

Caps. 2
Ams. 2101

CUS 417/4.15
SIR THOMAS BROWNE.
Religio Medici.

From the July of Sir Thomas Browne's papers.

The Manuscripts of the Religio Medici.

In 1642 appeared a duodecimo of 190 pages without the name of author, with a quaint title page depicting a man falling from earth into the sea of eternity, grasped by a hand reaching out from the heavens, with the legend a coelo salsus. The title, Religio Medici, and the subscription, printed for Andrew Crooke, 1642, and the name of the artist, William Marshall. The little work at once attracted attention and the Earl of Dorset sent word about it to his friend, Sir Kenelme Digby, who sent to St. Paul's Churchyard for a copy. So delighted was he that he took it to bed and did not close his eyes until he had enriched himself "with all the treasures that are lapped up in the folds of those few sheets" and sent to his friend his observations. Many others besides Dorset and Digby must have been pleased with the little volume, as the edition was so quickly exhausted that Crooke issued a second, again without indication of the author. There is no indication in the Observations that Digby had any idea who had written the work. Word had reached the author, Dr. Thomas Browne, at Norwich, of the intention of Digby to publish his Observations, and on March 3, 1642, he wrote protesting that the little work had been printed without his knowledge or consent from an imperfect and surreptitious copy. He makes the statement of special interest to us in connection with the manuscript, that the piece was contrived in his private study "as an exercise unto himself rather than exercitation for any other, having passed from my hands under a broken and imperfect copy, by frequent transcription is still run forward in corruption, and after the addition of some things, omission of others, and transposition of many, without my assent or privacy, the liberty of these times committed it unto the Presse, from whence it issued so disguised, the author without distinction could not acknowledge it". He then promised to deliver to the Press the true and intended original "whereof in the meantime your worthy self may command a view". To this Digby replied, in a most interesting letter, the original of which is in Bodley, from Winchester House March 20, that he would await with longing the coming abroad of the true copy.

In 1643 appeared "a true and full copy of that which was most imperfectly and surreptitiously printed before under the name of Religio Medici". There is the same frontispiece followed by a statement about the former corrupt copy, then a page of errata, and an address to the reader signed Thomas Browne. In this last, after apologizing in such troublous days for private complaints,

SIR THOMAS BROWNE
Religio Medici.

he says that the work was composed seven years ago for his private exercise and satisfaction and being communicated unto one became common unto many "and was by transcription successfully corrupted until it arrived in a most depraved copy at the Press". No doubt he was pleased and complimented that a man of such distinction as Digby should think the little work worthy of the Observations, which are usually found bound up with the 1643 edition, though sometimes met with separately.

In the life of Sir Thomas Browne prefixed to the Christian Morals, Dr. Johnson suggests that the surreptitious editions were not issued without the author's knowledge, but the truth of Browne's statement seems borne out by the fact that we know of seven manuscripts of the Religio all of which differ in minor points from each other and from the 1642 and 1643 editions. This is a remarkable confirmation of the statement made in his letter of protest to Digby, that the copies by frequent transcription had been corrupted, some things added, others omitted, and many transposed without his assent or privacy.

Seven manuscripts of the Religio are known:-

1. British Museum. Lansdowne MSS, 489, f. 132, consisting of ~~nine~~ and a half closely written pages, folio size; ends Section 15, or in Greenhill's edition at the middle of Section 18 with the words - "cansupply all these". It has Mr. Browne's "Theo. 1639" at the top of the first folio. It is divided into sections and differs in minor particulars from the three early printed copies and from the other manuscripts.
2. Bodleian. Rawlinson MS. Quarto, 44 folios. Complete. Not divided into sections. Note in Dr. Rawlinson's hand states, "This copy of the Religio Medici by Sir Thomas Browne, Kt. is very different from all printed". Second part begins at F. 31. Many more words are missed by the transcriber than in any other MS.
3. Wilkin I. "Foolscap. 8^o. 83 pp. Beautifully and closely written in a very small hand, the poetry and italics in a taller Italian hand:- about forty lines in a page. It has the title Religio Medici in the same hand". (Wilkin, Sir Thomas Browne's Works, vol. ii, Page 5).
4. Wilkin II. "4^o. 186 pp. Written in a much larger hand - and originally without title. In a different hand at the head of the first page is Religio Medici". In the same hand on the fly-leaf is a long Latin note attributing the work to a Dr. Read who died in 1641". Mr. Wilkin gives no indication of the source of these copies, both of which, through the kindness of his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Wilkin, are with the other Sir Thomas Browne papers in the Norwich Museum. Especial interest is attached to Wilkin II which the late Mr. Charles Williams of Norwich claimed to be in the handwriting of Sir Thomas Browne.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE
Religio Medici.

5. Pembroke College, Oxford. Presented to the Library in 1783 by the Rev. T. Wrigley. 4^o. 37 folios. Complete. Divided into sections (54) but not into parts. Most appropriate that a MS of the Religio should be in possession of Browne's old college.
6. Havilland Hall (47, Wimpole Street). Small 4^o. Book plate of W.B. Dr. Hall's father, Mr. William Hall of Tottenham, wrote to Wilkin, "I found it about forty years ago among some old things that came from Mimm's House, Herts, originally occupied by a family of Brown. How my grandfather became possessed of the manuscript I do not know. He died in the year 1792". 263 pages. No division into sections, though the second part is marked, beginning at page 142.
7. Osler Library. Folio size. 126 pages. No division into sections. Second part indicated at page 88. In general character, particularly in the omissions, this manuscript resembles more closely the Havilland Hall MS than the others. The manuscript had been in a Lancashire library for two and a half centuries, bound in a volume of historical pieces bearing dates from 1613 to 1631. It was sold at Sotheby's in 1906.

No one of these seven manuscripts agree in all particulars with each other or with the surreptitious editions of 1642 or the authorized text of 1643. Wilkin's remark "I am therefore perfectly satisfied that Sir Thomas Browne had several originals by his own hand, differing from each other. This opinion is confirmed - by the information of those who knew him "that it was his constant practice to make repeated copies of his compositions" - as well as by an examination of his remaining manuscripts".

The standard text, of course, is the 1643 edition, sent to the press by Browne himself. A page of errata, often missing, was printed with it. Eight editions were printed during the life-time of the author, but he did not even take the trouble to see that they were corrected in any one of them. Once issued he seems not to have taken much interest in its welfare, and indeed in one of his commonplace books he speaks slightingly of it as "a piece of mine published long ago". Browne has been fortunate in his editors. Wilkin's big edition in four volumes is a monument of careful work, and the Religio has been studied by Greenhill in a way that leaves very little for subsequent students. The Golden Treasury edition can never be superseded. In it Greenhill has given careful notes of the readings of the early editions and occasionally of the MSS. I have had the seven MSS collated with the two surreptitious editions and with the authorized 1643.