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978-0-521-08167-2 - The Theatre of the London Fairs in the 18th Century

Sybil Rosenfeld

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

BARTHOLOMEW FAIR  
EARLY SHOWS

## THE FAIR AND THE LAW

It was a jester turned monk who founded the greatest of London's many fairs. In 1133, Henry I granted a charter to Rahere, his former jester, who was then a prior at St Bartholomew's, confirming his right to hold a fair on St Bartholomew's eve, 23 August, St Bartholomew's day, 24 August, and the following day. In Charles II's reign the fair became extended to a fortnight.

As early as 1676 the inhabitants of Smithfield protested to the Court of Common Council against irregularities and petitioned for a limitation to three days,<sup>1</sup> probably without success, as the fair is said to have been held for two weeks up to 1700.<sup>2</sup> Two years later the Court of Aldermen, concerned at the disorders at Bartholomew and Lady Fairs, was seeking means of preventing them.<sup>3</sup> In July 1694 the inhabitants of Smithfield renewed their complaint of irregularities and again petitioned for a limitation to three days.<sup>4</sup> An order was actually granted for the reduction and a counter-petition supporting its continuance for fourteen days was rejected. This must have proved ineffective for, on 14 May 1700, a committee was appointed to consider ways and means of limiting the fair and preventing immorality.<sup>5</sup> By 18 June it had been decided that booths were to be used only for commerce, and that illegal interludes and stage plays would not be permitted.<sup>6</sup> An announcement to this effect was to be inserted in the *Post Man*. A proclamation, dated 25 June, commanded all concerned not to 'Let, Set, Hire or Use any Booth, Shed, Stall or other Erection whatsoever, to be used or employed

<sup>1</sup> Corporation of London Records Office, Journal 62, f. 342.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Corporation of London Records Office, Repertory 83, f. 285; Morley, *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair* (1892), p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> Repertory 98, pp. 395, 400, 410, 419.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 104, p. 313. <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 376, 390, 469.

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for Interludes, Stage-plays, Comedies, Gaming-places, Lotteries, disorderly Musick-meetings'. It was the authorities' first attempt to get rid of the drolls.

The decision was satirised in a mock *Letter from an Actress of the Play House to a Stroler in the Country, concerning...the Suppression of Drolls in Bartholomew Fair*.<sup>1</sup> The writer claims that drolls were condemned, not only for their immoral influence, but also because they ridiculed 'the Grandeur of the City' making 'a Lord-Mayor (as in the Renown'd Play of *Whittington*) beholding to so mean a creature as a Tabby Cat' or hiring a 'Punch gutted Porter' to represent 'an Alderman in a Scarlet Gown'. He protests against the loss to 'poor Strolers, and we the Underlings of his Majesty's servants':

We Play'rs sure are persecuted worst,  
Whose very Bills are under such Disgrace  
My Lord-May'r pulls 'em down . . .  
But that which grieves us starving Sinners most,  
Is the great Benefit o' th' Fair we have lost,  
Which keeps us all in decent Reparation,  
And gave us Credit thro' the long Vacation.

Though there is no evidence of actual performances in 1700 and 1701, the players were not deterred by authority for long and were back in 1702 in the face of a renewal of the proclamation in July that summer.<sup>2</sup> The next year the Lord Mayor, following on a presentment by the Grand Jury on 8 July, once again prohibited the hiring of booths for plays.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, by 1708 the theatrical booths had been thoroughly established. They were stated to be 'of extraordinary Largeness . . . used chiefly for Stage Plays, Musick and Tipling'; the cause of frequent disorders and interruption to traders' traffic as well as of lewdness and debauchery.<sup>4</sup> In the teeth of orders to the contrary, the fair continued to be held for fourteen days. The Court of Common Council once again limited it to 23–5 August. There may have been further suppression in 1710 as William Hone mentions a half sheet

<sup>1</sup> *A Pacquet from Wills* (1701).

<sup>2</sup> Order of the Court of Common Council, B.M. press-mark 1851 b. 2 (27).

<sup>3</sup> *Observer*, 18–21 August 1708.

<sup>4</sup> Corporation Records; Journal, 54, p. 692.

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octavo<sup>1</sup> published that year entitled 'The Wonders of England, containing Dogget and Penkethman's Dialogue with Old Nick, on the suppression of Bartholomew Fair in Smithfield'. This was a catchpenny title as it contained nothing about the suppression. In 1715 the order of 1708 was read to the Court of Aldermen and the Mayor recommended to see that it was observed.<sup>2</sup> In 1717 the fair was limited to three days owing 'to the Great Vice and Prophaness, occasion'd there by Stage-Plays',<sup>3</sup> yet, on 28 October 1717,<sup>4</sup> the residents of Smithfield found it necessary to protest against the toleration of a show booth within the Rounds and to request its removal; this was duly ordered. A later order of 1735 limiting the fair to three days and prohibiting play booths was more successful as far as the limitation was concerned,<sup>5</sup> and the fair thereafter was usually restricted to three or four days. But the prohibition of play booths lasted only that season, and they were allowed again the following year. Another prohibition was issued in 1744. In July 1750 a petition was presented to the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen, signed by over a hundred graziers, salesmen and inhabitants of Smithfield and the vicinity, protesting against the erection of show booths as an annoyance and disturbance to their work and as 'giving the profligate and abandon'd of both sexes, opportunity to debauch the innocent, defraud the unwary, and endanger the public peace'.<sup>6</sup> Alderman Blackford, who was Lord Mayor, then proclaimed in mid-July his determination to reduce the fair to three days and to invoke the Licensing Act of 1737 to punish the actors as rogues and vagabonds.<sup>7</sup> Other prohibitions were issued in 1762, 1769 and 1776. The last caused a riot with many broken windows.

On 3 December 1760<sup>8</sup> the Court of Common Council decided that Bartholomew and Southwark Fairs tended to vice and

<sup>1</sup> *Year Book*, 1832, p. 984. I have not traced a copy.

<sup>2</sup> *Repertory* 139, p. 233; 'Miscellaneous Papers Relating to Bartholomew and Southwark Fairs'.

<sup>3</sup> *Weekly Journal*, 24 August 1717.

<sup>4</sup> *Repertory* 121, p. 429.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 139, p. 233; E. A. Webb, *The Records of St Bartholomew's Priory* (1921), vol. 1, p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1750), vol. 20, p. 329.

<sup>7</sup> C. Walford, *Fairs, Past and Present*, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> *Journal* 62, p. 180.

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immorality and ought to be suppressed. The committee for letting city lands was asked to enquire into the authority by which they were held and to find out who were the interested people involved. This resulted in the suppression of Southwark Fair, but Bartholomew Fair was a harder nut to crack. By 1776 the city marshals succeeded in enforcing the order against play booths for that year.<sup>1</sup> A further attempt to abolish the fair was made by one Powell in 1798. He was opposed by Goodbehere who maintained that the fair had been held quietly for a number of years without so much as a broken head. A proposal to shorten it to one day was opposed on the grounds that the crowds which flocked from all parts of London would then be dangerous; evidence of the great attraction the fair still exercised.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons why the committee for letting city lands did not recommend its closure were, first, that it could not be suppressed without forfeiting the charter of Charles I, and, secondly, that it would need an Act of Parliament since the city was not the sole owner, a moiety being held by a man named Edwards.<sup>3</sup> It was not until 1855 that the fair finally petered out.

## THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

We may now turn to the strollers and puppets that were to be seen at the fair before the invasion of the players from the theatres at the end of the seventeenth century. Mr Speaight has shown that puppets were given at the fair during the Commonwealth without hindrance.<sup>4</sup> D'Urfey mentions the performance of pieces about patient Grisel, fair Rosamond, and Susanna, eleven years before the Great Fire of 1666.<sup>5</sup> *Patient Grizill* was seen by Pepys when he visited the fair in 1667,<sup>6</sup> and on a second visit he saw Polichinelle, a new character from the *commedia dell'arte*. In 1668 he witnessed 'a ridiculous, obscene little stage-play, called Merry Andrey [Andrew], a foolish thing, but seen

<sup>1</sup> *Annual Register*, 19, p. [176].<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 40, p. 57.<sup>3</sup> *Journal* 78, p. 83. The actual report is in 'Papers Relating to Bartholomew and Southwark Fairs'.<sup>4</sup> G. Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre* (1955), pp. 70–2.<sup>5</sup> *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1719), vol. iv.<sup>6</sup> *Diary*, ed. H. B. Wheatley and Lord Braybrooke (1904): 30 August, 4 September 1667, vii, 8, 98; 29, 31 August, 4 September 1668, viii, 93, 96, 98.

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by everybody', a Polichinelle, and *Bartholomew Fair* 'with puppets'. The *Merry Andrew* was evidently some crude, improvised farce, like that of the mountebank's patter with his fool. It may have been played on a parade in the open air in order to entice customers to a show within. The English and Italian clowns must have been rivals for the crowds' patronage. Of *Bartholomew Fair* Pepys says: 'It is an excellent play; the more I see it, the more I love the wit of it; only the business of abusing Puritans begins to grow stale.' Morley concludes that what Pepys saw was Jonson's comedy with the puppet show in it, and his mention of satire on the Puritans certainly means that he saw more than the puppet show within the play.<sup>1</sup> Whether it was partly performed by living actors or wholly by puppets is not clear; if the former it would be the first post-Restoration play recorded at the fairs, but it seems more likely that 'with puppets' means that the whole show was a puppet one.

The dramatic entertainments of the fair at that time were probably still limited to puppet plays and Merry Andrew farces. By 1676 the former were called 'operas', a term which seems to have been connected with scenic effects. Duffett, in his epilogue to the *Armenian Queen*, says:<sup>2</sup>

While Author Punch does strange machines prepare  
For their new Opera in Barthol'mew Fair.

A Bartholomew Fair account book in the Corporation of London Records Office lists the amounts paid by stall and booth holders, and among them are the names of many showmen. The famous rope dancer, Jacob Hall, paid £2. 6s. for 47 ft. in 1670; £5 for 45 ft. in 1672; £5 for 50 ft. and £5. 8s. for 54 ft. in 1674; £5 for 50 ft. and £4. 16s. for 40 ft. in 1675; and £5 from 1676 to 1680. The puppet showman, Anthony Devoto<sup>3</sup> (spelt in the MS. Devoes or Devoe) had 50 ft. for £6 in 1672, for £5 from 1674 to 1677. John Devoto, who provided props for the court performance of *Calisto* in 1675,<sup>4</sup> paid £5 for 40 ft. in 1672,

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair* (1892), p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> *New Songs* (1676).

<sup>3</sup> Devoto held a licence from the Lord Chamberlain, 11 November 1672 (see A. Nicoll, *History of English Drama* (1955), vol. 1, p. 250).

<sup>4</sup> E. Boswell, *Restoration Court Stage, 1660-1702* (1932), p. 212.

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for 50 ft. from 1674 to 1675, and for unspecified space in 1676. Robert Parker, who visited Stourbridge Fair in 1673,<sup>1</sup> and who had a company of players at Norwich from 1676,<sup>2</sup> was a constant visitor at Bartholomew Fair. In 1672 he hired 25 ft. for £2. 10s.; in 1674, 23 ft. for £2. 5s.; in 1675, 30 ft. for £3; in 1676 he paid £2 and in 1677 the large sum of £6, in 1681–2 only £3. Other showmen who are also found at Stourbridge were Cornelius Saffery, Richard Shore, and possibly John Perin. Saffery had 42 ft. for £5 in 1672; 40 ft. for £4. 8s. in 1675, and paid £4 in 1676–7, only £1 in 1680, £3 in 1681–2. On 22, 27, 29 August 1682 *The Loyal Protestant and True Domestick Intelligence* advertised ‘an Incomparable Entertainment call’d *The Irish Evidence, The Humours of Tiege; or The Mercenary Whore*; with a Variety of Dances at Mrs Saffry’s, a Dutch woman’s booth, over against the Greyhound Inne in West Smithfield’. Mrs Saffry’s first announcement reads ‘By an Approved Company’, her two others ‘By the first New-market Company’. Perhaps this was due to rivalry with Parker who was likewise appearing at the fair and who, in 1680, had called himself ‘Master of New-market Companie of Players’.<sup>3</sup>

Richard Shore, who had shows at Stourbridge in 1679 and 1680, paid £5 for space at Bartholomew Fair in 1681 and £5 and £4 in 1682. The case of John Perin is puzzling. A John Perrin paid £1. 10s. for 8 ft. in 1672, 4s. in 1676 and £1. 10s. in 1680. Why did he have so small a space? It may be that he had only a stall and not a booth, in which case he cannot be identified with the John Perin who was manager of the Nursery and master of the Duke of Monmouth’s company in 1673 and who took his company to Stourbridge in 1676. Lastly, John Coysh (or Cosh) paid £6 in 1682. Coysh had been an under-actor at Drury Lane up to 1681 and was in Norwich in 1683. With the exception of the one advertisement for Mrs Saffry, we do not know what drolls or other entertainments these strolling players gave.

Nearly all the plays known to us until towards the end of the

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in English Theatre History* (Society for Theatre Research, 1952), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> S. Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces, 1660–1765* (1939), pp. 38 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

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century were political squibs. Mrs Saffry's *Irish Evidence* must have had its echoes of the Popish Plot; anti-Catholic also was *The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth* acted in 1680 at both Bartholomew and Southwark Fairs and described at length by Morley.<sup>1</sup> This may also have been one of Saffry's drolls as he was at the fair that year. Morley gives an account of another piece entitled *The Royal Voyage, or The Irish Expedition* which he follows Macaulay in assuming was a fair play.<sup>2</sup> But there is no evidence for this. Performance at the fairs was usually announced on title-pages and the words on this one, 'acted in the years 1689 and 90', simply mean that the events it relates took place then. There were several other political plays at the Revolution of the same kind. These topical pieces, when they were performed, gave opportunity for gagging by the comedians. Thus when Admirals Killigrew and Delaval abandoned convoying the Smyrna merchant ships, they were made the subject of attack in a crude droll at the fair in which 'the office of Chorus was performed by a Jack Pudding who expressed very freely his opinion of the naval administration' until he went too far and caused the whole troupe to be arrested.<sup>3</sup>

Montague Summers lists *The Prince's Ball; or The Conquest of Queen Judith* as acted at the booth next to the Greyhound in 1682,<sup>4</sup> but I have been unable to trace this piece in any advertisement.

A description of the fair entertainments at this time is to be found in a poem entitled 'Bartholomew Fair':<sup>5</sup>

Here's the Whore of *Babylon* the Devil and the Pope,  
 The Girl is just agoing on the Rope  
 Here's *Dives* and *Lazarus* and the World's Creation,  
 Here's the Tall *Dutch* Woman the like's not in the Nation,  
 Here is the Booth where the *High-Dutch* Made is  
 Hear are the Bears that daunce like any Ladies,  
 Tat, tat, tat, tat, tat says the little penny Trumpet  
 Here's *Jacob Hall*, that does so jump it, jump it.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* pp. 197–217.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 233.<sup>3</sup> Macaulay, *The History of England* (1858), vol. v, p. 425.<sup>4</sup> *A Bibliography of the Restoration Drama*, p. 18.<sup>5</sup> *Wit and Drollery* (1682), p. 304. It is also printed as a song, with music by Henry Purcell, in an undated supplement to Playford's *Musical Companion* (1673).

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*The Whore of Babylon, the Devil and the Pope* was a droll acted by Jo Haines in his booth, for which indiscretion he was summoned before Judge Pollixsen and admonished.<sup>1</sup> *Dives and Lazarus* and *The World's Creation* were famous puppet shows. Four years later 'The Second Part of Bartholomew Fair'<sup>2</sup> refers to 'valiant *St George and the Dragon*, a farce' and '*Vienna Besieg'd* a most delicate thing'. The former may have been a puppet play or a droll, the latter sounds like a piece of machinery.

Rope dancing and music booths competed with players and puppets for the custom of the thronging crowds. Morley has given some samples of the kind of entertainments offered at the former;<sup>3</sup> and George Daniel has written of the activities of the latter.<sup>4</sup> There are five large, undated music-booth bills in Harvard University Library Theatre Collection, which are probably those seen by Daniel.<sup>5</sup> They are for: (1) The Kingshead and Mitre Music Booth in Smithfield Rounds kept by Michael Root from the Kings-head at Ratcliff-cross and Elnathan Root from the Mitre in Wapping; (2) Ditto with a slightly different programme; (3) Root's booth at the King Charles Head kept by Powel from Russel Court and Lussingham from the Cyder-Cellar in Covent Garden; (4) The Whelp and Bacon Musick Booth kept by John Sleep from the Rose in Turn-mill-street; (5) The Old Kensington-Court Musick House at the Red-Lyon in Hosier Lane. The booths, it is obvious, were attached to taverns and run by publicans. Their entertainments consisted of singing and dancing. The dances and dancers were often foreign: Indians with castanets, a Spanish saraband with the same, Scaramouches, Irishmen, Italian posture dances, Dutch dancers in costume and the like; or there were trick dancers such as a woman who danced with sixteen glasses on the backs and palms of her hands, or the girl who made play with naked rapiers over various parts of her body. The songs, sometimes dialogues,

<sup>1</sup> A. Aston, *A Brief Supplement to Colley Cibber*, p. 20. Aston dates Haines's appearance as in the first year of James II's reign, i.e. 1685, so he may have used a droll already known.

<sup>2</sup> Playford's *Second Book of the Pleasant Musical Companion* (1686).

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> *Merrie England in the Olden Time* (1842), vol. II, pp. 25 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Professor A. H. Scouten drew my attention to these and copied them for me.



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sometimes catches, frequently accompanied the dances. The 'merry Jest of Bob the Miller, Billey and Joan, Simpleton the Smith'<sup>1</sup> must have contained the kind of material that was later attached as comic underplot to the drolls.

1698–1699

A great change came over the theatrical booths when the actors from the patent theatres saw in them an opportunity of earning money during the closure of the theatres in the long vacation. As the companies were on shares, the actors received no pay when they were not acting, which was often for several weeks.<sup>2</sup> Bartholomew Fair was held from 23 August and Southwark Fair followed on 7 September, so that a scratch company could go on from one to the other and have a month's continuous work up to the time when the limitation to three days was enforced. Thus it was well worth while to erect booths. It was not surprising that the low comedy actors led the way, for their talents would appeal most to crowds accustomed to Merry Andrews and Jack Puddings.

To William Penkethman of Drury Lane must be given the credit of being the first of His Majesty's Servants to exploit the resources of the fair. An advertisement in the *Post-Boy* of 18 August 1698<sup>3</sup> announced that *Jephtha's Rash Vow*, which had been given the previous year at Blake's booth, would that year be at Blake and Penkethman's. The comedian wisely started his fair career as a partner of an experienced entertainer there. Sorbière wrote about this droll and *The Siege of Namur*.<sup>4</sup> The latter is also mentioned in an undated letter of Walter Moyle's: 'We had the satisfaction to see that the Town was taken, and

<sup>1</sup> *Simpleton the Smith* is one of the drolls in F. Kirkman's *The Wits*.

<sup>2</sup> We do not know exactly how long the theatres closed in the first years of the eighteenth century, as advertisements are irregular. In 1701, when booths were probably prohibited, the company at Drury Lane acted three times a week during the fair (*Post Man*, 19–21 August) but in 1702 they did not play after 22 August until after the fair was over (*Daily Courant*, 22 August). In 1704, Drury Lane was shut 24 August–11 September; Lincoln's Inn Fields 17 August–2 October; in 1705, D.L. 28 July–22 September; L.I.F. 14 August–12 September.

<sup>3</sup> Guildhall Library, a collection of cuttings, playbills, etc., MS. 1514.

<sup>4</sup> *A Journey to London in the Year 1698*, p. 27.

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the whole Siege was carry'd on as Sieges generally are, with a great deal more noise than Mischief.<sup>1</sup>

Miller had a droll booth next to Barnes and Appleby's rope dancers in 1699,<sup>2</sup> and in this year other actors followed Penkethman's lead. Ned Ward relates how he went to see a play at Drury Lane but found that the actors had migrated to Bartholomew Fair: 'After Strugling with a *Long Se Saw*, between *Pride* and *Profit*, and having Prudently consider'd the weighty difference between the Honourable Title of one of his *Majesties Servants*, and that of a *Bartholomew-Fair-Player*, a *Vagabond* by the Statute, [they] did at last, with much difficulty, conclude that it was equally reputable to Play the Fool in the *Fair*, for Fifteen or Twenty Shillings a Day as 'twas to Please Fools in the *Play-house*, at so much *per Week*.'<sup>3</sup>

Ward goes on to describe the scene on the parade of a typical droll booth: 'The first Objects . . . that lay within our Observation, were the Quality of the Fair, Strutting round their Balconies in their Tinsy Robes, and Golden Leather Buskins; expressing that Pride in their Buffonery Stateliness, that I could reasonably believe they were as much Elevated with the thoughts of their Fortnights Pageantry, as ever *Alexander* was with the Glories of a new Conquest; look'd with as much contempt from their Slit-Deal-Thrones, upon the admiring Mobility, who gazing in the Dirt at their Ostentatious Heroes, and their most Superbital Doxies who look'd as Awkward and Ungainly in their Gorgeous Accouterments as an Alderman's Lady in her Stiffen-body'd Gown upon a City Festival.' When they had paraded the length of the gallery 'each ascended to a Seat agreeable to the dignity of their Dress'. The conjuror or Merry Andrew entered, blew his nose over the people, who regarded it as a great joke, then picking out one of the actors began 'a Tale of a Tub,<sup>4</sup> which he Illustrates by abundance of Ugly Faces and Mimical Actions, for in that lay the chief of the Comedy, with which the Gazers seem'd most to be affected. Between these two, the Clod-

<sup>1</sup> John Dennis, *Select Works* (1718), vol. II, p. 512. I owe this reference to Mr George Speaight. *The Siege of Namur* had been given at May Fair in 1699, below, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> *London Spy* (August 1699), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Post Man*, 17 August 1699.

<sup>4</sup> A cock and bull story.