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 titbits 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. 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

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

, and scornes

Forlornes;

He who dares

, and no way dreads

The Gaping Grave

Brink of Ruine, and

doth even Falling stand.

He, He the *Triple Crown* doth win and wear;

And if his Pope-ship all Assaults can bear,

And Sithis Hollow Chaire, so that no Eye

Bewailes his Downfall; Then unto the Skie

His Praise resounds: His Party Pæans sing,

And claps Him with her Whitest Wing.

Thus One, Translator

Chooses to shew his ruder Cobling Hand

Rather then Disobedience: so that here

Nothing but *plain dull Duty* doth appear.

Whie the more

Lookes like the

de,

A Poet that could Gamesters Humours *hit*,

Might on each passage Play, and shovel Wit.

When it had been but Idleness to doe Well.

And here is

Mensa Lubrica Montgom: Illustrissimo Domino Domino Edwa[r]do *Baroni* de Cherbury

Roboreus longo se porrigit æquor Campus,

Emenso stadio præceps ruet, Alveus illum