The Earliest Known English Playbill

IN 1931 Miss Eleanor Boswell discovered among the uncatalogued State Papers Domestic in the Public Record Office an English playbill of 1687. This broadside antedated by five years the William and Mary playbill found by the late W. J. Lawrence among the Verney Papers in 1911 and termed by him 'the oldest known English playbill.' There has been, however, in the Theatre Collection of the Harvard College Library since 1915 a small playbill (7¼ by 5½ inches) — reproduced here approximately full size (Plate 1) — which I believe to be more than twenty-seven years earlier than the James II bill in the Public Record Office.

This interesting broadside, slightly imperfect, was acquired about 1850 for two guineas by William Upcott, the antiquary and collector, from Thomas Thorpe, the bookseller. Upcott had twelve copies of it lithographed for himself and his friends and then sold it to George Daniel, the miscellaneous writer and collector of theatrical curiosities. Daniel mounted it on one of the leaves of a quarto volume bound for him in calf in 1829 and containing twenty tracts, broadsides, and clippings concerning the famous fair that he has assembled from various sources. When his library came up for auction at his death in 1864, this volume passed through the hands of Ellis, a dealer, into the possession of Henry Huth; and as lot 489 in the great Huth sale it was purchased in 1911 by the firm of Treasurers, who sold it to Robert Gould Shaw, founder of the Harvard Theatre Collection.

Without giving the date or the time, the playbook announces that at John Harris's Booth, in Bartholomew-Fair ..., next the Rope-dancers, is to be seen, The Court of King Henry the Second; And the Death of Fair Rosamond; With the merry Humours of Punchinello, and the Lancashire-Witches. As also the famous History of Bungy and Friar Bacon: With the

2W. J. Lawrence, The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies, Second Series (Philadelphia, 1915), pp. 219, 244 (facsimiles of four William and Mary playbills, the oldest dated 9 November 1690).

*Two of these copies are in the Harvard Theatre Collection.
John Harris's BOOTH
in Bartholomew-Fair between the Hospital
gate and Duck-lane end, next the Rope-dance,
as to be seen.

The Court of King Henry the Second; And the Death of Fair Rosamund. With the merry Humours of Punchinello and the Lancashire Witches. Also the famous History of Buns and Piece-Bacon. With the merry Conjects of their Man-Meat. And the Brazen Speaking Head; wherein is represented the manner how this Kingdom was to have been settled with Brass. Added by Figures as large as Children two years old.

Mistake not the Booth, you may know it by the Brazen Speaking Head in the Gallery.
merry Conceans of their Man Miles.  And the byron speaking Head; . . .
Acted by Figures as large as Children two years old." These, therefore, are
puppet plays—"motions," as they were
called; and the broadside is a puppet
playbill, the first on record. Harris's
announcement is enclosed in a wreath
and surmounted by a curious woodcut
showing two Cupids blowing trumpets,
Punchinello in costume, and
Friars Bacon and Bungay standing be-
hind a cloth-covered table from which
protrudes the brazen speaking head.
The woodcut, paper, and typography
place the broadside in the seven-
teenth century, and Daniel dates it
'Temp. Charles 2.' 4 But it is most
unlikely that the playbill is Restora-
tion because it contains neither the
royal arms at the top nor the conven-
tional flourish, 'Vivat Rex,' which
almost invariably concluded any public
announcement issued in the form of a
proclamation or poster.

Of the very few late seventeenth-
century playbills that have survived,
all, including a Bartholomew Fair bill
of 1698, bear this flourish; and all bear
the royal arms except the four bills in
the Venet papers, and these are not
posters but handbills. 5 In the Theatre
Collection are a number of Barthol-
omew Fair posters dating from the
reigns of William and Mary, William,
and Anne, and announcing exhibitions
of freaks ('Wonders of Nature'),
trials of skill, tumbling, and rope
dancing. All have either the royal arms
or the flourish. Both are present on a
small poster proclaiming a fencing
match at the Red Bull Theatre in
1664. 6

We know that the flourish was used
even as early as the reign of James I.
Commenting upon the presence of
'Vivat Rex' at the end of a manu-
script Bear Garden poster written be-
fore 1614, Lawrence states:

'The truth is that, time out of mind,
the loyal flourish was a feature of all
proclamations, and that the playbill, be-
ing purely an outgrowth of the oral
announcement, was to all intents and
purposes a proclamation. In dismissing
the subject one may point out that what
had originally been a characteristic of
the poster eventually became the inher-
tance of the programme. With necessary
variants, and sometimes rendered into
English, 'Vivat Rex' held its place at the foot
of the bills to the close of the reign of
William IV.'

Why, then, are the loyal flourish and
the royal arms absent from the
playbill under discussion? The obvi-
cous answer is that the bill was issued
during the Interregnum. 8 The Pur-
itarian never banned Bartholomew Fair
and the showing of puppets there and
elsewhere. After they closed the
theatres in 1647, plays were occasion-
ally given surreptitiously, but none of

4 So listed in Daniel's table of contents, written on the first page of the volume.
5 That is, bills printed for distribution in the carriages and at the houses of theatre-
goers.
the participants would have had the temerity to print and post an announcement of one of these performances. John Harris, on the other hand, would have incurred no penalty in thus advertising his 'motions.'

This John Harris was probably the player of that name who performed at Norwich in 1635 and was a minor member of the King's Revels Company. When the playhouses were suppressed he became a printer at Oxford. Soon, turning his coat, he was one of two or three actors to join the Parliamentarians. Returning to London, he attached himself to the army and wrote for it a newsbook, Mercatorius Militaris, which he printed on a small press that he carried with him. In 1654 he was convicted of swindling three merchants out of 900 pounds, but apparently escaped punishment. In 1660, four months after the Restoration, he was hanged for theft and burglary.9

It is likely that sometime after 1654 Harris, completely out of favor and discredited, reverted to the profession of his youth for a livelihood and became, since plays were forbidden, a puppet showman. Having been a printer, he may have printed his own playbills. The bill at Harvard, with its letterpress carefully fitted within the wreath and its amusing woodcut illustration made especially for it, is the work of no ordinary printer of broadsides.

Of the plays it advertises, 'the fa-


mons History of Bungy and Frier Bacon: With the merry Conceits of their Man Miles’ was undoubtedly taken from the fifth chapter of The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon, a widely read chapbook that had gone through six editions before 1660.10 A play of this title was later in the repertory of Powell, the celebrated exhibitor of puppets in the age of Anne.

'The merry Humours of Punchinello' appears to be the first mention of Punch in England.11 The earliest reference given in the New English Dictionary is to an ‘Italian Punchinello,’ Antonio Devoto, who set up a booth at Charing Cross, London, in 1666, and performed there until 1673.12 In the woodcut Punch has the big paunch alluded to by Sir George Etheredge in 168613 and wears the tall peaked hat and large ruff seen on him in an engraving of 1715.14

It is hard to believe that this funny fellow played any part in ‘the Lancashire Witches,’ the name linked, at least typographically, with his on the

13 ‘Punchinello’ was shortened to ‘Punch’ about 1700. Pepys calls the famous puppet Polichinello, its original name.
15 ‘... this day he sets forth with an odder belly than ever had Polichinello’ letter by Etheredge quoted by Sybil Rosenfeld, ‘Sir George Etheredge in Rassian,’ Review of English Studies, X, 1934, 181.
16 Frontispiece to Sir Thomas Burnet’s A Second Tale of a Tub; or, The History of Robert Powl, the Puppet Show-Man.
bill. There is no other record of a motion so entitled. Presumably it was based upon the trial and conviction of seventeen women for witchcraft at Pendle Forest, Lancashire, in 1634, a much publicized event that soon occasioned two ballads and a successful play.14

'Fair Rosamond,' or 'Henry II and Fair Rosamond,' was a popular puppet play, derived, without doubt, from an oft-printed ballad by Thomas Dekker.15 It was given in the Commonwealth period and was still being presented as late as 1677.16 It is one of three motions mentioned in 'An Ancient Song of Bartholomew-Fair':

22 Prophan pastime or the witches Mad humors' and 'The Witches Dance,' entered in the Stationers' Register on 22 August 1635.
23 Heywood and Brune's The Late Lancashire Witch, acted at the Globe Theatre in 1654 and printed the same year.
24 In his Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, Bishop Percy reprints the 'Ballad of Fair Rosamond' from four black-letter copies, two of them in the Pepys Collection. A ballad on this subject was entered in the Stationers' Register on 13 March 1655/56.
25 The puppet play of 'Fayre Rosamond' was given at Norwich on 22 December 1657 (Depositions Taken before the Mayor & Aldermen of Norwich, 1549-1567. Extracts from the Court Book of the City of Norwich, 1555-1566, ed. Walter Bys, Norwich, 1905, p. 147).
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