

Giovan Battista della Porta's Histrionic Science

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Giovan Battista della Porta (1535-1615) was one of Europe's main proponents of a decidedly non-academic, yet erudite natural magic in the context of Italian Naturalist philosophy.¹ His works in this field, which also encompasses the arts of physiognomy, ciphers, distillation, and optics (to name but a few) ranked him amongst the most famous and popular writers and scientists of his day. Even though from early on his work was severely hampered by the close surveillance of the Roman Inquisition, this Neapolitan nobleman had sufficient means and social standing that allowed him to continue his works and stay in the *Regno* for most of his life.² One of Porta's lifelong concerns was the description and production of extraordinary experiments that would testify to his amazing abilities as a natural magician. Porta not only divulged traditional recipe books, classical literature, and secrets of the trades, but also his own experiments.³ Yet he was not only one of the most renowned "professors of secrets" of his time,⁴ but also authored at least seventeen successful works for the theater, some of them important mannerist plays.⁵

In their *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park have outlined Della Porta's deep interest in the marvelous and his concern with demonic arts.⁶ Like

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¹ For a succinct introduction to the intellectual background and Della Porta's forerunners, see Brian P. Copenhaver, "The occultist tradition and its critics" in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 454-57; Paola Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 13-34; Daniel Garber, "Physics and Foundations," In *The Cambridge history of science*, vol. 3 *Early modern science*, edited by Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21-61, esp. 33-36.

² For a short but succinct biography of Della Porta, see Giovanna Romei, "Entry: Della Porta, Giovambattista" in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, ed. Vincenzo Capelletti, Vol. 37 (Rome: Istituto Della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1989), 170-182.

³ William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 194-253 and esp. 195. Giovan Battista Della Porta, *Della magia naturale libri XX* (Naples: Carlino Vitale, [1589] 1611), 388: "Noi habbiamo raccolte alcune cose raccolte da' i scritti de gli antichi migliori, che ci parevano, l'habbiamo sperimentate, e le buone l'habbiamo portate qui, ma assai sono migliori quelle della nostra inventione, e de' i più moderni [...] che anchora non sono state stampate [...]." Adrian Johns in "Review of Eamon (1994)," *Isis* 86 (1995): 108, has highlighted the marketable aspect of such recipes. The professors of secrets ruined people by publishing their tricks of the trade; in such ways "the relationship between books of secrets and the *Philosophical Transactions* was not one of simple inheritance . . ." On the popularity of *sperimenti* amongst the professors of secrets in general, see Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets: Mystery, Magic and Alchemy in Renaissance Italy* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2010), 57.

⁴ I borrow the term from Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 195.

⁵ The best introduction to Porta's theater is still Louise George Clubb, *Giambattista della Porta, Dramatist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

⁶ Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 160: "The objects of preternatural philosophy coincided with the traditional canon of marvels. They included both the results of occult action such as magnetic attraction and the reputed power of the amethyst to repel hail . . . and rare individual phenomena, such as bearded grape vines, celestial apparitions, and rains of frogs and blood." *Ibid.*, 162: "Demonology was in some ways the alter ego of preternatural philosophy, for demons also worked marvels."

Marsilio Ficino, Pietro Pompanazzi, Agrippa von Nettesheim and Girolamo Cardano, Della Porta belonged to an influential group of what Daston and Park have labeled as “preternatural philosophers.”⁷ In this tradition, Della Porta developed a “sublime science” that catered to a courtly environment. “Wonder became a reflection not of ignorance but of virtuosity and connoisseurship; the product not only of great experience and erudition, but also of impeccable taste.”⁸ In spite of his international success, Della Porta’s approach towards natural philosophy was not uncontested in contemporary Naples. Bernardino Telesio from Cosenza, who spent large periods of his life in Naples, is a case in point. He was among the most influential advocates of new ways of investigating nature.⁹ Telesio says that he believes that the soul is mortal and the stars are not moved by divine intelligences; his new philosophy is confined to the material soul, which is governed solely by the universal and conflicting principles of heat and cold, which act on a passive material substratum:¹⁰ “. . . Telesio distrusted Aristotle’s analysis of causation and he shied away from unseen final and formal causes.”¹¹ I am reading a key passage from the 1570 edition of *De natura rerum iuxta propria principia* (Telesio’s sole, constantly revised book) as a polemic against Della Porta’s spectacular *scienza*. This is no wonder, as “Telesio was never charmed by occultism . . . his sense of empirical science grew out of a disenchanting world-view remarkable for its hard-headed clarity.”¹² In the second edition of the *Magia naturalis* Della Porta counter-attacks Telesio (again without mentioning the name of his opponent) by maintaining that the occult properties of marvelous bodies ultimately derive from their (invisible) substantial forms, and only secondarily from temperature or matter.¹³ It was on the topic of causes that a youthful and ardent follower of Telesio, Tommaso Campanella,¹⁴ took issue with Della Porta.¹⁵

⁷ *Ibid.*, 159-164.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁹ For good introductions to Telesio, see Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 309-14, and Roberto Bondi, *Introduzione a Telesio* (Bari: Laterza, 1997). Telesio not only inspired Giordano Bruno and Tommaso Campanella, but also Francis Bacon.

¹⁰ Bondi, 23-26; 42-48. Copenhaver and Schmitt, 313.

¹¹ Copenhaver and Schmitt, 312.

¹² *Ibid.*, 314. Bernardino Telesio, *De natura rerum iuxta propria principia / La natura seconda i suoi principi*, ed. and trans. Roberto Bondi (Florence: La nuova Italia, [1570] 1999), 4 (bk. I, ch. 1): “. . . ut si nihil divinum nihil admiratione dignum nihil valde etiam acutum nostris [sc. libris] inesse visum fuerit, at nihil tamen vel rebus vel sibi ipsis repugnet unquam, sensum videlicet nos et naturam aliud preterea nihil sequuti sumus, quae summe sibi ipsi concors idem semper et eodem agit modo atque idem semper operatur.”

¹³ Giovan Battista Della Porta, *Magia naturalis libri XX* (Rothomagia [Rouen]: Johannes Berthelin, [1589] 1650), 10-11 (bk. 1, ch 5): “At formae tanta vis inest, ut quos omnes intuemur effectus, ab ipsa primum progigni nemini sit non cognitu, divinumque habet exordium, veluti superior, & praestantissima, per se sine alterius adminiculo eis, uti instrumentis utitur, ut citius & commodius actionem expediat: quique animum minime addictum, assuetumque speculationibus habet, à temperamento, materiaque omne effici posse putat, quum iis, tanquam instrumenta fiant. Opifex enim si in alicuius constructione simulacri aliquo utitur stylo, vel scapulo, non ut agens utitur, sed supeditando, ut navius expediat.” On the differences between Telesio and Della Porta, see also Nicola Badaloni, *Tommaso Campanella* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965), 58 and Paolo Piccari, *Giovan Battista della Porta. Il filosofo, il retore, lo scienziato* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007), 53.

¹⁴ For introductions to Campanella and his complex relationship to Telesio, see Copenhaver and Schmitt, 317-28, and Luigi De Franco, “La *Philosophia sensibus demonstrata* di Tommaso Campanella e la dottrina di Bernardino Telesio” in *Tommaso Campanella (1586-1639). Miscellanea di Studi nel IV° centenario della sua nascita* (Naples: Fausto Fiorentino, 1969), 115-39. The *Magia naturalis* saw more than 20 editions: it was translated into Italian, French, German, English, and Dutch, totaling more than fifty editions. There were two editions of the *Magia*, the first in four books (1558); the 1589 edition comprised twenty books. Cf. Laura Balbiani, *La Magia naturalis di Giovan Battista Della Porta: lingua, cultura e scienza in Europa all’inizio dell’età moderna* (Bern, NY: Lang, 2001).

¹⁵ On the relationship of Della Porta and Campanella see Eamon, “Natural Magic,” esp. 382. Della Porta never

The latter's books on Physiognomy caused Campanella to write a treatise on magic, *Del senso delle cose e della magia*, in which he criticizes Della Porta for his unsystematic approach and his failure to investigate these causes (for instance of sympathy and antipathy).¹⁶ Campanella intended to give Della Porta's magic a "more general significance,"¹⁷ an idea in accordance with his interest in developing a new form of metaphysics (and in this respect Campanella is in disagreement with Telesio).¹⁸ Campanella also mentions another important Neapolitan contemporary, Ferrante Imperato, and his famous collection of natural objects, which Campanella believed to be a more systematic aid to understanding the secrets of nature than Della Porta's marvelous *scienza*.¹⁹ Campanella therefore tried to synthesize magic, theology, physics, and astrology into a coherent metaphysical system.

Yet viewed from another angle, Porta's reticence to construct large systems or to openly get involved with politics (let alone theology) as well as to leave the Peripatetic establishment alone, was quite prudent. For Campanella and Giordano Bruno published their ideas on new cosmologies and metaphysics, and they had to pay dearly for their audacity.²⁰

Despite such disagreements these intellectuals shared some common traits: they all tended to naturalize human beings. In spite of radically different views and backgrounds, Telesio, Della Porta, and the ex-Dominicans Bruno and Campanella, unanimously criticized earlier and more optimistic philosophical anthropologies that for instance were characteristic of Florentine Renaissance Neo-Platonism. At least during certain periods of their lives, these intellectuals of the Italian South shared strong naturalist inclinations, a penchant for Pythagorean panpsychism, together with Atomism in a Lucretian guise. Their different approaches formed part of a rich ferment in superseding the philosophy of the schools; another important aspect of Della Porta's *scienza* was its intertwining with a courtly cultures, which is also characteristic of Galileo's approach to physics.²¹

My article does not contest this general picture; I rather seek to broaden its scope to

mentions Campanella or Bruno in his writings; Campanella says that Della Porta is incapable of understanding Telesio's systematic criticisms of Aristotle. See Badaloni, 58 with N 96.

¹⁶ Tommaso Campanella, *Del senso delle cose e della magia*, ed. Antonio Bruers (Bari: Laterza, [1620] 1925), 221: "Si e nondimeno il Porta studiosissimo di revocar questa scienza [magica], ma solo storicamente, senza render causa, e lo studio d' [Ferrante] Imperato può esser base in parte di ritrovarla." (The Latin version has: Imperati Neapolitani studium seu technotheca. *Ibid.* FN 4) See also Badaloni 57-58, and Germana Ernst, *Tommaso Campanella: The Book and the Body of Nature* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 123-25.

¹⁷ Badaloni, 57-8.

¹⁸ For a succinct account of the difference between Campanella's and Telesio's approach, see Copenhaver and Schmitt, 320.

¹⁹ On Ferrante Imperato, see FN above; see also Enrica Stendardo, *Ferrante Imperato. Collezionismo e studio della natura a Napoli tra Cinque e Seicento* (Naples: Accademia Pontaniana, 2001), and Ernst, 16 -17. On Ferrante as apothecary who wanted to rise on the social ladder in Naples, see Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 41, and 226-28 on the tensions between Ferrante and Della Porta.

²⁰ For an elegant recent intellectual biography of Giordano Bruno, see Ingrid Rowland, *Giordano Bruno. Philosopher/Heretic* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008). Hilary Gatti, *Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) is the best introduction to Bruno's science. On the different approaches of Porta and Bruno towards magic, see Hélène Védrine, "Della Porta e Bruno. Natura e magia" (*Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 65 (1986): 297-309), and Ernst, esp. 33 and 77 on Campanella's and Bruno's imprisonment.

²¹ On the influence of Democritus's (Lucretius's) Atomism, and Pythagoras's doctrine of the transmigration of souls and panpsychism on these Neapolitan thinkers, see for instance Badaloni, 62, 68, and 77. On Galileo, see Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 11-48.

include Della Porta's numerous comedies, for he was the only preternatural philosopher whose literary works had a significant impact on the early modern European stage.

In what follows, I will give some examples that demonstrate how Della Porta's mannerist comedies are resonant with (often ironical) echoes of his preternatural philosophy.²² Moreover and conversely, I will also argue that the science of the marvelous manifests itself in Della Porta's experiments in a decidedly histrionic manner.²³ Louise George Clubb has synthesized the remarkable relationship between Della Porta's *scienza* and the audiences of his plays in the following ways: "Knowledge was not to be disseminated indiscriminately but in terms chosen to maintain epistemic secrecy while communicating to the aspiring seer the spectacle of nature's marvels and the manner of demonstrating them. Interesting questions arise here concerning Della Porta's theatricality . . ." ²⁴ The stage did indeed fulfill a highly important function in Della Porta's scientific works, for he was aiming at no less than to depict himself as a general mastermind who pulled the strings from behind the scenes. By means of his erudite publications on natural magic but also through his comedies Della Porta wished to point to his individual capacity to influence natural objects and human beings alike. I will outline the ruptures inherent of this kind of self-fashioning²⁵ and refer to the contemporary Neapolitan context, the specific social, religious and political constraints that formed an important backdrop for Della Porta's many clearly exaggerated claims.

Let me begin with the long chapter on magnetism in Della Porta's 1589 edition of the *Magia naturalis*. The lodestone is indeed a venerable magical object that was used since antiquity as a love charm, simply because its capacity to attract iron testifies to a sympathy between inanimate objects:²⁶

²² On this, see the interesting remarks on the connections between Della Porta's art of memory and the stage in Lina Bolzoni, *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press*, trans. Jeremy Parzen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 163-69. See also Katherine MacDonald, "Humanistic Self-Representation in Giovan Battista Della Porta's *Della Fisonomia dell'uomo: Antecedents and Innovation*" (*The Sixteenth Century Journal* 36 (2005): 397-414); Sergius Koderer, "Der Magus und die Stripperinnen. Giambattista della Portas indiskrete Renaissance-Magie" in *Rare Künste. Zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte der Zauberkunst*, ed. Brigitte Felderer and Ernst Strouhal (Vienna: Springer, 2006), 55-78. and *Disreputable Bodies: Magic, Gender, and Medicine in Renaissance Natural Philosophy* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010), 251-73.

²³ For the professors of secrets, the term *experimentum* was midway between the medieval idea of "ordinary experience" and Galileo's way of testing a hypotheses, see William Eamon, "The *Accademia Segreta* of Girolamo Ruscelli: A Sixteenth-Century Italian Scientific Society," *Isis* 75 (1984): 333. *Experimentum* for the professor of secrets "simply meant a trial or empirical verification of a recipe" (Eamon, "Science and Popular Culture in Sixteenth Century Italy: The 'Professors of Secrets' and Their Books" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 [1985]: 484). The term *segreto* changes in meaning from an anti-rationalist notion of "divinely revealed secret" to the "technical recipes that exploit the occult forces of nature without understanding" them, to the seventeenth century experimenters' program of actively and systematically uncovering the hidden workings of nature and their laws (Ann Blair, "Review of Eamon 1994" *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 [1996]: 178).

²⁴ (2003 189).

²⁵ I am of course referring to Stephen Greenblatt: ". . . we may say that self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien," (*Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 9). But see also the criticisms of this concept in John J. Martin, "Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe," (*American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 1314 and *passim*).

²⁶ Amongst other portentous qualities, the magnet can be used as an instrument to detect unfaithful wives; cf. Giovan Battista Della Porta, *Natural Magick* (London, 1658; Anastatic reprint, New York: Basic Books, 1957), 216 (bk. 7, ch. 56). (English translation of the second edition of the *Magia naturalis*, 1589.) Porta claims to have tested this *segreto* [1558] 1588, fol. 88r (bk. II, ch. 21). The magnet's "attractive virtue" serves Porta as evidence that

Because there is such a natural Concord and sympathy between the iron and the Loadstone, as if they had made a League; that when the Loadstone comes neer the iron, the iron presently stirs, and runs to meet it, to embrace by the loadstone. . . . And the loadstone runs as fast as the iron, and is a much in love with that, and unity with it; for neither of them will refuse to be drawn. . . . And Orpheus in his Verses relates, that Iron is drawn by the Loadstone as a Bride after the Bridegroom, to be embraced; . . . but if it once kist the Loadstone, as if the desire were satisfied, then it is at rest; and they are so mutually in love, that if one cannot come at the other, it will hang pendulous in the air.²⁷

Inanimate things seem to behave as though they are human: they may fall in love with each other. The ancients, Della Porta says, attributed to iron and lodestone “an understanding of venerious actions, and that they are in love with the other; nor will their mad love abate till they imbrace each one the other madly when they turn their backs, they hate the other, and drive the other off; and that they contain in them also the principles of hatred.”²⁸ Like humans who are “naturally” attracted to each other, the magnet and the iron will perform the most remarkable feats in order to find and embrace each other. It appears to be a kind of physical union that is here described and explained in the anthropomorphic terms of heterosexual relationships. Della Porta used the occult qualities of the magnet to create elaborate shows by means magnetic objects.²⁹ The *Magia* has a detailed description of *How to make an army out of Sand to fight before you*. The trick works with figurines made of finely pounded iron set on a table; the little images of soldiers are guided by the hand of the magus, which moves “a very principal Loadstone” beneath the table. When the figurines “drew neer together and were more neer the lodestone, the sands trembled; and by degrees, they seemed like those that take up their Spears, and when the lodestone was laid down, they laid down their spears, if they were ready to fight, and did threaten to kill and slay . . . and when the stones come neer to one the other, they seemed to fight, and run one with the other.”³⁰ In this natural theater, the magus is pulling the strings from behind the scenes, much to the amazement of the observers.³¹ Aiming less at the theoretical assessment or description of natural phenomena, Della Porta’s experiments generally have a histrionic character aimed at the creation of *meraviglia*.³² In the example above, the magus

seemingly inanimate objects are ensouled. He even says that the soul of the magnet can even be visualized: “I oft saw with great delight a Loadstone wrapt up in burning coles, than sent forth a blue flame, that smelt of brimstone and iron: and that being dissipated, it lost its quality of its soul that was gone, namely its attractive vertue” Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 192 (bk. 7, ch. 2).

²⁷ Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 201 (ck. 7, ch. 20).

²⁸ Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 215 (bk. 7, ch. 56).

²⁹ This histrionic aspect of scientific experiments remains characteristic well into the seventeenth century and beyond. For criticisms from members the Royal Society of this spectacular character of experiments, see for example William Eamon, “Markets, Piazzas, and Villages”. In *The Cambridge History of Science*, Vol. 3, *Early Modern Science*. Edited by Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston, 206-223. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 216.

³⁰ Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 199-200 (bk. 7, ch. 17).

³¹ Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 202 (bk. 7, ch. 24) describes a performance with a dancing needle that is guided by the magus who holds a magnet: “. . . by reason of this consent and discord of the loadstone, I use to make pretty sport to make my friends merry. . . and this is a pretty sight to show your friends, that cannot but admire it.”

³² A crafty stage director can produce many more marvels with these forms of attraction and repulsion, no matter if

describes himself as an omnipotent stage director who, much to the amazement of his audiences, is leading seemingly inanimate figures like puppets on a string.

Conversely, not only objects in the laboratory, but also Della Porta's actors on stage become akin to physical objects which are moved by the invisible hand of a mastermind, the author of the play who exploits their natural properties. Like the iron and the lodestone, the lovers on Della Porta's stage are driven by a regimen of power that is exerted by their bodies and which elides verbal negotiation. As Attilo, the *innamorato* in the *Sorella* (1604) Act I, Scene 3, puts it: "amor mi ha fatto bussola di naviganti, che, volgendola di qua e di là quanto si voglia, come si lascia libera, da se stessa si riduce alla sua tramontana" ("love turned me into a sailor's compass, that, whichever way you turn it, the moment you let it go, it turns back to its northern wind").³³ And indeed, the structural affinities between Della Porta's description of the phenomenon of magnetism described and his comedies are striking: in the above quotes, the iron and the magnet behave just like the topical *innamorato* and the *innamorata*. Like the iron and the lodestone, Della Porta's plays are moved by the sexual attraction between the male and female protagonists. The lovers on stage, too, are expected to perform the most remarkable deeds before they can be happily united. Double cross-dressing is one of the more common examples: in order to arouse the desire of a virgin, the lover in the *Fantesca* enters her family's service disguised as a maid, and then starts parading in male clothes in front of the girl's window; he is thus making the object of his love believe that he is the servant's brother.³⁴ Instead of by horseplay by rough comical effects, most of Della Porta's comedies are structured by peripety, by providential intervention, even if the happy ends are always the result of natural causes, usually the timely return of a member the family that was missing for decades and hence believed to be dead.³⁵ "The labyrinthine pattern should appear hopelessly frustrating, until suddenly resolved by a final peripety, a *coup de théâtre* with unexpected and satisfying dramatic impact producing order out of chaos and a happy ending all around."³⁶

Peripety is a means to elide verbal negotiation; as in Della Porta's experiments, the actions on stage are to appear as manifestations of the marvelous but natural forces which are meant to point to the ingenuity of the author of the plot. Like the iron in Della Porta's magnetic games, the actors seem to lack agency: they are rather moved by natural powers. This

he exercises his ingenium on the stage or in the laboratory, as Porta says in the conclusion to this *segreto*: ". . . but if one that is ingenious do the business, he will do more and greater Feats then we can write of." Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 199-200 (bk. 7, ch. 17).

³³ Giovan Battista Della Porta, *The Sister [La sorella]*, introduced and translated by Donald Beecher and Bruno Ferraro, (Ottawa: Dovehouse. [1604] 2000) 88.

³⁴ Della Porta, *Fantesca* (1592), Act I, scene 1, in *Teatro* vol. 2, 118. For a succinct summary of all of Della Porta's plays, see Clubb, *Giambattista della Porta*, 70-142; for a list of tentative dates of the composition of Porta's various plays, *Ibid.*, 300-301. Many of these intricate ruses are echoed in Shakespeares's comedies, such as *Twelfth Night* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. On these connections, see also the summary remarks in Clubb, "Nicht durch das Wort allein. Jenseits der Sprache von Della Portas Theater" (*Morgen-Glantz. Zeitschrift der Chrstitian Knorr von Rosenroth-Gesellschaft* 18, 2008), 174-77.

³⁵ Della Porta, Introduction to: *Sister*, 25 and 30.

³⁶ Della Porta, *Gli duoi fratelli rivali: The two rival brothers*, ed. and trans. Louise George Clubb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 9. Della Porta's comedies have been aptly described as exercises in Counter-Reformation ideology. And indeed, his plays are over before night falls, and (even against the will of the protagonists) they end with marriage, the only alternative being death or emigration. Transgression on the lover's side occurs only on the surface, as *sogno*, or momentary disturbance of an otherwise static social order. Cf. Michele Rak, "Modelli e macchine del sapere nel teatro di Giovan Battista della Porta" in *Giovan Battista della Porta nell' Eurpoa del suo tempo*, ed. Maurizio Torrini (Naples: Guida, 1990), 409-10 and Clubb, "Nicht durch das Wort allein," 181.

objectification, the reduction of the actors to marvelous objects with occult properties becomes evident in Della Porta's representations of beauty, which is the cause of sexual attraction. Like magnetism, it manifests itself as a non-discursive, natural power over other, less attractive individuals. For example Clarizia, in the *Fratelli rivali* (1601), is described in the following words: "Un sì stupendo spettacolo di bellezza rapì a sé tutti gli occhi e cuori de' riguardanti: restar le lingue mute e gli animi sospesi...."³⁷ ("So dazzling a spectacle of beauty ravished to itself the eyes and hearts of all observers: tongues fell silent spirits hung suspended...")³⁸ In the *Carbonaria* (1606) a beautiful virgin's noble outward appearance saves her from being raped by pirates.³⁹

Human sexuality and the natural order thus become interchangeable in quite uncanny ways: in Della Porta's texts humans and natural objects are both susceptible to physical attraction in the same way. In short: "love" on Della Porta's stage is always "besotted"; it is a somatic phenomenon caused by an imbalance of the humors. Hence infatuation can be (and indeed often is!) medicated by drugs. Emblematic of this practice is an often-repeated joke, put into the mouth of a witty servant and directed to the *innamorato* (who is raving with love): "Pigliate silopi e medicine che vi purghino il corpo" ("Take syrups and medicines to purge your body").⁴⁰ In *La furiosa* (1609), a doctor meticulously describes (and orders) such drastic cures for a lover:

Le spezie delle svanie amoroze non son così disperate come voi dite; e per esserne state di fresco, per fatiche, digiuni, e vigilie, con un mio mirabil rimedio mi basta l'animo curarli perfettamente in un subito. Darò due sole pilole [di elleboro] per uno che gli farò vomitar tutta la colera nera che han concepita nel corpo.⁴¹

The cases of the aberrations caused by love are not as hopeless as you say; and even if they have been unsuccessfully cured by hard work, fasting and vigils, I can cure the mind perfectly with one of my wonderful medicines in the wink of an eye. I will give only a couple of pills [of hellebore, a strong emetic, to the patient] by means of which I will make him vomit all the cholera he has conceived in the body.⁴²

³⁷ Della Porta, *Gli duoi fratelli* 1.1, 59.

³⁸ Translation *Ibid.*, 60. Clubb (*Ibid.*, 39) says: "Carizia imparts a sense of the supernatural, of miracle, without departing from the letter of the rule of verisimilitude or returning to medieval *rappresentazioni sacre*." See *Ibid.* for further references. I disagree with Clubb's claim that Della Porta is here catering to a need to stage "some 'realities' important to late Renaissance Christian thought" (*Ibid.*), because I rather believe that (at least in Della Porta's case) *meraviglia* is deliberately presented as a *secular*, natural phenomenon.

³⁹ Cf. *Carbonaria* (1606) 5.3, in Della Porta, *Teatro*, vol. 2, 535: "la maestà della bellezza sforza ancor le genti barbare a non cercarle cosa contra il suo volere." This mental habit seems to have been fairly commonsensical in Naples: Guido Panico in *Il carnefice e la piazza. Crudeltà di Stato e violenza popolare a Napoli in età moderna* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche Italiane, 1985), 53 reports that virtually the only way for a convict to arouse compassion from an otherwise merciless crowd was by his or her youth and beauty. Otherwise the crowd cheerfully watched the convict's shameful death; the other possibility for empathy with the convict was a disproportionately severe verdict.

⁴⁰ *Sorella* (1604) 1.1, *Della Porta, Sister*, 76

⁴¹ *Furiosa*, 3.3 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, Vol. 4, 148.

⁴² And in case the lovers resist treatment, they have to be forced: *Furiosa* 3.3 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, Vol. 4, 150: "in tal caso la medecina è il bastone." See also *Olimpia*, 4.10 (Della Porta, *Teatro*, Vol. 2, 76).

After the hellebore is (forcibly) administered to the *innamorato*, the doctor has another ordeal in store for his lovesick patient: he is to be tied and locked up in a dark room and treated with enemas.⁴³ To be sure, these cures for love-sickness seem to be grotesquely exaggerated, and the physical violence perpetrated on the ardent lover is represented in hyperbolic form. Or so one may think. For when one considers that Medieval and Renaissance doctors had prescribed exactly such remedies for patients suffering from *amor hereos* or the heroic frenzies, one will be less assured.⁴⁴

These grotesque representations of the power of emetics over our emotional lives point to the idea that *meraviglie* such as iconic beauty and besotted love elide verbal negotiation; they are natural forces. According to Della Porta's *Celeste fisiognomia*, one of his most important texts, these traits are due to an imbalance of the medical humors; they therefore cannot be corrected through learning or the development a spiritual culture.⁴⁵ Infatuation is rather a disease that has to be treated either by marriage or by medicines. In his comedies there is a characteristically satiric mood in which Della Porta alludes to the Petrarchan rhetoric of love,⁴⁶ or the Platonic idea, propagated in Marsilio Ficino's *Symposium* commentary, according to which the perception of physical beauty may lead to spiritual elevation.⁴⁷ Generally we have to think of the contexts in which the lovers appear on stage (perhaps one even has to imagine them with a *petrarchino* in their hands.)⁴⁸ The *innamorati* are using a vocabulary that is directly and indirectly inspired by the *Canzoniere*. It is an all-too common linguistic repertory of spiritual desire,⁴⁹ which becomes inserted into the turbulent action of a Renaissance comedy. As a consequence, the haughty speech of the lovers is depicted as being caused by their sexual desires. Like the needle and the magnet in Porta's laboratory, the *innamorati* have the innate urge to unite physically; to that aim, they are dependent on the machinations of their sly servants (as well as on other dubious persons, such as the mastermind behind the scene). On Della Porta's stage, the contrast between spiritual language and ruse, between mystical and carnal desire is striking; in fact, the changes of

⁴³ *Furiosa* 4.6 (Della Porta, *Teatro*, Vol. 4, 162): "Dateli delle pugna ... Togliete questo miseraccio e cosi legato, portatelo in cantina. Serrate le fenestre, che stai al buio, che cosi il meno gli svara il cervello. E quivi, cosi legato, fategli duo cristieri che ho ordinati, che da sopra e da sotto purghi i maligni umori."

⁴⁴ See as one *locus classicus*, Bernard Gordon, *Lilium medicinae, de morborum proprie omne curatione* (Lyons: G. Rouillius, 1559), 210 (ch. 20): "Amor qui hereos dicitur, est sollicitudo melancholica propter mulieris amorem." (The text was written between 1303 and 1305, ed princ. 1480.)

⁴⁵ Della Porta, Giovan Battista, *Coelestis Physiognomoniam. Della celeste fisionomia*, ed. Alfonso Paoletta (Naples: Edizione scientifica Italiana (Edizione nazionale delle opere di Giovan Battista della Porta, vol. 8) [1606] 1996), fol. 228v (Proemio to bk 6): "Gia nei libri passati s'è abondevolmente dimostrato, come da segni del corpo si possono costumi riposti ne' più segreti luoghi dell'animo investigare veramente cosa assai degna, & ammirabile, resta che . . . si tratti di cosa più mirabilissima, . . . cioè che conosciuti i tuoi, ò gli altrui vitij, possi levarli via, e scancellarli del tutto. A che dunque ci gioveria questa arte, se conosciuti i tuoi difetti, non potessi quegli convertirli in virtudi? Ma ciò non con pensieri, imaginationi, ò persuasioni di morali Filosofi, che per lo più vane riescono, ma con purgationi, locali rimedij, e natural virtù di herbe, pietre, & animali & occulte proprietadi. . . Perciochè l'habito dell'anima potersi mutar con diligentia dice esser cosa chiara, con cibi, con bere, & con essercitij mutar il temperamento in meglio." For a further discussion of this passage, see Kodera, *Disreputable Bodies*, 263-5.

⁴⁶ For instance in *Sorella* 1.2 (Della Porta, *Teatro*, 81) an appointment is canceled in the following words: "Se non ci passo col corpo, ci passo con l'animo mille volte; e quanto è miglior l'animo del corpo, tanto è più degna quella vista di questa."

⁴⁷ Marsilio Ficino, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon Marsile Ficin. De amore*, ed. and trans. Raymond Marcel (Paris: Belles Lettres, [1484] 1956), 213-15 (bk. 6, ch. 9).

⁴⁸ On sixteenth century paintings (for instance by Parmigianino) of young men who are holding a copy of Petrarch's poetry, as well as on the fashion to have the *Canzoniere* in the pocket, see Arnaldo Di Benedetto, "Un'introduzione al petrarchismo cinquecentesco," *Italica* 83, 2 (2006): 178.

⁴⁹ On sixteenth century Petrarchism, see for instance Di Benedetto 177-78, 204-6 and *passim*.

linguistic registers are responsible for much of the laughter. The following grotesque verbal exchange between the *innamorato* and the *parassita* (glutton) is just one example:

Lampidirio: O braccia mie avventurose, dunque voi cingerete il collo della terrena mia dea? O bocca mia, tu bascierai le guancie delicate e gli occhi del mio sole? O Amore, se ti piace ch'io ottenga così desiderata felicità, donami tanta forza che la possa soffrire: che dubito che, vedendomi Olimpia in queste braccia, non mi muoia di contentezza.

Mastica: . . . tieni le parole a mente. Subito che serai intrato in casa, comanda che si tiri il collo a quante galline ci sono e che mi siano dati dinari per comprar robbe.⁵⁰

Lampidirio: Oh my adventurous arms, will you then be girding the neck of my earthly goddess? Oh my mouth, will you kiss the delicate cheeks and the eyes of my sun? Oh Amor, if it pleases you that I will gain this so much desired felicity, endow me with enormous strength to bear it; for, when I get to see Olimpia in these arms, I am not sure whether I will not be dying from contentment.

Mastica: . . . and do not forget your word: immediately when you will enter the house, to order to turn the necks of all the chicken that are there and [to see] that I will be given money to buy things.

Don Flaminio in the *Fratelli rivali*, with all his terrible love-sickness, immediately starts breathing (*comincio a respirare*) when his servant Panimbolo starts talking about the use of *inganno* (trickery) to win over his lady.⁵¹ In the prologue to the *Olimpia*, the comedy is presented as a woman: but certainly not in the terms Petrarch imagined his Laura (whose describable and desirable bodily features end where her shoulders begin). In a grotesque and highly sexist mode of speech, Della Porta presents himself as the pimp of his *Olimpia*, parading the woman on stage as fair game for (male) audiences.⁵²

In this use of emetics to cure the disease of love, Della Porta is also referring to the remedies of the professors of secrets. One of their most renowned exponents, Leonardo Fioravanti, used such a drug, which he called *Precipitato* (mercuric oxide). He claimed that this substance was a powerful (and one may add, dangerous) *segreto* to treat almost every internal disease.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Olimpia* 3.1 (Della Porta, *Teatro*, vol 2, 44).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 58. Panduorfo, one of Della Porta's most comical *senex* figures, speaks in Neapolitan dialect and like a "horrible Petrarchist." Clubb, *Giambattista Della Porta*, 221 and Della Porta, *Teatro*, vol.3, 443 (*Moro* 2.7).

⁵² Della Porta, *Teatro*, vol. 2, 11-12: "A me sta il menarla [la Olimpia] dove mi piace: le sono (per dirvela onestamente) come un ruffiano. . . Al fin l'abbiamo forzata a comparire. . . Miratela dalle trecce insino a' piedi, vedete se i membri sian ben disposti, se corrispondono tutte le parti, se fanno fra sé armonia e se tutta la testura del suo corpo è insieme dicevole ed isquisitamente proporzionata. . . Porta una toga insino a' piedi, e giuro che sotto il grave della toga ricopre molte bellezze, ché, se ben non è isconcia nella faccia, è molto buona roba sotto i panni. Se fusse un poco vana o lasicvetta, iscusatela, che il bello e 'l buono non pottero mai imparentarsi insieme; ché se provaste una donna di tutte le vanità, forse non vi resterebbe cosa veruna, non sarebbe più donna. Io ve la do in preda; toglietevela con le man vostre, menatevela dove vi piace. E se pur biasimando lei la morderete, mordetela con discrezione, di modo che non vi appaiano nel volto o nel petto i segni delle piaghe e le lividure di deità cagneschi."

⁵³ Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 79-83, 207 describes the moral backdrop against which the cleansing of body

And indeed, Della Porta's combinations of science and comedy appear less uncommon when we consider them in relationship to the contemporary culture of the *saltimbanchi* (mountebanks). These forerunners of the *comedia dell' arte* were performing short plays in public places on makeshift stages in order to market their merchandise, the *segreti* (or wonder drugs to cure all kinds of different ailments). Though transferred from the *piazza* to the higher social echelons and to the literary world, these aspects of performance and self-marketing are echoed in a distinct way in Della Porta's histrionic *scienza*.⁵⁴ Like the mountebanks, he directs the attention to the spectacular manifestations of the portentous qualities in certain physical bodies or remedies, and like many of these popular empirics, Della Porta was a practitioner in the art of distillation and the chemical transformation of substances. For instance, his *De distillationibus libri IX* (1609) is a lengthy treatise on the subject.

The kind of *scienza* Della Porta and the mountebanks share in common has an emphasis on practical recipes and swift remedies.⁵⁵ Moreover, Della Porta often looked for his *meraviglia* in the demi-monde of prostitutes, panderers, criminals, and necromancers.⁵⁶ Far from being the caprice of a Neapolitan nobleman, for Della Porta (as well as for some of his readers) the dubious sources of these *segreti* must have enhanced the belief in their efficacy. After all, these methods had been tried by *meretrici, ruffiani, furfanti, e nigromanti*,⁵⁷ and such people were frequently and spectacularly punished for their crimes; obviously they were crafty practitioners of their *mestiere*.⁵⁸ Della Porta believed in an inborn astuteness—a true *ingenium*⁵⁹—that was so thoroughly imprinted and represented in these individuals that their bodies and their belongings

and soul through these drastic cures was supposed to take place.

⁵⁴ For a vivid description of the world of the mountebanks on Venetian piazzas, Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 166-72.

⁵⁵ On the magician as artisan, cf. Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 217; on Della Porta's recipes, *Ibid.* 219-21.

⁵⁶ In Della Porta's unpublished *Criptologia* (ed. Gabriella Belloni (Rome: Centro Internazionale di Studi Umanistici, 1982), 158), the author says that much of popular magic contains great truths that are however distorted by popular superstition such as illicit spells and invocation of demons. Della Porta shares this opinion with many contemporary medical doctors who were concerned with distinguishing themselves from popular healers, but were nevertheless "increasingly curious about the therapeutic uses of occult forces" (Eamon, "Markets, Piazzas", 219); see also Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Renaissance Medicine*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 152; Gentilcore, , 209.

⁵⁷ Jean-Michel Sallmann, *Chercheurs de trésors et jeteuses de sorts. La quête du surnaturel à Naples au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1986).

⁵⁸ See for instance Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 252-3 (bk. 9, ch. 29): "How the Matrix over widened by childbirth, may be made narrower. . . .thus may you restrain that part of common Whores, with Galls, Gums, whites of Eggs, Dragon's blood, Acacia, Plantain, Hypocistis, Balanstia, Mastick, Cypress nuts, Grape skins, Acorn cups. . . .The Decoction of Ladies Mantel, or the juice, or distilled water of it cast into the Matrix, will so contract it, that Whores can scarce be known from maids. . . I found out this noble way. I powder Litharge very finely, and boil it in Vinegar, till the Vinegar be thick. I strain out that, and put in more, till that be colored also. Then I exhale the Vinegar at an easy fire, and resolve it into smoke."

⁵⁹ On the concept of *ingenium* in the Renaissance, see for instance, Kodera, "Ingenium: Marsilio Ficino über die menschliche Kreativität" in *Platon, Plotin und Marsilio Ficino. Studien zu Vorläufern und zur Rezeption des Florentiner Neuplatonismus*, ed. Maria-Christina Leitgeb et al. (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 77-94.

could become powerful *materia magica*.⁶⁰ It is quite clear that Della Porta's way of doing business as well as that of the *saltimbanchi* differed largely from the medical academic establishment, which actually loathed its competition in the piazza, not least because the *dottore* was a stock figure of mockery in their *commedie*.

The charlatan's use of theater was one of the aspects that most infuriated the medical elites. . . Their use of performance and entertainment was the most apparent indication of their ambiguous status. It was thought to bring medicine into disrepute.⁶¹

This ambiguous status also is reflected in the fact that the activities of the *saltimbanchi* were regulated by the local medical boards, that is, by medical doctors who authorized these recipes. Actually, the mountebanks formed an important, if less reputable part of the medical system throughout the early modern period.⁶² This rather mobile status is also reflected in the literature that was produced by the more learned exponents of the *saltimbanchi* and the professors of secrets: their straightforward instructions and recipes mediated between literate and oral cultures.⁶³ The marketing strategies of the mountebanks, who were dexterously moving between compromises with the medical establishment and the necessity of making a living in the *piazza*,⁶⁴ find particular resonances in Della Porta's theater. The latter stages many hilarious travesties of the very tradition of *segreti* the same author had described in his scientific books with apparent sincerity. For instance, in *Trappolaria* (1596) we find a description of a fantastic potion that is used as antidote against a wicked *ruffiano*:⁶⁵

Come empiastro?—Dico il vero. Prima torrò tutte le ladrarie, furberie e tradimenti che siano stati al mondo, le bollirò in una caldaia e ne caverò la schiuma; questa la mescolerò con olio d'inganni, frodi e trappole; ci aggiungerò quinte-essenze di scopati, di condannati in galera, d'impiccati, poi ne farò confezione co 'l succo del mio cervello; e di tutte queste cose ne farò una pittima per lo cor del ruffiano, che aggirerà tanto il cervello e lo porrà in tanta confusione che arà a grado concederti

⁶⁰ Della Porta shares for instance the widespread belief according to which wearing prostitutes' clothing or using their mirrors induces indecorous behavior in decent women. See, for instance, Della Porta, *Della magia naturale*, 34 (bk. 1, ch. 23): "Alle sfacciatissime meretrici, non solo non manca la sfacciatezza, ma ritengono anchora virtù, che le cose che toccano, ò che portano sopra, han forza di far altri sfacciato, laonde chi si mirerà spesso in un specchio, dove elleno si sieno specchiate, overo chi porterà le loro camice, diverrà simile a loro, e di lussuria e di sfacciatezza."

⁶¹ David Gentilcore, *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 117

⁶² Gentilcore, 166-8, 209, Eamon, "Markets, Piazzas" 211-15, 219

⁶³ Gentilcore 1998, 111

⁶⁴ Eamon, "Markets, Piazzas", 219 on the competition of *saltimbanchi* with histrionic monks and priests, not only on the same piazza, but even in Neapolitan churches.

⁶⁵ Clubb, *Giambattista della Porta*, 65. For a detailed analysis of the Plautine origins and the plot of the play, and especially of the figure of the *ruffiano*, see Rolf Friedrich Hartkamp, *Von "leno" zu "ruffiano". Die Darstellung, Entwicklung und Funktion der Figur des Kupplers in der römischen Palliata und in der italienischen Renaissancekomödie* (Tübingen: Narr, 2004), 203-20.

Filesia.⁶⁶

What kind of plaster?⁶⁷ I am telling the truth: First, I will take all the thieveries, cunningness, and betrayals in the world, I will boil them in a caldron, removing the scum, which I will mix with oil of imposture, trickery and pitfalls; I will add quintessences of dragged delinquents, of those who were condemned to the galleys and to hanging. And then I will make a [sweet] confection of it with the juice of my brain; and from all these things I will make an epithem⁶⁸ for the pimp's heart, that will make his brain go so much around and will make him so confused that he will let you have Filesia voluntarily.

This mock *segreto*, “mimick[ing] the comic speech of the *ciarlatani*,”⁶⁹ is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, the demi-monde of charlatans is here represented by Della Porta in a clearly derisory way; they serve to distance their author and his *scienza* from this “scientific underworld.”⁷⁰ Yet, on the other hand, the wording is a precise reference to the idea that essences can be extracted by means of distillation, a very serious topic in Della Porta's *Magia naturalis*.⁷¹ Not only were various fruits and grains distilled to liquor, a substance with portentous effects on the human body, but Della Porta—as well as many others since John of Rupescissa, Arnaldo da Villanova, and Ramon Llull—prided himself of being able to distill the “essences” from almost every material. In doing so, their aim was to produce highly potent substances, which, they claimed, contained the characteristic properties of a particular natural object, albeit in a very potent form.⁷² Della Porta says:

⁶⁶ *Trappolaria* 1.5 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, vol. 2, 250. The practice of exploiting the literature of secrets for comic purposes was not uncommon in contemporary Neapolitan culture; see for instance Giovan Battista Pino, *Ragionamento sopra de l'asino*, ed. Olga Casale (Rome: Salerno Editore, 1982), 101; he introduces similar *segreti* in connection with asses. Cf. also Giordano Bruno's *Candelaio* act 4, sc. 8 for a recipe to fortify male potency. “Recipe acqua di rene, oglio di schene, colatura di verga e manna di coglioni; ad quantom suffrica, mesceta et fiat potum; e poi vi governarete in questa foggia: videlicet, statevi su le staffe, a fin che, galoppando galoppando, l'arcione de la sella non vi rompa il culo.” Giulio Cesare Croce (b. 1550) is another case in point: he wrote pamphlets in macaronic language, such as the *Secreti di medicina*, in which he used a similar language to poke fun at medical doctors and healers alike. See Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 67-8.

⁶⁷ A stiff variety of ointment made with gums or resins. James Shaw and Evelyn Welch, *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 12.

⁶⁸ Note (again) the precision of Della Porta's medical language: a *pittima* (epithen) consists of “powdered drugs mixed with a liquid for external application to the body with a cloth or sponge” (Shaw and Welch, 11). In our case, the liquid is the juice from the brains. “The most common epithen was a cordial variety, containing musk and amber and used to treat heart complaints,” *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶⁹ Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 67.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷¹ Della Porta, *Della magia naturale*, 430 (bk. 10, *proemio*): “Impara questa scienza cose mirabili, come i corpi, che son cosi gravi divenghino spirituali, e sottili, e montino in alto fatto leggeri, e cosi spirituali, che di nuovo diventino gravi, e corporenti, e calino giù. L'essentie, ovvero virtù delle cose, che stanno nascoste nella sua mole sotterrate, conculcate, e disperse, ne'suoi ripostigli, come nelle sue camerette, ma pure, e sottigli quasi senza meschiamento di materia impura, cosi nelle piante, come ne' metalli, pietre, e gemme, e noi non contenti di quelle manifeste virtù, che possiedono, le vogliamo più nobili, e più gagliarde, e far le più sollimi, e quasi inalzarle infin al cielo.”

⁷² On the medical use of *aqua ardens* in alchemical literature, see Pereira 1994, 8-9 and *passim*. On John of Rupescissa, see Lea DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time. John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 70 and 105-109. For an introduction to Fioravanti and his art of distilling medicines in contemporary Naples and elsewhere, see Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 114-8, 205-7, 279-

The power, virtue, and medicinale qualities, are not the elements, but in their Essences, which yet are elements, and contain the virtues of the elements in them, in the highest degree. For being separated from the grossness of their bodies, they become spiritual, and put forth their power more effectually and strongly when they are freed from them, then they could while they were clogged with the elements . . . There are an infinite number of Essences, and almost as many ways of Extraction.⁷³

In comparing this passage from the *Magia naturalis* to the quotation from the *Trappolaria*, we are immediately alerted to the idea that “to extract essences”⁷⁴ has a scientific foundation in Della Porta’s *scienza*, as well as in popular culture and medicine: “distilled brains” are by no means merely a grotesque figure of speech. Now one may say that in the above quotation Della Porta is actually talking about juniper and its essences, and one may therefore conclude that the *Magia naturalis* reports a recipe for the distillation of gin; there are no brains; furthermore, one may argue that “lambiccarsi il cervello” was after all a stock phrase, a trope in satirical Renaissance literature, which simply means to “rack one’s brains”.⁷⁵ Yet the *Magia* also has an elaborate recipe for the extraction of essences “out of flesh,” in this case from the meat of a capon. The distillation results in a sort of highly potent stock. Della Porta claims that a soup made from this miraculous substance brings back to life humans who were on the point of starvation.⁷⁶ Again, this *segreto* has a comic echo in *I fratelli rivali* (1601) where a doctor praises a recipe to medicate the appetite of a glutton as having the capacity to revive even the “dead and buried”.⁷⁷

Such instructions are not limited to a few capons, whose meat is cooked for days into a sort of broth (*brodo*). The brain of an executed criminal was an ingredient for various magical concoctions. The 1558 edition of the *Magia* divulges recipes that contain ingredients such as the essences of the brains of horses, asses, or recently killed humans. If taken orally, this kind of *succo di cervello* (to use again the phrase from the *Trappolaria*) will induce madness.⁷⁸ Viewed

80.

⁷³ Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 267-8 (bk. 10, ch. 13)

⁷⁴ On this issue, see for instance Suzanne Colnort-Bodet, “Eau-de vie logique et Banqueroutiers du Saint-Esprit” in *Culture science et développement. Mélanges en l’honneur de Charles Morazé* (Paris: Editions Privat, 1979), 310-311; Sergius Kodera, “The Art of the Distillation of ‘Spirits’ as a Technological Model for Human Physiology: The Cases of Marsilio Ficino, Joseph Duchesne and Francis Bacon” in *Blood, Sweat and Tears: The Changing Concepts of Physiology from Antiquity into Early Modern Europe*, ed. Helen King et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 112-8.

⁷⁵ See, for instance Giordano Bruno’s *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, in Giordano Bruno, *Dialoghi italiani*, vol. 2, ed. G. Gentile and G. Aquilecchia (Florence: Sansoni, 1985), 827: “Perché . . . vi lambiccarete il cervello” and his *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo*, *Ibid.*, 897: “dopo avervisi su lambiccato alquanto dell’umor del capo . . .”

⁷⁶ See Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 268 (bk.10, ch. 13): “To Extract Essence out of flesh. Out of three Capons, I have often Extracted an Essence in a small quantity, but of great strength and nutriment, wherewith I have recovered the life and strength to sick persons, whose stomachs were quite decayed. And they almost were dead for want of nourishment, having not been able to eat any things in three days.”

⁷⁷ Della Porta, *Fratelli Rivali*, 80 (1.3): “Con certe animelle di di vitellucce ti riporterò l’anima in corpo. . . Se fussi morto e seppellito resuscitarei per farmi medicar da te.”

⁷⁸ Della Porta, *De i miracoli et maravigliosi effetti dalla natura prodotti libri IV* (Venice: Lodovico Avanzi, [1558] 1588), 78v- 79r (bk. II, ch. 17). This is an Italian translation of the first edition of *Magia naturalis* (1558). Nor was this practice uncommon: on the use of distilled blood and of human brains in Leonardo Fioravanti, see Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 290. On brains as ingredients for medicines, see Della Porta, *Criptologia*, 190 and *De i miracoli*, 78v- 79r (bk. II, ch. 17): “Ex humano capite recenter obruncato electum oleum, animalibus faciem hominis inducit, sic variis animalium capitibus, monstruosiora reddes corpora . . .” See also below.

from the perspective of the *Magia*, the above quotations from Della Porta's comedies therefore take on a different aspect: the *succo di cervello* was more than just a mock recipe. For contemporary spectators, it rather had a well-known basis in a set of contemporary popular medical and magical practices; according to Della Porta's texts on natural magic, such drugs are highly efficacious. In such ways, these comedies stage playful, self-ironical, yet carefully calculated allusions to their author's expertise as a powerful magician. These tensions inherent in Della Porta's literary and scientific oeuvre echo the ways in which the *saltimbanchi* were poking fun at the very medical establishment they were licensed by.⁷⁹

We may therefore come to a preliminary conclusion: there is an intensive, often ironically charged interaction between Della Porta's *scienza* and his stage plays. His comedies in particular playfully refer to chemical remedies, *segreti*, which Porta discusses with apparent sincerity in his works on natural magic. The method of carnivalesque advertisement for miraculous drugs in the piazza becomes in Della Porta's hands an important tool for self-advertisement. It allows the author to distance himself from the more popular cultures of *ciarlatani* and/or *saltimbanchi* and at the same time to use (or even expropriate, if you wish) their *segreti* for his self-aggrandizement. Rather than a fundamental difference, the distinction between mountebank and magus was, therefore, class, education, and most importantly, a particular form of literacy. Della Porta was the only one of the preternatural philosophers who also was a highly renowned dramatist. The separation between Della Porta's texts written for the stage and those for erudite audiences (the former in the vernacular, the latter in elegant Latin) is indicative of the distance their author sought to construct between his own person and the people he wished to imagine as his peers and the ignorant crowd.⁸⁰

Conversely, we also notice that Della Porta's *scienza* is informed by a histrionic paradigm; these tensions can meaningfully be conceptualized as part of an attempt at forging "a performative self": a mode of action that was a specific trait of late Renaissance societies. It was, moreover, a dire need in an increasingly repressive Neapolitan environment undergoing deep economic and ideological transitions.⁸¹

The Witch's Unguent

Taking a distance from the *saltimbanchi* was one thing, and comparatively easy to achieve in a hierarchic society where these peddlers in the piazza remained irredeemably the social inferiors of this magus.⁸² Dealing with the inquisition was another: in 1574, 16 years after the first edition of Della Porta's enormously successful *Magia naturalis* the Roman "Holy Office" demanded

⁷⁹ Eamon, "Markets, Piazzas," 214.

⁸⁰ Surgeon-writer Leonardo Fioravanti, by contrast, prided himself of writing a *terso stile* Italian that was "more appropriate for the unlettered" because he considered the knowledge of Latin as unnecessary for the practice of medicine, Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 181, 186, 287.

⁸¹ Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets*, 144, 250, 313-4 and *passim* has outlined this kind of self-fashioning through the medium of print for Fioravanti. Even though he came from much more humble origins than Della Porta, it was not primarily the quest for utility that drove Fioravanti, but rather the attempt to secure for himself an elevated personal status in a society that was regulated by the feudal concept of honor.

⁸² See also Eamon, "Markets, Piazzas", 219 with regard to the ambivalent attitude of the medical establishment towards the wonder-drugs of the *saltimbanchi*.

Della Porta's arrest by the archbishop of Naples.⁸³ In 1577, Della Porta had to defend himself in a second trial in Rome; due to his ill health, he was not tortured, and stayed under house-arrest with Cardinal Falvio Orsini. In the following year, Della Porta was sentenced to canonical purgation for the possession of books on black magic and for having spoken to necromancers.⁸⁴ Even more serious was, perhaps, the fact that he had published the ingredients of the (in)famous witches' unguent.⁸⁵ Jean Bodin in his *Démonomanie des sorciers* (1580) accuses Della Porta of naturalizing witchcraft,⁸⁶ for the latter had pointed to the hallucinatory powers of the ingredients of the unguent with which witches anointed themselves with before (allegedly) flying to the Sabbath. Their capacity to move through the air and their orgies with the devil were, therefore, not real, but a product of a distorted imagination.⁸⁷

From the perspective of Della Porta's *scienza*, the witches' unguent is, therefore, nothing else but another *segreto*. It is a powerful drug, just like those which the mountebanks were marketing in the piazza⁸⁸ and which Della Porta had appropriated in his *Magia naturalis*. Just as the disturbances of the imagination of the besotted lovers in Della Porta's comedies were treated with powerful emetics, so the mental disturbances of the witches could be artificially produced by drugs containing substances such as *belladonna*.⁸⁹

The powers of drugs to influence our imagination allows us to perceive the objectives of Della Porta's histrionic *scienza* in yet another way. From a modern perspective we tend to think that the hallucinations caused by drugs are individually different and therefore cannot be compared to theatrical performances in a meaningful way. Yet there is evidence to the contrary; for apart from the witch's unguent, Della Porta also published other *segreti* to create collective hallucinations:

But if you wish people to have heads of horses or of asses . . . cut off the head of a horse or of an ass that are alive,—in order that the virtue [of it] be not feeble—and have a pot prepared this is large enough to fit [the head] in, fill it to the brim with oil and lard, and close [the pot] with a strong clay, and expose it for three days to a gentle fire, in order for the oil to form a broth and the boiled meat to be absorbed by the oil until the bones [the cranium] lay bare; crush them in a mortar and mix

⁸³ Laura Balbiani, "La ricezione della *Magia naturalis* di Giovan Battista della Porta nella Cultura e scienza dall'Italia all'Europa," *Bruniana et Campanelliana* 5 (1999): 277-303.

⁸⁴ Michaela Valente, "Della Porta e l'inquisizione. Nuovi documenti dell'Archivio del Sant'Uffizio." *Bruniana et Campanelliana* 3 (1997): 415-445., 422: We have only indirect knowledge of these legal proceedings through a list of trials that was made by the notary Joele at the behest of the Archbishop of Naples in 1580, cfr. also Michela Valente, "Della Porta, Giovanni Battista" in *Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione*, Vol. 1, ed. Adriano Prosperi, (Pisa: Edizione della Normale, 2010), Vol. 1, 460.

⁸⁵ On Della Porta's involvement with ceremonial magic, see Zambelli, 28.

⁸⁶ Gentilcore, 209 says that after the Council of Trent in Naples maleficent magic was "recognized by all levels of society, though to different degrees. . . Even at their most skeptical, physicians considered . . . spells . . . part of that gray area shared with the miraculous."

⁸⁷ Michela Valente, "Della Porta", 419; Balbiani *La Magia naturalis*, 58 -60.

⁸⁸ Gentilcore, 117

⁸⁹ The idea that the devil would administer drugs to the witches in order to cause them to believe in certain illusory voyages, was not unorthodox. A manual for confessors from the mid-sixteenth century actually claims that the devil was a "great doctor." Even so, the ecclesiastical point of view remained ambiguous on this question, because it also subscribed firmly to the reality of the Sabbath. On this topic, see the elegant presentation in Adriano Prosperi, *Tribunali di coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari* (Torino: Einaudi, 1996), 378-82.

the powder with the oil; with it, you have to anoint thoroughly the heads of the by-standers similarly fill the lamps with that oil and put into their centre some thin wicks made of coarse flaxen, neither too far apart nor too near, but as you need them, and you will see that they will appear with monstrous faces. And from this you can learn how to put together many things, but it appears to me to have said enough for an attentive reader.⁹⁰

In the passage that immediately follows, Della Porta describes another *segreto* which is prepared with a recently cut off human head; it will produce visions not of animals with human heads, but rather of humans with animal heads.⁹¹ In these passages from the first edition of the *Magia naturalis*, we find all the typical aspects of *segreti* and their histrionic qualities we have previously discussed: the distillation of animal and human brains to bring forth the essences of the animals and their use to create hallucinations (as lamp-oil as well as by direct application to the forehead like the witches' unguent). This *segreto* aims at a kind of performance in which the perceptions of the audience are totally controlled by the omnipotent and crafty stage director. Again, these eccentric practices find a grotesque echo in Della Porta's comedies, for example in the following passage from the *Astrologo* (1606), which describes a false magician:

Fa nascere [il mago] in un subito in testa ad un uomo un par di corna più grade di uno cervo.—Ogni donna maritata lo sa fare.—fa diventare li uomini bestie, asini e becchi, e le donne vacche e scrofe.—Ci diventano senza l'arte ogni giorno.⁹²

In the wink of an eye [the magus] grows a pair of horns on a man's head bigger than that of a stag.—Every married woman can do that.—he turns men into beasts, asses and cuckolds, and women into cows and sows.—All the time they become like that, even without [magical] art.)

Della Porta here exploits a *double entendre* that was in all probability apparent to his audience. The magicians prowess (or cheating) is here not only unfavorably compared to the effects of

⁹⁰ Della Porta, *De i miracoli*, fol. 78v (bk 2, ch.17): “Si vis autem, vt Equina, vel asinina videantur astantium capita, ... Equo abscinde caput, vel asino, non mortuo, ne languida sit virtus, eiusdemque capacitatis fictilem fabricato ollam, oleo plenam, suique pinguedine, vt superemineat: os operculato, tenacique munias luto, ignem subdelentum, vt planè bulliens tribus seruetur diebus oleum, elixataque caro in oleum currat, vt nuda spectentur ossa, pila tundito, pulisque oleo permisceatur, quibus astantium capita perungantur: similiter in lampadibus stupei funiculi in medio statuantur, nec propè, nec longè vt res postulat, & monstruoso spectaberis vultu. Ex iis multa discas componere: satis enim dixisse videor, si diligens fuerit intuator.”

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 78v- 79r (bk. 2, ch. 17): “Ex humano capite recenter obtruncato electum oleum, animalibus faciem hominis inducit, sic variis animalium capitibus, monstruosa reddes corpora, si iis accensis liciis illustretur domus, quod fido claude pectori, nam vti arcana ab antiquis celabantur, nec ita faciliter ex eorum eruitur dictis. Aliter tamen docet Anaxilaus nec irritè: Equorum virus à coitu accipitur, nouisque lampadibus ellychniis accensum, hominum capita, equina visui monstrifrice repræsentat: de asinis sic quoque proditur. Sic illud, quod apriam vocant in suis, cum subant: acceptum enim, & accensum idem præstat. Sic animalium reliquorum auricularibus accensis sordibus. Si illud perures, quod dicemus sperma, eoque spectatorum facies perunxeris, eorundem animalium conspicias capita, serua.”

⁹² *Astrologo* 1.3, Della Porta, *Teatro*, Vol. 3, 337.

unfaithful wives (who are putting horns onto the heads of their husbands), but also described as anaologous to a general decline of mores (which brings the bestial sides of men and women to the fore). The occurrence of such passages on stage are indicative of the author's attempt to ironically distance himself from such ideas in public, while leaving the theoretic foundations of the underlying *scienza* intact.

Physiognomy

Della Porta's troubles with the ecclesiastical authorities were not over yet. Quite on the contrary, after Sixtus V issued the 1586 Bull *Coeli et terrae creator Deus*, which banned all forms of divinatory arts that predicted individual human fates,⁹³ the author of various and highly successful books on the art of physiognomy experienced even greater difficulties to get his texts past the Congregation of the Index: his *Magia naturalis* was on the Madrid index in 1583, and in 1592, the Archbishop of Naples, Annibale di Capua, forbade the publication of his *Fisiognomia Humana*;⁹⁴ in 1610 Della Porta's *Chiromantia* failed to receive the *imprimatur*.⁹⁵ In spite of these difficulties, Della Porta managed to get his revised and largely expanded version of the *Magia naturalis* published in 1589 (the book was to be again on the index by 1668 and it remained there until the end of the nineteenth century).⁹⁶ Della Porta's texts on the art of physiognomy provide cartographies of the outward appearance of physical bodies with the aim not only of curing all kinds of physical diseases, but also of predicting the hidden inclinations or dispositions of the soul (past, present, or future). As the *Coelestis physiognomia* emphasizes, a general law of nature seems to be that one can foresee, in a single glance (*all'improvviso*), a person's future.⁹⁷ The

⁹³ On the distinctions between natural and judicial astrology (the latter predicting certain events in the lives of individual beings of necessity), and the vigorous ban on all divinatory arts of 1586 (which even ruled out the prediction of mere inclinations, which until then had been a very common practice), see Ugo Baldini, "The Roman Inquisition's Condemnation of Astrology: Antecedents, Reasons and Consequences" in *Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Gigliola Fragnito, trans. Adrian Belton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 81-82, 91-93; cfr. *passim* on the difficulties of upholding that distinction and therefore in general to enforce the ecclesiastical ban.

⁹⁴ At the behest of the chief Roman inquisitor, Giulio Antonio Santori. See Saverio Ricci, *Il sommo inquisitore. Giulio Antonio Santori tra autobiografia e storia (1532-1602)* (Rome: Salerno Editore, 2002), 400.)

⁹⁵ See Valente "Della Porta". For a summary of the proceedings and a comparison of the court cases of Cardano and della Porta, Saverio Ricci, *Inquisitori, censori, filosofi sullo scenario della Controriforma* (Rome: Salerno Editore, 2008), 145-59; Oreste Trabucco, "Riscrittura, censura, autocensura: itinerari redazionali di Giovan Battista Della Porta," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 22 (2002): 41-57, and Id., "Il corpus fisiognomico dellaportiano tra censura e autocensura" in *I primi Lincei e il Sant'Ufficio. Questioni di scienze de di fede*, (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2005), 235-72 on Della Porta's (self-) censorship of the *Physiognomia*. The increasingly critical attitude towards this kind of erudite natural magic is reflected in the practice of the ecclesiastical tribunals in the *Regno* during the later seventeenth century. These courts seem to have been much more concerned about persecuting defendants who were suspected of adhering to learned forms of magic, whereas sentences were much more lenient for popular healers, because the latter were neither suspected of offering alternative religious beliefs, nor seemed capable of propagating heterodox ideas; Milena Sabato, *Il sapere che brucia. Libri, censure e rapporti Stato-Chiesa nel Regno di Napoli fra '500 e '600* (Galatina, Lecce: Congedo editore, 2009), 165, 168-70.

⁹⁶ On the censorship of printing the *Regno* and the tensions and rivalry between ecclesiastical and viceregal claims to control the book-trade, as well as the genuinely chaotic forms of competition and cooperation (and the ensuing failure to effectively control the clandestine book market), see Sabato, 121-5, esp. 124.

⁹⁷ Della Porta, *Coelestis Physiognomia*, 191 (bk. II, ch. 2): "in questa arte che dal solo aspetto, all'improvviso, tanto veracemente predicava le morti, i pericoli della vita e i tempi de gli eventi."

following quote from *Olimpia* (1589) takes the veracity of the art of the divination from birthmarks as a matter of fact, and it implicitly points to the idea that this kind of physiognomic art has to be practiced by the right kind of people:

I furbi che vanno a torno per il mondo, da nei che vedono nella faccia, indovinando gli accosti nella persona: lo sa per questo che v'ha visto nella faccia.⁹⁸

The tricksters who wonder around in the world, are able to foretell the things to come of persons from the birthmarks they see in the face: he knows it because he has looked into your face.

As in the case with the *segreti* of the mountebanks, this is an ironic and grotesque reference to Della Porta's serious claim, namely that his physiognomic art is useful for the prevention of crime and for the speedy detection of criminals.⁹⁹

Non ha un pelo sul' capo o nella barba che non l'accusi per un traditore. È senza fede; e non so come non gli sieno restati quel naso e quelle orecchie che non gli sieno state tagliate, e quel viso sfregiato mille volte.¹⁰⁰

And he has not a hair on his head or in his beard which does not accuse him as a traitor. He is faithless; and I do not know why he still has this nose and these ears and why they have not been cut off and why this face has not been scarred a thousand times.¹⁰¹

Obviously, the idea that the art of physiognomy is useful for the re-ordering of a society plagued by social unrest can be seen as an attempt by Della Porta to bypass the ecclesiastical ban on divination by trying to recommend this art to the attention of the Ruler of the Regno. And indeed, at least some help with policing in Naples was perhaps welcome (then as now): during the sixteenth century, the Spanish authorities were often unable to control the territory. Officials of the Regno observed the tendency of bandits to flee to the capital for greater security, thus making Naples a "wood."¹⁰² In 1550 Viceroy Pedro de Toledo reported having executed 18,000

⁹⁸ *Olimpia* 4.6 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, Vol. 2, 66.

⁹⁹ Della Porta, *Coelestis Physiognomonia*, 192 (bk. I, ch. 2): "Con questa arte abbiamo giovato a molti amici, acciò schifassero i perigli se salissero alle dignità. Poco prima che io scrivesi queste cose avisai un amico che si guardasse dalla compagnia d'un certo uomo infelice e brutto, il che egli non volle fare, essendogli da quello stato promesso che l'avrebbe arricchito; onde accasò che, essendo stati trovati dal Governatore in una spelonca, che falsificavano la moneta, poco dopo furono tutti due appiccati." It is not without irony that Della Porta in his *Magia naturalis* gives recipes for counterfeiting of money and precious stones; cf. Eamon, "Science and Popular Culture," 482.

¹⁰⁰ *Trappolaria* 1.5 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, vol. 2, 247.

¹⁰¹ Another example: "Ecco il naso corvino, e i diti con l'unghie arroncigliate come nibbio, che è segno, che sei un sollemnissimo ladro: ecco l'orecchie lunge, che dimonstrano, che sei un asino. Poco barba, e men colore: sotto il ciel non è peggiore. Tu sei veramente servo da soldato." *Trappolaria*, 3.2 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, vol. 2, 268-9.

¹⁰² Pier Luigi Rovito, *Il Vicereame Spagnolo di Napoli. Ordinamento, istituzioni, culture di governo* (Naples: Arte

criminals over the past eighteen years. Between 1556 and 1599, historians estimate for Naples alone an average of 32 annual executions.¹⁰³ We find these very practices being rehearsed in on Della Porta's stage.¹⁰⁴ In the *Trappolaria* (15986), the hangman says the following to some criminals:

Or da così onorati principii, se non mentono i segni della fisionomia che ne' vostri fregiati visi si veggono, come uomini della prima bussola, ne ho fermo proposito che sete per ascendere a gradi più alti e far più gran salti e avere carichi su le spalle i maggiori che sian al mondo, over spero a vedervi giunger presto come meritano le vostre opere.¹⁰⁵

Now from such honored principles, (if the signs of the physiognomy in your scarred faces do not lie) like the men of the first rank, I am strongly convinced that you are to ascend to the highest levels and to make the biggest leaps and to have the biggest weights in the world on you shoulders, or [at least] I hope to see you soon getting where your deeds are rewarded.

Here a grotesque *boia* appears on stage as an expert in the art of physiognomy. And indeed, Della Porta's interest in the physical shape of the criminal body took on bizarre forms. For his *Chirophysiognomia* (1581, published posthumously 1677), Porta claims to have collected the imprints and drawings of the hands of executed criminals in order to empirically test the claims of palmistry. To access these corpses, Della Porta claims to have become friends with the viceroys' hangman.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the gallows are a frequent and macabre topic in Della Porta's comedies, and they are also the occasion to make fun of *segreti*:

Sai alcun brodetto di erba che guarisca i ladri di quella maledetta voglia di rubbare? . . . Questa è erba notoria: si piglia il canape, qual, posto a macerare per 15 giorni in certi liquori, e poi pesto ben bene e posto in un strumento fatto a modo de denti del pescecane, si prepara, e messo alla gola di un ladro farà che non rubbi mai più.¹⁰⁷

Do you know a little broth of herbs that will cure thieves of this accursed longing to steal? . . . This herb is notorious: one makes it by taking hemp, which after it

Tipografica, 2003), 386-7.

¹⁰³ Panico, 14.

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance *La Turca* 5.1 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, Vol. 3, 306: "Vo' appicarti solo per farti dispiacere. Tu non potevi esser se non un rustico villano, ed il tuo collo me lo pagherà ben sì. Le carezze che soglio far agli non le vo' far a te. Questo nodo grosso te lo porrò sotto la gola, ti farò stralunar gli occhi, torcer la bocca, e ti farò uscir la lingua fuori un palmo. A tuo dispetto ti stringerò tanto che ti farò uscir l'anima per lo culo. Bagnerò la fune che non scorra, acciocché più tradi facci l'effetto e facci morir con maggior tormento. Ti farò una pavana sulle spalle senza suoni, che non ti piacerà molto, poiché mi vai donando le cose mie, il mio stento, il mio sudore, Ti porro il capestro al collo e ti strascinerò come meriti. Camina appiccato, furfante, appiccato prima che ti appicchi."

¹⁰⁵ *Trappolaria* 1.1 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, vol. 3, 330.

¹⁰⁶ Clubb, *Giambattista della Porta*, 40; Della Porta, *Criptologia*, 75f. On the highly ambiguous role of the hangman as popular healer in early modern societies, see the fascinating remarks in Eamon, "Markets, Piazzas", 216.

¹⁰⁷ *La Turca* 2.4 in Della Porta, *Teatro*, Vol. 3, 256.

has been soaked for 15 days in certain liquids, is then pestled very thoroughly and put it into a tool which is shaped like the teeth of a shark, and then you put it to the throat of a thief that he will never steal again.)

Della Porta here describes the production of a rope, which is then used to strangle the delinquent on the gallows. The most one can say from a modern scientific point of view, is that Porta's ideas on means for the reduction of crime rely on a kind of rather crude, and literally "exhaustive" empiricism. It is, in fact, another example of his particular understanding of the combination of natural magic and criminal punishment. There is more to the idea that a hangman's rope is a miracle medicine against kleptomania: the rope that has taken a life is a powerful magical tool, especially for making love charms. In this case, the efficiency of the *materia magica* relies on the literal interpretation of the concept of the "strings of love".¹⁰⁸

A Trickster Economy?

But in what respect do these different kinds of literary and scientific registers in Della Porta's texts relate to the greater picture, that is, to the social and political situation of contemporary Naples? With its approximately 250,000 inhabitants, it was one of the largest cities in Europe and by far the biggest in the entire *Regno*. Yet Naples lacked the developing industry that was a characteristic of other European states. For centuries, the money generated through the agricultural surplus in the South went to the North, thus effectively precluding the emergence of a dynamic mercantile society characteristic of many other European centers.¹⁰⁹ By the middle of the sixteenth century a static non-martial society had thus emerged in the Viceregio; here the landed gentry sought to make up for disenfranchisement on the international stage by means of proverbial pompous appearances, combined with domestic recklessness¹¹⁰ and judicial and legal severity.¹¹¹ A "signorile capitalism" evolved, which effectively eroded the old categories of lineage, blood and kinship.¹¹² A new class of powerful political administrators emerged, the *baroni di toga*, who had bought their titles from the Spanish crown. In fulfilling important administrative functions for the foreign government, these bureaucrats often became more powerful than the landed gentry. The changes were apparent to everyone: even if members of the old nobility were carrying arms, behaving ruthlessly and dressing in extravagant ways in order to

¹⁰⁸ In 1653 Antonia Bruno was imprisoned for having baptized and sold these strings ("chiappi d' impiso") as love charms (Panico, 85-9; Giovanni Romeo, *Aspettando il boia. Condannati a morte, confortatori e inquisitori nella Napoli della Controriforma* (Florence: Sansoni, 1993), 166). Della Porta, *De i miracoli*, fol 86 r (bk. II, ch. 21) reports, albeit doubtfully, a *segreto* with a "laccio di impiccato per ladro."

¹⁰⁹ John A. Marino, "Economic Idylls and Pastoral Realities: The 'Trickster Economy' in the Kingdom of Naples." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24 (1982): 226.

¹¹⁰ For an example of such unruliness on Della Porta's stage, see *Rivali*, 5.2 in Della Porta, *Gli duoi fratelli*, 65-80.

¹¹¹ Rovito, 88; 96-98, 122; Raffaele Ajello, "La crisi del Mezzogiorno nelle sue origini. La dinamica sociale in Italia ed il governo di Filippo II" in *Napoli e Filippo II. La nascita della società moderna nel secondo Cinquecento* (Naples: G. Macciaroli, 1998), 15-17, 22; Maria Pia Iovino, "L' incubo turco" in *Ibid.*, 67. Giulio Fenicia, *Il regno di Napoli e la difesa del mediterraneo nell' età di Filippo II (1556-1598). Organizzazione e finanziamento* (Bari: Caccucci, 2003), 297 diagnoses at least for some years in the second half of the sixteenth century a strong economic dynamism that superseded for a short time the usual characteristic inertia as contested this picture.

¹¹² Rovito, 98.

set themselves apart from the rest, their role in real political decision-making had become menial.¹¹³

John Marino has described this phenomenon in relation to what he has labeled a “Trickster Economy.” Marino argues that in the face of factual political and economic impotence the locals turned to the home front, as it were, to develop a culture in which trading became a game. Economic relationships were less dependent on actual gain and loss than on the symbolic status that could be acquired through such *ersatz* monetary and political exploits.¹¹⁴ The local elite’s opting out of international markets and politics forced by the Spanish crown upon the Italian South became manifest in the conspicuous display of wealth by the nobility and in general codes according to which cleverness, kinship ties and friendship became the leading virtues.¹¹⁵ Again, a quotation from Della Porta’s *Fratelli rivali* (3.1) illustrates this situation:

Quando non ci valerà ragione, bontà e giustizia, poneremo mano agl’inganni e furfanterie, ché queste vincono e superanno tutte le cose, e poi che egli cerca con inganni torvi l’amamta, sarà bene che con i medesimi inganni gli rispondiamo, e facciamo cader inganno sopra l’ingannatore. E che val l’uomo che non sa far bene e male? bene à buoni, e mal a’ cattivi?¹¹⁶

If reason, goodness and justice are useless, we shall turn our hands to tricks and knavery, for these defeat and triumph over all things; since with tricks he aims to deprive you of your beloved, we may well answer him with the same tricks and turn the tricks against the trickster. What’s a man worth if he cannot do both good and evil?¹¹⁷

Della Porta’s constant attention to the special and inborn features of bodies in general precluding metaphysical and religious speculation can, therefore, be read as a reflection of the economic situation broadly outlined above. For Porta and his kind, appearances had become perhaps the most central aspect of their lives. To take recourse to judgment from the physical evidence of the body and to the claim that one could perform miracles by means of secrets, remained the only safeguard for truth in a colonial place where dissimulation had become vital. I think that the great popularity of Della Porta’s works all over Europe confirms that he as a colonized subject anticipated the pressure of absolutist power in his colonial situation earlier and perhaps also more vehemently than in other parts of Europe.

¹¹³ Rovito, 130.

¹¹⁴ Marino, 220, 223, 225.

¹¹⁵ Marino, 212, 215, 233. In the *Fratelli Rivali* 2.4 in fact, Eufarone who is speaking here belongs to the Della Porta family and speaks to the nephew of the Spanish viceroy: “Voi altri signori ricchi stimate poco l’onore de’ poveri, e noi poveri gentiluomini, non avendo mo altro che l’onore, la stimiamo più che la vita.” (“You rich noblemen think little of the honor of the poor, and we poor gentlemen, with nothing left us now but honor, we prize it more than life,” Della Porta, *Gli duoi fratelli*, 124-25.)

¹¹⁶ Della Porta, *Gli duoi fratelli*, 152.

¹¹⁷ Trans. Clubb in Della Porta, *Gli duoi fratelli*, 153; slightly modified.

Conclusion

The nobleman was a trickster: I hope to have brought evidence to the claim that Della Porta's theater works in ways that are analogous to his scientific studies and that both realms are continuously influencing each other. Indeed, Della Porta's insistence on a categorically sensual and somatic foundation of the human mind seems to me a strikingly cohesive line along which his work can be understood. The magus/playwright merely exploits the natural properties of these emotions, for instance infatuation; he also cures the ailments of the social body, such as the speedy detection of criminals. The message Della Porta wishes to convey with his experiments is quite unequivocal: a powerful magus is capable of diagnosing as well as curing all kinds of diseases not only in the human but also in the social body. Rather than being based on transferable knowledge, this specific capacity to bring forth miraculous works of art is founded on *ingenium*, an elusive set of innate qualities.¹¹⁸ In order to demonstrate this specific capacity of handling all kinds of natural objects, as well as human beings, Della Porta stages *meraviglia*: portentous events that are designed to leave his uneducated spectators stunned; the crowd's amazement at the marvelous performances was an essential confirmation of the magical prowess of their author.¹¹⁹ Della Porta thus aims at an asymmetric and non-dialectical relationship between the mastermind and the multitude. In that context, the stage functions as an intricate apparatus that is designed to produce extraordinary physical effects in the spectators. Viewed from this perspective, Della Porta certainly shared more in common with the *saltimbanchi* in the *piazza* than he himself would have willingly admitted. His intertwining of secrets and the spectacular disclosure of what lies hidden indicates that he did not wish to make his audiences capable of political action or juridical verdict. As with his magical drugs and histrionic experiments, Della Porta rather seeks to paralyze the spectator's body and mind. This form of scientific control of the emotions was the most important pedigree of the learned magus in the specific political and economic environment of late-sixteenth-century Naples. The Neapolitan nobility had become impersonators of their own class: a phenomenon that anticipates the role of the courtier in absolutist Europe.

The development of modern science out of various cultural practices (such as collectionism, alchemy, astrology, magic) and an eclectic mixture of Peripatetic and other philosophic traditions (Pythagorean, Platonic, Atomistic, Skeptic), as well as various literary forms (dialogue, drama, encyclopedia, to name but a few) took on very different shapes in the syntheses of different Renaissance intellectuals. In the case of Della Porta, the study of nature was closely associated with the practices of dissimulation, marvel, and the histrionic display of the omnipotence of its author, the ingenious magician. In all probability, this synthesis of science and literature started out as a highly personal response to the specific political situation of a colonial environment, Spanish Naples. I have argued that Della Porta's conspicuous display of

¹¹⁸ On which, see for instance, Kodera, *Ingenium*.

¹¹⁹ Louise George Clubb, "Review of Balbiani 2001," *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (2003): 188-89. Della Porta, *Magia naturalis*, 13 (bk. I, ch.6): "Haec noscens Magus, ut agricola ulmos vitibus, sic ipse coelo terram vel, ut apertius loquar, inferna haec superiorum dotibus mirificisque virtutibus maritat, & inde arcana Naturae gremio penitus latentia, veluti minister in publicum promit, quaequae assidua exploratione vera noverit, ut omnes cunctorum artificiis amore flagrantis, sui contentur omnipotentiam laudari & venerari." On the magician as performer/actor and the conscious re-mystification of natural phenomena, see also Paula Findlen, "Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge. The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe." *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990): 320.

magical prowess can be perceived as a response to that specific and political situation, which created “trickster economies.” Viewed from this perspective, his marvelous *scienza* is an effort to give a voice to a member of a politically powerless former ruling class. Yet this individual effort (combining theater, magic, physics, astrology, and physiognomy) very quickly became highly popular across Europe. I would like to suggest that Della Porta’s *scienza* became such a success because it naturalized (and thereby legitimized) the social realities of many other members of educated elites in the various absolutist cultures of Europe. In order to ascend on the social ladder, courtiers especially had to rely on dissimulation; they therefore had to objectify their peers; Della Porta’s histrionic *scienza* must have been so appealing to these audiences because it provided them with an ideology that demonstrated how natural (and therefore innocent) and yet how socially effective their glamorous social practices actually were. Della Porta’s literary strategy, in which he constantly tries to arrogate for his person the position of a magus with nearly unlimited power to create *meraviglia*, is a phantasm of omnipotence: it reflects an objective loss in political power.

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