

## INTRODUCTION



‘BETWEEN THE PAWS OF A SPHINX’:  
THE CONTEXTS OF THOMAS BROWNE

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Writing in 1906, Lytton Strachey suggested contexts in which the works of Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682) might best be read. ‘One could read him floating down the Euphrates, or past the shores of Arabia’, he wrote, ‘and it would be pleasant to open the *Vulgar Errors* in Constantinople, or to get by heart a chapter of the *Christian Morals* between the paws of a Sphinx’.<sup>1</sup> Nestling between the Sphinx’s paws may once have seemed an appropriately enigmatic setting in which to contemplate prose which, as Virginia Woolf observed, brought ‘the remote and incongruous astonishingly together’.<sup>2</sup> It brings into question, however, the relationship between Browne’s writings and his own time and place. The history of twentieth-century scholarship on Browne might be described as his slow extraction from a comfortable incumbency between the paws of the Sphinx.<sup>3</sup> For Woolf, Strachey and their contemporaries, Browne was a lovable curiosity; the affection for his eccentricity is plain in Woolf’s famous dictum that ‘[f]ew people love the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, but those who do are of the salt of the earth’.<sup>4</sup> The old orthodoxy in Browne scholarship held, meanwhile, that he was a man without context. Divorced from his time, unmarked by the civil strife through which he lived, he penned his antiquarian works of sesquipedalian quaintness in the seclusion of his Norwich study, interrupted only by the importunities of uroscopy and the medical complaints of persons from Norfolk who would not

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<sup>1</sup> Strachey L., “Sir Thomas Browne”, in *Books and Characters French and English* (London: 1924) 27–38, here 38. The article was first published as a review of Edmund Gosse’s *Sir Thomas Browne* in 1906.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf V., “Sir Thomas Browne”, in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. A. McNeillie, 4 vols (London: 1988) 3.368–372, here 370. The essay was originally published as a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1923.

<sup>3</sup> What follows is a necessarily partial account of the fortunes of Browne in the twentieth century. For fuller details see the bibliography gathered at the close of this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf V., “Sir Thomas Browne” 368.

leave his hours of composition unmolested. As Philip Major points out in his essay in this volume, critics in this vein have often suggested that Browne deliberately cultivated detachment from his context. Edmund Gosse claimed there was an ‘absence of almost all allusion to the Civil War’ in Browne’s writings;<sup>5</sup> half a century later, Joan Bennett commented that ‘there is nothing in his published writings to remind us of the Civil War’.<sup>6</sup> Even in 1982 it was possible to write that Browne ‘represents a sensibility that chooses not to relate itself to the turbulence of the age’.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, much of the best twentieth-century work on Browne focussed on classifying and analysing the sonorities of his style.<sup>8</sup>

The latter part of the century saw a change of emphasis. In Stanley Fish’s influential essay “The Bad Physician”, the valorization of the old orthodoxy – which delighted in the ‘warmth of Browne’s personality’ which ‘shone through’ his work<sup>9</sup> – was turned on its head.<sup>10</sup> Browne’s playfulness in *Religio Medici* was taken to be irresponsible rather than charming; his avoidance of controversy or context not conciliatory and eirenic, but cynically evasive. Rather than the good doctor of Norwich, Browne became the “bad physician” in Fish’s schema of seventeenth-century literary affect. Subsequent critics, more sympathetic to Browne, have called Fish’s refusal to enjoy Browne’s ingenuities puritanical.<sup>11</sup> It was Puritanism of another sort which dominated in an article that fundamentally changed the old orthodoxy on *Religio Medici* in particular and on Browne’s works in general. Michael Wilding’s “*Religio Medici* in the English Civil War”, first published in 1982, pointed out that apparent abstention and retirement from politics is in itself political,

<sup>5</sup> Gosse E., *Sir Thomas Browne* (London: 1905) 102.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett J., *Sir Thomas Browne: A Man of Achievement in Literature* (Cambridge: 1962) 1.

<sup>7</sup> Jefferson D.W., “‘Pitch beyond Ubiquity’: Thought and Style in Sir Thomas Browne”, in Patrides C.A. (ed.), *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne: The Ann Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays* (Columbia, MO and London: 1982) 143–154, here 154.

<sup>8</sup> The doyen of stylistic criticism was Morris Croll; see Croll M., *Style, Rhetoric and Rhythm* (Princeton, NJ: 1966). For a useful summary of the Croll tradition, see Havenstein D., *Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne: Religio Medici and Its Imitations* (Oxford: 1999) 88–103.

<sup>9</sup> Roston M., “The ‘Doubting’ Thomas”, in Patrides C.A. (ed.), *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne* 69–80, here 69.

<sup>10</sup> Fish S., “The Bad Physician: The Case of Sir Thomas Browne”, in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, CA: 1972) 353–373.

<sup>11</sup> See Warnke F., “A Hook for Amphibium: Some Reflections on Fish” in Patrides C.A. (ed.), *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne* 49–59; see also Huebert R., “The Private Opinions of Sir Thomas Browne”, *Studies in English Literature* 45 (2005) 117–134.

and particularly so in the charged environment of Civil War England. He identified various tropes of Royalism in the changes Browne made to *Religio Medici* in 1643.<sup>12</sup> Since then, a steady succession of critics has combed Browne's works for traces of Royalist sympathies, survivalist tropes, and monarchical imagery. The commitments, or deliberate avoidance of them, of *Religio Medici*, have been successively analysed;<sup>13</sup> the relationship of *Urne-Buriall* to the politics of ritual under the Commonwealth and Protectorate has been expertly explored;<sup>14</sup> submerged significances latent but legible in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* have been exposed.<sup>15</sup>

This fertile line of inquiry continues to bear fruit. Several essays in this volume contribute to it, offering a new reading of the subtexts of *Urne-Buriall*, a first reading of *Repertorium* in the light of confessional nostalgia and the rebuilding of the Church of England at the Restoration, an exposure of the politics of play and fecundity in *Garden of Cyrus*, and of the political significance of Browne's attitude to melancholy.<sup>16</sup> The more reactive contextualization of the new orthodoxy, however, necessary as it has been, has sometimes been too keen to taxonomize Browne precisely within the political and intellectual discourses of his day.<sup>17</sup> Pigeonholing Browne has until recently been a preoccupation, and asking '[i]n what category should Browne be placed?' has elicited a bewilderingly broad and sometimes contradictory range of answers.<sup>18</sup> Given his undeniable interest in the observation of nature, conducting experiments, and advances in medical and botanical knowledge,

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<sup>12</sup> Wilding M., "Religio Medici in the English Civil War" in Patrides C.A. (ed.), *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne* 100–114. This was reprinted as a chapter in Wilding M., *Dragon's Teeth: Literature in the English Revolution* (Oxford: 1985) 89–113.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Post J., "Browne's Revision of *Religio Medici*", *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985) 145–163; Berensmeyer I., "Rhetoric, Religion and Politics in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*", *Studies in English Literature* 46 (2006) 113–132.

<sup>14</sup> Guibbory A., "'A rationall of old Rites': Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Buriall* and the Conflict over Ceremony", *The Yearbook of English Studies* 21 (1991) 229–241.

<sup>15</sup> Killeen K., *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern Culture: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Aldershot: forthcoming 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See the essays by Philip Major, Kevin Killeen, Claire Preston and Karen Edwards in this volume.

<sup>17</sup> The best earlier collections focussing on Browne's intellectual contexts, which mostly avoid this categorizing drive, are Cawley R.R. – Yost G. (eds.), *Studies in Sir Thomas Browne* (Eugene, OR: 1965), and Schoeck R.J. (ed.), *Sir Thomas Browne and the Republic of Letters. English Language Notes* 19 (1982).

<sup>18</sup> The quotation is from Hall M.B., "Thomas Browne Naturalist" in Patrides C.A. (ed.), *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne* 178–187, here 179, but the question implicitly underlies much criticism.

Browne has been portrayed as naturalist, scientist, Ancient, Modern, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonist, both ‘thoroughly Baconian’ and having ‘little or no interest’ in Bacon.<sup>19</sup>

Recent work on Browne has suggested that our account of Browne’s contexts must be more complicated and nuanced, reflecting a recent resurgence of interest in Browne spurred by the quatercentenary of his birth, and the publication of Claire Preston’s *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science*, both in 2005.<sup>20</sup> The renewed attention to Browne has opened up a range of new contexts in which to consider him: both those from which he wrote, and those in which he was read. Preston’s association of Browne with the discourses of early modern civility and intellectual curiosity has presented a much more textured sense of the communities of like-minded gentlemen who corresponded with him and for whom he often wrote. Contrary to Strachey’s statement that ‘[t]he life of Sir Thomas Browne does not afford much scope for the biographer’, the discoveries of recent scholarship encourage hope that more suggestive detail might yet be uncovered, potentially resolving vexed questions about Browne’s life.<sup>21</sup> Recent discoveries on the readers of *Religio Medici* in manuscript suggest a more complicated political picture for the publication of that work than has been thought.<sup>22</sup> And the works assembled here suggest a number of new ways of reading and thinking about Browne’s relationship to his age: whether by giving a close account of the circumstances in which he lived; or examining his less studied works, his manuscripts, or his revision practices in successive editions of his published writings; or by setting his familiar works – *Religio Medici*, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, *Urne-Buriall (Hydriotaphia)*, *The Garden*

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<sup>19</sup> The last verdicts are from Walters F.D., “A Strategy for Writing the *Impossibilium: Aporia* in Sir Thomas Browne’s *The Garden of Cyrus*”, *Prose Studies* 18 (1995) 19–35, here 19; Hall M.B., “Thomas Browne Naturalist” 185.

<sup>20</sup> Preston C., *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science* (Cambridge: 2005). Browne’s quatercentenary was marked by a conference, “Four Centuries of Thomas Browne”, held at the University of Leiden from 26–28 October 2005, from which some of the essays gathered here derive.

<sup>21</sup> Strachey L., “Sir Thomas Browne” 27. Reid Barbour, currently engaged on an intellectual biography of Browne, recently discovered the subject of Browne’s doctoral dissertation: see Barbour R., “The Topic of Sir Thomas Browne’s Dissertation”, *Notes & Queries* 54 (2007) 38–39, and his essay in this volume. Biographies to date include Finch J., *Sir Thomas Browne: a Doctor’s Life of Science and Faith* (New York: 1950) and Huntley F.L., *Sir Thomas Browne: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Ann Arbor, MI: 1962). The best and most suggestive account of Browne’s life is Robin Robbins’s *ODNB* article.

<sup>22</sup> See Murphy K., “‘A man of excellent parts’: The Manuscript Readers of Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici*”, *Times Literary Supplement* 5492 (4 July 2008) 14–15.

of *Cyrus* – in unfamiliar or previously unconsidered contexts; or by considering his translators and readers.<sup>23</sup>

This volume moves from biographical studies of the environments in which Browne lived (part I), through the circumstances and procedures of the composition of his works (part II), through the intellectual (part III) and political (part IV) contexts of those works themselves, and finally to the contexts in which those works were read (part V). The first section of this volume presents work which deepens our understanding of Browne's stay in Leiden. Reid Barbour explores the context in which Browne found himself when he matriculated at Leiden University in 1633, detailing the medical, theological and moral ethos of Leiden and its university. He also elaborates on his recent discovery that the topic of Browne's doctoral thesis was smallpox. Harm Beukers asks why Browne would have chosen Leiden for his doctoral examination, focussing on the medical faculty at Leiden University, the curriculum and criteria to which Browne would have been expected to conform, and relating Browne's experiences to the typical course of study of British students in Leiden. In part II, Antonia Moon investigates the evidence for Browne's reading and writing contained in unpublished notebooks in the British Library, and suggestively compares Browne's strategies with other keepers of notebooks and commonplace books. Working from revisions to *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in its six editions from 1646 to 1672, Hugh Adlington shows Browne's blue pencil at work, and links his writing on divination to the literary intuition of philological correction.

The subsequent two sections explore new ways of reading individual works by Browne, placing him in relation to the political and intellectual contexts of his time. Brent Nelson suggests a generic parallel for *Urne-Buriall* in works of occasional meditation, and reads that work's emphasis on ignorance and oblivion as a devotionally inflected trope. Siobhán Collins and Louise Denmead explore the originality of the chapters devoted to blackness in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, and the intertwining of discourses of race, alchemy and the microcosmic view of the human body. Turning to the fertile ground of Browne's relationship to horticultural treatises, Claire Preston explores the relationship between Browne's depiction of nature and contemporary ideas of the Fall, and

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<sup>23</sup> See also the essays collected in Barbour R. – Preston C. (eds.), *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed* (Oxford: 2008).

the human capacity to work towards perfecting the fallen world. In a fresh reading of the *The Garden of Cyrus*, Preston shows how its rhetorical profusion is inflected by the political problems of games and maying in the mid-seventeenth century.

This political dimension is continued in the fourth section of this volume. Kevin Killeen's essay examines *Repertorium*, one of Browne's lesser known works: an architectural and antiquarian tour of Norwich Cathedral which Killeen situates in the context of Restoration religion and politics. In a complementary discussion, Philip Major continues the excellent work of recent decades on the submerged political imagery of Browne's writings by tracing Royalist tropes in *Repertorium* and *Urne-Buriall*, linking Browne to his contemporaries John Whitefoot (1610–1699) and Henry Vaughan (1621–1695). Karen Edwards, returning to the importance of learned medicine for interpretation of Browne's texts, sets his attitude to melancholy against the context of seventeenth-century discourses on the humours and passions, and suggests the relevance of this to the political turmoil of the mid-century.

The final section of this collection examines the contexts of Browne's works in the hands of readers. Mary-Ann Lund examines the relationship between the two parts of the title of *Religio Medici*: how does Browne's writing explore the role of the spiritual physician, and the pious doctor? Her essay presents new material on Browne's reputation in the later seventeenth-century and like Killeen's work, usefully situates Browne in the Restoration. Eric Achermann's essay examines the appropriation of Browne by Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1631–1689), a German scholar, Hebraist and pietistic poet, who published a translation of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in 1680, interpolating a range of other texts to make of Browne's catalogue of errors a tendentious response to Descartes. The final essay in the volume, by Kathryn Murphy, uses evidence from the Hartlib Archive and other correspondence to suggest something of the significance of Browne for his contemporaries, and to situate him within the mid-seventeenth-century commonwealth of learning.

This volume thus suggests fruitful new ways of considering Browne, and thickens the texture of the background against which we read his works. Among the pathways for future study indicated by these essays are studies of Browne's unpublished notebooks and manuscript writings; of his revising practices;<sup>24</sup> and studies of his reception, both in England

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<sup>24</sup> In addition to the work of Michael Wilding and Jonathan Post, Brooke Conti

and on the Continent.<sup>25</sup> Just over 100 years after the first publication of *Religio Medici*, the *Biographia Britannica* article on Browne was in no doubt about the book's provocative nature, claiming '[t]here was hardly ever a book published in Britain, that made more noise than the *Religio Medici* [...] [F]ew things have been more commended on one hand, or on the other now eagerly censured.'<sup>26</sup> Yet the noise that *Religio Medici* and Browne's other works made is now only faintly heard, and deserves to be listened to more carefully. Browne's text acted as a barometer of religious opinion in the many contexts in which it was read in the seventeenth century, passing through 13 editions in English, seven in Latin, three in Dutch (in two separate translations) and one in French.<sup>27</sup> *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Browne's most substantial work of scholarship, was published six times in English in his lifetime, and translated into Latin, Dutch, German, and Danish.<sup>28</sup> As the frontispiece to this volume shows, some readers were keen to record their opinions of Browne's works in the blank spaces left by his work: Jonathan Carpenter, the annotator, declares Browne the religious physician, in Greek, to be a 'wonder truly wondrous'. The notes by Thomas Keck and Levin Nicolaus von Moltke (d. 1663) supplied in later editions of his works have yet to

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has recently studied the copy of Browne's *Religio Medici* which he marked up for the press in 1643: "Sir Thomas Browne's Annotated Copy of his 1642 *Religio Medici*", *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 67 (2006) 595–610. See also Carter J., "Sir Thomas Browne's Autograph Corrections", *The Library*, Series 4, 19 (1939) 492–493. Other than Adlington's essay in this volume, however, study of the corrections to other works has not been thoroughly carried out.

<sup>25</sup> Few studies have hitherto been devoted to Browne's reception. Havenstein's *Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne* is an honourable exception. Geoffrey Keynes's *Bibliography of the Works of Sir Thomas Browne, Kt., M.D.*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: 1968), offers a partial list of references to Browne in printed works. Otherwise, attention has focussed on the responses to *Religio Medici* by Alexander Ross and Sir Kenelm Digby: see Bennett J., "A Note on *Religio Medici* and Some of its Critics", *Studies in the Renaissance* 3 (1956) 175–184; Wise T.N., *Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici and two seventeenth-century critics* (Columbia, MO: 1973); Huebert R., "The Private Opinions of Sir Thomas Browne", *Studies in English Literature* 45 (2005) 117–136.

<sup>26</sup> "Sir Thomas Browne", in *Biographia Britannica* (London: 1748) 2.994. The contributor was James Campbell: see Rivers I., "Biographical Dictionaries and their Uses from Bayle to Chalmers", in Rivers I. (ed.), *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays* (London and New York: 2001) 135–163.

<sup>27</sup> See Keynes G., *Bibliography*.

<sup>28</sup> Only the Dutch and German translations were published; the Danish remains in manuscript in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, while the Latin translation by Isaac Gruter was lost. On the German translation, see Eric Achermann's article in this volume.

receive attention, let alone the comments left by readers in manuscript in the margins of their books and commonplace books.<sup>29</sup>

The essays by Kevin Killeen, Hugh Adlington and Mary Ann Lund address another context of Browne's writings which has been neglected: the Restoration. The major works were first published between 1642 and 1658, and the neat coincidence of these years with the period of the Civil Wars, Commonwealth and Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell has classified Browne as a mid-century figure, closely related even in his antipathy to the turmoil of those years. Browne however lived and continued writing until 1682. The *Christian Morals*, some of the *Miscellaneous Tracts*, *Repertorium*, and, as Mary Ann Lund suggests in her article in this volume, *Letter to a Friend*, can all be attributed to this later period, though they were not published until after Browne's death.

When William Rand wrote to Samuel Hartlib in 1651 to say that Thomas Browne was a man 'very well studyed', he meant that Browne had himself spent much time gathering knowledge – something which none of his readers would deny.<sup>30</sup> The essays gathered here wrench his phrase towards a more modern sense. Rather than studying him by the Euphrates or the Nile, the scholars assembled in this volume have focussed on the contemporary contexts in which Browne wrote and was read. In addition to supplying examples of ways in which Browne's works can be well studied and read in their own world, they suggest the richness of possible contexts that world provides, and gesture towards further fruitful ways of reading Browne in context.

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<sup>29</sup> Keck's comments were first printed in the London edition of 1656; von Moltke's in the Latin edition printed at Strasburg in 1652. Dean Christopher Wren's extensive annotations to *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* are preserved in a copy in the Bodleian Library, shelfmark O2.26 Art.Seld.; see Colie R., "Dean Wren's Marginalia and Early Science at Oxford", *Bodleian Library Record* VI/4 (1960) 541–551.

<sup>30</sup> William Rand to Samuel Hartlib, 1 September 1651, *The Hartlib Papers*, Sheffield University Library, CD-Rom edition (Ann Arbor, MI: 1993); 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: 1995) 62/27/1A-4B, here 1A. See the essay by Kathryn Murphy in this volume.

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