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Error, Sprawl and Epistemological Poise in Thomas Browne: how to Sit Right at the Last Supper

Error, in early modernity, has an oscillatory quality: on the one hand, it is a mild and trifling thing, a cognitive lapse, an accident or minor carelessness; and on the other hand, it is something heinous and evil—because heresy is also error, not so much a weakness of the will as a positive hardening and emboldening of our natural turpitude. In the 17th century, this bi-polar quality of error is illustrated nowhere so effectively as in Thomas Browne’s Pseudodoxia Epidemica (1646), an encyclopaedia of error, whose long first book (“The Causes of Common Error”) attends to the psychology of our fractured humanity, credulous and supine, docile and derivative, illogical and obstinate. We are, it seems, kaleidoscopically fallen. But as it turns out, our devilish errors are not so soul-shaking and Browne produces a catalogue of mildly amusing errors, sometimes in the spirit of scientific or anthropological enquiry, but as often for the pleasure of errors that arrive pre-corrected and delicious. This essay traces the very particular epistemological poise that Browne’s most lengthy work represents in the history of error.

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*Pendant la première modernité, l’erreur oscille entre la broutille, l’anomalie cognitive, la méprise ou la simple bévue d’une part, et de l’autre le péché, le mal et l’hérésie, erreur qui ne relève plus d’une quelconque faiblesse mais résulte d’une turpitude trop humaine, à laquelle il serait donné libre cours. Au cours du XVIIe siècle, cette propriété duelle de l’erreur s’incarne de façon exemplaire dans l’encyclopédie des erreurs de Thomas Browne,* Pseudodoxia Epidemica *(1646), dont le long premier volume (« Les causes de l’erreur commune ») traite de la psychologie humaine, tantôt marquée par la crédulité et l’indolence, docile et suiveuse, tantôt irrationnelle et obstinée, toujours divisée. La chute originelle ferait de nous un kaléidoscope brisé. Pourtant, nos erreurs diaboliques ne sont pas toujours synonymes de la perdition de l’âme. Browne produit un catalogue d’erreurs amusantes, dans une démarche d’exploration scientifique et anthropologique, mais aussi pour le plaisir d’erreurs bénignes et savoureuses. Cet article retrace la posture épistémologique de Browne dans son ouvrage le plus conséquent au regard de l’histoire de l’erreur.*

There are few such diligent collectors of error as Thomas Browne (1605-82), whose *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, sometimes known by its running-title *Vulgar Errors*, heaps them high, in any number of fields, scientific, classical, biblical and beyond. Published in 1646, at the height of the civil wars, and in a period of often fervent polemical warfare, *Pseudodoxia* is remarkable as much for its stylistic equanimity, its almost indulgent rehearsing of error, as for its wide range. But at the same time, Browne includes some of the sternest statements on the infectious and dangerous character of error to be found in the era, its poisonous and viral nature. Though tonally very far from the wrangles that animated the period, his subject matter veers, albeit gingerly, on topics that in other hands would be intrinsically political. This apparently incompatible element of his writing—that error, an otherwise serious, even deadly affair, is treated in so indulgent a fashion—makes him one of the most interesting and often paradoxical of writers on error, which, for Browne, often involves some kind of pleasure.

Anne Carson, in her poem “Essay on What I Think About Most,” writes on the *emotion* of error, a distinct enjoyment in encountering its rupture of logic, how it halts our progress, “the mind moving along a plane surface / Of ordinary language / When suddenly / That surface breaks or complicates.” Error is a thrill, but also a device that waylays us and refuses to negotiate. The speaker likes a “good mistake,” she explains, exemplifying this via the Spartan lyric poet Alkman (Carson’s spelling for Alcman), whose fragment of poem seems unable to count the seasons correctly, missing out summer when there might be enough to eat—and “Hunger always feels like a mistake.” But Alkman’s speaker doggedly goes on, “unbalancing his arithmetic” of the seasons, knotting us in its imperfection, while “blurting out the truth in spite of itself. / Many a poet aspires / to this tone of inadvertent lucidity” (50–51). Carson’s poem tests and revels in manifest errors, allowed to sit uncorrected, and in how they can reveal their collateral truth (a phrase of Thomas Browne’s that I will return to). The reader, the error-corrector (no, there are four seasons!) cannot alter, and is half-implicated in, the implacable grating fact of the non-fact. Carson traces a kind of delight in the similarity between error and the character of poetic language. The pleasure of outlandish error, she suggests, is akin to that of metaphor, which positively preens itself on its category mistake, its right wrongness, where the inexactitude, or its excess of resemblance, produces its thrilling illusion of logic, in need of disentangling. She cites Aristotle with full Bekker reference (*Rhetoric,* 1410b10–13) in the body of her poem, itself a kind of error in genre, that such fodder for footnotes can have a place in poetry.

Early modernity, often hyper-alert to the manifold dangers of error, with its diabolic root and heretical consequences, might not seem open to the pleasures of error that Carson writes of, but—and this is in large part the argument of this essay—sometimes the serious and the playful can coexist. It does, in any case, seem that the era was wholly alert to the strange proximity of error to the character of poetic thought, both involving a sense of malfunction, in language and in logic. The era was wary of the figurative—whether simile, allegory, or the panoply of analogical rhetorical tropes—even if it was deft in wielding it. George Puttenham notes, in relation to metaphor, how those “grave judges” the *Areopagites* forbade “all manner of figurative speaches to be used before them in their consistorie of Justice, as meere illusions to the minde” (1589, 3.7. See Leonard 15–22, on error and figurative language). The era appreciated, too, that it is hardly possible to think without the figurative, that it was the privilege of poets to invent and concoct fabulous tales in the service of truth, and that good didactic purpose often demanded the subterfuge of parable, allegory and metaphor. The ramifications of this were not confined to the literary: religious disputes very often involved themselves in working out the parameters of the symbolic and the literal—most notably, for example, in the Eucharist, but also across the sprawling territory of idolatry. Even a figure as averse to controversy as Thomas Browne could relish this, as some of the examples to follow will trace.

Error in the always emotionally volatile England of the 17th century encompassed very different things, from the nearly insignificant to the soul-threateningly grave: it was not only, or not primarily, a matter of “fact,” but rather involved a fact-got-wrong as a result of human turpitude or meanness or apathy; it had an emotional charge and was always symptomatic of something other than itself, a chain of things beyond it, often leading back invariably to Eve. There was gradation, of course. It might involve a mild and trifling slippage, a cognitive lapse, an accident or minor carelessness—and as such it could even be usefully heuristic, not particularly evil; unless, that is, it was heinous, because heresy was also error, not so much a weakness of the will as a positive hardening and emboldening of natural malice. In the face of the latter, where every religious, intellectual or scholarly slip was yet another sign of one’s enemies’ thoroughgoing vileness, tolerance was no virtue. A stand had to be taken, to battle our first and fallen Adamic proclivity to “error [...] wherein all the sonnes of *Adam* are so deepely drenshed,” as John Healey’s 1610 translation of Augustine’s *Of the citie of God* has it (902). François Rigolot, exploring the era’s range of responses to error—denounced or indulged, condemned or enjoyed—notes “the involuntary character of error, with its uncanny origin and often disastrous consequences. [...] One never errs intentionally. A premeditated crime is not an error,” except of course in Christian terms, when the situation is reversed and intentionality becomes crucial, even while our *errores*, our lost human wandering with its Miltonic gravity of error infuses every aspect of our wretched fallen lives (Rigolot 1223).

This bi-polar response to error is illustrated nowhere so effectively as in Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), an encyclopaedia of falsehoods, whose long first book (“The Causes of Common Error”)attends to the psychology of fractured humanity, constitutionally doomed and malevolently inclined to getting things wrong: every pit and snare we fall into; we are credulous and supine, docile and derivative, illogical and obstinate; we are kaleidoscopically fallen, and prone to the wiles of Satan. Or at least so it would seem from the extensive anatomy of error in the opening book, which is sometimes an epistemological manifesto and sometimes a Protestant anthropology of the fallen self. The devil, we are given to understand, is everywhere, even in minor slips and in every sum done badly: “the uniqueness of his malice hunts after simple lapses.” But why, Browne asks, would the devil trouble himself with such paltry business? “For maligning the tranquility of truth, he [Satan] delighteth to trouble its streames, and being a professed enemy unto God (who is truth it selfe) he promoteth any error as derogatory to his nature, and revengeth himself in every deformity from truth” (Browne 1.1.71, see Killeen 34–40).[[1]](#footnote-1) Such an uncompromising statement—that the devil involves himself in and gets a kick even from insignificant and inconsequential mistakes—might well seem to align Browne with the more rigid moralists of a stringent age.

But as it turns out, the devilish errors, as they unfold over the subsequent six books, are not really so soul-shaking: that “an elephant hath no joynts,” that “a man hath one rib less than a woman,” that the root of Mandrake “resembleth the shape of man” and “gives a shreek under eradication,” to name a few (Browne 3.1, 7.2, 2.6). A catalogue of mildly amusing errors is traced, sometimes in the spirit of scientific or anthropological enquiry, but as often for the shared pleasure of quibbles that (usually) arrive pre-corrected and delicious. Browne can sometimes seem positively indulgent of his errors, regretfully conceding, for example, that mermaids, unicorns, or God depicted as an old man are not, strictly considered, real. He rehearses his hundreds of humanist, scientific, and religious canards, performing the twists and turns by which he traces how the error came into being, its presence in esteemed—and rarely “vulgar,” in the sense of “folk”—sources, and the character of its tenacity. After the stern opening, we encounter Browne as the lenient orchestrator of the implausible, a mapper of human foibles.

Browne ranges across the disciplines, finding a feast of trivia: a misreading of a Hebrew vowel or a too-tenacious and literal insistence on a tale that was only intended figuratively and poetically. Or he finds signs of the devil and his thoroughgoing wiles, provoking his minor and trivial—but nevertheless diabolical—errors, to set us on the pathway to more damnable untruths. If these are often a matter of demonstrably, factually mistaken notions, Browne attends also to a hinterland of error, what remains unsaid, textual silences, and, as Jessica Wolfe explores, “how to construe textual oversights, omissions, deficiencies, and evasions” (105). While there are plenty of statements that take a stern view of mistakenness as egregious, Browne’s work is generally viewed as forbearing, a mildly amused collation of the errors that had washed up on the shores of early modernity. Error, in *Pseudodoxia*, could range from the delightful and poetic to the inconsequential and trifling, and it could be a spur, in Baconian fashion, to epistemological alertness. Much noted is the fact that Browne alludes, in his prefatory epistle, to Bacon’s call for an “advancement of learning” by “expurgation,” creating what Bacon terms a “Kalendar of popular errors,” a “registering of doubts […] as so many suckers or sponges […] that Mans knowledge be not weakened nor imbased by such drosse and vanitie” (Browne, “To the Reader,”; Bacon, ed. Kiernan 91–92). Error, traced systematically, can be carefully weeded, and Browne announces himself a field-worker, clearing the overgrowth. The Baconian frisson suggested here is, in a certain sense, pervasive in the work—Browne’s scientific and medical gaze is brought to bear on many questions—but it is also the case that his biblical, theological and classical-patristic frames of reference are everywhere, from his attention to animals, to art and geographical curiosa, and they demand a quite different dynamic. If he sometimes carries the flail of reason and experiment-experience (Robbins, in Browne, xxxvi), more often his task is weeding an overgrowth of hieroglyphic excess, or the tangles of interpretative and exegetical complexity, the figurative and metaphorical misunderstood (see Woodward on Browne’s “double hermeneutics”; Dodds on style and error, and Iannaccaro on the character of Brownian complexity). But Browne is also not so very far from the dog-fights of religious disputation that are the soundtrack to the English civil war, even while, in tone, he is rarely involved in these skirmishes himself.

Browne’s sprawling range of error is beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses more closely on his balancing acts of engagement and disengagement from the wrangling of his era. While we might think of this across the whole lengthy work—how it maintains, or sometimes does not maintain, its poise, epistemological and political, as it negotiates the poles of error—it is also the case that on the smaller scale of the individual chapters, he is similarly engaged in his complex rhetorical manoeuvres, evasions and retracts. Here, I look primarily at one: Brown’s musing on the Last Supper, in which he engages not with the always fraught post-Reformation questions around the Eucharist, but rather with its seating protocols. The essay will conclude, more briefly, with attention to the character of digression, looking at a second chapter, on the glutton-parasite Philoxenus, and an exploration of avian anatomy that Browne deploys to consider how best to stimulate an epicure’s gullet. That these two errors occur on their different scholarly terrains—the biblical and the classical, one involving potentially fraught religious subject matter, while the other is ostentatiously speculative—will serve to highlight still more fully the dynamic of the serious-playful strategy of Browne’s error-hunting.

There is something more to say by way of preface about the character of error and the non-committal poise in Browne’s work. The epidemic of falsehood that constituted *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* was published in the same year as Thomas Edwards’ *Gangraena* (1646), the latter subtitled *A catalogue and discovery of many of the errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices of the Sectaries*, itself following close on the heels of Ephraim Pagitt’s *Heresiography* (1645). Browne had noted the proliferation of such sects in *Religio Medici* (1.8)*,* and though *Pseudodoxia* is more reticent, indeed contains nearly no acknowledgement of the increasingly fraught politics of sectarianism, he includes quite an extensive account of the devil’s activity in ruffling the mind and endangering the soul. Long before Baudelaire made the same claim in *Le Spleen de Paris* (29), Browne notes the devil’s finest trick is to make us think he does not exist, “insinuating into men’s mindes there is no divell at all,” or exasperating us with the “melancholy depravements of phancy,” till, overwhelmed with the insolidity of it all, the devil awaits our spiritual exhaustion. As a model of how we succumb, he conjures up the wheedling figure of Cassius the Epicurean gaslighting Brutus (though the era did not yet have an equivalent word for the act) by insisting that the spectre he had seen was no such thing, “ready at hand to perswade him it was but a mistake in his weary imagination” (Browne 1.10.64). The Trumpish Devil, who would swear black is white, continually muddies the water with fine-grained doubts and metaphysical quibbling. *Pseudodoxia* remains a slightly baffling text, one that is regularly plundered for what its individual chapters have to say, but which, considered in the round, is a trickier object to gauge. Though we are told at one point that the Devil enjoys simple as well as compound error (“yet doth he also deal in points of speculation, and things whose knowledge terminates in themselves”) it is also the case that few if any errors do not germinate further, and it is this associative sprawl that I want mainly to note, how minor lapse relates to major sin, how harmless folk-saying connects with hideous iniquity (1.11.70).

It is worth noting, in this regard, the difficulties of register and genre that plague (or generate) the book. The longstanding supposition about *Pseudodoxia* is this: that Browne is not interested in any *really* vulgar errors. He is no Keith Thomas, scouring the countryside for residual superstitious thinking (see Phillips 2017, Thomas). Errors matter only when they can be learnedly sourced. That a Norwich yokel believes that hares are transsexual is of less importance than Plutarch and Philostratus believing so; occasionally perhaps he may go as late as Cardan asserting hermaphroditical principles in the mares who drew Nero’s chariot, but he has in this account, again, little interest in what a 17th-century vet believed about such possibilities (3.17). Such a characterization of Browne, true in part, also comes up against his interest in scientific writing, by which he updates and corrects *Pseudodoxia* across its new editions, six of them between 1646 and 1672. In part, it may be that any humanist like any physician in the era takes authority seriously and likes to quote copiously. Browne mentions explicitly a number of figures who write on medical “popular errors,” such as Laurent Joubert, *Erreurs Populaires* (1578),Scipione (Girolamo) Mercurio, *De gli errori popolari d’Italia* (1603), and James Primrose, *De vulgi in Medicina Erroribus* (1638) and while he is a little disappointed with what he finds in these, and their ragbag genre, he evidently enjoys the form and is content to attribute his highly learned errors to the “vulgar”—we might note also a number of works that cover related ground, including Gaspard Bachot,*Erreurs populaires* (1626), Étienne de Clave, *Paradoxes* *[…] contre l’opinion vulgaire* (1635), and Jean d’Espagne, *Les Erreurs populaires* (1639) (See Leonard and Parker; Mori 357–61).

There is also something slightly absurd in not taking Browne at his word that this is a book of “vulgar” errors, for it is this oscillating quality that gives the book its texture, and which I want to explore in this essay, not to claim that the work is about “folk” beliefs and superstitions, but to argue that it is about what, for Browne, is the vulgar politics at the edges of his errors. Browne is certainly learned and Latinate, bookish and scholarly, but his encyclopaedia has a range of resonances and connections, and it is this idea of the social register of error that I want to pursue. He is aware and his readers are aware, I take it, of the connotative politics that accrue around his errors, their political (with a small p) subjects. This matters, not least because of the deep-set associative logic of error—the movement from the pedantic to the political—being akin to the associative logic of sin that beset Adam—sin that spills over and error that is leaky and infectious in all directions.

**Etiquette and Dining with Jesus**

Browne’s chapter “Of the Pictures of Eastern Nations, and the Jews at their Feasts, especially our Saviour at the Passover” (5.6) addresses the apparently inconsequential question of how Jesus and the apostles ought to be depicted at the Last Supper. Initially, at least, this seems like a painterly, philological and historical concern with accuracy, *ut pictura poesis*, that the representation ought punctiliously to reflect how things were. Browne concludes that the correct posture and pose for the scene is not a Leonardo da Vinci Last Supper, upright, animate and luminous at a long table. This was not explicitly doctrinal and there were Protestant upright equivalents, among which we might note Lucas Cranach the Younger’s astonishing Burgher-feast, in which Christ is surrounded by Reformed theologians with a hearty roast lamb heaped upon the table (cf. fig. 1). These, though, are not right: the Last Supper, Browne concludes, should be shown with the disciples lounging, leaning on their elbows, in the manner of a sumptuous slumber party. He is not, and this is generally true of the book (Book 5 is entitled “Of Pictures”), critiquing any particular portrayal, but is rather exploring the parameters of the literal. If, however, we were to seek models, Nicolas Poussin’s series of paintings on the Seven Sacraments, the earliest versions of which were painted in the 1630s, would serve the purpose (fig. 2). But it is how Browne arrives at his conclusion and what is covertly at stake in this that is my interest here, in that it shows the sinuous, the polyform character of error. “Art,” however it may be construed, is hardly the issue at all.

Fig. 1. Lucas Cranach the Younger, *The Last Supper* (*Epitaph for Prince Joachim of Anhalt)* (1565), painting on limewood, 257,5 x 209 cm, St John’s Church, Dessau-Roßlau, Germany

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lucas\_Cranach\_d.J.\_-\_Das\_Abendmahl\_(Johanniskirche\_Dessau).jpg

Fig. 2. Nicolas Poussin, *The Last supper, The Seven Sacraments, Second Series,* (*L’Eucharistie, les Sept Sacrements, deuxième série*), 1647, oil on canvas, 117 x 178 cm, Scottish National Gallery, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seven\_Sacraments\_-\_Holy\_Eucharist\_II\_(1647)\_-\_Poussin\_-\_NGofScotland.jpg

Ostensibly, the questions addressed are of a strictly historical bent: in what posture did the ancients eat, relaxed-recumbent or formally seated? Hovering around this might be a concern not to have the apostles appear louche or too casual at this most solemn moment. Propriety, it seems, was in potential interpretative collision with the need for exegetical accuracy. We hear later in the chapter of the troublingly relaxed gesture of the disciple in the gospel phrase “Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of his Disciples whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23). Both the etiquette of this snuggling and the physical contortion of eating dinner in this way were difficult to comprehend, prompting a concern which, Browne explains, “imputed this gesture of the beloved Disciple unto Rusticity, or an act of incivility”—many depictions have John nestling down between Christ and his plate. For early modern readers, the evidence seemed to suggest that Jewish eating habits might have been similar to Roman, Greek or Persian dining while reclining, mined from Martial, Seneca, Athenaeus or Plutarch, and much of the chapter is devoted to rehearsing this material. But this created the additional problem that such lounging seemed not so far, in its prandial tone, from the debauchery of classical Gods and orgyesque Romans,as in Raphael’s near-naked banquet fresco in the Farnesina, with its tale of Cupid and Psyche. To depict slouching disciples might not seem appropriate to the gravity of the occasion, decorum at odds with realism.

Presuming that the attention Browne lavishes on this topic is to be taken seriously, we might note an extensive set of learned discussions that treat the question of the Last Supper’s seating as a matter of some importance. Many of these are mentioned explicitly in the text, and can be traced to editions in Browne’s library (the Sales Catalogue of which is extant): Justus Lipsius, *De Ritu Conviviorum apud Romanos* (1592), Claude Salmasius, *Plinianae Exercitationes* (1629), Girolamo Mercurialis, *De Arte Gymnastica* (1644), Petrus Ciacconius, *De Triclinio Romano* (1588), or Giovanni Battista Casali (Casalius), *De Antiquis Romanorum Ritibus* (1644). These sometimes reuse the images, and often the scholarship, of their predecessors. Commentary on Ezekiel 23:41 (the child prostitutes, Aholah and Aholibah, lolling on “a stately bed,” and a table prepared before it) and on the Gospels themselves also yield expansive discussion, in sources such as Johannis Baptistae Villalpandi, *In Ezechielem Explanationes* (1596) and Benedict Pererius, *Selectarum disputationum in sacram scripturam* (1610). The impressive annotations to Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* by Robin Robbins (1981) are a goldmine of such sources and clearly reflect an important pool of humanist endeavour, that matters to the early modern error-seeker, always looking *ad fontes*. One had to have a rich set of linguistic and scholarly skills to convince discerning readers in an era that liked its learning to be authoritatively dense.

However, these well-sourced *loci* for the chapter are also not quite sufficient, because they do not really reveal *why* the question mattered, and mattered anew in early modern England; and the answer to this lies in a different set of contemporary sources. The electric political charge of this question in 1646 was one of church decorum, how one behaved at the Eucharist, whether one knelt or did not kneel at communion, all tied into the wider issue of *adiaphora*, ceremony, vestments, genuflection, and church decor. Browne himself is reticent about, though not by any means oblivious to, the quasi-political currency and the ecclesiastical energies that animate his discussion. We might look at the debates from the 1620s through to the 1640s, between, for instance, David Calderwood, *A defence of our arguments against kneeling* (1620) and Thomas Paybody, *A just apologie for the gesture of kneeling* (1629), or Henry Leslie, *A treatise of the authority of the church* (1637), and there are many such skirmishes on ecclesiastical probity, between Puritans, Laudians and Catholics that attend, in detail, to the gestures and posture of the disciples, in relation to contemporary ecclesiastical practice. This is a mode of writing, with its pugnacious style, that we do not readily associate with Browne, and we do not find many such polemical spats in his Sales Catalogue—though it may do an injustice to such works to suggest that this was an intrinsically ephemeral form: they are often far more substantial than mere pamphlets. Browne rarely seems animated by mere controversy, and his style is wholly alien to such works. Nevertheless, the history of “error” has porous generic boundaries, and the same questions can occur in the highest scholarly register and the most jeering populist religious screed.

As it happens, in this case, we have a writer who is tonally much closer to Browne, who deals with and depicts the issues at stake in the Last Supper quite graphically. Examining this text, Edward Kellet’s *Tricoenivm Christi in nocte proditionis suae: The Threefold Supper of Christ* (1641), is well worthwhile, in that it shows how fraught and associatively rich the subject proved to be. Kellet, prebendary of Exeter, is one of the sources to whom Browne returns frequently, though without mentioning him—he is at least a little averse to citing his contemporaries in English, when a Latinate source is available. There are some one-step-removed biographical connections with Browne’s circles of acquaintances—but nothing substantial. Nevertheless, his writing chimes closely with Browne’s, for example Kellet’s *Miscellanies in Divinitie* (1633) on the nature of the soul, which intersects quite frequently with Browne’s *Religio Medici*.

A text published in 1641, on the eve of the civil war, on such a subject as *The Threefold Supper of Christ*—the Eucharist—can hardly be innocent of its potential controversy. It rehearses for English readers a full range of antiquarian detail that serves as context for the Last Supper, acknowledging Pererius, Scaliger, and others. Kellet concludes that while we can accept that the Jews of Roman Palestine probably reclined while eating, Passover nevertheless had to be understood as exegetically multi-storied, that it was, at different points, legalistic, domestic and Eucharistic. There were *three* last suppers that needed to be superimposed on each other. Each part served different commemorative and theological purposes and produced its own complex exegetical conundra. The Mosaic Passover supper, derived from the memorial strictures in Exodus (12:3–11) and Deuteronomy (16:5–9), was the event that brought Jesus and the apostles together in Jerusalem, and had its several symbolic, legal and social layers, each demanding their own hermeneutic and, it seems, their own menu: “The first Supper was onely a Sacrament of the Old Testament, and Type of the New Testament; whereof they ate but sparingly. For sacred morsels were never intended to be fill-bellies” (Kellet 225). Then there was the actual eating—domestic, in which the apostles might relax even as far as adopting a slouched posture—in which mode, John’s leaning on the bosom of Jesus might suggest just the couch in front of Jesus. But the third element of the supper, its Eucharistic quality, is something else again—mysterious (in the theological sense), outside ordinary time in its sacramental force. The Christian specificity of the moment even leads Kellet to wonder whether Jesus need bother to be precise in Jewish legal matters which would, by his edict or at least the Pauline interpretation of it, soon be abrogated. This division of the Last Supper into three phases also allowed Kellet to vent against the idea that Judas could be said to have taken part in the Eucharist: “Would Christ suffer the first institution of his last Divine Supper, to be polluted, by the presence of a Traytor? Or did *Judas* eate of that body, which he murthered? Or drinke of that blood which he caused to be shed?” (Kellet 344).

Kellet’s title page (fig. 3) features three images of the Last Supper: one with the disciples sitting upright for the legal supper, while another has them slouching in the classical manner, but the most prominent is the Eucharistic image which, controversially, has the disciples—or rather eleven of them, minus Judas—kneeling in a row in front of Christ who himself distributes the communion host, the whole scene aglow with Laudian propriety. This idea of the apostles kneeling thus would be to many, in the fever-pitch of the 1640s, an idolatrous, crypto-Catholic outrage and an exegetical nonsense, skewing the biblical for the self-serving aggrandizement of the clergy. Likewise, the notion that the Last Supper should be so elaborated as though it involved the several courses of a banquet might seem a frippery; the shape of the table in Kellet’s cover-image in fact changes, mid-meal, from the rectangular, altar-like object to the classically-correct *sigma*, “made in the forme of an halfe moone, the one part of it being cut in with an arch or semicircle,” as Thomas Goodwin reports (Goodwin, *Romanae historiae anthologia*, 1614, 77). Kellet himself goes into some detail on the character of the *sigma* couch (191), without, it seems, being concerned about what, in film parlance, might be called the continuity issues between one shot and the next. Whatever the forgetfulness of the engraver, the overall purpose was this: that the theological, sacramental and typological quandaries of the Eucharist be made to coexist with a literal and historically precise analysis of the text.

Fig. 3. Edward Kellet’s *Tricoenivm Christi in nocte proditionis suae: The Threefold Supper of Christ* (1641), title page and facing engraving. “Images courtesy of Lambeth Palace Library

With Kellet’s idiosyncratic and doctrinally loaded account in mind, we can return to Browne’s chapter, which, having traced the classical and Judaic contexts that might help the reader imagine the scene, then borrows Kellet’s scheme of a threefold supper quite precisely:

The first [supper] was that Legall one of the Passeover, or eating of the Paschall Lamb with bitter herbs, and ceremonies described by Moses [...] The second was common and Domesticall, consisting of ordinary and undefined provisions [...] The third or later part was Eucharisticall, which began at the breaking and blessing of the bread. (385)

That this is controversial territory receives no mention in the text: Browne merely incorporates the potent aspects of his debate silently, so that this *might* pass for playful trivia, error in its minor rather than its major key. The text passes on, serenely, to discuss, on the back of this, a number of biblical translations that do not take account of custom and historical contingency: when, for example, it is written that Christ, in the temple, read and “closed the book” (Luke 4:20), it may be “proper unto the paginall books of our times, but not so agreeable unto volumes or rolling bookes in use among the Jews” (386). Browne then looks at Passover customs that have been abrogated—daubing one’s doorpost with blood, for example. If we no longer need to follow that custom, how far do we need to replicate precisely the biblical Passover supper scene, in our commemoration?

Before returning to what Browne’s elaborate account of apostolic seating can show us about his understanding of error, it might be worth putting this in a different context of what constitutes a *source* from the point of view of a modern editor or reader; the editorial question arises, in particular, with a new Oxford edition of *Pseudodoxia* in the works. Do we need to assert a high degree of probability that the texts we mentionwere *open* on Browne’s table, or do we only need to suggest a looser orbit of relevance, those whom we deem within the penumbra of our authors? Kellet is not mentioned in Robin Robbins’s edition of *Pseudodoxia*, which by and large adopts the solution of using the Sales Catalogue—full of biblical commentaries we know were in his library. This is in some ways sensible, even while quite a few works that we know Browne used are absent from it, George Hakwill’s *Apologie* (1627)or Walter Ralegh’s *History of the World* (1617) for example. But the still more important problem with this use of the Sales Catalogue is that it makes Browne sound like he has gone to theology camp; and setting him too exclusively in a learned Latinate context drains the work of its particular political-theological electricity. In fact, Kellet finds himself in a source-acknowledgement quandary as well, when in an appendix (659), he notes having discovered the notion of the triple-supper solution, retrospectively, in two Jesuit authors, Jan Wauters van Vieringen, *De triplici coena Christi agni, vulgari, eucharistica* (1617), and Theophilus Raynaud, *Optimae vitae, finis pessimus* (1634), while also insisting he came up with the idea himself.

We might understand this whole question of the Last Supper within that very Brownian discursive strategy, calling in an excessive artillery of learning wholly disproportionate to so quibblingly indifferent and inconsequential a matter—lavishing effort on a very minor point, implying that once you have got this particular quiddity sorted, the rest of your interpretation can be taken as read. This can be very close to a joke, in its over-punctilious connoisseurship, a vast apparatus of humanist erudition brought to bear on mere minutiae, a studied disproportion of scholarship and subject matter. Or we might suppose, as well, that Browne is luxuriating in a rich vocabulary of never-before or rarely-used Latinate terms for lying down shoelessly on a couch during dinner: “accubation,” “discumbancy,” “accumbing,” “cubiculary,” “discubitory,” “tricliniary,” “discalceation,” “cenatory.” How far, then, do we need to follow Browne’s thick sourcing of the classical philology, biblical annotations, and contemporary commentators, to discern the character and the weight of the “error”? How serious is it? This is where we need the context: without being alert to the controversies of iconoclasm and ecclesiastical dispute, we might be inclined to suppose that Browne, writing in so light a tone, *must* be sharing a scholarly joke or having his readers on.

I opened this essay noting that error could range from nitpicking pedantry to grievous heresy and rampant sin. We might expand upon this and say that error, in early modernity, has about it the quality of the encyclopaedic, that any one isolated fact speaks necessarily to the entirety. It is swampy as well as specific. This, I think, is the encyclopaedic thing for Browne, that an error can oscillate and imply the whole infectious range of falsehood. Chapter after chapter in *Pseudodoxia* attends, usually in oblique form, to errors that are at once learned, delving into the humanist morass of scholarship, and edgy with the politics of error in Browne’s bellicose civil-war world. Browne’s rhetorical as well as his political character is constituted in a hyper-polite refusal to engage, a disinfected prose that only rarely allows the terms of reference of a controversy to become explicit. But from what we know of the churches and people whom Browne had connections to in Norwich—a broadly parliamentarian and Puritan city and cauldron of religious fervor—it would be hard to imagine he did not encounter the issue of communion etiquette as a continuously fraught matter (see Killeen 185–216). Error is protean, epidemic; it spills over and reformulates; it is legion, as the heresiographers might say.

While we can think of Browne’s errors as bookish, and trace the sources back, it is also the case that the depiction of the Last Supper, along with the many other Pictorial mistakes that he describes, were more likely to be encountered in churches. The error-scape in *Pseudodoxia* includes a number of chapters that speak to the history of Catholic relic-hustling, as early modern Protestants understood it: the Three Kings whose relics were reputedly in Cologne, Pope Joan who brought derision on the papacy, Saint Christopher and Saint George—these all the subject of fierce contention (7.8, 7.17, 5.16, 5.17). The whole stained-glass edifice of *Pseudodoxia*’s fifth book, with its biblical dazzle of storied windows richly-dight, was barely disguised in its political meaning, even while Browne does not mention the bare ruined choirs a single time, in *Pseudodoxia* at least, though his *Religio Medici* is more forthcoming in this respect. And there are numerous instances in which such political context shimmers at the edges, with Browne seeming to suggest that if we get the picture accurate, if it imitates the original biblical text closely enough, then who could object?

Many of Browne’s subjects, of course, do not arrive fraught with potential politics, and the valences of error might be different when he writes within the annals of tremendous pedantry, and the history of non-enormous errors, and it will be worth looking at one of these, by way of contrast, but also in so far as it shows a not-dissimilar dynamic, in which the serious and the trivial co-exist. Philoxenus was depicted as a decadent Epicure and parasite, noted in passing in Athenaeus and Plutarch. He was a figure who, as Browne’s chapter describes it, “wished the neck of a Crane, that thereby he might take more pleasure in his meat” or in a separate speculation, “to obtain advantage thereby in singing” (7.14.580–82). While Philoxenus was often the target of moral censure in early modern writings, Browne considers him in relation to the biology of gluttony, whether longer dalliance with food in the throat would lengthen the pleasure, the cue for which is Aristotle’s comment that gluttons enjoy or rather mis-enjoy the rub and touch of food more than its taste (*Eudemian Ethics*,3.2 – 1231a15). The chapter attends to the anatomical coherence of Philoxenus’s wish, the site of the taste buds and the branching of the nervous system into the tongue, followed by digressions on proportion in the length of neck and legs, greediness in animals and the musicality of different species of birds. The latter comes notwithstanding Browne’s doubts about the relevance of the musical claims, to which he brings some disambiguation, distinguishing between figures of the same name, among whom is Philoxenus of Cythera, the dithyrambic poet, who recoils at excess of wealth and feasting.

There is, in this, some splendid sprawl and digression, speaking both to the multiple registers of error and to the encyclopaedic character of its correction (on Browne’s digressive, encyclopaedic style, see West; also Knott). Errors were not only there to be chided and corrected; they should also serve a purpose on the way. In this case, the tale had a particular currency in the moralistic economy of early modern prose. A figure such as Philoxenus was proverbial, even while he might be an arcane learned reference. We can find Robert Greene using the reference to snipe against those who would with too much pleasure “swill in the sweete tast of their superfluous deinties” (*Perimedes the blacke-smith*, 1588, B2r), while Joseph Hall cites the tale in the context of a meeting at “Gourmonds hall” for “Gut-mongers,” in the “Metropolitane City of Eat-allia” (*The discovery of a new world*, 1613, 22). James I advises his son to be manly in how he eats, by reference to Philoxenus: “In the forme of your meate-eating, be neither uncivill, like a grosse Cynicke; nor affectatlie mignarde, like a daintie dame; but eate in a manlie, rounde, and honest fashion” (*Basilikon doron*, 1603, 107). A number of others might be cited, some moral, some medical, others in the emblematic mode of Spenser (*Faerie Queene*, 1.4.21).

Browne himself had a deeply ingrained medical habit of reference, and his knowledge of the body is never far from his analysis of classical and biblical stories. He notes, in rather literal fashion, that having an extended neck would not actually help you to enjoy food longer, and he does this in an extended piece of tongue theory, an anatomical digression into the nerves of the larynx and into the throat, via Galen, Vesalius and others. Here he is expounding in arabesque prose why the neck of a crane is no better that a smaller bird’s anatomy for gorging one’s food:

For, if we rightly consider the organ of taste, we shall finde the length of the neck to conduce but little unto it. For the tongue being the instrument of taste, and the tip thereof an exact distinguisher, it will not advantage the gust to have the neck extended, wherein the Gullet and conveying parts are onely seated,which partake not of the nerves of gustation or appertaining unto sapor, but receive them onely from the sixth payre; whereas the nerves of taste descend from the third and fourth propagations, and so diffuse themselves into the tongue. And therefore Cranes, Hernes, and Swans, have no advantage in taste beyond Hawkes, Kites, and others of shorter necks. (580–81)

What kind of “error” is at play here? Ostensibly, it is how best to help the aspiring glutton to a heightened experience, to avoid their wasting their anyway-only-imaginary ploy of a long neck, in order to stimulate what Ben Jonson called “the fury of men’s gullets, and their groins” (*The Staple of News*, 3.4.46). Is this Browne’s underlying purpose? Almost certainly not, but it is also the case that he reports Philoxenus’s bad behaviour with some deadpan zest, noting his habit—reported in Plutarch and elsewhere—that at their shared dishes and banquets he “was so uncivilly greedy, that to engross the mess, he would preventively deliver his nostrils in the dish,” this in the manner of a footballer who snots out of his nose on the grass, except that it is onto the plate. This is, as one might imagine, a much-repeated tale of bad manners, how some “snite their noses into the very dishes and platters with meat before them” (Plutarch, 1603, p. 606, 1128b). Dean Wren writes in the margin of his richly annotated copy of *Pseudodoxia* of the bad table manners and the greedy ruses he has encountered: “There have beene some whose slovenlye and greedines, have aequalled His: By throwing a candles end, into a messe of Creame. But more Ingenuous frame a peece of aple like a Candle, and therin stick a clove, to deceave others of their deyntyes: In fine eating the counterfet candle” (Bodleian shelfmark O2.26 Art. Seld).

There is a certain delight in all this, we might even suppose a certain game-playing that would bring its arsenal of learning—philological and anatomical—to discern as many facets to an error as possible. Browne’s neck-knowledge in natural history proves to be remarkable—Horses, Camels and Dromedaries crowd in the long-necked menagerie with Swans, Geese and Pelicans. The relative lengths of leg to neck contrast with that portion of the natural world which “have no weazon and [...] scarce any neck” elaborating helpfully: “all sorts of pectinals, Soals, Thornback, Flounders; and all crustaceous animals, as Crevises, Crabs and Lobsters.” As for the music, whose only connection to the tale is the misidentified Philoxenus, sometimes confused, there too, it seems, there would be no gain in elongation, long-necked birds having “harsh and clangous throats,” while stockier birds, “Nightingales, Finches, Linnets, Canary birds and Larks” have some uncertain advantage, when “weazon, throtle and tongue be the instruments of voice, and by their agitations do chiefly concurr unto these delightfull modulation” (581). How did the ancient glutton fail to consider all this arcane natural history and anatomical detail? “All which considered, the Wish of *Philoxenus* will hardly consist with reason” (581).

At this point, it might seem that I have talked myself out of my main argument, that error was serious, and the era unflinching in its opinion that even minor, casual and proverbial falsehoods could be deadly and could set off a chain reaction in the minds of early modern thinkers. How does this co-exist with material where a writer is evidently enjoying the absurdity? This I think is key: though Browne is, after a fashion, having fun with his own methodology—a mock-pedantic playfulnes—nevertheless, it can turn: the all-involved series of connections he makes is very much part of his anatomy of error, tangled because the world is tangled, sprawling because everything sprawls. Every subject for Browne seems able to transform itself, error being unstable, prone to metamorphosis.

Error, in *Pseudodoxia,* often leads a double life, but it is by no means always a *political* double life. If it is not always the case that we can link a classical or biblical error to some early modern political twin, surprisingly often there is a correlate, and not only in his quite miscellaneous books of pictures, that imply a church-setting. His age-of-the-earth controversies in book 6 and the amorphous religious questions and curiosa of the final book are likewise often involved in contentious debates happening off-stage. Even in his more medical and scientific modes—when he attends to the world in its effluvial forces of magnetism and electricity, the quite particular anatomical or proverbial habits of animals, and the *problemata* of human anatomy and disposition—there is generally some currency to the debates. At the same time, Browne is whimsical, digressive, alert to the absurd in why he selects one and not another “error.” This too might be strategy: to include the politically fraught in among the playfully abstruse errors, the scientifically urgent in amongst already well-debunked canards, dilutes and dampens the ready fury in an era when everyone is seething. Browne’s tonal shifts into the hinterlands of tomfoolery frequently turn on an overload of learning, a frame of scientific or classical reference too weighty for the thinness of the error itself. But such sprawl is not altogether frivolous: that error forms a terrible chain is part of its catastrophic, epidemic character.

Perhaps we could return to Anne Carson with her suggestion of the emotional thrill of error, the way it directs the mind to its own indirection: “Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself / In the act of making a mistake,” she writes, “At first it looks odd, contradictory or wrong. / Then it makes sense” (“Essay on What I Think About Most,” 50). This is a very different experience of error from that which requires the hard graft of scholarly digging and polemical fist-fighting to resolve it. But neither is it an alien experience to *Pseudodoxia*, which often tarries in subject matter that others, at least, are exercised about. Even in dark pugnacious days, it seems, error could be encountered in terms of its agreeable paradox, the twist it produced in the fabric of things, when the absurd breaks through. Error, which seems so all or nothing, so right or wrong, can be generative rather than infectious. It has a delicious taste, even when there is little nutritional value. Many of Browne’s errors arrive always-already corrected—the correction is part of the tradition itself, and they reflect not so much a stubborn tare that is hard to uproot as an experience of the pleasurably absurd. The waywardness and the capricious nature of any individual error is necessarily in play with the encyclopaedic tapestry of *Pseudodoxia* as a whole—with its gaze across every field of endeavour, beset by our human messiness. In his Epistle to *The Garden of Cyrus*, written to Nicholas Bacon, Browne comments on the value of the trivial and obscure, that “bye and barren Themes are best fitted for invention.” Approaching matters aslant, we encounter what he calls “collaterall truths, though at some distance from their principals.” Is there a contradiction in arguing for Browne’s gossamer touch, his delicate, Carsonesque enjoyment of error, and to say at the same time that his apparently abstruse and scholarly enquiries moonlight as politically contentious material, that he is wholly alert to their second life? If there is, it would be a quite Brownean contradiction, embracing the nearly incompatible.

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1. The one monograph on *Pseudodoxia* is *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England: Thomas Browne and* *the* *Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Killeen 2009), and I lean on some of its arguments, in the introductory part of this essay. See too Preston 82–112. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)