The earliest known English playbill

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The Earliest Known English Playbill

In 1931 Miss Eleanor Boswell discovered among the meager-dated State Papers Domestic in the Public Record Office an English playbill of 1687. This broadside anticipated 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% by 5% 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 1890 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


*W. J. Lawrence, The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies, Second Series (Philadelphia, 1915), pp. 214, 241 (facsimiles of four William and Mary playbills, the oldest dated 9 November 1679).
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 Rosamond. With the merry Humours of Punchinello and the Lancashire Witches. Also the famous History of Bung and Frier Bacon. With the merry Conquests of their Man Merg. And the Brazen Speaking Head, wherein is represented the manner how this Kingdom was to be walked in with Bears, Acted by Figurs as large as Children two years old.

To mistake not the Booth, you may know it by the Brazen Speaking Head in the Gallery.
merry Conceits of their Man Miles. And the brezon 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 behind a cloak-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 playbill of 1698, bear this flourish; and all bear the royal arms except the four bills in the Verey 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 1664.6

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.6

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 So listed in Daniel's table of contents, written on the first page of the volume.
5 That is, bills printed for distribution in the carriages and at the houses of the regents.
6 This poster, almost the same size (7½ by 4½ inches) as the one under discussion, is described in Raroia: Being Notes of Some of the Printed Books, Manuscripts, Historical Documents, Medals, Engravings, Potsery, etc., etc., Collected (1838–1900) by John Ellin Hodgkin (London, 1901), III, 53, 54. In this collection was another poster, ca. 1658, announcing feats of tumbling and rope dancing by Richard Lancashire and the celebrated Jacob Hall. It carries the royal arms but not the flourish.
7 Lawrence, 'The Origin of the Theatre Programme,' op. cit., p. 51.
8 Very occasionally proclamations of this period bore the Commonwealth arms—never, of course, the flourish.
the participants would have had the temerity to print and post an announcement of one or 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 newsbook, *Mercurius 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 paunch alluded to by Sir George Etherege 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


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


12Proselytise to Sir Thomas Burnet's *A Second Tale of a Tub,* or, *The History of Robert Powel, the Puppet-Show-Man.*
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 Curr, 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.  

Was it at John Harris's booth 'next  
the Rupe-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 Purse Mel-  
sacholy, ed. 1719-20, IV, 169."
CONTENTS


WILLIAM BERRIE, The Modern Language Center 396

JOHN H. BIRDS, The Story of Toby, a Sequel to Tyypee 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. GRIEBER, The Collecting of War Agency Material at Harvard 111

Guides to the Harvard Libraries 123

The Harvard Keats Memorial Studies 123

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, Franchino Gafuri and Marsilio Ficino 379

RUPERT B. LILLIE, The Historical Series of Harvard Diortamas 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 Prelibus Alexandri Magni (19)
KEYES D. METCALF, Foreword 377
KEYES D. METCALF, Spatial Growth in University Libraries 5
KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1765–1877 133
KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1765–1877 288
AGNES MORGAN, A Group of Newly Discovered Sixteenth-Century French Portrait Drawings 155
AGNES MORGAN, A Group of French Portrait Drawings — Addendum 397
NEW, Catalogues of the Library of Congress 162
NATALIE N. NICHOLSON, The Engineering Library at Harvard University 387
MAXWELL E. PERKINS, Thomas Wolfe 269
FRED N. ROBINSON, Celtic Books at Harvard: The History of a Departmental Collection 52
HYDER E. ROLLINS, An O. Henry Cocktail 119
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