The earliest known English playbill

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The Earliest Known English Playbill

In 1931 Miss Eleanor Boswell discovered among the mecklenburged 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 1913 a small playbill (7/4 by 5/4 inches) — reproduced here approximately full size (Plate I) — 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 1830 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 1839 and containing twenty tracts, broadsides, and clippings concerning Bartholomew 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 Tregaskis, who sold it to Robert Gould Shaw, founder of the Harvard Theatre Collection.

Without giving the date or the time, the playbill 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

*W. J. Lawrence, The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies, Second Series (Philadelphia, 1915), pp. 276, 278 (facsimiles of four William and Mary playbills, the oldest dated 9 November 1680).

*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-dancers, as to be seen.

The Court of King Henry the Second; And the Death of Fair Roastoon. With the merry Humours of Punchinello and the Lancashire-Witches. Also the famous History of Bung and Friar Bacon. With the merry Conquests of their Man Marry. And the Brazen Speaking Head; wherein is represented the manner how this Kingdom was to be vented in with Brass. Added by Figures as large as Children two years old.

In Mislake will the Booth, you may know, by the Brazen Speaking Head in the Gallery.

Plate I
merry Conceits of their Man Miles, And the brazen speaking Heide;... 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 Friar Bacon and Bungay standing behind a clock-covered table from which protrudes the brazen speaking head.

The woodcut, paper, and typography place the broadside in the seventeenth century, and Daniel dates it "Temp. Charles 2." But it is most unlikely that the playbill is Restoration because it contains neither the royal arms at the top nor the conventional 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 Veney papers, and these are not posters but handbills. In the Theatre Collection are a number of Bartholomew 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.*

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 manuscript Bear Garden poster written before 1614, Lawrence states:

The truth is that, time out of mind, the loyal flourish was a feature of all proclamations, and that the playbill, being 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 inheritance 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 obvious answer is that the bill was issued during the Interregnum. The Puritans never banned Bartholomew Fair and the showing of puppets there and elsewhere. After they closed the theatres in 1647, plays were occasionally given surreptitiously, but none of...
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 newshook, Mercatorius Militaris, which he printed on a small press that he carried with him. In 1634 he was convicted of swindling three merchants out of 900 pounds, but apparently escaped punishment. In 1650, four months after the Restoration, he was hanged for theft and burglary."

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 Bunyan and Fryar Bacon: With the merry Conceits of their Man Miles' was undoubtedly taken from the fifth chapter of The Famous Historie of Fryar Bacon, a widely read chapbook that had gone through six editions before 1660. 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. 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. In the woodcut Punch has the big pouch alluded to by Sir George Etheredge in 1686 and wears the tall peaked hat and large ruff seen on him in an engraving of 1715.

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

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"Punchinello" was shortened to "Punch" about 1700. Pepys calls the famous puppet Polichinello, its original name.


... this day he sets forth with an odder belly than ever had Polichinello; letter by Etheredge quoted by Sybil Rosenfeld, 'Sir George Etheredge in Retrospect,' Review of English Studies, X, 1934, 181.

Frontrpiece to Sir Thomas Burnet's A Second Tale of a Tub; or, The History of Robert Power, the Puppet-Show-Man.
notes

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William Van Lennep

"Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy, ed. 1719-20, IV, 169."
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