DIVINATION IN PSEUDODOXIA EPIDEMICA:
THOMAS BROWNE’S HABITS OF REVISION

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The number and types of divination or augury known to early modern savants such as Thomas Browne were as various as the creatures of the earth: from dowsing to hepatoscopy (divination by entrails), from rune casting to critomancy (divination by cakes), and from ornithomancy (construal of bird patterns) to tyromancy (divination by the coagulation of cheese).1 Attitudes to such practices varied just as widely. While Francis Bacon (1561–1626), in his Advancement of Learning (1605), dismissed augury from natural phenomena as ‘for the most part […] superstitious’, seventeenth-century Britons nevertheless continued casting lots, scrying clouds, and predicting the weather using pigs’ spleens.2 Given the enduring fascination of such popular customs, it is no surprise that Thomas Browne should hold them up for scrutiny in Book V of Pseudodoxia Epidemica. Browne’s survey of augural practices reveals not only the quality of his scepticism regarding divination per se, it also sheds light on aspects of his method of inquiry more generally. In particular, small but significant revisions made by Browne to the section on divination in Book V of Pseudodoxia – traced through the evolution of the work’s six printed editions between 1646 and 1672 – reflect Browne’s responsiveness to a changing intellectual climate in mid-seventeenth-century Britain, and demonstrate his willingness to adapt his approach to popular practices such as divination accordingly.

As Robin Robbins has observed, the focus of modern scholarship on Browne’s works has shifted away from an earlier emphasis on prose

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style; instead, recent critical work has been particularly interested to debate the extent to which Browne might be classified as ‘creator of a persona, epistemologist, Baconian discoverer, and popularizer of the new learning’.3 This essay seeks to contribute to this continuing debate by drawing attention to the emergent nature of Browne’s thought through the early editions of *Pseudodoxia* – the characteristics of which are revealed in a telling shift, between 1646 and 1672, in the vocabulary (if not the method) of Browne’s inquiries into the truth or falsity of enduring popular customs such as divination.

1. *Divination in the Works of Thomas Browne: Literary Context*

In 1826 William Hazlitt (1778–1830) reported that the two authors from the past whom Charles Lamb (1775–1834) would most like to have met were Thomas Browne and Fulke Greville (1554–1628). Hazlitt quotes Lamb’s justification for his choice: ‘their writings [Browne’s and Greville’s] are riddles, and they themselves the most mysterious of personages. They resemble the soothsayers of old, who dealt in dark hints and doubtful oracles.’4 Lamb’s reported remarks are directed both at Browne’s self-declared willingness in *Religio Medici* (1642) to lose himself ‘in a mystery’, and more particularly at ‘that obscure but gorgeous prose-composition, the *Urn-burial*’.5 But to what extent does Browne’s work consider the practice of divination and ‘doubtful oracles’ themselves?

Aside from Browne’s extended treatment of divination in Book V of *Pseudodoxia*, his writings contain three significant references to the subject. First, in a letter written on “A Prophecy Concerning the Future State

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5 Hazlitt W., “Of Persons” 525.