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 broadside of 1687. This broadside ante-dated by five years the William and Mary playbill found by the late W. J. Lawrence among the Vernon 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 (7½ by 5½ 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 Buny and Friar Bacon: With the


*W. J. Lawrence, The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies, Second Series (Philadelphia, 1915), pp. 216, 241 (facsimiles of four William and Mary playbills, the oldest dated 9 November 1630).

*Two of these copies are in the Harvard Theatre Collection.
John Harris B O O T H
in Bartholomew-Fair, between the Hospital
igate and Duck-lane end, next the Rope-dancer.
so to be seen.

The Court of King Henry the Second; And the Death
of Fair Raffles. With the merry Humours of
punchinello and the Lancashire Witches. Also the fa-
mous History of Bents and Frieza Bason. With the merry
Concerts of their Man Mina. And the Brazen speak-
ing Head, wherein is represented the manner how
this Kingdom was to have been wellin with Bells.
Aded by Figures as large as Children two years old.

To Millet the Book may be known
by the Brazen Speaking Head in the
Gallery.
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 surmounted by a curious woodcut
showing two cupids blowing trumpets,
Punchinello in costume, and
Friars Bacon and Bungay standing be-
hind a cloch-covered table from which
protrudes the brazen speaking head.
The woodcut, paper, and typography
place the broadside in the seventeen-
teenth century, and Daniel dates it
'Temp. Charles 2.' But it is most
unlikely that the playbill is Restora-
tion because it contains neither the
royal arms at the top nor the conventi-
fional 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 Anna,
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 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 inheri-
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.° The Puritans
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

° This poster, almost the same size (7½
by 5½ inches) as the one under discussion,
is described in Rare Prints: Being Notes of Some of the Printed Books, Manuscripts, His-
torical Documents, Medals, Engravings, Pot-
tery, etc., etc., Collected (1898–1900) by
John Eliot Howard (London, 1902), III, 52,
54. In this collection was another poster, ca.
1658, announcing feats of tumbling and rope
dancing by Richard Lancashire and the celeb-
ated Jacob Hall. It carries the royal arms
but not the flourish.

Lawrence, 'The Origin of the Theatre
Programme,' op. cit., p. 61.

* Very occasionally proclamations of this
period bore the Commonwealth arms—
ever, of course, the flourish.
the participants would have had the
temerity to print and post an an-
nouncement of one of these perfor-
amances. 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 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 newshook, 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 1660, 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-
mous 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 Punchi-
nello' 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-
nello,' 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 punch-aloud to by Sir George
Etheredge 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

8J. B. Williams, J. G. Muddiman, A
History of English Journalism (London,
1908), pp. 196, 197; G. E. Bentley, The
Jacobean and Caroline Stage (Oxford,
1941- ), ii, 462; H. R. Plomer, A Dic-
ionary of the Booksellers and Printers . . .
in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1641 to

9Arun dell Radcliffe, A List of English
Tales and Frose Romances Printed before
1720 (London, 1912), pp. 16, 17.

10Punchinello' was shortened to 'Punch'
about 1700. Pepys calls the famous puppet
Polichinello, its original name.

11H. B. Wheatley, London Past and
Present (London, 1857), i, 318; Allardyce
Nicoll, A History of Restoration Drama,
238; The Dramatic Records of Sir Henry
Herbert, ed. J. O. Adams (New Haven,
Conn., 1877), p. 138; Pepys's diary, 20 March
and 24 October 1667.

12... this day he sets forward with an
oddle belly than ever had Polichinello' let-
ter by Etheredge quoted by Sybil Rosenfeld,
Sir George Etheredge in Retrospect: Review
of English Studies, x, 1934, 180.

13From a piece to Sir Thomas Burnet's
A Second Tale of a Tub; or, The History
of Robert Powel, the Puppet-Show-Man.
Notes

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 Boards, 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 Cant, I dare swear a Man,
May put six of 'em into a Quart.

Their Sights are so rich, is able to bewitch
The Hearts of a very fine Man-2;
Here's patient Grisel here, and Fair Rosamond there,
And the History of Susanna.2

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 Melancholy, ed. 1719-20, IV, 169.
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