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978-0-521-14823-8 - Sir Thomas Browne: 'A Man of Achievement in Literature'

Joan Bennett

Frontmatter

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SIR THOMAS BROWNE



At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature....I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

JOHN KEATS, *Letter to George and Tom Keats*
December 1817

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To

H·S·B

Love's not Time's fool

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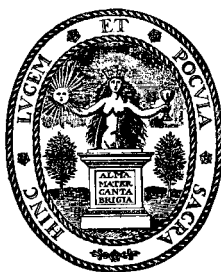
SIR THOMAS BROWNE

'A man of achievement in literature'

BY

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Fellow of Girton College*



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[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	page vii
I The Life of Sir Thomas Browne	i
II Domestic Correspondence	25
III 'Religio Medici' (Part I)	53
IV 'Religio Medici' (Part II)	98
V 'Pseudodoxia' (Book I)	125
VI 'Pseudodoxia' (Books II–VII)	158
VII 'Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall'	188
VIII 'The Garden of Cyrus'	205
IX Posthumous Works	220
<i>Select List of Books</i>	248
<i>Index</i>	251

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FOREWORD

LIKE so many others I had enjoyed reading Sir Thomas Browne from the time when I first consciously enjoyed good writing, but in the course of years I became increasingly aware how imperfectly I understood him. A number of questions spurred me on to a further exploration of his work. What, for instance, was the nature and extent of Browne's scepticism? Was he exceptionally able 'to live in divided worlds', or was it common in the mid-seventeenth century to retain old beliefs (in, for example, witchcraft, or a Ptolemaic earth-centred universe) and yet to welcome, to advocate and to further the Baconian advancement of learning? Is Browne's work amusing to read because his ideas and the way he expresses them are strange to us, or because he writes humorously and is himself amused? Is the pleasure he gives to his reader due to the rhythm of his prose, his rich vocabulary and complex sentence structure, or do we enjoy his writings because they reveal a personality that delights us? These were among the questions in my mind when I chose my subject. This book is written in an attempt to answer some of them by studying his work in detail and relating it to some contemporary works that seem relevant.

I have not attempted a close analysis of Sir Thomas Browne's style although it is fully illustrated in quotations. To borrow his own phrase, 'I am naturally amorous of all that is beautiful', but the beauty of Browne's style has been admirably praised and I have little to add. His prose rhythms have been analysed and scholars have examined his rhetoric in relation to the history of prose style. In this area there is, I believe, nothing left to do and certainly nothing of which I am capable. My endeavour has been to find out what he thought and what the style expresses. To this end I have first tried to portray the man himself as we see him in his life and in his correspondence. After that I have examined each

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[More information](#)*Foreword*

work closely, allowing him often to speak for himself, explaining where that seemed necessary and quoting contemporary comments where these are illuminating.

This book could never have been written but for the generosity of two great American libraries. In 1955 the Huntington Library invited me to work there for ten weeks and it was there that much of the preliminary reading was done. When the Folger Shakespeare Library gave me a Fellowship in 1961 I was able to continue the work which had made little progress in the intervening years. Doubtless I could have found all the books I needed without travelling so far, but these two libraries gave me the time to pursue my studies in ideal conditions, with all that I could need made easily available. I take this opportunity to record my thanks. I am especially grateful to Sir Geoffrey Keynes and to Messrs Faber and Faber for permission to quote extensively from their six-volume edition of the *Works of Sir Thomas Browne*. I am also indebted to a number of those who have written about Sir Thomas Browne or his background, whose names I have listed in my select bibliography, and I am obviously and very deeply indebted to the scholars who have established the text.

J. B.

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