



# The earliest known English playbill

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musicae; (29) Propositiones et proportiones ad musicam Pythagoricam et Platoniam pertinentes; (30) Quod in musicis unum ex multis efficitur, per quod consonantia definitur; (31) Quae consonantiae ex quibus proportionibus orientur; (32) De harmonica animae compositione; (33) Summa

numerorum harmonicorum ad compositionem animae conducentium.

Surely, a small niche should be reserved for Marsilio Ficino in the hall of fame of musical theorists of the Renaissance.

OTTO KINKELDEY

## The Earliest Known English Playbill

IN 1931 Miss Eleanore Boswell discovered among the uncalendared State Papers Domestic in the Public Record Office an English playbill of 1687.<sup>1</sup> 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.'<sup>2</sup> There has been, however, in the Theatre Collection of the Harvard College Library since 1915 a small playbill (7¼ by 5⅞ 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 litho-

graphed for himself and his friends<sup>3</sup> and then sold it to George Daniel, the miscellaneous writer and a 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 Frier Bacon: With the

<sup>1</sup> Eleanore Boswell, 'A Playbill of 1687,' *The Library*, 4th ser., XI (1931), 499-502 (facsimile).

<sup>2</sup> W. J. Lawrence, *The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies, Second Series* (Philadelphia, 1913), pp. 240, 241 (facsimiles of four William and Mary playbills, the oldest dated 9 November 1692).

<sup>3</sup> Two of these copies are in the Harvard Theatre Collection.

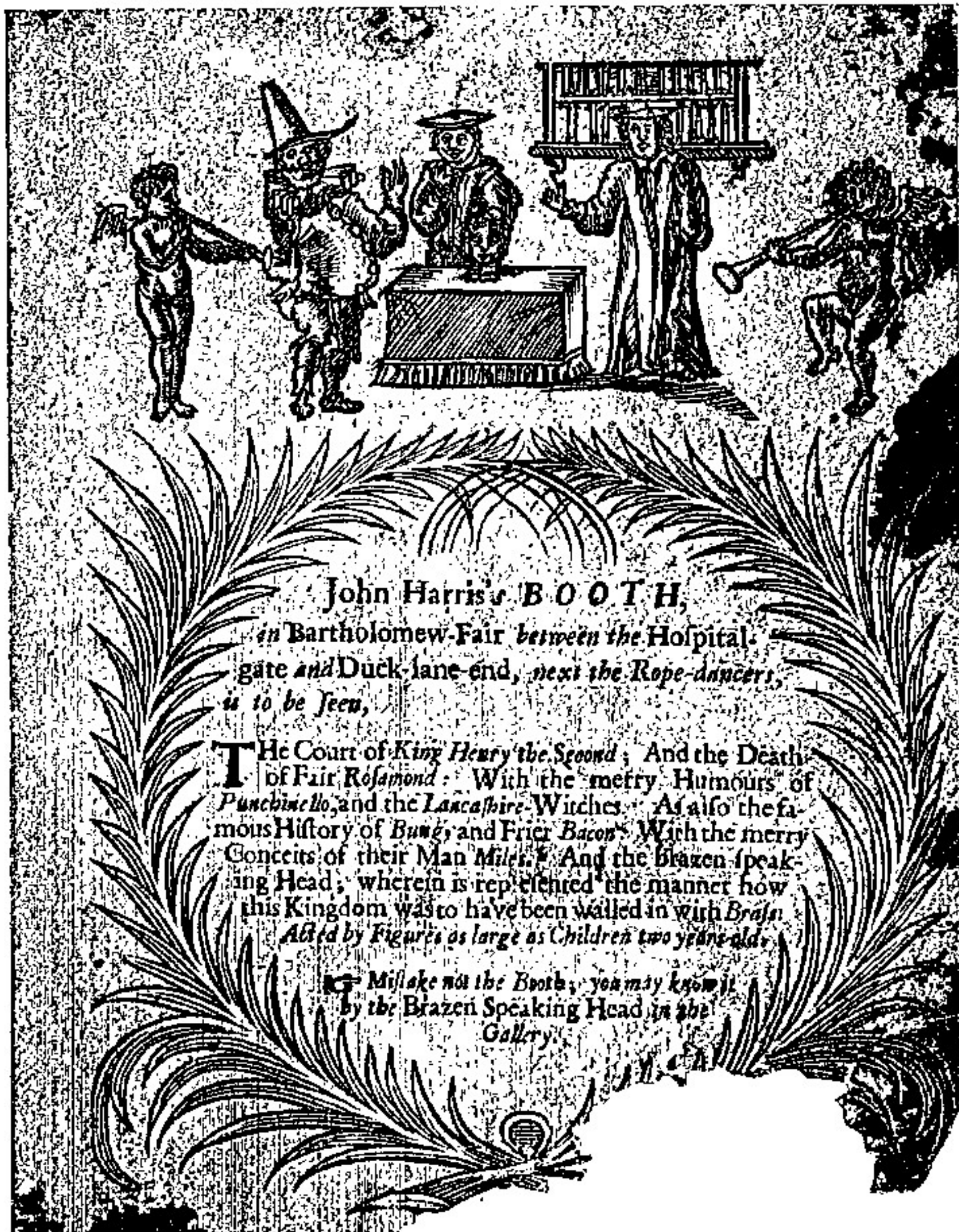


PLATE I





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 behind a cloth-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.'<sup>4</sup> 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 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> So listed in Daniel's table of contents, written on the first page of the volume.

<sup>5</sup> That is, bills printed for distribution in the carriages and at the houses of theatre-goers.

match at the Red Bull Theatre in 1664.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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

<sup>6</sup> This poster, almost the same size (7½ by 5½ inches) as the one under discussion, is described in *Rariora: Being Notes of Some of the Printed Books, Manuscripts, Historical Documents, Medals, Engravings, Pottery, etc., etc., Collected (1858-1900) by John Eliot Hodgkin* (London, 1902), III, 53, 54. In this collection was another poster, ca. 1668, announcing feats of tumbling and rope dancing by Richard Lancashire and the celebrated Jacob Hall. It carries the royal arms but not the flourish.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence, 'The Origin of the Theatre Programme,' *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> 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 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 newsbook, *Mercurius 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.<sup>9</sup>

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-

<sup>9</sup>J. B. Williams [J. G. Muddiman], *A History of English Journalism* (London, 1908), pp. 106, 107; G. E. Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* (Oxford, 1941- ), II, 462; H. R. Plomer, *A Dictionary of the Booksellers and Printers . . . in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1641 to 1667* (London, 1907), p. 91.

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> In the woodcut Punch has the big paunch alluded to by Sir George Etherege in 1686<sup>13</sup> and wears the tall peaked hat and large ruff seen on him in an engraving of 1715.<sup>14</sup>

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

<sup>10</sup>Arundell Esdaile, *A List of English Tales and Prose Romances Printed before 1740* (London, 1912), pp. 16, 17.

<sup>11</sup>'Punchinello' was shortened to 'Punch' about 1700. Pepys calls the famous puppet Polichinello, its original name.

<sup>12</sup>H. B. Wheatley, *London Past and Present* (London, 1891), I, 358; Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Restoration Drama, 1660-1700* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 1940), p. 238; *The Dramatic Records of Sir Henry Herbert*, ed. J. Q. Adams (New Haven, Conn., 1917), p. 138; Pepys's diary, 20 March and 24 October 1667.

<sup>13</sup>' . . . this day he sets forward with an odder belly than ever had Polichinello' (letter by Etherege quoted by Sybil Rosenfeld, 'Sir George Etherege in Ratisbon,' *Review of English Studies*, X, 1934, 181).

<sup>14</sup>Frontispiece to Sir Thomas Burnet's *A Second Tale of a Tub; or, The History of Robert Powel, the Puppet-Show-Man*.

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<sup>16</sup> and a successful play.<sup>16</sup>

'Fair Rosamond,' or 'Henry II and Fair Rosamond,' was a popular puppet play, derived, without doubt, from an oft-printed ballad by Thomas Deloney.<sup>17</sup> It was given in the Commonwealth period and was still being presented as late as 1677.<sup>18</sup> It is one of three motions mentioned in 'An Ancient Song of Bartholomew-Fair':

In Fifty-five, may I never Thrive,  
If I tell you any more than is true;  
To London che 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 rub  
[rob] away,  
But those we suppose to be Ill-Birds.

For a Penny you may zee a fine Puppet-  
play,  
And for Two-pence a rare piece of  
Art;  
And a Penny a Cann, I dare swear a  
Man,  
May put zix of 'em into a Quart.

Their Sights are so rich, is able to be-  
witch  
. The Hearts of a very fine Man-a;  
Here's patient Grisel here, and Fair  
Rosamond there,  
And the History of Susanna.<sup>19</sup>

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

<sup>19</sup> *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy*, ed. 1719-20, IV, 169.

<sup>16</sup> 'Prophane pastime or the witches Mad humors' and 'The Witches Dance,' entered in the Stationers' Register on 22 August 1634.

<sup>16</sup> Heywood and Brome's *The Late Lancashire Witches*, acted at the Globe Theatre in 1634 and printed the same year.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> The puppet play of 'Fayre Rosamond' was given at Norwich on 22 December 1677 (*Depositions Taken before the Mayor & Aldermen of Norwich, 1549-1567. Extracts from the Court Books of the City of Norwich, 1666-1688*, ed. Walter Rye, Norwich, 1905, p. 147).



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