

## The First Printed Description of Italian Draughts

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In works of general literature some quotations have been devoted to Italian draughts, starting from the end of the 16th century. They are useful for letting us know when and where the game was played, but they don't provide any detailed information about the rules of the game, which we know from manuscripts and from a book written by the Frenchman Pierre Mallet, printed in 1668. The first account of Italian draughts, with some details about the game itself, may be found in a book printed in Italy in 1786, and which is little known in my country. See also *Damasport*, 1988, no. 3, page 3.

This book consists of poems, written by Gaetano Buganza, and it is compiled as a Latin exercise. We have a lot of similar works remaining. However, this work is more interesting than most of these, since the contents are explicitly dealing with "subjects never before treated in Latin". The edition of the poems was not attended by the author himself. Apparently, for him the work was only a language exercise, meant to obtain more attention from his students, Florentine young noblemen. As a Jesuit teacher in the Collegio dei Nobili, Buganza had come to Florence from Mantua, where he was born in 1732 and where he was to come back in 1786, after the suppression of the Jesuit order in 1773.

Some years later, one of his students, only indicated as A.R., considered the Latin poems worth publishing. The book *Poesie latine dell'Abate Gaetano Buganza Mantovano*, Pagani, Firenze 1786, is well edited, with notes and with engravings by Fedi. This already shows that the contents were considered of a certain value. Moreover, the book was later reprinted by Vestri, Prato 1830, without any dedication and engravings. Thus, the contents of the book were considered in itself well worth publishing again.

To find truly original subjects might appear a far from easy task at the time, since the use of Latin in general literature was already about two thousand years old. However, poets tend to treat once and again traditional literary subjects. Buganza simply turned to observe what was

happening inside the homes and along the streets of Florence, in order to fulfil his aim of dealing with original subjects.

Thus we have the description of many popular habits, in more detail than in other sources of the time. Some typical subjects are the Florentine tarot game of “minchiate”, the building of birdcages, milk, coffee, the Christmas Crib, traditional festivals of the town and pastimes of young people. The last subject is divided into interior and outside games and related to the four seasons. The poetic style changes and pieces suitable for the stage can be found together with other kinds of compositions. We are only interested here in the passage concerning draughts, described among the spring interior games. It is written in elegiac couplets, as follows:

Sed satis oh stetimus: cur non requiescimus, inquam,  
 Ludis, quos molli ludere sede licet?  
 Corripimus tabularn in dicto, cui Nobile Nomen;  
 Nomen, quo fato nescio, foemineum.  
 Tessellis tabulam alternis albamque, nigramque  
 In quadrum, ad belli castra parata vices.  
 Exiguus buxi pugnatur utrinque patellis,  
 Quas fecit duplex agmina bina color.  
 Hinc albae totidem, hinc totidem stant ordine nigrae,  
 Quaeque hosti obversa fronte timenda suo.  
 Certandi hae leges: obliquo tromite cunctae  
 Procedant, hostis circumeantque latus.  
 Vicit, si qua, hostis lateri adstans, desuper hostem  
 Cum transit, gressum mox ubi figat, habet.  
 Vicit deprensam abducens ex lege patellam,  
 Audaci et penetrans castra inimica pede.  
 Ni faciat; victrix heu castris cedere victa  
 Cogitur. Hanc lusor sibilat ore super.  
 At patina adversi externo si limite campi  
 Sistat; lusori gloria magna duci est:  
 Turn sociam siquidem redimens ex hoste patellam  
 It gravis; et victrix io triumphe canit.  
 Ceu galea sociae impositae se pondere munit,  
 Quaque lubet dominos fertque, refertque pedes.  
 Heu fugite exiles patinae, non viribus aequis;  
 Et tutum cunei more tenete latus.  
 Cruribus it longis campo magna illa, micatque  
 Saltibus, Ut multas mors premere una queat.  
 Heu fugite, aut notam tangentes vos quoque metarn,  
 Ite pares, meritis ite ferae in galeis.  
 Turn certare animis aequo sub Marte licebit,

Tumque cadet vestra forte tyranna manu.  
 Quidquid erit tabula sic ludimus, atque patellis,  
 Defessos ludi dum novus urget amor.

We already stood more than enough; why don't we rest and play while sitting in a comfortable armchair?

Let us at once take the board set, which has a noble name, a female name, due to a reason I don't know.

The white and black board, due to chequered squares, is as a camp ready for the battle. Both sides fight with thin slabs of box-wood which the two colours have transformed into two ranks.

In equal number and in order here stand the white, there the black ones, each in front of its dangerous enemy.

The rules of fighting are: all of them must proceed along the diagonals and surround the enemy flank.

It is gained if one near the flank of the enemy, jumping over it, has a square into which to come.

It is gained by carrying out according the rule the captured slab and boldly entering the enemy field.

If it doesn't, the winner has to leave the field as a loser. The player blows with his mouth over the piece.

But when a slab stands on the farthest edge of the enemy field, it brings great glory to the leader player.

Then if it redeems a fellow slab from the enemy it goes heavy and sings victory hymns. As a helmet it takes the weight of the added fellow and marches here and there as the masters like.

Ho! run away thin slabs with uneven power, and in wedge-shape hold sure the edge.

With long legs it goes through the field and flashes jumping so that a same death may oppress many slabs.

Ho! run away, or you too after touching the known goal go as its equal, go boldly with the deserved helmet.

Then it will be possible to fight evenly matched and then the tyrant will fall under your strong hand.

However that may be, let us thus play with board and slabs, until a new desire seizes us, already bored with the game.

The short poem describes a typical handling of the game. Unfortunately for us, it is not intended to explain the essential rules of the game

to somebody unacquainted with it. Nevertheless, some useful indications can be derived from the text about some details of the game. Let us consider three points:

1– Huffing was usual. Taking was already compulsory so that any piece not behaving accordingly is removed from the game.

2 – A strategic advice is offered to men fighting against a king: to maintain a wedge-shaped formation along the edge of the board.

3 – The possibility exists that the king had a long jump move, as in Spanish draughts, since the king is explicitly described as marching on long legs.

As for the last indication, however, we don't know from any other source of a long jumping king in Italian draughts. Thus, the expression may be simply attributed to some poetical emphasis in describing the advantages of a king over a man. It suffices to remind that in Italian draughts a king cannot be taken by common men.

In any case, in order to attract the author's attention, the game of draughts must have been largely spread in Florence at the time. It is thus not surprising if the first printed treatises on Italian draughts – dating about sixty years later and the first ones on a long list of specific manuals – will come from the same provenance.