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 broadside 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 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 Hunt, and as lot 459 in the great Hunt 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; The Death of Fair Rosamond; With the merry Humours of Punchinello, and the Lancashire-Witches. As also the famous History of Bungy and Frier Becon: 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 1681).

*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, Repairs. With the merry Humours of Punchinello and the Lancashire Witches. As also the famous History of Bonds and Friz Bason: With the merry Conceits of their Man Maria. And the Brazen speaking Head, wherein is represented the manner how this Kingdom was to have been walled in with Brass. Added by Figures as large as Children's two years old.

Of Mislake not the Book, ye may know by the Brazen Speaking Head in the Gallery.
merry Conclists 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 cloche-covered table from which protrudes the brezen 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 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.7 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 (7¼ by 5½ inches) as the one under discussion, is described in Raffles: Being Notes of Some of the Printed Books, Manuscripts, Historical Documents, Medals, Engravings, Pottery, etc., etc., Collected (1850–1860) by John Eller Houghton (London, 1902), III, 53, 54. In this collection was another poster, of 1653, announcing 'fests of tumbling and rope dancing by Richard Lancastre and the celebrated Jacob Hall. It carries the royal arms but not the flourish.

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

6 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 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 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-
ratiou, he was hanged for theft and
burglary.10
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 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 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 Punchi-
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 paunch alluded to by Sir George
Etheredge in 168613 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-
shire-Witches,' the name linked, at
least typographically, with his on the

10 Arundell Radcliffe, A List of English
Tales and Prose Romances Printed before
11 'Punchinello' was shortened to 'Punch'
about 1700. Pepys calls the famous puppet
Polichinello, its original name.
12 H. B. Wheatley, London Pamphlet
Present (London, 1807), 1, 318; Allardyce
Nicoll, A History of Restoration Drama,
278; The Diarists 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 sets forward with an
oddler belly than ever had Polichinello';
letter by Etheredge quoted by Sybil Rosennfeld,
'Sir George Etheredge in Revolution,' Review
of English Studies, X, 1934, 181.
14 Frontispiece to Sir Thomas Burnet's
A Second Tale of a Tub; or, The History
of Robert Fussell, the Puppet Show-Man.
Notes

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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 Dekker.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 Prophane pastime or the witches Mad humours' and 'The Witches Dance,' entered in the Stationers' Register on 22 August 1636.

23 Heywood and Brune's The Late Lanchashire Witchet, 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 1655/56.

25 The puppet play of 'Fair Rosamond' was given at Norwich on 22 December 1677 (Depositions Taken before the Mayor & Aldermen of Norwich, 1548-1567. Extracts from the Court Books of the City of Norwich, 1555-1658, ed. Walter Rye, Norwich, 1905, p. 147).

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 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 Groat, I dare swear a Man,
May put ziz of 'em into a Quart.

Their Sights are so rich, is able to bewitch
The Hearts of a very fine Man.26
Here's patient Grisel here, and Fair Rosamond there,
And the History of Susanna.27

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

28 Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy, ed. 1719-20, IV, 169.
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