

**RELIGIO MEDICI, LETTER
TO A FRIEND AND
CHRISTIAN MORALS**

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Religio medici, Letter to a friend and Christian morals by Sir Thomas Browne

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SIR THOMAS BROWNE

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THE RELIGIO MEDICI

LETTER TO A FRIEND

AND

CHRISTIAN MORALS

BY

SIR THOMAS BROWNE

WITH INTRODUCTION BY C. H. HERFORD

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INTRODUCTION

THE modern visitor to Norwich who has found his way through steep, winding streets or staircased alleys into the most romantic of English market-places is within a stone's throw of the spot in which the famous physician whose tercentenary East Anglia was celebrating lately spent the greater part of his long and fortunate life. A very ordinary house, distinguished, however, with a memorial tablet, occupies the site. The garden, too, with its rarities, which Evelyn, when he visited Browne in 1671, thought "a paradisc," has long since disappeared. But close at hand towers the great east window of St. Peter Mancroft, the magnificent church in which the *medicus religiosus* worshipped; and Old Norwich affords not a few glimpses from crowded streets into venerable courtyards with vistas of greenery beyond, which make it easy to imagine the circumstances of his abode.

Although Norwich took the lead in commemorating his birth, he was not, as is often imagined, born there. His father, also a Thomas, came of a stock of Cheshire squires. He was a younger son, and had gone up to London to push his fortune in trade. At the beginning of the century we find him settled in or near

Cheapside as a mercer. Here on October 19, 1605, the author of the *Religio Medici* was born. Of his early years almost nothing is known, beyond the fact that he passed his schooldays at Winchester, and thence, in 1623, entered as a fellow-commoner at Pembroke (then known as Broadgates Hall), Oxford — the college in which, a hundred years later, his great eighteenth-century devotee, Samuel Johnson, passed fourteen months of proudly concealed poverty. Browne's means appear to have been at this, as at all other times, ample, and he was able to gratify, as Johnson never could, the varied thirst of an intellect yet more encyclopædic than his, and far more adventurous in the temper of its curiosity. At Oxford, indeed, in those, as in Johnson's and in Shelley's, days a mind of this type found less than no help from the studies of the place. The great naturalists of the Restoration period were infants or unborn; even the "universally curious" Doctor Wilkins and his like-minded friend, John Evelyn, the diarist, were boys at school; and Francis Bacon had only just sounded, in the *Novum Organum*, the summons to the methodic interpretation of Nature. Browne, whose sympathetic imagination assimilated so much, never comprehended Bacon; but he was not untouched by the Baconian ardour of discovery, and it was scientific enthusiasm more than professional ambition which sent the young Oxford graduate abroad in 1630 to pursue the study of medicine and natural history in the three foreign universi-

ties — Montpellier, Padua, and Leyden — which were then the focuses of advanced research.

The greater part of the following three years was thus spent. Of the details of his life in France, Italy, and Flanders we have little knowledge ; but the *Religio* permits us one or two significant glimpses. We see the English Protestant student of medicine as he paces the streets of Montpellier or Padua with a crowd of companions even now, in the very heyday of dogmatic youth, listening, with lifted heart, to the Ave Mary bell, and moved, even to the point of "weeping abundantly," as some solemn procession passes by, "while my consorts, blind with opposition and prejudice, have fallen into an excess of scorn and laughter." Or we find him arguing with an Italian physician "who could not believe perfectly the immortality of the soul, because Galen seemed to make a doubt thereof."

These glimpses indicate, in the zealous student who took his doctor's degree at Leyden, a temperament of decided originality ; they also make it easy to understand the mood in which, a year or two after his return to England, Browne composed, as a sort of private confession, for his own behoof, the *Religio Medici*. According to the most authentic tradition it was written at Shipden Hall, Halifax — an old house and park, since somewhat rudely encroached upon by industry. Its date is fixed with some precision in the year 1635 by one of the spacious stellar similitudes its author loves. "As yet," he remarks incidentally, "I have

not seen one revolution of Saturn, nor hath my pulse beat thirty years ;"—a double mode of reckoning in which we seem to catch the far-off murmur of generations of mediæval doctors, prescribing for the unhappy patient with their eyes on the midnight horizon, and cupping him at the bidding of the stars. But the mediæval chord vibrates incessantly in Browne, by whatever richer and rarer notes it be accompanied and outsung.

The *Religio Medici* was not designed for publication ; and it had been read with delight in MS. by a steadily enlarging circle of friends for several years before the indiscretion of one of them gave the eager printer his chance. A pirated edition appeared in December, 1642, followed, early in 1643, by the appearance of the authentic text, which Browne in alarm had hastened to supply, characteristically enough, to no other than the erring but scarcely penitent pirate himself. The book's fame spread with a rapidity then almost unexampled. Sir Kenelm Digby's account of how he sent his man out to buy a copy, received it at bed-time, read it in rapt excitement through the night-watches, and rose early to write his hundred and more pages of *Observations*, takes us across two centuries to the days when people fought for *Old Mortality* and the *Heart of Midlothian*. A Latin translation, made in Holland, gave the *Religio* the franchise of the Continent.

The harsher dogmatisms of the age did not fail to resent Browne's sweet reasonableness to heretics and

papists ; and the formidable Alexander Ross, in the *Medicus Medicatus*, drove his heavy bludgeon this way and that through the tenuous fabric of the *Religio* without damaging a whit its spiritual substance :

" For it was as the air invulnerable,
And these vain blows malicious mockery."

When the *Religio* was thus at length tardily sent forth, Browne had been for some years established as a physician at Norwich, with a thriving practice and considerable private means. He had also married, in 1641, and the mild scorn expressed in the *Religio* for "that trivial and vulgar way of union" does not appear to have prevented Thomas and Dorothy Browne from enjoying an exceedingly happy married life. Browne's view of woman and her place was, indeed, as uncompromisingly masculine as Milton's, if more quaintly and pleasantly expressed. For him, too, Man was "the whole World, and the Breath of God ; Woman the Rib and crooked piece of man." He wrote this while still a bachelor, but even after four years of marriage we find him, in the *Vulgar Errors*, speculating curiously on God's purpose in creating Eve "as a helpmeet" to Adam. It can only have been, he opines, in view of their function as the future parents of mankind ; "for as for any other help, it had been better to have made another man." It is clear that Browne, who showed in his speculative enterprises so much of the temper of romance, was not dangerously romantic