

Detailed figures on Elizabethan publications

Sarah Smith

Out of curiosity, I looked up the actual quantity of Elizabethan books printed, as reflected in citations in Early English Books Online and the English Short Title Catalog, for the years 1558-1620. Joe estimated that in 1580 English printers printed 300 books a year; the actual numbers are significantly smaller for most of the earlier part of the period.

ESTC numbers are higher than EEBO numbers because ESTC counts anything printed in a year, including blank music paper and bookplates; and if it can only guess at a date range for an item, it'll list it in every year of that range. So I've also done a "corrected EEBO" column, which is the raw number multiplied by the percentage of "bad" items in the first 25--items that actually had nothing to do with that year. (Why only the first 25? Life is short...)

For the years marked * I didn't do the calculation.

More than you wanted to know, I bet.

Still, in this context, we can estimate that somewhere around 14,500 traceable publications *in all* were printed during the years 1558-1616. This number includes blank music paper, statutes, sermons, Bibles, joke books, dictionaries, ballads, and many other publications that aren't literature, and it includes all reprints. (In contrast, about 40,000 books a year are published in the United States.)

In this context, libraries of 400, 600, or 1000 books look quite large, and it's impressive that Shakespeare cites over 200 literary and historical sources.

But there's more to the story.

Douglas Bruster, of the University of Texas at Austin, has done research on what kinds of books were printed in Elizabethan England. Approximately 16 out of every 19 books printed were sermons or books of theology. (These were often political in intent as well as religious.) Two out of every 19 were medical or legal. Only one out of every 19 was a "liberal arts" book--history, poetry, or other literature.

The rightmost column in the table below gives a very rough approximation of the number of books of history and literature published in England during a single year. The EEBO and corrected ESTC numbers give a very rough approximation of the total number of books published.

All the more impressive that Shakespeare cites so many literary and historical sources.

| Year | EEBO | ESTC | "Bads" | Corr ESTC | 1/19 of avg of EEBO+C-ESTC |
|------|------|------|--------|-----------|----------------------------|
| 1558 | 77 | 111 | * | 111 | 6 |
| 1559 | 85 | 117 | * | 117 | 6 |
| 1560 | 130 | 171 | * | 171 | 9 |
| 1561 | 101 | 147 | * | 147 | 8 |
| 1562 | 123 | 164 | * | 164 | 9 |
| 1563 | 99 | 144 | * | 144 | 8 |
| 1564 | 64 | 93 | * | 93 | 5 |
| 1565 | 119 | 169 | * | 169 | 9 |
| 1566 | 142 | 182 | * | 182 | 10 |
| 1567 | 107 | 158 | * | 158 | 9 |
| 1568 | 93 | 132 | * | 132 | 7 |
| 1569 | 124 | 157 | * | 157 | 9 |
| 1570 | 172 | 265 | 2 | 244 | 13 |
| 1571 | 116 | 156 | * | 156 | 9 |
| 1572 | 143 | 182 | * | 182 | 10 |
| 1573 | 143 | 182 | * | 182 | 10 |
| 1574 | 147 | 196 | * | 196 | 19 |
| 1575 | 189 | 241 | * | 241 | 13 |
| 1576 | 124 | 181 | * | 181 | 10 |
| 1577 | 154 | 219 | * | 219 | 11 |
| 1578 | 169 | 220 | * | 220 | 11 |
| 1579 | 193 | 264 | 4 | 222 | 11 |
| 1580 | 227 | 319 | 3 | 281 | 13 |
| 1581 | 217 | 298 | 4 | 250 | 12 |
| 1582 | 170 | 222 | 0 | 222 | 10 |
| 1583 | 177 | 264 | 4 | 222 | 11 |
| 1584 | 230 | 289 | 4 | 243 | 12 |
| 1585 | 228 | 341 | 4 | 286 | 14 |
| 1586 | 162 | 247 | 1 | 237 | 11 |
| 1587 | 181 | 253 | 4 | 213 | 10 |
| 1588 | 195 | 261 | 5 | 209 | 11 |
| 1589 | 243 | 311 | 7 | 224 | 12 |
| 1590 | 257 | 367 | 6 | 279 | 14 |
| 1591 | 249 | 316 | 5 | 253 | 13 |
| 1592 | 232 | 318 | 5 | 254 | 13 |

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|--------------|--------------|--------------|---|--------------|------------|
| 1593 | 167 | 224 | 2 | 206 | 10 |
| 1594 | 197 | 276 | 5 | 221 | 11 |
| 1595 | 251 | 337 | 4 | 283 | 14 |
| 1596 | 243 | 329 | 5 | 263 | 13 |
| 1597 | 218 | 295 | 5 | 236 | 12 |
| 1598 | 235 | 307 | 6 | 233 | 12 |
| 1599 | 255 | 334 | 5 | 267 | 14 |
| 1600 | 286 | 427 | 5 | 342 | 17 |
| 1601 | 190 | 284 | 5 | 227 | 11 |
| 1602 | 254 | 357 | 6 | 271 | 14 |
| 1603 | 324 | 472 | 6 | 359 | 18 |
| 1604 | 309 | 449 | 5 | 359 | 18 |
| 1605 | 280 | 416 | 6 | 316 | 16 |
| 1606 | 318 | 439 | 5 | 351 | 18 |
| 1607 | 348 | 476 | 6 | 362 | 19 |
| 1608 | 298 | 416 | 5 | 333 | 17 |
| 1609 | 367 | 488 | 4 | 410 | 20 |
| 1610 | 317 | 428 | 5 | 342 | 17 |
| 1611 | 315 | 423 | 6 | 321 | 17 |
| 1612 | 367 | 466 | 6 | 354 | 19 |
| 1613 | 402 | 522 | 7 | 376 | 20 |
| 1614 | 339 | 465 | 6 | 353 | 18 |
| 1615 | 420 | 576 | 4 | 484 | 24 |
| 1616 | 392 | 511 | 9 | 327 | 19 |
| | | | | | |
| Total | 12674 | 17374 | | 14558 | 766 |