

**RELIGIO MEDICI:
HYDRIOTAPHIA: AND
THE LETTER TO A FRIEND**

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SIR THOMAS BROWNE & J. W. WILLIS BUND

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RELIGIO MEDICI,
HYDRIOTAPHIA, AND THE LETTER TO A FRIEND.

BY

SIR THOMAS BROWNE, KNT.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

J. W. WILLIS BUND, M.A., LL.B.,

TRINITY AND CATS' COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE,
OF LINCOLN'S INN, BARRISTER-AT-LAW.



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INTRODUCTION.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE (whose works occupy so prominent a position in the literary history of the seventeenth century) is an author who is now little known and less read. This comparative oblivion to which he has been consigned is the more remarkable, as, if for nothing else, his writings deserve to be studied as an example of the English language in what may be termed a transition state. The prose of the Elizabethan age was beginning to pass away and give place to a more inflated style of writing,—a style which, after passing through various stages of development, culminated in that of Johnson.

Browne is one of the best early examples of this school; his style, to quote Johnson himself, "is vigorous but rugged, it is learned but pedantick, it is deep but obscure, it strikes but does not please, it commands but does not allure. . . . It is a tissue

of many languages, a mixture of heterogeneous words brought together from distant regions."

Yet in spite of this qualified censure, there are passages in Browne's works not inferior to any in the English language; and though his writings may not be "a well of English undefiled," yet it is the very defilements that add to the beauty of the work.

But it is not only as an example of literary style that Browne deserves to be studied. The matter of his works, the grandeur of his ideas, the originality of his thoughts, the greatness of his charity, amply make up for the deficiencies (if deficiencies there be) in his style. An author who combined the wit of Montaigne with the learning of Erasmus, and of whom even Hallam could say that "his varied talents wanted nothing but the controlling supremacy of good sense to place him in the highest rank of our literature," should not be suffered to remain in obscurity.

A short account of his life will form the best introduction to his works.

Sir Thomas Browne was born in London, in the parish of St Michael le Quern, on the 19th of October 1605. His father was a London merchant, of a good Cheshire family; and his mother a Sussex lady, daughter of Mr Paul Garraway of Lewis. His father died when he was very young, and his mother marrying again shortly afterwards, Browne was left to the care of his guardians, one of whom is said to

have defrauded him out of some of his property. He was educated at Winchester, and afterwards sent to Oxford, to what is now Pembroke College, where he took his degree of M.A. in 1629. Thereupon he commenced for a short time to practise as a physician in Oxfordshire. But we soon find him growing tired of this, and accompanying his father-in-law, Sir Thomas Dutton, on a tour of inspection of the castles and forts in Ireland. We next hear of Browne in the south of France, at Montpellier, then a celebrated school of medicine, where he seems to have studied some little time. From there he proceeded to Padua, one of the most famous of the Italian universities, and noted for the views some of its members held on the subjects of astronomy and necromancy. During his residence here, Browne doubtless acquired some of his peculiar ideas on the science of the heavens and the black art, and, what was more important, he learnt to regard the Romanists with that abundant charity we find throughout his works. From Padua, Browne went to Leyden, and this sudden change from a most bigoted Roman Catholic to a most bigoted Protestant country was not without its effect on his mind, as can be traced in his book. Here he took the degree of Doctor of Medicine, and shortly afterwards returned to England. Soon after his return, about the year 1635, he published his "*Religio Medici*," his first and greatest work, which

may be fairly regarded as the reflection of the mind of one who, in spite of a strong intellect and vast erudition, was still prone to superstition, but having

"Through many cities strayed,
Their customs, laws, and manners weighed,"

had obtained too large views of mankind to become a bigot.

After the publication of his book he settled at Norwich, where he soon had an extensive practice as a physician. From hence there remains little to be told of his life. In 1637 he was incorporated Doctor of Medicine at Oxford; and in 1641 he married Dorothy the daughter of Edward Mileham, of Burlingham in Norfolk, and had by her a family of eleven children.

In 1646 he published his "*Pseudodoxia Epidemica*," or Enquiries into Vulgar Errors. The discovery of some Roman urns at Burnham in Norfolk, led him in 1658 to write his "*Hydriotaphia*" (Urn-burial); he also published at the same time "*The Garden of Cyrus, or the Quincunxial Lozenge of the Ancients*," a curious work, but far inferior to his other productions.

In 1665 he was elected an honorary Fellow of the College of Physicians, "*virtute et literis ornatissimus*."

Browne had always been a Royalist. In 1643 he

had refused to subscribe to the fund that was then being raised for regaining Newcastle. He proved a happy exception to the almost proverbial neglect the Royalists received from Charles II. in 1671, for when Charles was at Newmarket, he came over to see Norwich, and conferred the honour of knighthood on Browne. His reputation was now very great. Evelyn paid a visit to Norwich for the express purpose of seeing him; and at length, on his 76th birthday (19th October 1682), he died, full of years and honours.

It was a striking coincidence that he who in his Letter to a Friend had said that "in persons who out-live many years, and when there are no less than 365 days to determine their lives in every year, that the first day should mark the last, that the tail of the snake should return into its mouth precisely at that time, and that they should wind up upon the day of their nativity, is indeed a remarkable coincidence, which, though astrology hath taken witty pains to solve, yet hath it been very wary in making predictions of it," should himself die on the day of his birth.

Browne was buried in the church of St Peter, Mancroft, Norwich, where his wife erected to his memory a mural monument, on which was placed an English and Latin inscription, setting forth that he was the author of "*Religio Medici*," "*Pseudodoxia*