

Reid Barbour. *Sir Thomas Browne: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xiv + 534 pp. + 20 b/w illus. \$125.00. Review by RICHARD TODD, UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN.

Ever since his death on 19 October 1682 O.S., by some accounts his seventy-seventh birthday, Sir Thomas Browne's life has been a source of fascination. The neat enclosure suggested by the birth-death cycle was sometimes endorsed by its subject (Browne was certainly attracted to the *Ouroboros*, that is, the hermetic figure of the serpent eating its own tail), but at other times not (Browne was known to have been vague about his birth-date, at least once giving it as 19 October [5] rather than November and regarding himself as a Scorpio). The life (like those of other comparable early modern and, indeed, medieval figures) has been scrutinised for the extent to which Browne's travels were indeed those of actuality (he seems not to have left England after 1637, settling in Norwich).

Although conventional wisdom has it that little is known of Browne's earliest life, Barbour is alert to what he calls the "evocative clues" Browne left as to the way in which the events surrounding it shaped him. Browne was born either immediately before or immediately after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The discovery and neutralization of this event, which if successful would have reduced not only the House of Lords but by some accounts two-thirds of contemporary London to rubble, was an event of tremendous ideological resonance right through the eighteenth century, and it and its savage reprisals are still marked in atavistic and even provocative form in parts of England today. It is characteristic of Reid Barbour's mindset to note that 5 November 1605 was also the date of publication of Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*.

Barbour unearths more of Browne's early life than had previously generally been known. While Browne's schooling at Westminster is well-attested, though what is less known is that he also, in later life, recalled a visit to Lewes, Sussex, evidently before he had been breeched (he was still "butt in coats"). The significance of Lewes lies in its being the location of his maternal grandparents' residence. From the very beginning, then, it is clear that if more direct factual material is lost or simply not forthcoming, Barbour proves himself a biographer who

turns documentary lack to advantage in pressing home the potential relevance of details that might have escaped a less observant chronicler.

Barbour works like this throughout this absorbing book. There must always be some biographical speculation relating to the earlier part of Browne's life, but Browne has added more than his fair share to the existing documentary record. He can claim credit for announcing the discovery in 2007 of Browne's Leiden *stelling* or "postulate" that concluded his brief study for his MD degree there (1633-4). Such postulates still survive as appendices to doctoral dissertations in The Netherlands today: in the seventeenth century they formed the focus of the defense. In 2007, Barbour, rooting around in the Bodleian library, discovered that Browne's postulate had been on smallpox, a much-feared disease both on account (justly) of its capacity to hideously disfigure the face as well as of its stigmatized but incorrectly supposed relationship to syphilis, "the great pox" (202). Smallpox was not to be successfully treated until Edward Jenner (1749-1823) inductively pioneered the technique of vaccination at the end of the eighteenth century by examining (or as we might now say "interrogating") the folk-lore that milkmaids were pretty: in fact, their faces were likely to be much less disfigured than those of their unfortunate contemporaries because not only had they contracted the much less devastating "cowpox" but (crucially) this gave them natural immunity to the severer disease.

Where little is known for certain about Browne's own life and indeed those of his nearest family, Barbour provides a richly described and impressively researched blend of mid-Stuart scientific thought and practice, as well as the period's social history, drawing into his account those aspects of Browne that are better known from the period after the Wars of the Three Kingdoms and the Restoration. One might quibble with Barbour's use of "interregnum" to describe the period 1649-60 on the grounds that, (a) though commonly to be found, it presupposes an uncompromisingly Royalist standpoint, and (b) strictly speaking, the only true seventeenth-century "interregnum" in the sense of a formal "power vacuum" occurred during the confusingly anarchic few weeks between 23 December 1688, with the deposition and flight to France of James VII & II Stuart and the installation of William of Orange and James's daughter Mary Stuart as joint sovereigns (William

I of Scotland and III of England and Mary II), and 13 February 1689 (both dates O.S.).

But this kind of objection is more than offset by Barbour's apparently effortless ability to cross-reference items current in Browne's early life, but not necessarily used by him until work written and/or published much later. Barbour's memorially retentive control of his material is quite exceptional. Praise, having duly been acknowledged for Barbour's contriving to cross-reference in this way, in the body of the text rather than in digressive footnotes, must be offset by the admission that this ability can cut both ways. Thus, many notes remain, whose content could without loss have been incorporated into Barbour's text; and there is at times, particularly in the book's first half, a sense that the intellectual background is overwhelming the biographical foreground. Still, Barbour's style throughout is pleasantly distinctive, and he usefully contextualizes Browne's foreign travels (Montpellier, Padua, and Leiden) during 1631 through 1634. Even so, there is a lot of undigested material and lack of follow-through in parts of this account. One would have liked to learn more, for example, of "the tensions between [Padovan] students and Jews" (173), especially given the existence of Jewish ghettos in many (but not all) of the European cities Browne visited.

Despite minor reservations such as this, there is much to admire and even praise. A particularly interesting passage on pp. 102-3 magisterially charts (almost in passing) the evolution from a humoral into what might be termed a modern understanding of medicine. It is at this kind of felicitous grasp of a complex subject that Barbour excels.

The seeming uneventfulness of the later part of Browne's life would appear to be counterpointed in the apparently haphazard manner in which his knighthood was conferred. That knighthood was (or is believed to have been) first destined for Norwich's mayor, Thomas Thacker. On declining it, Thacker is said to have pressed the case for its bestowal on Browne. In keeping with his remarkable learning, Barbour (404 n 26) cites recent scholarship (1998-99) that refutes this early nineteenth-century orthodoxy.

Right from the start Barbour enters Browne's world of words in portraying that life as a "miracle," a "fable" or "peece of Poetry." From 1637, after travels that took him away from England—to Montpellier,

Padua and Leiden—Browne settled in Norwich and made his inner world his own. Yet at times, even during these travels, Barbour's reader may get the sense that context (the rich intellectual and cultural background he is describing) is overwhelming text (a focus on Browne's life). One feels this particularly, perhaps, in the account of pre-Lenten Carnival at Padua, a sense enhanced by the claim that it was a phenomenon over which "Browne's fellow English travellers often registered their bemusement" (178). Barbour cites many of Browne's quirky observations (such as the direction in which an elephant farts, 438) but leaves his reader unenlightened as to whether insatiable curiosity and amusement are in any way linked, and, for this reviewer, Barbour's impassiveness to potentially humorous, almost Rabelaisian, aspect of his subject is one minor drawback of this insatiable study.

One does not have to proceed far into Barbour's monograph to encounter some errors that really should have been weeded out at copy-editing stage. There are three early examples, within a few pages of each other: a Malapropism for "Wykehamist" (Barbour has "Wyckamite," 37); an incorrect notation of pre-decimal £/s/d coinage, a notation lost only in February 1971 and thus available to living memory, let alone to current early modern scholarship (see e.g. Barbour's puzzling "£5.667½d": should this not rather read £5,667/0/0½d [32]?); and the bestowal of a superfluous ordinal number on the only post-Conquest English king named Stephen, r. 1135-54 (known in more revisionist circles as "Etienne de Blois"): 38 and not indexed. Another little clutch of irritation occurs on pages 171 ("Ave Marie [*sic*] bells") and 173, in a disquisition on Jewish burials in Padua, where we learn that the students' attempt at pilfering Jewish corpses for anatomization was foiled by "citizens appalled at the sacrilege," a significant and well-noted point, but characteristically observed rather than followed through (that is, the *reasons* for such a response need specifying as opposed to noting the response itself).

In its entirety the index is not as comprehensive as the study itself. There are some mistakes in the Dutch, which are better left to another forum. And the term "side-kick," which Barbour anachronistically uses to describe "intellectual companion" or, really, "admirer," several times throughout, can tend to irritate.