

SIR THOMAS BROWNE AND THE WITCHES*

By JAMES HENDRIE LLOYD, M.D.

PHILADELPHIA

SIR Thomas Browne, author of the "Religio Medici," once appeared in court as a witness against two women on trial for witchcraft; and it was largely on the strength of his testimony that they were found guilty and condemned. At this very period the whole detestable superstition had been exposed by critical writers, such as Reginald Scot and Wierus, so it seems that Sir Thomas Browne had not much excuse for his credulity. He still shared the stupendous delusion which for so many centuries dominated the thoughts, beliefs and practices of this dear old human race of ours; and in spite of all this he gave us his philosophical and moral prosings, which have gained for him the reputation of a medical pundit.

The case is worth looking at if for no other reason than that it displays the large capacity of the human mind for the storage of queer notions. For at this distance of time this looks like a queer notion for a man like Sir Thomas to have entertained, although to the two victims it must have seemed not so queer as tragic.

At the time of the trial (1664) Browne was nearly sixty years old, and had attained a great reputation as a physician and writer. He practiced in Norwich, a provincial city which had some claims to distinction as a place of culture; and he had long since written not only the "Religio Medici" but also his work on "Vulgar Errors" and, more recently, his "Urn Burial," upon which three works mainly rests his fame. He became soon after an Honorary Fellow of the London College of Physicians, and later contributed papers to the Royal Society, of which, however, he seems not to

have been a Fellow. His scientific curiosity was insatiable; his reading was extensive; and he kept common-place books in which he jotted down all that he saw, heard or read that interested him. Withal, he impresses us as being something of a compiler; but he was liberal minded and even sceptical, so we should hardly be prepared to see him go witch-hunting, if he had not told us himself that in divinity he "loved to keep the road." A belief in witches was evidently a part of his divinity.¹

The two women, Rose Cullender and Amy Duny, were indicted for bewitching some children, and the chief evidence against them was given by their parents, relatives and neighbors.² The children were evidently hysterical perverts, who had fits, hysterical paralyses, blindness, and vomiting of pins and nails. This so-called evidence was of the flimsiest kind; the product of suggestion, malice, ignorance and superstition. It was so flimsy that one of the lawyers, Mr. Sergeant Keeling, was much dissatisfied with it, and thought it not sufficient to convict the prisoners; and he said that if such evidence were allowed, only upon the imagination of the parties afflicted, no person whatever could be in safety, for they might accuse anyone, who might be altogether innocent. These were the only

¹ See Wilkins' preface to the *Pseudodoxia* in his edition of Sir Thomas Browne's Works, Vol. 11, p. 164. Also his *Supplementary Memoir*, Vol. 1.

² A *Trial of Witches*, at the Assizes held at Bury St. Edmunds for the County of Suffolk; on the Tenth Day of March, 1664, before Sir Matthew Hale, Kt, then Lord Chief Baron of His Majesty's Court of Exchequer. Reprinted verbatim from the original edition of 1682. With an Appendix by C. Clark Esq. London, 1838.

The writer of the present paper is indebted to Miss M. C. Klingelsmith, Librarian of the Biddle Law Library, University of Pennsylvania, for the opportunity to see a copy of the report of this trial.

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rational words spoken in the court, and they were spoken by a lawyer; except that a group of gentlemen who were asked by the Court to examine one of these youngsters, protested after their examination that "they did believe the whole transaction of this business was a meer imposture."

Nevertheless, Dr. Browne (who was not yet Sir Thomas) took the stand and delivered himself of the following remarkable opinion.

He was clearly of the opinion that the persons were bewitched; and said, that in Denmark there had been lately a great discovery of witches, who used the very same way of Afflicting Persons, by conveying Pins into them, and crooked as these Pins were, with Needles and Nails. And his opinion was, That the Devil in such cases did work upon the bodies of Men and Women, upon a Natural Foundation, (that is) to stir up and excite such humours superabounding in their Bodies to a great excess, whereby he did in an extraordinary manner Afflict them with such Distempers as their bodies were most subject to, as particularly appeared in these Children; for he conceived that these swooning Fits were Natural, and nothing else but that they call the Mother, but only heightened to a great excess by the subtlety of the Devil, co-operating with the Malice of these which we term Witches, at whose Instance he doth these Villanies.

This opinion calls for no comment, unless it be to note that it contains more words than sense.

The trial, according to the report, must have been brief. No witnesses were examined on behalf of the accused women, and they were not represented by counsel, because in those days the common law of England did not allow counsel for persons accused of felony. The judge, Sir Matthew Hale, when he charged the jury, said he made no doubt that there were such creatures as Witches, and told the twelve men to observe strictly the evidence. As this was nearly all one way, the jury, after deliberating a half-hour, brought in a verdict of guilty; and the two women were hanged about one week later.

This ghastly trial has probably few parallels even in the bloody annals of the English Criminal Law. It can only be matched in its atrocity by some of the worst orgies of witch-hunting in the Middle Ages; and for the medical profession it has an ugly distinction as the scene of the demoniacal outburst of the author of the "Religio Medici."^{2a}

Sir Thomas Browne has had his apologists, and many of them have been his warm admirers, although probably few of them believed in witches. In the first place, he was an expert witness for the Crown, and doubtless knew what was expected of him, which was to help to secure a verdict of guilty. His editor, Wilkin, thinks that if he believed in witches he was entirely justified in testifying as he did. Moreover, in this belief he was in good company, and his editor points to Lord Bacon, Lord Chief Justice Hale, Bishop Hall, and others.³ But it is a rather curious fact that all three of his early biographers omit to mention this gruesome episode in his career, as though they were not proud of it; although it would seem that it might have been a tempting subject for the pen of Dr. Samuel Johnson, who wrote one of these lives.⁴

Witchcraft had long held its own in England, and had been a penal offense for many years. C. Clark, Esquire, who wrote an Appendix to the report of this trial, tells us that the first trial "of any note" for witchcraft took place in 1593. A statute was passed in the first year of James I for the punishment of "these detestable slaves of the devil." The number executed during the next century amounted to 3192; but Barrington does not hesitate to estimate the total number of those put to death in England on the charge of witchcraft at

^{2a}Lecky, W. E. H. *History of Rationalism in Europe*. Chapter on "Witchcraft and Magic," 1, 101, *et seq.*

³Sir Thomas Browne's Works, Edited by Simon Wilkin, London, 1836, vol. 1, 74.

⁴Johnson's *Life* is prefixed to Volume 1 of Wilkin's Edition.

30,000. There were witch-hunters on the scent. These men professed to be able to ferret out witches; they went from village to village, and were paid so much a head. One man and 15 women were executed at Newcastle in one batch. One of these witch-hunters himself came to the gallows, and confessed just before he was hanged that he had been the death of above 220 women for the gain of 20 shillings a piece. The catalogue of legal murders in England closes with the crowning atrocity of the hanging of a Mrs. Hicks and her daughter, a nine year old girl, in 1716, the penal statutes against witchcraft being repealed in 1736.⁵

Thus it appears that Sir Thomas Browne had plenty of precedents; but he came near the end of the moving picture, for after his time the trials seem rapidly to have diminished in number. His testimony, says Aikin, "had no small influence in occasioning the condemnation of the wretched victims, whose execution was one of the latest instances of the kind, by which the English annals are disgraced."⁶ It is a pity that Sir Thomas had not lived a little later. As it is, he serves as a frightful example of an age that was passing.

He was, indeed, somewhat behind the best of his own times. In 1584, Reginald Scot had published his book on "The Discoverie of Witchcraft,"⁷ "a very remarkable book, the object of which was to put an end to the cruel persecution of witches." We are told that it was a work of great learning and acuteness, written in a spirit of righteous indignation against witch-mongers.⁸ It was burnt by order of King James I, who was something of a pedant as well as a king, and wrote a foolish book

⁵ See the Appendix to the "Tryal of Witches" for many instances. But witches were evidently persecuted long before 1593. Barrington's figures seem incredible; they are given here on the authority of Clark.

⁶ Aikin, *Biographical Dictionary*, quoted by Wilkin, *Supplementary Memoir*, LXXXIII.

⁷ This work, edited by Brinsley Nicholson, M.D. was reprinted in London, 1886.

⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XXI, 470.

on "Demonologie," to controvert Scot, in which he urged that the defence of insanity should be denied in the courts to those on trial for witchcraft. Sir Thomas Browne must have known of Scot's book, but he was evidently on the side of the king. In Germany the literary movement against this superstition had begun even earlier, and Wierus had written in 1563. But the dawn of reason had not yet broken upon the mind of Browne a full century later. A book which shows clearly the growing disbelief in witches in Browne's own day is John Webster's "Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft" wherein is affirmed that there are many sorts of "Deceivers and Imposters," and to win persons under a passive "Delusion of Melancholy and Fancy." Webster was a Practitioner of Physick in London, 1677.

Browne's primitive belief in the supernatural was not limited to the modern witches, but included even the ancient ones. He wrote a paper on the Oracle at Delphi and the answers given there by Apollo to Croesus, King of Lydia.⁹ He considered the oracle as indubitably supernatural and, as Johnson says, "founds all his disquisition upon that postulate." His perfect conviction of the Satanic influence exerted in the oracles is strongly expressed also in a passage in the "Religio Medici," and is based on the alleged confession of the Devil himself in his oracle to Augustus.¹⁰ This was also the belief of some of the early Christian writers; they did not deny the supernatural in the Pagan oracles, but imputed it to the demons. Sir Thomas, indeed, was so credulous that he believed not only in witchcraft but also in astrology, alchemy and magic; and he never abandoned the Ptolemaic system of astronomy.¹¹ For him the sun

⁹ Browne's Works, Edited by Wilkin, Lond., 1836, vol. IV, 223.

¹⁰ Johnson's Life, xxxvii. Also, footnote 2. Also, *Religio Medici*, Part I. Sect. xxix, p. 42. *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. Bk. vii. Cap. xii.

¹¹ *Dictionary of National Biography*, article on Sir T. B. Also *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. Bk. vi. Cap. v.

continued to revolve around the earth, and witches to stick pins in children.

There is a rather mysterious story about the first appearance of the "Religio Medici." The author, then only about thirty years old, had loaned the manuscript to a friend, and it was passed on from one hand to another, and the work was finally printed anonymously and surreptitiously. It aroused great interest and excited some controversy, and was animadverted on by Sir Kenelm Digby, a noted scholar. Some of the criticism had, indeed, been severe. Browne then brought out his own edition, claiming that the spurious edition had been mutilated. Dr. Johnson hints that Browne had been privy to the whole scheme. If so, he probably feared the reception which the work might have, because of some of the dubious opinions contained in it. He wanted to try out his public, and did this under the mask of anonymity; and when he found that the work had won extensive and, on the whole, favorable notice, he acknowledged it. Dr. Johnson's idea has been disputed, and may be taken for what it is worth, but it does suggest a characteristic of Browne's which is at least noteworthy. He delighted in paradoxes, subtleties, and quaint, even obscure, language; so he may also have delighted in a round-about-way of catching his readers. Moreover, he was still a young man and an untried author, and the learned world may have looked to him like a very formidable judge.

The success of the book seems to have been phenomenal, but its orthodoxy was suspected, and opinions about it and its author varied. Some said he was a Catholic, others a Protestant, and one reader even thought he was a Quaker. The work was promptly translated into Latin, and later into several modern languages. But the Latin translation was rejected in turn by three printers in Leyden, who feared it would get them in trouble with the authorities. Elsewhere on the Continent it was assailed as unorthodox, and Sir Thomas was called a deist and an infidel.

The book was even placed on the "Index Expurgatorius," although the author proclaimed his Christian faith. All this may be explained by Browne's peculiar twists and turns and his involved style. He has been called a "Platonic Mystic," a writer who liked to play with ideas; or, as Johnson says, "a great scholar, turning his learning into amusement." It is sometimes hard to tell whether or not to take him seriously. The "Religio Medici" has been described as "a puzzle to contemporaries, and still hard to understand." It is probably more praised than read. Sir Thomas is of the type of the credulous sceptic or superstitious agnostic; a type which is not very rare.¹² He tells us himself in one place, where he writes almost like a freethinker, that he is "naturally inclined to that which misguided zeal terms superstition."¹³ He sometimes runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds, as when in his testimony against the witches he said that the fits were natural but heightened by the devil. This was having things both ways. He even expresses a doubt in his commonplace books whether the parties accused of witchcraft had always been guilty.¹⁴ In the field of science he was inquisitive rather than original, and it does not appear that he contributed much to medical knowledge. But as a humorist he has his points, as when he infers that Moses was the greatest autobiographer that ever lived, because he wrote the story not only of his own life but also of his own death; and again when he informs his readers that Adam was thirty years old at his creation. He also says that Adam had no navel, as he was not born of a woman. It is no wonder that Sir Thomas' orthodoxy fell under suspicion. The "Religio Medici" also contains a few indelicacies, some of which are evidently taken from Montaigne.

The reputation of Sir Thomas Browne has

¹² *Religio Medici*, Wilkin's Edition, Part I. Sect. x, p. 14.

¹³ *Religio Medici*, Wilkin's Edition, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Common Place Books*, Wilkin's Ed. iv, 389.

suffered some changes. Not so very long after his time the Rev. Francis Hutchinson wrote a book on Witchcraft which was devoted to the discrediting of demonomania, and in which he handled Browne without gloves.¹⁵ It is a carefully written monograph, showing evidence of wide research, invaluable for reference, and marking the reaction against this gross obsession in the early eighteenth century. Perhaps the most indignant voice has been raised in our own time. This was in 1904, when it was proposed in England to erect a memorial to the author of the "Religio Medici." This roused the wrath of Dr. Conolly Norman, a well-known Irish alienist. Whatever claims Sir Thomas Browne had to the admiration of scholars, he had no claim whatever, in Dr. Norman's opinion, to the respect of the medical profession. He was not a great physician, since he was neither scientific nor humane. For the proof of the first charge Dr. Norman referred to Browne's works, and for proof of the second to Browne's action in the trial of the witches. If a monument was to be erected, thought Dr. Norman, it ought to include also the

figures of the innocent poor women who owed their death to the testimony given by the physician; and they might be introduced in the monument as supporters to the figure of Sir Thomas Browne. This protest, in a letter to the *British Medical Journal*, started a war of letter writers, whose various emotions, pro and con, may be traced today in their epistles.¹⁶ Dr. Norman's severe judgment will probably not be approved by many readers of the "Religio Medici," but it serves to show how the fame of the distinguished author of that book has had to run the gantlet of criticism.¹⁷

Among the best known, as it is also perhaps the best liked, of Sir Thomas Browne's writings, is the book called "Pseudodoxia Epidemica," a treatise on Vulgar and Common Errors. It is replete with learning, humor and odd conceits, written in a characteristic style, and seems to be made up of the accumulations of scrap-books. We can only regret for the author's sake that he did not include among "Vulgar Errors" his own belief in witchcraft.

¹⁶ *British Medical Journal*, Aug. 20, 1904, 396; also same vol., 474, 620, 621, 777 and 952.

¹⁷ For recent estimates see Sir Edmund Gosse's *Life of Sir Thomas Browne in the English Men of Letters*; and Sir William Osler's paper in his *Alabama Student and Other Biographical Essays*.

¹⁵ *An Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft*, by Francis Hutchinson, D.D. London, MDCCXVIII. Chap. VIII.



[From Boyle: *Opera Omnia*. Venetiis, 1697.]