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Shakespeare and the Popularity of Poetry Books in Print, 1583–1622

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Abstract

Shakespeare's poems had very uneven success in the early modern book trade: *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* became immediate

bestsellers, whereas the *Sonnets* received not a single reprint in the 30 years following their original publication in 1609. We argue that an examination of the popularity of poetry books in the book trade is necessary to come to a better understanding of the status of Shakespeare's printed poems in their own time. What were the best-selling poetry books of the period, and how popular were they compared to Shakespeare's narrative poems? How unusual was it for a poetry book to be reprinted 15 times (like *Venus and Adonis*), or not to be reprinted at all? We also contextualize the question of popularity by focusing on genre, placing Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and *Venus and Adonis* amidst the publication history of their generically most closely related poetry books. Our article also has a second, broader ambition, which is to evaluate the popularity of late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century poetry books in relation to the book trade more generally.

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