

How successfully did  
della porta defend the  
naturalness of his  
natural magi

[History](#)



There are two sorts of Magick; the one is infamous, and unhappy, because it has to do with foul Spirits, and consists of incantations and wicked curiosity; and this is called Sorcery; an art which all learned and good men detest; neither is it able to yield a truth of reason or nature, but stands merely upon fancies and imaginations... The other Magick is natural; which all excellent wise men do admit and embrace, and worship with great applause; neither is there any thing more highly esteemed, or better thought of, by men of learning.

Della Porta frequently insists that the type of magic that he practices and writes of is pure, good and completely natural, working with the balances of the world rather than with anything beyond the earthly, such as demons or spirits, although he admits the existence of such terrible things. He claims that he 'never wrote here nor elsewhere, what is not contained within the bounds of nature.'<sup>2</sup> The 'naturalness' of his natural magic seems very nearly indisputable given the content of Natural Magick.

His Natural Magic is more of a catalogue or encyclopaedia than a book of magic in many ways. It has been described as 'a strange book, combining valuable observations of physical phenomena, including a detailed description of Della Porta's re-invention of the camera obscura, and chapters on magnetism, farming, and Empedoclean atomism with notes on compounding cosmetics, charms, love philtres, and practical jokes.'<sup>3</sup> He writes entire chapters cataloguing animals and plants, such as chapter VI, book II, which is entitled 'How there may be Dogs of great courage, and diverse rare properties, generated of diverse kinds of beasts', and lists the breeds of dog, and their ancestry, claiming that 'a strong Indian-dog may be <https://assignbuster.com/how-successfully-did-della-porta-defend-the-naturalness-of-his-natural-magi/>

generated of a Tygre'<sup>4</sup> and that 'A strong and swift Dog gendered of a kind of Wolf called Thos'<sup>5</sup>.

Parts read as a manual for husbandry, farming and housekeeping, with chapters entitled 'How we may cause fruit to grow bigger then their ordinary kind'<sup>6</sup> and 'Diverse ways to make Bread of all sorts of Corn and Pulse'<sup>7</sup> Most of the knowledge contained within the books does not, in fact, bear any relation to magic as we know it, natural or otherwise, but more to day to day life and advice on a wide variety of subjects, the early self-help manual.

Derek J. Price claims that the text, does, indeed contain magic in Della Porta's definition. For the author, Natural Magick was... magic because it was unencumbered by the artifices and instruments then becoming so widespread in the exact sciences of astronomy and mathematics'<sup>8</sup> As such, much of his book is indeed magic, referring, as it does, to everyday processes and using everyday knowledge- it is not so much a scientific text, as a compendium of knowledge, which may have been passed down through generations, on the best way to cure a fever or grow fruit.

Della Porta regards these processes as a kind of magic, as they so not require the exactness of science, such as the astronomy or mathematics named by Price. Indeed, Della Porta claims that anything that is 'amongst all Natural Sciences more excellent or more wonderful then another, that they would still call by the name of Magick'. <sup>9</sup> Magic is nothing more than 'the practical part of natural philosophy. '<sup>10</sup> Despite what may seem an obvious separation from any demonic activities to a modern reader, the situation in

1558 was different to that today: the witch hunt in Europe was still very much alive.

Della Porta himself drew the attention of the inquisition at some point before 1580, <sup>11</sup> explaining his preoccupation with being seen to have no connection with demonic magic. Indeed, the Inquisition deemed his work dangerous enough to advise him to write comedies instead, as Della Porta duly did. <sup>12</sup> Clubb states that 'the immediate cause of Della Porta's being hauled before the Inquisition was a denunciation by some fellow Neapolitans who were scandalized by his growing reputation for magic and by the titles of *Indovino* and *Mago* bestowed on him by the populace'.

It is understandable, then, that Della Porta would be aware of the dangers of going against the Church, and would be careful of his works even in 1558, the date of the earliest known version of *Magicae Naturalis*, <sup>14</sup> which would be translated into the English *Natural Magick* in 1658. It has been suggested that 'more distressing than family trouble or sickness to one of Della Porta's intellectually but religiously orthodox mind, however, was pressure from the ecclesiastical authorities'<sup>15</sup> The staunch Catholicism followed by Della Porta is also confirmed by him in the 'Preface to the Reader'.

He asks 'the grate and good God'<sup>16</sup> to forgive a man for claiming that Della Porta, was in fact, a sorcerer, saying that to ask the mercy of God for others was what was correct for 'a noble and Christian man to do'<sup>17</sup> he claims in his chapter entitled 'The Instruction of a Magician, and What Manner of Man a Magician Ought To Be' that those who practised magic did so as a God-given gift: 'that God may seem to have made them hereunto. <sup>18</sup> The existence of

God, and the omnipotence of God is reiterated many times thought the first book: that which is considered 'most excellent' by Della Porta, that which Plato calls the Form, he says to come from 'a most excellent place; even immediately from the highest heavens, they receiving it from the intelligence's, and there from God himself'<sup>19</sup>. If this is magic, then, Della Porta states, it is magic which is endorsed by God. 'It comes from the Elements, from Heaven, from the intelligences, yes, from God himself'<sup>20</sup>

Whilst, as previously stated, Della Porta's Natural Magick is, for the large part, a compendium of knowledge, the first book deals with the theory of the 'magick' itself. Even, or perhaps especially, his preface and first book are concerned with dispelling any notion that he was involved with that magic 'which all learned and good men detest,'<sup>21</sup> and warns the reader that it is only those who would be jealous of his work that would accuse his of sorcery: 'if I had no care to retell the calumnies of detractors and envious men, that most immodestly wound me, calling me a Sorcerer, a Conjurer, which name from my tender youth I have abhorred. <sup>22</sup> Thus, he places any reader who does accuse him of sorcery into the category of jealousy, and by saying 'vile and hateful men, who by doing injury to others, justly or unjustly, labour to win the popular and base approbations, and applause of the vulgar'<sup>23</sup> causes any who believe those who place him into the category of sorcerer to be forced into the definition of 'vulgar', and named 'ignorant people, void of all serious matters. '<sup>24</sup>

He protects himself further from any suspicion of sorcery or any other crime in the 'Preface to the Reader' with something of a standard disclaimer: 'if I

have over-passed some things, or not spoken so properly of them as I might; I know there is nothing so beautiful, but it may be adorned; nor so full, but it may be augmented'<sup>25</sup>. In saying this, Della Porta paints a picture of himself for the reader: as nothing more than a lowly mortal, and, as such, likely to make mistakes and oversights.

He declares that his intentions are of the best, and any mistakes are purely unintentional. However, with all of the assertions that Della Porta makes as to the purity and goodness, the naturalness of his work, it must be wondered whether he himself believed there to be some parts of his Natural Magick that are, indeed, enough to merit the raising of suspicion, and might point to some demonic art. This could well be addressed by the activity of the Inquisition at the time of publication.

He even dedicated the 1558 *Magicae Naturalis* to Philip II of Spain, <sup>26</sup> suggesting that he was trying to garner support from other Catholics, particularly one so close to the running of the inquisition. Marie Boas states that There is very little of the true occult here, though a reading of the *Natural Magick* makes one understand why the *Accademia Secretorum Naturae* was suspected of occultism, as well as how little like seventeenth-century experimental science this kind of natural magic really was.

This is not the magical and theoretical mysticism of a Kepler, but rather the arts and crafts of mystics. <sup>27</sup> *Natural Magick* is well described as 'arts and crafts', given the wide variety of subjects covered in the text, some as diverse as methods of writing on the shell of an egg, and perhaps also as

'mystic'. Della Porta frequently refers to mysteries and secrets, particularly in the first book.

He states that 'that the knowledge of secret things depends upon the contemplation and view of the face of the whole world'<sup>28</sup> and that 'the likeness of things shows their secret virtues.'<sup>29</sup> This perhaps links back to his interest in cryptography, and in other ways of hiding written secrets: book sixteen of *Natural Magick* is entitled 'Of Invisible Writing' and informs the reader of the best ways to hide their secrets, from writing on an egg covered in wax to secreting messages on the body of an unwitting messenger by writing them on his head or other parts of his body. <sup>0</sup> Whilst this is, undoubtedly, a fascination with secrets, as the entirety of the text is perhaps a volume of knowledge passed down through generations, and so something of a 'secret recipe' to those who knew, demonic magic is not present. Evil spirits are not mentioned, except to assure the reader that the knowledge within the books has no bearing upon the spirit world, merely the natural one. Della Porta would have us know that the natural world, and the magic within it, is brought about by God, and as such, the secrets of nature, are, in fact, good and Godly:

And by this means he, being as it were the servant of Nature, does extract her hidden secrets, and bring them to light, so far as he has found the true by his own daily experience, that so all men my love, and praise, and honour the almighty power of God, who has thus wonderfully framed and disposed all things. <sup>31</sup> What there is, then of magic, is far more a selection of knowledge which could indeed be considered occult, as Della Porta is so

keen to point out that this learning is, in fact, secret until now, and that the reader is in a privileged position to be viewing these long- kept secrets.

These secrets, however for the most part, consist of recipes for simples and methods of cooking game, and that which could be considered less mundane, such as his book on the load-stone, do treat entirely on the natural world. References to beings beyond the physical are almost entirely to God, since Della Porta, as a staunch Catholic, held that God was the source and creator of all things. As such, it is undeniable that his 'magick' is natural.

However, his defence of the naturalness of his natural magic suggests that he believes such a defence to be necessary. The Inquisition believed the text to be dangerous enough to restrict Della Porta's further works. However, the defence that he gives only serves to emphasise the lack of mention of demons or spirits in the work. As such, Della Porta defended his natural magic well, and only the concerns and paranoia of the time in which the work was published resulted in suspicion.