‘THERE IS ALL AFRICA […] WITHIN US’: LANGUAGE, GENERATION AND ALCHEMY IN BROWNE’S EXPLICATION OF BLACKNESS

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[...] the mind of Man is farre from the Nature of a cleare and equall glasse, wherein the beames of things should reflect according to their true incidence.¹

Thomas Browne’s Pseudodoxia epidemica: or, Enquiries into very many Received Tenents and commonly presumed Truths, more commonly known as Vulgar Errors, was published in 1646 and reissued in five successive editions in the author’s lifetime. Within Pseudodoxia’s “cabinet of curiosity”, three chapters are devoted to the discussion of blackness (book VI, chapters X “Of the Blacknesse of Negroes”, XI “Of the same” and XII “A digression concerning Blacknesse”) which, though at times ‘plundered for choice quotations’,² have yet to receive full exposition and analysis.³ Mary Baine Campbell offers the most detailed study of these chapters to date, but limits her analysis of Browne’s representation of blackness to eight pages.⁴ Moreover, in keeping with Joan Bennett’s note that only two chapters in Pseudodoxia discuss the blackness of Negroes, Campbell also discounts Chapter XII; she says that in this chapter Browne ‘addresses the general referent of “Blackness”, separating it

from the putatively paradoxical relation to human skin’. In contrast, we see a thematic and philosophical link between Browne’s focus on the materiality of blackness in this chapter and his earlier consideration of how black skin may have been acquired: each of the three chapters draws on imagery associated with alchemy.

To show the significance of Browne’s articulation of the false origins and probable causes of blackness, his discussion will be examined within the context of contemporary rhetorical and scientific theories of colour, and of relations between self and world, microcosm and macrocosm. This essay will illustrate how Browne’s use of figurative language to contest the two following commonly perceived notions – firstly, that blackness results from heliotropic causes; and secondly, that blackness is a divine curse ‘derived unto them from Cham, upon whom it was inflicted for discovering the nakedness of Noah’ (1.518) – complicates, yet retains, the early modern European commonplace notion of blackness as deriving from an original white identity. This essay will also show that Browne’s discussion of black skin as artifice, or something that may be ‘procured’, positions blackness within theories of art and nature; the imagination and generation; and thus interlinks with his more extended focus on alchemy and the materiality of blackness in the “Digression concerning Blacknesse”.

1. ‘Darkness and Light’: Authority, Memory and Knowledge

Browne’s scientific enquiry into “blackness” needs to be understood within the context of both the new seventeenth-century emphasis on empirical research and the idea of correspondences between subject and object that underpins the ancient microcosm-macrocosm model of the universe. Man as microcosm is both of nature and, through his rational faculties, distinct from it. The alchemist-physician Paracelsus (1493–1541) believed that a physician should study cosmography, since correspondences and similitudes between the microcosm and the macrocosm constitute the foundation of all knowledge. Browne pursues

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6 We will employ the term ‘man’ for the generic human species in keeping with the practice of the period.