The earliest known English playbill

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Accessibility
The Earliest Known English Playbill

In 1931 Miss Eleanor Boswell discovered among the unclassified 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 (7½ 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 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 1835 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. 246, 247 (facsimiles of four William and Mary playbills, the oldest dated 9 November 1687).
*Two of these copies are in the Harvard Theatre Collection.
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 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.' 7 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 Verney papers, and these are not 
posters but handbills. 8 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 danc-
ing. 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, 
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 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 
thearies in 1647, plays were occasion-
ally given surreptitiously, but none of 

8 This poster, almost the same size (7 1/2 
by 3 1/2 inches) as the one under discussion, 
is described in: "Episcopri: Being Notes of Some 
of the Printed Books, Manuscripts, His-
torical Documents, Medals, Engravings, Pot-
tery, etc., etc., Collected (1816-1820) by 
John Elliot Hodgkin (London, 1902), III, 53, 
54. In this collection was another poster, ca. 
1658, announcing festas of tumbling and rope danc-
ing by Richard Lancaster and the cele-
brated Jacob Hall. It carries the royal arms 
but not the flourish.

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 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 newsbok, 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.

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 fantasticks History of Bungy and Frier Bacon: With the merry Conceits of their Man Miles’ was undoubtedly taken from the fifth chapter of The Famous Histories of Frere 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 paunc 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
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 occasioned two ballads and a successful 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 Commonwealth period and was still being presented as late as 1677.18 It is one of three motions mentioned in 'An Ancient Song of Bartholomew-Fair':

22 'The pastime of the witches Mad humors' and 'The Witches Dance,' entered in the Stationers' Register on 22 August 1636.
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 1655/6.
25 The puppet play of 'Fair Rosamond' was given at Norwich on 22 December 1657 (Depositions Taken before the Mayor & Aldermen of Norwich, 1549-1567. Extracts from the Court Books of the City of Norwich, 1655-1658, ed. Walter Bys, Norwich, 1905, p. 147)."  

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

In Houses of Boards, Men walk upon
Cords,
As easie as Squirrels crack Filberts;
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 Can, I dare swear a
Man,
May put six of 'em into a Quart.

Their Sights are so rich, is able to be-
wich
. The Hearts of a very fine Man-3;
Here's patient Grisel here, and Fair
Rosamond there,
And the History of Susanna.29

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-
sacholy, ed. 1719-20, IV, 169."
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