The earliest known English playbill

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The Earliest Known English Playbill

In 1931 Miss Eleanor Boswell discovered among the meagre State Papers Domestic in the Public Record Office an English playbill of 1687. She broadside ante-dated 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 (7 1/2 by 5 1/2 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 1810 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 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 Frier Bacon; With the

*Two of these copies are in the Harvard Theatre Collection.
John Harris's B O O T H.
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 Rosamond. With the merry Humours of
Punchinello and the Lancashire Witches. Also the fa-
mous History of Buny and Frier Bacon. With the merry
Conducts of their Man Mephisto. And the Brazen speak-
ing Head, wherein is represented the manner how
this Kingdom was to have been well'd in with Brass.
Adorned by Figures as large as Children two years old.

A Mistake at 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 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 surrounded 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 Verney 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 1664.8

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.8 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

4 This poster, almost the same size (7½ by 3½ inches) as the one under discussion, is described in Repairs: Being Notes of Some of the Printed Books, Manuscripts, Historical Documents, Medals, Engravings, Pottery, etc., etc., Collected (18 sis-1808) by John Elliott Hodgkin (London, 1901), III, 53, 54. In this collection was another poster, of 1658, announcing feats of tumbling and rope dancing by Richard Lancaster and the celebrated Jacob Hall. It carries the royal arms but not the flourish.

8 Lawrence, 'The Origin of the Theatre Programme,' op. cit., p. 56. 4 Very occasionally proclamations of this period bore the Commonwealth arms—never, of course, the flourish.
the participants would have had the
temper to print and post an an-
nouncement of one of these perfor-
mances. 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 1633 and was a minor
member of the King’s Revels Com-
pany. When the playhouses were
suppressed he became a printer at Ox-
ford. Soon, turning his coat, he was
one of two or three actors to join the
Parliamentarians. Returning to Lon-
don, he attached himself to the army
and wrote for it a newsbook, Mer-
curius 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 1659, four months after the Resto-
ration, he was hanged for theft and
burglary. 8

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 be-
came, 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
broadside.

Of the plays it advertises, ‘the fa-

8J. B. Williams, J. G. Muddiman, A
History of English Journalism (London,
1908), pp. 106, 1472; G. E. Bentley, The
Jacobean and Caroline Stage (Oxford,
1918–1933), II, 461; H. R. Plomer, A Dic-
tionary of the Booksellers and Printers...in
England, Scotland and Ireland from 1547 to

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 Pryer 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 Punchin-
ello’ appears to be the first mention
of Punch in England. 11 The earliest
reference given in the New English
Dictionary is to an ‘Italian Punchin-
ello,’ 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
Etherge in 1686 13 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 Lancas-
tshire-Witches,’ the name linked, at
least typographically, with his on the

10Arundell Ralegh, A List of English
Tales and Fries Romances Printed before
11‘Punchinello’ was shortened to ‘Punch’
about 1700. Pepys calls the famous puppet
Polichinello, its original name.
12H. B. Wheatley, London Fairs and
Present (London, 1867), I, 348; Allan Bryce
Nicol, A History of Restoration Drama,
278; The Drame Records of Sir Henry
Herbert, ed. J. O. Adams (New Haven,
Conn., 1917), p. 138; Pepys’s diary, 20 March
and 24 October 1667.
13‘...This day he set forward with an
oddler belly than ever had Polichinello’ let-
ter by Etherge quoted by Sybil Rosenfeld,
Sir George Etherge in Revision. Review
of English Studies, X, 1934, 181.
14From a piece to Sir Thomas Burnet’s
A Second Tale of a Tub; or, The History
of Robert Poole, the Puppet Show-Man.
Notes

385

In Fifty-five, may I never Thrive,
If I tell you any more than is true;
To London she came, hearing of the
Fame
Of a Fair they call Bartholomew.

In Houses of credit, Men walk upon
Cords,
As easie as Squirrels crack Filberds;
But the Cut-purses they do bite and rob
[rob] away,
But these we suppose to be Ill-Birds.

For a Penny you may see a fine Puppet-
play,
And for Two-pence a rare piece of
Art;
And a Penny a Cart, I dare swear a
Man,
May put zix of 'em into a Quart.

Their Sights are so rich, is able to be-
wich
The Hearts of a very fine Man;
Here's patient Grisel here, and Fair
Rosamond there,
And the History of Susanna.22

Was it at John Harris's booth 'next
the Rope-dancers' that the puppet
play of 'Fair Rosamond' was shown
in 1655? Possibly; for in my opinion
the playbill at Harvard dates from
about that time.

WILLIAM VAN LENNEP

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

**Notes**

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 oc-
casioned two ballads 26 and a success-
ful play.16

'Fair Rosamond,' or 'Henry II and
Fair Rosamond,' was a popular puppet
play, derived, without doubt, from an
oft-printed ballad by Thomas De-
loney.17 It was given in the Com-
monwealth period and was still being
presented as late as 1677.18 It is one of
three motions mentioned in 'An Anci-
ent Song of Bartholomew-Fair':

20 Prophan pastime or the witches Mad
humors,' and 'The Witches Dance,' entered
in the Stationers' Register on 22 August
1636.

21 Heywood and Brune's The Late Lan-
cashire Witchet, acted at the Globe Theatre
in 1634 and printed the same year.

22 In his Reliques of Ancient English Pe-
nty, Bishop Percy reprints the 'Ballad of
Fair Rosamond' from four black-letter
copies, two of them in the Pepys Collec-
tion. A ballad on this subject was entered
in the Stationers' Register on 13 March
1655/56.

23 The puppet play of 'Fair Rosamond'
was given at Norwich on 22 December 1677
(Depositions Taken before the Mayor &
Aldermen of Norwich, 1549-1567. Extracts
from the Court Books of the City of Nor-
nicke, 1655-1658, ed. Walter Rye, Norwich,
1905, p. 147).
CONTENTS


WILLIAM BERRIEN, The Modern Language Center 395

JOHN H. BIRKS, The Story of Toby, a Sequel to Tydee 118

WILLIAM H. BOND, Nance Oldfield: An Unrecorded Printed Play by Charles Reade 386

WILLIAM H. BOND, Wordsworth's Thanksgiving Ode: An Unpublished Postscript 115

EDWIN G. BORING, The Library of the Psychological Laboratories 394

ETHEL B. CLARK, A Manuscript of John Keats at Dumbarton Oaks 90

I. BERNARD COHEN, A Lost Letter from Hobbes to Mersenne Found 112

ARTHUR H. COLE, The Business School Library and Its Setting 332

C. LESLIE CRAIG, The Earliest Little Gliding Concordance 311

Exhibitions, 1946 123

REGINALD FITZ, President Eliot and Dr Holmes Leap Forward 212

EVA FLEISCHNER, Napoleon to His Mother: The First Draft of a Letter Written from School 244

LOUISE B. GRAVES, The Likeness of Emily Dickinson 248

ELMER M. GRieder, The Collecting of War Agency Material at Harvard 111

Guides to the Harvard Libraries 323

The Harvard Keats Memorial Studies 223

The Harvard-Nowberry Calligraphic Series 262

PHILIP HOFFER, The Graphic Arts Department: An Experiment in Specialization 252

PHILIP HOFFER, A Newly Discovered Book with Painted Decorations from Willibald Pirkheimer's Library 66

WILLIAM A. JACKSON, The Carl T. Keller Collection of Don Quixote 305

WILLIAM A. JACKSON, The First Separately Printed English Translation of Horace 238

WILLIAM A. JACKSON, Humphrey Dyson and His Collections of Elizabethan Proclamations 76

HAROLD S. JANTZ, A Funeral Elegy for Thomas Danforth, Treasurer of Harvard 113

FRANK N. JONES, Harvard's Importation of Foreign Books since the War 256

OTTO KINKELDEY, Fra Angelico Gafori and Marsilio Ficino 379

RUPERT B. LILLIE, The Historical Series of Harvard Dioramas 391

List of Contributors 127, 264, 399
THOMAS LITTLE, The Thomas Wolfe Collection of William B. Wisdom 280
ROBERT W. LOVETT, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1877–1937 221
PHILIP J. MCNIFF, Reading Room Problems in the Harvard College Library, 1942–1947 254
FRANCIS P. MAGOUN, JR, Photostats of the Historia de Preliis Alexandri Magni (19) 377
KEYES D. METCALF, Foreword 5
KEYES D. METCALF, Spatial Growth in University Libraries 133
KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1765–1877 29
AGNES MONGAN, A Group of Newly Discovered Sixteenth-Century French Portrait Drawings 155
AGNES MONGAN, A Group of French Portrait Drawings—Addendum 397
NEW Catalogues of the Library of Congress 262
NATALIE N. NICOLSON, The Engineering Library at Harvard University 387
MAXWELL E. PERKINS, Thomas Wolfe 269
FRED N. RODGERS, Celtic Books at Harvard: The History of a Departmental Collection 52
HYDER E. ROLLS, An O. Henry Cocktail 139
ADRIANA R. SALEM, The Purchases of a Seventeenth-Century Librarian 241
SALES OF DUPLICATE BOOKS 261
CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, The Collections of the Harvard University Archives 176
CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, The Harvard University Archives: Goal and Function 101
STAFF ACTIVITIES 260
THE THEATRE COLLECTION IN NEW QUARTERS 261
WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, The Earliest Known English Playbill 382
WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, John Adams to a Young Playwright 317
THOMAS WOLFE and MAXWELL E. PERKINS, The Last Letter of Thomas Wolfe, and the Reply to It 278