mueller’s concept of ‘scalable reading’ is apposite.¹⁹ The chapters attempt to individualize those processes of book history which can flatten out specifics via quantitative rather than qualitative approaches.²⁰

But, as Simons also points out, drama represents a potentially ‘anomalous case’, since it possesses the curious property of being, as Raymond Williams puts it, ‘linguistically co-extensive with the whole range of its society’.²¹ We might add that it fulfils Tessa Watts’s definition of popularity as that which blends the literate with other forms of media.²² Once plays were printed, they became available to readers who didn’t or couldn’t go to the theatre, and could be read in a variety of theatrical and non-theatrical ways. Historians of eighteenth-century books on acting theory have argued for ‘the importance of recognizing publications about acting as a crucial part of the period’s cultural imagination, one that engaged the audience well beyond that immediately involved with theatre and that was implicated with a broad variety of political, aesthetic and literary discourses and practices’.²³ Like these later publications connected with the theatre, Elizabethan playtexts began to establish a stable market, ensuring that plays could be read well beyond the theatre by a wide readership as a means to connect with contemporary political and social debate. Indeed, early modern drama has been at the epicentre of current discussions of print popularity, and the much-cited disagreement between Peter Blayney, Alan Farmer and Zachary Lesser stands behind much of the debate in this book.

¹⁸ John Simons, ‘Open and closed books: a semiotic approach to the history of Elizabethan and Jacobean popular romance’, in Bloom, *Jacobean Poetry and Prose*, p. 22; p. 9.

¹⁹ Martin Mueller, ‘Scalable Reading’ at <https://scalablereading.northwestern.edu/>.

²⁰ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: 2005), p. 1.

²¹ Simons, ‘Open and closed books’, p. 9.

²² Watts, *Cheap Print*, p. 7.

²³ Lisa Zunshine (ed.), *Acting Theory and the English Stage, 1700–1830*, vol. I (London: 2009), p. xvi.

In 1997, Peter Blayney claimed that ‘not one in twenty [printed plays] would have paid for itself during its first year’, a claim challenged eight years later by Farmer and Lesser arguing that such plays offered ‘reasonable profits with unusually low risk’ and were therefore excellent investments for stationers.²⁴ This argument has prompted the current volume’s reconsideration of the meanings of popularity as a theoretical and empirical category, the ways in which we measure popularity and the gap between modern canons and the early modern print market. It is not surprising that early modern drama should stimulate such an enquiry, since it is a focus for intense scholarly interest in our own time, appeals to an audience beyond the book and offers various kinds of sensory experience to a heterogeneous mix of consumers.

Even before they reach print, plays represent a challenge to traditional divisions between elite and popular culture. They are both a scripted and an oral form, and therefore available to literate and non-literate audience members alike; they were performed in front of audience members paying different amounts of money and segregated accordingly, but nevertheless gathered together in one building; they were performed across the country, across the capital and at court, as well as in Europe; they were performed by players otherwise defined as vagabonds or common, and available to amateur players to perform. Their very written fabric combines and runs across registers traditionally considered popular or elite, vernacular or learned, as in the famous example when Macbeth tells the audience that his bloody hands will ‘The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red’ (2.2.62–63). Macbeth’s second line translates the first from a Latinate diction to an Anglo-Saxon one, and in so doing may prompt the actor to address each line to different sections of the audience. We might want to ask whether such a moment highlights the inclusive popularity of early modern drama or underlines social segregation.

Stephen Purcell warns against assuming an integral meaning for popularity. ‘[T]he label implies no shared political standpoint or stylistic features, no distinctive audience demographic, nor any particular measure of commercial success’. But, he suggests, popular theatre is distinguished by a concern to develop a sense of community, especially an unusual or imagined community ‘in which the group somehow steps outside of its normal social parameters, and social models alternative to the established order become equally possible’. Thus popular theatre might be theorized as a form ‘seeking to affirm and consolidate a communal identity’ or ‘to disrupt and destabilise that same identity in order to instil a “critical” attitude among that community’s individual members’; it may do both of these

²⁴ Peter Blayney, ‘The Publication of Playbooks’, in John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (eds), *A New History of Early English Drama* (New York: 1997), p. 389; Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, ‘The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56: 1 (Spring 2005): 1–32; 28.

things, serving to ‘confirm *and* subvert the communal values of its audience’.²⁵ We might therefore want to think of Darrell’s ‘Pop-holy generation’ of ‘credulous popularitie’, Cornwallis’s worries about popularity bandying with and competing for power or Norton’s ‘popularities and hangings by the vayne ayre’ in the terms Purcell provides for popular theatre: popularity is that which might either confirm or subvert communal value, or confirm *and* subvert it, remembering that for early modern politics communality itself was viewed suspiciously by those who saw hierarchy, monarchy and patronage as guarantees of social stability.

‘We’re more popular than Jesus now’ (John Lennon, 1966)

Every census of what was published in the Elizabethan period reveals the dominance of religious material in the print marketplace. But despite the much-vaunted (and much-needed) ‘turn to religion’ in early modern studies during the last two decades, sermons, liturgies, catechisms, prayer books and bibles have been to the question of Elizabethan print popularity what mass-market paperbacks are to the *New York Times Book Review* best-seller lists: something of an embarrassment.²⁶ As Ian Green points out in his study of print and Protestantism, many attempts to identify early modern bestsellers have, similarly, decided to leave out some or all of this expansive category, in order to bring into prominence works that more closely map onto (or, sometimes, challenge) fields of critical, particularly literary interest. Green’s own list, with an exclusive focus on religious bestsellers, sets out a quantitative methodology, including those titles which were reprinted at least five times over a 30-year period: a figure ‘low enough to include steady sellers as well as bestsellers, but high enough to eliminate those works which do not appear to have caught the public imagination sufficiently to warrant much more than a couple of editions’.²⁷ Included among these bestsellers are collected and individual sermons by Henry Smith, Calvin’s *The Catechisme or manner to teach children*, Edward Dering’s *A Sermon preached before the Quenes Majestie*, and scores of editions of the Bishops’ and Geneva Bibles, of *An ABC with a Catechism*, and of the Prayer Book. Some of these books were compulsory, and purchased by churchwardens on behalf of their churches. The Churchwardens’ accounts for 1564 in Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire, record a payment of one shilling and threepence for a copy of the official Elizabethan homilies.²⁸ The publishing history of this book means that it clearly counts as one of Green’s bestsellers, but its sales

²⁵ Stephen Purcell, *Popular Shakespeare: Simulation and Subversion on the Modern Stage* (Basingstoke: 2009), p. 8; pp. 13–14; pp. 15–16 (Purcell’s italics).

²⁶ Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, ‘The Turn to Religion in Early Modern Studies’, *Criticism* 46 (2004): 167–90.

²⁷ Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: 2000), p. 173.

²⁸ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: 2004), p. 459.

are due largely to its status: can we call popular a book that *had* to be bought, even if that compulsion meant large sales over an extended period and extensive exposure to a relatively wide populace?

Religious books did indeed dominate the market. Of the almost 11,000 titles published during Elizabeth's reign, our best estimate is that around 40 percent were in this category, as discussed in the chapters by Lori Anne Ferrell, Brian Cummings and Beth Quitsland, and in Alan Farmer and Zachary Lesser's innovative analysis of the *Short Title Catalogue*.²⁹ But if we were to take Green's methodology, that five editions over a 30-year period signals a significant intervention into the print market, plenty of more obviously 'literary' titles would also come to the fore. A survey of the ESTC shows that by this measure, literary bestsellers during the second half of the sixteenth century include many works recognized as part of the literary canon of Elizabethan England: poetry, including the works of Wyatt and Surrey in Tottell's *Songes and Sonnettes*, Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar*, Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Shakespeare's narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*; prose works, such as Sidney's *The Countess of Pembrokes Arcadia*, Lyly's *Euphues* and its sequel *Euphues and His England*, Lodge's *Rosalynde* and Greene's *Pandosto*; and drama, including Shakespeare's history plays *Richard II* and *Richard III*, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and the anonymous *Mucedorus*, discussed by Peter Kirwan in Chapter 14. As Neil Rhodes's chapter shows, the canonization of our uber-Elizabethan, Shakespeare, begins in the late sixteenth century. Farmer and Lesser show us that texts we would now call 'literary' – and therefore give a high status – were a larger part of the late Elizabethan print market. Here popularity – as indicated by the bestseller list – and value – as indicated by presence on college professors' curricula – are often aligned rather than opposing.

Green's quantitative method also prioritizes repeated print editions as the most important metric of popularity. But absence from print need not mean that texts were failures. We know, for instance, that Marlowe's *The Rich Jew of Malta* was a valuable commercial property for Philip Henslowe during the early 1590s – and we know also that the play was not printed until 1633. Here, evidence of popularity from performance and from print pulls in apparently contradictory directions. Likewise, though book historians often characterize a text which is not reprinted as a commercial failure, such a text may simply indicate a book which sold moderately well, or whose publisher became involved in other ventures, or which was inherited by a new publisher with no interest in that genre. Manuscript circulation, of poetry but also of playtexts (such as *A Game at Chesse*) and prose works (such as *A View of the Present State of Ireland*), is an important alternative locus of the popular. We know that some editions of books were apparently read to destruction: survival may be evidence less of popularity than its opposite.

²⁹ Print numbers from Table 1 in John Barnard and D.F. McKenzie (eds, with the assistance of Maureen Bell), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume IV 1557–1695* (Cambridge: 2002), pp. 779–84.

Alexander Wilkinson's assessment of 'Lost Books Printed in French before 1601' gives survival figures for different genres of between 95 percent (for Heraldic Works) and 41 percent for calendars, almanacs and prognostications.³⁰ An earlier study of English print by Franklin B. Williams noted that over four thousand *ESTC* titles survive in a single copy, and analyzes the titles listed by the publisher Andrew Maunsell in his *Catalogue of English Printed Books* (1595) to suggest loss rates of around 15 percent of religious titles.³¹

And extreme topicality can mitigate against the longevity required of Green's bestsellers. John Sutherland, writing of twentieth-century bestsellers, proposes the term 'fast-seller' as a preferable label, arguing that the pace, not the ultimate total, of sales best measures the impact of a particular title. For Sutherland, topicality, and consequent transience, are crucial: 'this hand-in-glove quality is inextricably linked with the ephemerality of bestsellerism. A #1 novel may be seen as a successful literary experiment – as short-lived as a camera flash, and as capable of freezing, vividly, its historical moment.'³² Such ephemeral moments of print popularity are difficult for us to pinpoint, since their manifestations can look to quantitative methodology like print failure. Farmer and Lesser's useful identification of 'structures of popularity' goes some way to rectify this blind spot.

[30 August 1599] 'Wrett of my Common place book'³³

For some critics, statistics suggest that the vast majority of the people were illiterate, and popularity and print are therefore mutually exclusive. Tessa Watt sensibly suggests that 'in a partially literate society, the most influential media were those which combined print with non-literate forms', such as musical ballads, illustrated books and books for devotion.³⁴ But we should still ask whether, in an era before mass literacy, any printed text could truly be described as 'popular'. Joad Raymond's intervention is helpful: 'print culture can be described as "popular" not because it is the voice of the people, nor necessarily because it was widely read among the people or reflected their views, but because the people were understood to be involved in the publicity dynamic, the dynamic by which print came to play a part in public life and the political process'.³⁵ This book explores the ways print, in its content, appearance or placement, addresses itself to and is constructed by

³⁰ Alexander S. Wilkinson, 'Lost Books Printed in French before 1601', *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* 10 (2009): 188–205.

³¹ Franklin B. Williams, Jr, 'Lost Books of Tudor England', *The Library*, 7th ser. 33 (1978): 1–14.

³² John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: 2007), p. 3.

³³ From the diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, quoted by William H. Sherman in *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: 2008), p. 63.

³⁴ Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 7.

³⁵ Joad Raymond (ed.), *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture, Vol 1: Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660* (Oxford: 2011), p. 6.

this sense of the public. Like the contributors to Raymond's recent *Oxford History of Popular Print Culture* (2011), the writers in *The Elizabethan Top Ten* contribute to a reassessment of the role of print in studies of the popular.

Most classic accounts of popular culture disregard print, following Peter Burke's monumental *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, first published in 1978, and prefer the reconstruction of the non-commercial practices of a communal, oral folk culture over the commodified entertainment of a learned elite. Roger Chartier's observation that 'popular culture is a category of the learned', together with Zachary Lesser's recognition that 'the study of popular culture is the desire for popular culture', indicate something of what is at stake in the academy in this aspect of historical recovery.³⁶ Any attempt to trace the demography of any particular aspect of print culture is beset with methodological and evidential difficulties (and desires). Two aspects of access to print, literacy and cost, are relevant here: both confirm that while 'Early modern England was ... not a society in which an illiterate majority lived without access to print', the extent of both the reading and the customer base was certainly limited.³⁷

Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes point out that 'The sixteenth century may have been the first age of print in England, but it was also a time when the majority of people were unable to read'.³⁸ Accurate assessments of the proportion of the population who could read in this period are hampered by the fact that reading is an activity which need not leave any recoverable traces. Recent studies have, however, emphasized that 'Renaissance readers were not only *allowed* to write notes in and on their books, they were *taught* to do so in school', and the study of readers' marks in particular copies aims to understand this humanist practice.³⁹ David Cressy's landmark study of literacy in the early modern period 'regards the signatures and marks that men and women made on various documents as the best evidence of literate skills', and uncovers a widely varying picture, in which gender, region, and class all affect writing rates. His estimated literacy rates in 1600 are 30 percent for men and 10 percent for women.⁴⁰ But as Cressy admits, reading was taught separately from and prior to writing: John Hart's primer *A methode or*

³⁶ Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: 1995), p. 83; Zachary Lesser, 'Typographic Nostalgia: Playreading, Popularity and the Meanings of Black Letter', in Marta Straznicky (ed.), *The Book of the Play: Playwrights, Stationers, and Readers in Early Modern England* (Amherst: 2006) pp. 99–126; p. 100.

³⁷ Tim Harris, 'Popular, Plebeian, Culture: Historical Definitions', in Joad Raymond (ed.), *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture*, p. 55.

³⁸ Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes, *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture* (London: 2006), p. 9.

³⁹ Sherman, *Used Books*, p. 3. See also Lisa Jardine and A.T. Grafton, "'Studied for Action": How Gabriel Harvey read his Livy', *Past and Present* 129 (1990): 3–51 and William H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst: 1995).

⁴⁰ David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: 1980), p. 42; p. 177.

comfortable beginning for all unlearned, published in 1570, advised neophytes 'first to learne to reade before they should learne to write, for that it is farre more readie and easie'.⁴¹ Thus marks of writing probably substantially underestimate competence in reading, particularly for women, who are both underrepresented in Cressy's legal documentation and had far less access to the formal education in which writing was taught. Literacy, too, was more than a binary yes (signature) / no (mark), as Adam Fox points out:

The vast range of capacities and competencies which lay behind the term 'literacy' were as stratified as the social order itself. Many more people could read than could write, while among readers there were some who could manage the printed word but could not always decipher one, or any, of the variety of scripts which characterised contemporary handwriting.⁴²

While the argument that some readers were literate only in the more 'basic skill' of reading blackletter or gothic type – used in many reading primers – has undergone some decisive critical modification, it is true that different types of scripts, print and manuscript, were differently legible.⁴³ Of the best-selling books discussed in this volume, however, it is striking that few are in blackletter, despite Mark Bland's contention that the persistence of blackletter at the end of the sixteenth century 'illustrate[s] how typographic convention might continue older traditions into a period where cultural change had taken place, and must, in part, testify to the status of such books as popular classics'.⁴⁴

The historiography of literacy is itself undergoing important reconceptualization. Heidi Brayman Hackel summarizes some recent developments:

Scholars have come up with many terms to suggest both the degrees and forms of popular literacy in the early modern period: alphabetic, abecedarian, reading-only, marginal, partial, full, signature, comprehension; delegate, surrogate, artisanal, material, contextual, nonverbal and others. Nowhere, then, does it make more sense to move away from signature literacy as the standard than in studies of popular literacy, which is various and multiple, visible in some formats and media, invisible in others, encompassing many acts and practices.⁴⁵

⁴¹ John Hart, *A methode or comfortable beginning for all unlearned, whereby they may be taught to read English in a very short time, with pleasure* (London: 1570), sig. 4vo.

⁴² Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, p. 42.

⁴³ Keith Thomas, 'The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England', in Gerd Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Oxford: 1986), pp. 97–132; Lesser, 'Typographic Nostalgia'.

⁴⁴ Mark Bland, 'The Appearance of the Text in Early Modern England', *Text: An Interdisciplinary Annual of Textual Studies* 11 (1998): 91–154; 95. On John Wright's use of blackletter as part of the nostalgic popular world evoked by Dekker's play *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, see Lesser, 'Typographic Nostalgia'.

⁴⁵ Heidi Brayman Hackel, 'Popular Literacy and Society', in Raymond, *Oxford History*, p. 97.

Access to print culture – in forms from bills to ballads and from legal writs to romances – was, therefore, probably wider than the estimates of the literacy of the population have suggested, and also less neatly divided between the states of ‘literacy’ and ‘illiteracy’. We know that access to print in this period increasingly included non-readers: as Adam Fox discovers, ‘reading aloud helped to draw everyone into the ambit of the written word’, and he adduces examples of public and familial reading from bibles to ballads.⁴⁶ Both Peter Kirwan’s discussion of *Mucedorus* and Lori Anne Ferrell on Henry Smith’s sermon oratory discuss the interplay between oral and printed texts and the extent to which print popularity registers, capitalizes on or supersedes the reception of an original performance. We know, too, that the pages of type with which the sixteenth-century print shops were routinely most concerned were what Peter Stallybrass calls ‘small jobs’ rather than books: books were only one part of a market with a high demand for ephemeral and administrative printed material such as advertisements, playbills, proclamations, licenses, indentures, bonds, petitions, indulgences and oaths.⁴⁷ Non-readers could therefore be exposed to printed material and print content in various forms and contexts.

Cost of printed material was one further factor in the extent of ‘popular’ access to print culture. Tessa Watt observes that, in real terms, books became more affordable during the course of the sixteenth century, as their prices remained steady against a backdrop of rising prices and rising wages.⁴⁸ Assessments of dispersed evidence about book prices suggest that they approximated the price set by the Stationers’ Company in 1598 as a ‘remedy’ against ‘divers abuses [that] have been of late committed by sundry persons in enhancing the prices of books and selling the same at too high and excessive rates and prices’: viz, a penny for two sheets.⁴⁹ Small pamphlets were, however, proportionately more expensive for their size, and fashionable literary works were more expensive still. Specific prices are hard to come by, but the 1581 edition of Lyly’s *Euphues* cost 2s. unbound, Sir Henry Cocke bought a copy of Spenser’s *Complaints* in 1590–1591 for 2s. 6d. (a cost of 1.3d per sheet) and the *The Book of Common Prayer* was an early example of price-fixing, stating its maximum permitted prices of 2s. 6d. unbound, 3s. 4d. bound in parchment and 4s. bound in leather.⁵⁰

But the public for print needs to be seen as extending beyond those who actually bought it and into a more heterogeneous, increasingly print-aware culture. As we have seen, estimates of the number of print ballads in circulation in the Elizabethan

⁴⁶ Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, pp. 37ff.

⁴⁷ Peter Stallybrass, “‘Little Jobs’: Broad-sides and the Printing Revolution”, in Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Linquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (eds), *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein* (Amherst and Boston: 2007), pp. 315–42.

⁴⁸ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 261.

⁴⁹ Francis R. Johnson, ‘Notes on English Retail Book-Prices, 1550–1640’, *The Library*, 5th ser., vol. V (1950): 83–112; 84.

⁵⁰ Johnson, ‘Notes’, pp. 91–92; St Clair, *Reading Nation*, p. 458.

period reach into the millions; religious texts like the *ABC and Catechism* went into scores, perhaps hundreds of editions; almanacs, as Adam Smyth shows here, were printed in the hundreds of thousands. For bibles, prayer books and other state-sponsored religious publications, the Stationers' Company print-run limit of 1,500 – a figure we do not seem to be entirely sure about – was sometimes, perhaps often, suspended, but one important caveat about the reach of specific print titles relates to the number of copies printed. We have little hard evidence about print runs: 106 copies of a 1558 official proclamation on licensing of preachers were printed; during the 1560s official decrees were printed in runs of 20–700, mostly at the lower end. John Dee's *General and rare memorials pertaining to the art of navigation* (1577) was printed in a run of 100; a pirated version of the *ABC and catechism* (1581) in a run of 600; Richard Stanyhurst's *The First Foure books of virgil, his Aeneis* (Leiden, 1582) in a run of more than 928; 1,250 copies of a reprint of Bullinger's *Decades*, a compulsory book of sermons, were printed in 1587; the 1595 edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* had a print run of 1,200–1,350.⁵¹ And although press run for particular print artefacts is not the only indicator of 'popularity', it does suggest which works were already, or anticipated to be, commercially successful and which had relatively widespread penetration.

We can see that numbers here vary widely, but even at the upper end of the range they remain small, particularly when set against, for example, the capacities of the theatres or the expected crowd at a sermon; on the other hand, we do not know how many people might encounter any one copy of a book. In their contributions to the current volume, Helen Smith cites Gabriel Harvey's habit of signing his books 'et amicorum' and Abigail Shinn discusses Harvey swapping books with Spenser. The study of popularity needs to incorporate a study of human networks and the reception and ongoing use of books, as well as their publication and distribution.

The Elizabethan Top Ten

The current book engages with these issues in two sections, one on methodology and the other the Top Ten itself. The first four chapters sketch out the conceptual and evidential issues associated with popularity. Thus Alan Farmer and Zachary Lesser open our discussion by investigating and interrogating how the *English Short Title Catalogue* represents popularity within the early modern book trade. They provide new categories for a large-scale analysis of the print market, drawing together theoretical, evidentiary and bibliographic themes. Lucy Munro demonstrates how Elizabethan popularity was driven by books first printed before Elizabeth's reign, so that age, paradoxically, offered new possibilities to a print market often criticized for its fixation on newness and novelty. Helen Smith abandons financial concerns entirely, advocating the early modern book as an

⁵¹ St Clair, *Reading Nation*, pp. 462–63.