Browne, Thomas 1605-1672, from Dictionary of Energy

English scholar who conducted important early experiments with static electricity and magnetism and who was the first to use the terms “electric” and “electricity” in the English language (1646).


Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82), physician and polymath, wrote on a wide variety of topics in seventeenth-century natural philosophy, natural history, antiquarianism, philology, and religion. His works are particularly notable for a combination of natural investigations with religious reflection, while his sonorous style has been much admired and imitated.

Browne was born in London in 1605, on either 19 October or 19 November, the son of a prosperous mercer of the same name who died in 1613. In the following year his mother Anne married Sir Thomas Dutton, a courtier and soldier who squandered much of Browne’s father’s legacy. Dutton was scoutmaster-general in Ireland, and in 1629 took Browne on a tour of the castles and forts he commanded. Browne had an excellent education: he was sent in 1616 to Winchester College, where he received a thorough grounding in humanist letters. In 1623 he matriculated at Broadgates Hall, Oxford, which in 1624 was incorporated as Pembroke College. Browne delivered the undergraduate address at the ceremony marking the incorporation; this short Latin oration, with witty puns on the change of name, was published in 1668. His first publication also dates to 1624: a 20-line Latin poem, published in Camdeni insignia, an Oxford volume commemorating the death of the antiquarian William Camden. Browne’s tutor was Thomas Lushington, a controversial theologian whose interests in Plato and Neoplatonism were transmitted to Browne.

Browne was admitted BA in January 1627 and proceeded MA in 1629. He then travelled to Continental Europe to study medicine at the universities of Montpellier, Padua, and finally Leiden, where he graduated doctor of medicine in December 1633, with a dissertation on smallpox. These universities were at the forefront of medical education, avant garde in promoting recent advances, such as William Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood, and innovative in their teaching of anatomy and natural history. Browne’s travels exposed him to a variety of cultures, customs, and religious rites, and to the effects of the Thirty Years War. These experiences had an obvious influence on his writings. The first part of his Religio medici (A physician’s religion, 1642) emphasizes his willingness to tolerate different rites and sects of Christianity; the second, which boasts that he understands six languages, takes pride in his openness to other cultures, their customs, and their cuisines.

Browne returned to England in 1634 to serve a medical apprenticeship. Alternative traditions place him in Oxfordshire or in Halifax, Yorkshire. The latter is more plausible, since it explains references in later correspondence with Henry Power, a natural philosopher and physician brought up in Halifax, to various inhabitants of the town as mutual acquaintances. It was during this period that Browne wrote Religio medici, his most famous work. Internal evidence suggests it was composed around 1635, though it is evident from surviving manuscripts, none in Browne’s hand, that it was revised at a later date. The earliest version was probably intended to be read by only a small circle of acquaintances. Browne was incorporated DM at Oxford in 1637. At the prompting of friends from his student days, and of Thomas
Lushington, who had left Oxford in 1632 for Norfolk, he moved to Norwich to practice. The later
manuscript versions of *Religio medici*, more rhetorically elaborate and less intimate, are thought to date
from Browne’s early years in Norwich. By 1640, it was circulating beyond his immediate acquaintance,
and had reached the intelligencer Samuel Hartlib.

In 1642 *Religio medici* was published anonymously by the bookseller Andrew Crooke, to Browne’s alarm.
Hearing that the courtier and natural philosopher Sir Kenelm Digby intended to publish criticisms,
Browne, with Crooke, prepared an authorized edition, published in 1643 under the less memorable title
*A true and full coppy of that which was most imperfectly and surreptitiously printed before vnder the name
of Religio medici*, which still bore the engraved frontispiece designed for the first edition by William
Marshall. Browne supplied a prefatory note ‘To the Reader’, in which he distanced himself from the 1642
publication, insisting that the text was corrupt, and that he had not courted public attention. He also
made several alterations and additions to the text, some of which aimed to make the text less
provocative.

*Religio medici* is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two active aspects of religion: faith and
charity. In a loosely associative structure, Browne confesses his opinions and beliefs, and emphasizes
his disinclination to conflict and his sympathies with the faith, customs, and opinions of other people and
nations. As the title suggests, a constant theme is the paradoxical relationship between faith and
reason. Physicians were proverbially assumed to be atheists, since their profession inclined them to
materialism and the investigation of nature, rather than God. *Religio medici* begins with a defiant credo
refuting that assumption, but faith and reason are in fruitful tension throughout. Browne declares his
pleasure in confounding his reason with the mysteries of faith, while at the same time drawing attention
to the paradoxes which emerge from approaching the Bible from a rational perspective. An important
thread in *Religio medici* insists on the value of interpreting nature as a means both of worshipping God
through wonder at the intricacy of his Creation, and of learning more about God through natural
theology. Browne privileges the natural philosophical vocabulary of Plato and Paracelsus over
traditional Aristotelianism, in part because it affords greater opportunities for metaphors that unite faith
and reason. His advocacy of ‘deliberate research’ into nature as an exercise of piety anticipates
Restoration justifications for the activities of the Royal Society and for natural history. The style of
*Religio medici* is remarkable, at once intimate and confiding, and rhetorically ornate. Particularly striking is
Browne’s use of rhythm, which achieves biblical intensity through cadenced cola, and syntactic and
verbal parallelisms and contrasts.

Browne’s alarm at the publication was a justified recognition of *Religio medici*’s potential for controversy.
Though written in the 1630s, it was published in the year in which Charles I went to war with Parliament,
in an atmosphere of political and religious suspicion and antagonism, when the presses of London were
busy with controversial pamphlets. Though many indications suggest that Browne was conservative and
sympathetic to royalism, he preferred to keep his political statements indirect or private. In 1642,
however, *Religio medici*’s reasoned ecumenism and conciliatory tone amounted to a political stance.
Browne showed sympathy with several controversial positions in matters of faith, among them toleration
of Catholics, and a youthful inclination, only half-heartedly repudiated, towards several heresies. His
tendency both to abandon reason in favour of faith, and to pose difficulties for faith through the
exercise of reason, particularly in the interpretation of Scripture, were also provocative. In addition to
Kenelm Digby’s *Observations upon Religio medici* (1643), Browne also drew criticism from the prolific
translator and critic Alexander Ross, in *Medicus medicatus, or the physicians religion cured* (1645).
Continental debates accusing Browne of atheism or defending him from it continued into the eighteenth

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In addition to criticism, however, *Religio medici* also met with many positive responses. The seventeenth century saw 13 editions in English, seven in Latin, three in Dutch, and one in French, and there is evidence of readers as far afield as Polish Prussia and Transylvania. Many letters survive from enthused readers: Browne's broad sympathies meant that he was coopted by Quakers, Anglicans, and Catholics. The suggestive title was much imitated, including works by both Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and John Dryden entitled *Religio laici (A layman’s faith)*. His style remained influential long after the controversies over his religion had lost their vigour: among his imitators and admirers are Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey, Charles Lamb, Virginia Woolf, and Jorge Luis Borges.

Perhaps in an attempt to secure a more solid scholarly reputation, Browne's next publication was the weighty *Pseudodoxia epidemica* (1646), often referred to as the 'Vulgar Errors'. *Pseudodoxia* is a scholarly work, addressed to the learned, which in seven books sets out to expose or refute errors in a variety of fields, beginning with 'Minerall and Vegetable bodies', progressing through animals and men, to pictures, geography, and Scripture. The first book treats the general causes of error, starting with the Fall, and including credulity, mistakes in reasoning, the behaviour of crowds, and Satan. Browne's criticism of ‘obstinate adherence unto Antiquity’ and ‘Authority’ aligns him with the contemporary tendency to insist that sense and reason be elevated over the testimony of the ancients in the investigation of nature. This view is frequently associated with followers of Francis Bacon, and the composition of *Pseudodoxia* is sometimes attributed to Bacon's desideratum in his *Advancement of learning* (1605), for a 'Kalendar of popular Errors'. The 'vulgar errors' tradition was however already well established, and Browne, though he owned works by Bacon and sometimes cites him, shows few signs of the pious respect of Bacon's epigones in the Hartlib circle, or among the founders of the Royal Society.

*Pseudodoxia epidemica* is a massive display of erudition and wide reading. It proved popular, and made Browne's name as a learned authority. Published in six English editions in his lifetime, it was also translated into Latin, Dutch, German, and Danish. *Pseudodoxia* exhibits an interest in the exotic and fantastic. Despite its avowed aim to extirpate errors, the subjects of some chapters are evidently included for their curiosity regardless of veracity, and for the opportunity they offer to demonstrate Browne's learning and associative habits of mind. Chapters ostensibly concerned with the refutation of a single fact often mutate into essays on more general topics. Browne does not refute the belief 'That Hares are both male and female', for example, and digresses instead into questions of gender, generation, and the nature of seeds. Though his taste for the bizarre has led to an association with cabinets of curiosities and works on wonders and monsters, *Pseudodoxia* also demonstrates Browne's engagement with recent scholarship and developments in natural philosophy. Many chapters use evidence drawn from his own experiments. Browne's mention of 'Renatus des Cartes' and citation of his *Principia philosophiae* (1644) constitutes one of the earliest references to René Descartes in English, and Browne also expresses enthusiasm for William Harvey.

*Pseudodoxia* is also notable for the inventiveness of its language. Though less elevated than *Religio medici*, the style is remarkable for its coinages and polysyllabic Latinity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits *Pseudodoxia* with almost 500 first citations; though many of these are specialist and obscure (e.g., 'albuginous', 'retromingent', 'solidungulous'), several remain in common usage (e.g., 'bisect', 'causation', 'electricity', 'exhaustion', 'invigorate').

Browne's next publication, besides a revised edition of *Pseudodoxia* in 1650, was a volume published in
May 1658, whose full title reads: *Hydriotaphia, urne-buriall, or a discourse of the sepulchrall urnes lately found in Norfolk. Together with the garden of Cyrus, or the quincunciall, lozenge, or net-work plantations of the ancients, artificially, naturally, mystically considered.* The two treatises emerged from a context of gentlemanly friendship, and were addressed to friends in Norfolk. *Urne-buriall* was dedicated to Thomas Le Gros of Crostwick, and *The garden of Cyrus* to Nicholas Bacon of Gillingham, a collateral relative of Francis Bacon who kept an elaborate garden. The essays are oblique and elliptic, because of their gestation within the context of close friendships in which arcane references are more easily understood, because they are composed according to numerological and structural patterns which are not made explicit, and because of Browne’s allusiveness and the scope of the fields of knowledge he surveys, including history, comparative religion, ancient philosophy, religious controversy, botany, arboriculture, optics, and generation.

*Urne-buriall* was prompted by the discovery of five funeral urns in a field near Walsingham in Norfolk. The first three chapters speculate on the origin of the urns, displaying Browne’s antiquarian knowledge of various practices in disposing of the bodies of the dead. His conclusions are, however, awry: he believed the urns to be Roman, though they have subsequently been identified as Saxon. The anthropological and archaeological considerations are used as the prompt for meditations in the final two chapters on the vanity of memory and human knowledge, the inevitability of earthly oblivion, and the consolations of Christian belief in resurrection. These passages are among Browne’s most stylistically wrought, and have been much excerpted and anthologized.

*The garden of Cyrus,* in comparison with the sententiousness and gravity of *Urne-buriall,* has often seemed baffling or eccentric. The ostensible topic is the layout of ancient gardens, which were planted in rows of diagonal lines, forming a net- or lattice-like pattern when viewed from above. Browne begins with an erudite account of various mythological and ancient gardens, but is soon discussing the quincunx (a pattern of four dots forming a quadrilateral, with a fifth at the point where the diagonals would meet) in whatever phenomenon he finds it: the growth of plants, the design of pyramids, ancient beds, nutcrackers, forceps, galloping horses, the function of human vision. He incorporates digressions on generation and the shapes of plants, and abandons the quincunx for circles and the number five. Such disparate materials are finally united, however, when Browne makes the quincuncial cross, contained within a circle, an emblem of God’s creative power in nature. *The garden of Cyrus*’s cumulative examples of pattern in nature and art resolve into a mystical consideration of the world as the book of God, recalling similar concerns in *Religio medici.*

It is evident from close structural and thematic parallels that *Urne-buriall* and *The garden of Cyrus* were designed as companion pieces. While *Urne-buriall* considers the failure of memory, scepticism about the scope of human knowledge, burial, and death, *The garden of Cyrus* resorts to the certainties of geometry and mathematics, and is centrally concerned with generation, seeds, and new life. Patterns of imagery reflect this: *The garden of Cyrus* counters the darkness and oblivion of *Urne-buriall* with light and vision. Structurally, each modulates into Browne’s high style, and moves from its ostensible theme into mystical considerations, at the same point at the close of the fourth chapter.

The volume of 1658 was the last original work which Browne published during his lifetime. He lived, however, until 1682, and continued to write. Revised editions of *Pseudodoxia epidemica* continued to appear until the sixth in 1672. He welcomed the Restoration, and enjoyed an international reputation, which fostered correspondence with several important Continental scholars. In 1664 he was an expert witness at a witch trial in Suffolk, testifying that he believed that the accused women were witches; they were hanged. Later in the same year he was elected to an honorary fellowship of the College of

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Physicians, and in 1671 he was knighted by Charles II.

Works left in manuscript continued to appear after his death on 19 October 1682. Thomas Tenison, a future archbishop of Canterbury and a relative of Browne's wife Dorothy, published 13 essays, written originally as letters, on topics including natural history, scriptural criticism, music, philology, and etymology, under the title *Certain miscellany tracts* (1683). These included 'Musæum Clausum', a whimsical description of items to be included in Browne's ideal museum and library. *The works of Sir Thomas Browne* appeared in 1686, containing all the major writings published to that date. In 1690 *A letter to a friend*, a consolatory piece probably composed in several stages, combining a medical report on the death of a patient with a series of moral sententiae, was published. The bookseller Edmund Curll published *Posthumous works* in 1712, which added to the Browne canon 'Repertorium, or the antiquities of the cathedral church of Norwich', an account of the architectural features and tombstones of the cathedral; 'An account of some urnes ... found at Brampton in Norfolk', a pedestrian description in comparison to the meditative expansiveness of *Urne-buriall*; letters between Browne and the antiquarian William Dugdale; and some short manuscript pieces. Shortly before Tenison's death in 1715, a manuscript entitled *Christian morals* was recovered from among his papers, and published in 1716. *Christian morals* is a collection of moral precepts and instructions, some of which also appear in *A letter to a friend*, written in Browne's high style. It was edited in 1756 by Samuel Johnson, whose edition also included an appreciative 'Life of Sir Thomas Browne'. Browne corresponded with some of the leading intellectual figures in England in the period, including John Evelyn (who recorded a 1671 visit to Browne in his diary), Elias Ash-mole, Henry Oldenburg, and John Aubrey, as well as writing regularly with scholarly advice or information to his son Edward. He also left a large number of notebooks and commonplace books, containing drafts, notes on reading, and records of experiments.

**SEE ALSO:** Aubrey, John; Bacon, Francis; Bible, the; Dryden, John; Evelyn, John; Hartlib, Samuel; Harvey, William; Herbert, Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury

**REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS**


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