

Thomas Master and the *Mensa Lubrica*: a Seventeenth-Century Gaming Poem

In the late 1650s the Oxford press was in intellectual decline, some complained. One modest effort to smarten up the Oxford image was a small 1658 miscellany of Oxonian pieces, headed by a Latin address penned by Thomas Barlow, Bodl

from Autograph manuscripts of several Oxford historical tit-bits were sought out, presumably by Barlow himself, and handed over to the Oxford printers, the Lichfield dynasty, now under the leadership of Leonard Lichfield II, who following the death of his father was appointed with his mother printers to the university on 17 September 1658.¹

The short works gathered together by Barlow were mixed in genre and language but of highly respectable authorship. First came the statesman, scholar, and mathematician Sir

argued that military matters and the study of philosophy might both thrive together in the

by the celebrated Abraham Cowley,
appeared in the various editions of his bestselling (and today almost unread) poems, and it is
chiefly through this English poem that the name of Thomas Master has been spared total
expulsion from the literary firmament.

It is to *Mensa Lubrica* to which I shall devote this note. The
Latin text consists of 63 hexameters; the English presents a slightly longer text of 84 lines in
rhymed couplets. The Latin text is certainly by Master: it had first been published as a single
sheet, perhaps in 1651, but only one copy is recorded as surviving in institutional hands,
among the second Keeper of the Ashmolean, now in the Bodleian
Library.⁴ It was republished again as a single sheet in late 1690 and where the original
poem is said to have been composed in around 1636 but it survives now again in only one
institutional copy, this time among the antiquary Anthony
owned two copies of the poem.⁵ Master, however, was not the author of the English version,
although he was a competent English poet, and no contemporary manuscript of the English
text appears to survive,
the poem on his cat.⁶ Indeed, the final sections of each poem confirm that Master wrote the
command by the anonymous
translator learned Baron

edition, very much wor

supplied a detailed

And as their *Painted Chariots* did divide
This and that Faction; Each one his owne side
Admiring and applauding; Thus there are

Emenso *stadio* præceps ruet, *Alveus* illum