

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, Bodley's Librarian since 1652 and from 1658 the Provost of Queen's. 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 Henry Savile's Oxford oration delivered in the presence of Elizabeth I in 1592; in it, Savile argued that military matters and the study of philosophy might both thrive together in the state; and that judicial astrology ought to be banished from the well-ordered city.² There followed a letter from the university to Sir Thomas Bodley when in his last sickness; some verse composed by the senior academician and Provost of Queen's before Barlow, Gerard Langbaine, upon the occasion of the Act in 1651; and then an odd little poem dedicated to the philosopher Lord Herbert of Cherbury on the 'Mensa Lubrica' or 'Slippery Table', given first in Latin and then in an English translation. Finally, Barlow printed a Greek poem on Christ's Passion, together with Latin and English versions. These may well be *minutiae*, as Barlow concedes, but little things are not to be despised, he argues in his preface, especially when written by great men – in this case, Henry Savile, the university itself, and the poet of both games and the Passion, one Thomas Master.

Thomas Master on how to play shove-ha'penny does not strike one as weighty fare, but evidently even the rather dour old theologian and librarian Barlow found it an admirable piece. Now Master of the slippery table is the same Thomas Master we have encountered in these notes before, he who wrote verses on the cat who bit through his lute-strings (Issue 1).³ He was employed by Herbert of Cherbury in the 1630s as a scribe, and his Latin poem on the 'Slippery Table' was evidently written to amuse his employer; the third word of his title is 'Montgom.' i.e. 'Montgomeriae', or Montgomery Castle, Cherbury's seat. Master's Greek verse on the Passion (dated 19 April 1633 by Master) was of course more serious stuff. Its Latin paraphrase, as Barlow's contents page states, was written by Henry James, quondam fellow of Merton College; and the English version, in a notable compliment to Master, was

¹ Henry Savile *et al.*, *Oratio coram Regina Elizabetha Oxoniae habita, aliaque doctiss[imorum] virorum opellae posthumae* (Oxford: Lichfield, 1658). Falconer Madan, *Oxford Books*, vol. 2, no. 2369, preface ascribed to Barlow on the authority of Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, vol. 2, col. 314 and also his *Life and Times*, vol. 2, p. 239; see *ODNB* on the Lichfields. It collates 4^o: [A]-E⁴ F², F2 being blank. It is fairly common in Oxford, there being five in the Bodleian today (two in Arts, so near-contemporary accessions; the others are from the Wallis books in the Savilian Library, Anthony Wood's library, and the topographical bequest of Roger Gough), and at least six colleges hold the title in often more than one copy (SOLO; ESTC).

² This text was edited from MS Bodl. 3516, as Madan noted.

³ Since my first note, I have chanced across a little more concerning Master. Here is an anecdote involving Ben Jonson: 'Ben Johnson having read a translation of a Copy of his verses made by Mr Masters of N: College, Ingeniously replied. B: J; I would haue said so if I could.' (MS Rawl. B 158, p. 179, from the anecdotes of an anonymous but probably Roman Catholic observer of the time). Master also had a hand in the donation of one of Herbert's own books to the college library. In the Benefactors Book (p. 81) it is recorded that Cherbury gave his own *De veritate* in 1639. The college owns two copies of the work presented, one the Latin edition of 1633, the other the French edition of 1639, the year of presentation. Though handsomely bound, the former is unmarked; whereas the latter is inscribed 'Illustrissimus Author donavit', and underneath 'Thomae Master 1639', the smoking gun that Master was indeed the college connection, and that although inscribed in Latin in the register, the French translation is the one meant.

by the celebrated Abraham Cowley, ‘prince of the poets of this age’. Cowley’s text thereafter 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 Master’s poem on the *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, Edward Lhuyd’s papers 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 Wood’s books; Wood originally 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, as opposed to manuscripts of Master’s other English verse, especially the poem on his cat.⁶ Indeed, the final sections of each poem confirm that Master wrote the Latin but not the English, which was done at Barlow’s command by the anonymous translator. The Latin concludes with a direct address to the ‘Docte Baro’ or ‘learned Baron’ i.e. Cherbury; whereas the English version ends by disavowing any poetic competence and insisting that the translation has been written by ‘One, *Translator* turn’d at your Command’. It seems very likely, then, that some young student of Queen’s was pressed into service by Barlow. We do not know who this young man was, but plausible candidates include the (otherwise devotional) poet Sir James Chamberlayne, who matriculated at Queen’s in 1657; the translator Henry Denton (matr. 1653, becoming a fellow in 1660); the versatile scholar and orientalist Thomas ‘Tograi’ Smith (matr. 1657); or perhaps the historian and political theorist James Tyrell (matr. 1657). It would be especially fine if the translation were the work of the young Thomas Hyde, the great orientalist who would in turn become Bodley’s librarian in 1665; he after all had migrated to Queen’s in 1654, taking his M.A. in 1659, and although English poetry was not Hyde’s poison, he did in later life become a historian of board-games. I wonder whether his later fascination with all kinds of board games, witnessed chiefly by his *De ludis orientalibus* of 1694, might not have received its first prompt from Barlow back in the late 1650s? But this is all speculation.

‘Shovel Board’ appears to have been a very popular game from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, and was played on the continent too. It appears to have been a full-sized game, as it were, played (often for serious sums) with paddles and weighted pucks – Henry VIII played this version – but a table-top version using a coin or a counter soon developed, and both forms are still played today, the latter known now as shove ha’penny, slype groat, and slide-thrift. It is still played in pubs. As for the table-top version as it was played in the early-modern period, a diagram of the board and detailed instructions for how to play were furnished by Master’s younger contemporary, the Cambridge scholar and naturalist Francis Willughby (1635-72). Willughby left in manuscript at his death an extremely interesting dictionary of games, which has only very recently been edited and published in a splendid

⁴ Madan, no. 2154. The surviving copy Ashm. 1818(69b) is now frayed at the edge where the year of publication would be, but a later hand has added ‘1651’, presumably to preserve the original reading as it began to disappear. Despite one emended slip (‘Ravo’ in the earlier is corrected to ‘Ravco’ in the later) the Barlow text may well have been set from the 1651 printed broadside, and not a manuscript, as the texts are otherwise at least lexically identical.

⁵ Wood 416(5) and see Kiessling, *Library of Anthony Wood*, nos. 4408, 4409. Wood has annotated the title-page, where the English name of the game is given as ‘Shovel-Board’, with ‘published againe by Dr R. Bathurst in the month of Dec. 1690’.

⁶ See the Union First Line Index of English Verse at <http://firstlines.folger.edu/>

edition, very much worth the investment. For ‘Shovel Board’ Willughby supplied a detailed diagram showing the table and its various zones. ‘The Shovel Board must be a very smooth table’, he recommended, and the coins ‘either shillings, halfcrownes or round brasse or silver peices made of purpose, very smooth of one side, and with a little edge rising quite round of the other side. The longer the table is the better.’ At the far end of the table is a box to catch any coins that are cast so hard that they slide off the far end. To play the game,

The plaiers stand at [one] end, and have everie one 2 peices which they hold round with all their fingers and thumbes, almost close to the table & parallel exactly to the horizon, and they deliver them as smoothly as they can, that they may glide along the table. They play by turns as at Boules, first one delivering a peice & then his opposite another. The peice that is nearest the end wins ...

Scoring is determined by various lines drawn across the board. If the counter fails to make it even to the first line, it is a ‘Hog’ and scores nothing. The best score is if the coin hangs off the far end without falling; this scores three (a ‘trea’ or ‘Looker’, because it looks over the edge). A piece behind the last line but not over the edge is called a ‘Duce’ (signs of French origin, like the ‘deuce’ of tennis, said to derive from a clock-face? – or perhaps just *deux* (like ‘trea’ = *trois*) from the numbers) and scores two. There can be guile in the game, as well-placed coins can be knocked out of position by an opponent: ‘When one side has gotten a trea, duce or good cast, the other side aimes at it & strives to knock it off.’⁷ These details, especially on the ‘hog’ and the tray at the far end, will elucidate details in the following poem.

In the mid-1990s in college I can remember a craze for penny football, played with coins on the bar tables, but which is not really like shove ha’penny, as the final shot was a rather gutsy, violent move. But shovel-board, especially in its ‘roquet’ tactic, is rather like croquet, which is still widely played by the students on the east lawn of the New Quad; I wonder if they realise that the south-east garden off the main lawns was originally a bowling green, or is that ‘bowlin green’ ... ? See elsewhere in this edition of *New College Notes* ...

III.

Here is Master’s poem, in its anonymous English translation:

The Shovel-Board Table Turn’d

The rough Oak *Plain’d, Polish’d, & Glaz’d* all’ore,
And Table like with Antick Pillars bore
The keep the *Campaigne* steddie, that it might
Be *Levell* as the *Rule* is to the Sight,
Here, when to mitigate Severer Care,
Some *In-doore* Recreation must repaire
The Wasted Spirits; Those who have *Dextr’ous* Skill
Let flie their *Coin like Silver*, which does *trill*
In Various order’d Courses, and create
Contentions; Such, as when they celebrate
Bacchus his *Feasts* the *Sacrificing* Year;
You’d think the *Romane Circus* now was here:

⁷ All these descriptions are from *Francis Willughby’s Book of Games: A Seventeenth-Century Treatise on Sports, Games and Pastimes*, ed. David Cram, Jeffrey L. Forgeng and Dorothy Johnston (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 212-13.

And as their *Painted Chariots* did divide
This and that Faction; Each one his owne side
Admiring and applauding; Thus there are
Small Plates of differing Stamps which in this Warre
Make differing Parties: Hence, this done, a shout
Proclaimes the Battle, th'*Echoing Hall* throughout.
And though there's *Partiality* in each vote,
Yet there's no Brawling, no harsh sounding Note.

He who begins the strife, does first compose
His Fingers like a Purses mouth, which showes
A shilling in the Lips. And then the *Length*
Being exactly weigh'd (Not with bruit strength)
But with advised wary force, His Hand
Shootes the *Flat Bullets* forth; It doth not stand
With Art to use much Violence; for so
They slip aside the *Measur'd Race*, or goe
Into the *Swallowing Pit*, which waites upon
Excessive Rashnesse, as the Grave ha's done
On each Extream Disease; And if once there,
There's no Returne, no more than from the *Biere*.
There every Piece must Suffer the like fate,
Be't *Clown* or *Gentleman*, be't *Lead* or *Plate*.
But if the Fear of this should make him throw
Short of the *mark* (as some will *Crab-like* goe
Lest they should run too faree) Then there is past
Censure and shame on the *Abortive Cast*.
Hee's Laugh'd at, as a *Racer* in a Bogge;
The *Lead* once call'd a *Pig*, is now turn'd *Hogge*.

There is a *Line* which must be *Cut* before
He can *Arrive* at the desired *shore*.
Nor is't enough barely to come to *Land*,
He *Cowardly Invades* that sticks i'th'*Sand*,
And dares not *Enter Castles*; He alone
Deserves Applause and Glory, who is gone
Boldly to *Charge the Front*, conceiving still
Not to be Best is but the same with *Ill*.

Him, him the frighted Enemies *Envie*,
Casting a *side-long* many a spitefull Eye,
While they all Big with Emulation swell,
And strive his *Towring Valour* to Excell.

Mean while his *Faithfull Seconds* (with th'Expence
Of what themselves might *Gain*) *Keep, Barr & Fence*
His meritorious Fame; Tis some Renown
When one tis got, thus to Preserve the Crown.

And now the *Fight* being *Hot*, even in this *Warre*,
Fortune, Art, Virtue, Fraud, all mingled are;
Especially, when One with skillfull Care
Has *Stealingly crept up* into the *Spheare*
Where *Double Honour dwells*: who did begin
Single, by this brace Act becomes a *Twin*.

But He, whose *Virtue's i'th'Extreame*, and scornes
To be'mongst any souldiers but *Forlornes*;
He who dares *Hang'ore Death*, and no way dreads
The *Gaping Grave*, but with pois'd Valour Beds
Himself i'th'very *Brink of Ruine*, and
Dang'rously High 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 *Vict'ry* claps Him with her *Whitest Wing*.

Thus One, *Translator* turn'd at your Command
Chooses to shew his ruder *Cobling Hand*
Rather then *Disobedience*: so that here
Nothing but *plain dull Duty* doth appear.
Whie the more *Noble Latin's Indress'd Pride*
Lookes like the *Table turn'd on the wrong side*,
A Poet that could Gamesters Humours *hit*,
Might on each passage *Play*, and *shovel Wit*.

But here for me 'tis Glory *Not t'Excell*,
When it had been but Idleness to doe Well.

And here is Master's original Latin text, taken from the same edition:

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

Roboreus longo se porrigit æquor *Campus*,
Adsimilis *Mensæ*, Crebro *Tibicine* fultus,
Deviet à justæ nè quâ *Libramine* normæ:
Hunc (ubi sepositis placuerunt otia curis,
Et coière, suæ quibus est fiducia dextræ)
Pervolitant specie nummorum, *argentea* Turba,
Orbiculi, & vario celebrant certamina cursu.
Romani credas spatium te cernere *Circi*;
Aut stadium *Elei*, lustrò redeunte, *Tonantis*.
Utque *Coloratas* mirata est *Roma Quadrigas*,
Et *Prasino*, *Venetóque* suo sua factio plausit:
Sic & nos pictæ studiæ in contraria scindunt
Laminulæ, & teretis facies non una *Metalli*.
Hinc favor, & *Partes* strepitu cava personat *Aula*.
Ira procul male suada, & Rauco gutture Rixa.

At *Tu*, qui primo ordiris certamine *Mison*,
Compressum extremis digitis, & pollice summo,
Deinde ita libratum tantundem ut distet ubique
A facie *Tabulæ*, vi prorsum impellito *Discum*,
Vi modicâ, namque hîc non bruto robore, quantùm
Consiliis opus est. *Leges* ante omnia disce,
Et servare *Modum*. Nam si violentior ibit,

Emenso *stadio* præceps ruet, *Alveus* illum
Excipit extremæ commissus margine *Mensæ*,
Sandapilæ similis, duroque immitior *Orco*.
Unde datur reditus nulli, sors omnibus una;
Seu plumbi ignavi Massa est, seu divitis *Auri*.
Sed neque si pœnam meruit temeraria *Virtus*,
Segnities placeat, dextram comitatur inertem
Et pudor, & risus, cassique infamia jactûs.

Est quæ transversam distinguit *Linea* mensam,
Hanc superare tibi sit cura, nec ardua res est.
Namque avido distat de quo modò diximus alveo,
Quantùm bis *Cubitus*, pes ter repetitus, adæquat.

Nec septum hoc superasse sat est, contemnitur hostis
Qui timent, & tutâ pavidus subsistit *arenâ*.
Pergendum porrò; ille meis fervente *Duello*
Militet auspicijs, veré ille *Argenteus orbis*,
Et dignum splendore suo, qui *Carcere* pernix
Evolat, & (cursum accendens tenui stridore)
Lineolam post se linquit, neque limine *Campi*
Contentus, summâ gaudet consistere *Metâ*.
Illum hostes oculo obliquo videre, graduque
Deijcere, & merito certant spoliare *Triumpho*:
Sed socii fido circumstant agmine, *Terga*
Claudentes, & utrumque latus, vitamque sodali
Morte suâ redimunt. Toto cum tinnula *Campo*
Bella sonant; *Virtus, Dolus, Ars, Sors*, omnia miscent.
Præcipuè quando emissus Moderamine certo
Orbiculus, spatio summo sese insinuavit,
Distat ab extremâ bino quod *Pollice, Mensâ*;
Huic geminum decus, hic *Miles duplicarius* esto.
At si quis multùm *Virtuti* fisis, & arti,
Fatalem *Alveolum* haud metuit, *Tabulæque* supremæ
Hæsit, & *eminulus* subjectum despicit *Orcum*,
Intrepido vultu vestigia pendula librans;
Huic summum est pretium, Triplici hic præfulget honore:
Qui si oppugnatus, nusquam statione recessit,
Servavitque locum, neque deflevêre cadentem
Mœrentes socii, plausu super *æthera* tollunt.
Stat juxta, & *niveis Victoria* concrepat *alis*.
Hos ego nec *Manibus* doctus, neque ludere *Musâ*
Docte *Baro* expressi te fretus *Apolline Versus*.

D. C. T.

T. M.

William Poole
Fellow Librarian