The earliest known English playbook

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Accessibility
The Earliest Known English Playbill

In 1731 Miss Eleanor Boswell discovered among the meager State Papers Domestic in the Public Record Office an English cabinet of 1687. This 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 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 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 at £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. 196, 199 (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-dancers to be seen.

The Court of King Henry the Second; And the Death of Fair Reapers. With the merry Humours of Punchinello and the Lancashire Witches. As also the famous History of Bun and Friar Bacon. With the merry Conceits of their Man Mere. And the Brazen Speaking Head, wherein is represented the manner how this Kingdom was to be sold in with Bricks. Added to Figures as large as Children two years old.

Of Mistakes in the Booth, you may know by the Brazen Speaking Head in the Gallery.
merry Conceits of their Man Miles.
And the brezn 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 trum-
pets, Punchinello in costume, and
Friars Bacon and Bungay standing be-
hind a cloch-covered table from which
protrudes the brezn speaking head.
The woodcut, paper, and typography
place the broadside in the seven-
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 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 1668, 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 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
1664.8
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 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 an-
nouncement, was to all intents and pur-
poses 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 vari-
ants, and sometimes rendered into Eng-
lish, "Vivat Rex" held its place at the foot
of the bills to the close of the reign of
William IV.9
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-
tans 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 This poster, almost the same size (7¼
by 5 inches) as the one under discussion,
is described in "Shakspeare: Being Notes of Some
of the Printed Books, Manuscripts, Historical Docu-
ments, Medals, Engravings, Pot-
tery, etc., etc., Collected (1858-1860) by
5 In this collection there was another poster of
1658, announcing feats of tumbling and rope
dancing by Richard Lancashire and the celeb-
trated Jacob Hall. It carries the royal arms
but not the flourish.
6 Lawrence, "The Origin of the Theatre
Programme," op. cit., p. 56.
8 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 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 1633 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 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.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 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 Frier 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 punch alighted 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 Lancashire-Witches,’ the name linked, at least typographically, with his on the
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 easy 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-3;
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. 1719-19, IV, 169."
CONTENTS

HAMILTON VAUGHAN BAILE, Views of Harvard to 1860: An Iconographic Study — Parts I-III 11, 185, 339

WILLIAM BERLOK, The Modern Language Center 396

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

WILLIAM H. BOND, Nancy 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. GRIEGER, The Collecting of War Agency Material at Harvard 111

Guides to the Harvard Libraries 223

The Harvard Keats Memorial Studies 223

The Harvard-Newberry Calligraphic Series 262

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

PHILIP HOFER, A Newly Discovered Book with Painted Decorations from Willibald Pirckheimer'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, Francesca Gaffori and Marsilio Ficino 379

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

List of Contributors 127, 264, 399
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THOMAS LITTLE, The Thomas Wolfe Collection of William B. Wisdom</strong></td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ROBERT W. LOVETT, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1877–1937</strong></td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHILIP J. MCNIFF, Reading Room Problems in the Harvard College Library, 1942–1947</strong></td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FRANCIS P. MAGOUN, JR, Photostats of the <em>Historia de Preliis Alexandri Magni</em> (16)</strong></td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KEYES D. METCALF, Foreword</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KEYES D. METCALF, Spatial Growth in University Libraries</strong></td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1765–1877</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1937–1947</strong></td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGNES MONGAN, A Group of Newly Discovered Sixteenth-Century French Portrait Drawings</strong></td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGNES MONGAN, A Group of French Portrait Drawings — Addendum</strong></td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEW Catalogues of the Library of Congress</strong></td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NATALIE N. NICHOLSON, The Engineering Library at Harvard University</strong></td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MAXWELL E. PERKINS, Thomas Wolfe</strong></td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FRED N. ROBBINS, Celtic Books at Harvard: The History of a Departmental Collection</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HYDER B. ROLINS, An O. Henry Cocktail</strong></td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADRIANA R. SALEM, The Purchases of a Seventeenth-Century Librarian</strong></td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sales of Duplicate Books</strong></td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, The Collections of the Harvard University Archives</strong></td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, The Harvard University Archives: Goal and Function</strong></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff Activities</strong></td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Theatre Collection in New Quarters</strong></td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, The Earliest Known English Playbill</strong></td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, John Adams to a Young Playwright</strong></td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THOMAS WOLFE and MAXWELL E. PERKINS, The Last Letter of Thomas Wolfe, and the Reply to It</strong></td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>