

The Control and Censorship of Dramatic Publications in Renaissance England (In Honour of Professor Keiichi Onizuka On the Occasion of His Retirement)

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The Control and Censorship of Dramatic Publications in Renaissance England

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This paper attempts to investigate how English Renaissance dramatic publications were controlled by analyzing the official licenses of plays for print recorded in the London Stationers' Registers.

One of Queen Elizabeth's Injunctions issued in July 1559, which aims at achieving pervasive press censorship, requires licensing for print of "pamphlets, playes and ballads" by "suche her maiesties Commissioners, or three of them, as be appointed in the Cittie of London." The Injunction also "straitly" commands "especially the Wardens and company of Stationers to be obedient" – that is, to have all copies licensed by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners or other official censors before allowing them to be entered in the Registers. (An entry was a permission to print as well as a record of a stationer's right to the copy.) Analysis of the London Stationers' Registers, however, shows that Elizabethan censorship of the drama for publication was not always strictly imposed. Before 1600, the proportion of plays entered in the Registers that were officially licensed was much lower than that of other classes of works such as religious or political books – though in 1590–92 the rate was exceptionally high, reaching nearly 100 percent, perhaps because the 1588–89 Martin Marprelate controversy caused the ecclesiastical authorities to tighten their press control. One reason for the relatively low proportion (25.0 percent in 1580–89 and 11.8 percent in 1593–99) may be that plays were regarded as insignificant, "lewd" books as distinct from serious theological works. Another important reason may be that most of the plays brought to Stationers' Hall for registration had already been allowed by Edmund Tilney, the Master of the Revels and the censor of plays for performance, to be presented on the stage. The Wardens of the Stationers' Company were apparently ready to endorse obviously harmless plays without

having them submitted to ecclesiastical censorship if they had obtained a license from Tilney and caused no scandal in actual performance.

In the final year of the sixteenth century, the proportion of plays entered with ecclesiastical authorization rose sharply, reaching 52.2 percent. The percentage became still higher after 1603. More than 80 percent of the plays entered in 1604–6 were officially licensed. This strongly suggests that with the accession of James I censorship of plays for publication began to be exercised more rigidly. A remarkable change in the licensing system for the press took place in 1607 when George Buc (who was to succeed Tilney as Master of the Revels in 1610) began to assume the whole responsibility for press censorship of the drama, to the exclusion of the ecclesiastical authorities. Henceforward and to February 1622 when Buc licensed a play for publication for the last time, almost every play entered in the Registers was allowed by Buc or his deputy.