

OBSERVE

INSPECT

AND

THE
PHYTOGNOMONICA
OF GIOVANNI BATTISTA
DELLA PORTA, NEAPOLITAN.

CONTAINING EIGHT BOOKS

IN WHICH A NEW, AND MOST EASY
method is given, by which the hidden powers
of plants, animals, metals, and in short all
things, from the initial inspection
of their external appearance,
are revealed.

*THEY AGREE WITH AND ARE TO BE CONFIRMED BY
nearly infinite and more select secrets,
investigated and explored with
great effort, loss of time, &
waste of expenses*

WITH THE PRIVILEGE
OF NAPLES, at the House of Orazio Salviani. 1588.

Translated from the Latin by Ian Karp



AT AGE 50

TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS MARINO
BOBALI, SON OF ANDREA
FROM RAGUSA

*GIOVANNI BATTISTA PORTA NEAPOLITAN
SENDS MUCH HEALTH*

There was an ancient custom of the northern people that illustrious knights would send soon to be married daughters out from their country's home without a guide, so that wandering and rambling through different regions with a body and dowry having to be spread, they might procure for themselves a husband of their choosing. I had called to mind this same fact about myself and followed the custom of these nations, thus when I recognized I had reached the proper age to send out strange things, he would compose his manners thus, and so prefer himself to all others so that he might find a man and patron suitable to his qualities. Indeed, a new form is advancing into the light, marching along new paths, and bearing new things not seen for many centuries. I was afraid lest such a novelty should win the hatred of many that I promised myself there would be no lack of those who would secretly, and publicly, suppress and pollute this with offensive influence. I am speaking of those who, suffering from such dullness of mind, are so addicted to the judgement of others that they are absolutely deprived of everything befitting them, and when they cannot even try to know something, they wish to appear to be achieving something by despising others. I am afraid of nothing, and it should gain favor even among the learned who, tired of the daily forms, welcome new ones (however small they may be) with the esteem and applause of all. Therefore, so that I might subvert these enemies, the greatest of my wishes was to find a certain man, one generous, famous, judicious, and preeminent in gifts of genius, by whose patronage it would be rendered safe

from that deplored race of men so that, having barely crossed the threshold of tender age, having barely left its postliminary, and not yet made sufficient enough to be seen by anyone, its fame was brought to your ears before it deserved to be loved and seen, before it deserved to be desired, and before it deserved to be known. Allow me to speculate about you in the same way the most diligent fathers seek to invest in their daughters. Therefore, while examining the course of your life, moved by your great fame, I am flooded with a great joy that it has obtained a greater patronage than its dignity merits. For if I consider nobility more attentively, there is no single thing I admire more greatly; indeed, I recall so well the ancient fame spread through your ancestors, as if it had been delivered by hand all the way down to these times, and while I searched with the greatest zeal through the ancient monuments of literature from Ragusa and from ancient Epidaurus, I discovered that your ancestors descended from the Roman Fabii. For in the conquest of the entire world, so that they might govern the warring magistrates throughout different parts of the world, and so that they might lead colonies, the different families were distributed to various places, so that they might become inhabitants. Remnants of the name still survive: for, is the family name bob called faba, and does bobali come from Fabis? And Pliny testifies that the Fabii were called fabi. Is there anyone who does not know of your family's long series of years leading up to these most famous, distinguished times? Indeed, as often as possible they administered the highest magistracy in the Republic with the greatest praise and glory, by which it was made that the gentle fathers of your country may be rightly called the best by one mouth, and with the consent of the citizens. If I look at the fame of the name, it is spread longer and wider than your city, and that neighboring Macedonia, made illustrious by the famous deeds of Alexander, and moreover Rome, queen of the world's land. But when you are second in Fortune to the good few, you are easily the first among them all, by managing them wisely and entreating them. And if I look at your portrait, you show not a shadowy image, but the perfect form expressed by a Hero, with the hereditary strength of the dead Fabii ancestors, eyes of great wit, the dexterity of a genius, and you prefer to support the person of Alexander the Great before whom, as is limited, you are so near in munificence. At last, I see nothing in you that does not obviously indicate the greatness of a king's mind, exceptional manners, a guiltless life to consider everything happily, and so much admirable skill to be imitated. You are one who promises more in the end than in the beginning. But let this oration return to where it left off. Hastily I draw out my years by concealing. He has a singular aspect and grace that is decorated with no exquisite or zealous ornaments; indeed, his natural color cannot be bought, he is contented with his natural form, neglects seduction, and, so pleasing to

himself, he dashes towards you. This is not the tongue of a Roman, or of an Attic matron, but of a simple girl. I promise that what is covered by cloths will appear much more beautiful and pleasant than what is visible externally: about which, he who has contemplated the matter more deeply and thoroughly will obtain a richer fruit and fuller obedience, since it provides access to long hidden recesses. Contemplating the appearance of things deceives one so much that they do not know they are deceived. If any one of the ringlets offends, and renders the hair untidy, or the clothes dirtied or poorly dressed, which have escaped the care and attention of the handmaid (for it is not possible for the eyes to be so acute), let me come bent forward, if you wish, looking for the truth, lest the love of such a great man boils over, returned to you with haste. Therefore, if you did not love yours, I want you to cherish yours now, and to protect her, cherish her, and receive her, and from you she may accept safe patronage against these foolish and ignorant laborers. If I feel that you have accepted it, I will make nothing of the others who are unadmired, and the sister will hasten more quickly to the younger brother. Farewell, and love me, like you're accustomed to.

PROEM

Indeed, I have always thought the most noble duty of a more refined and divine philosophy was to discover by shrewd investigation that which has been hidden by nature and concealed by a most rich majesty. An immense work, and the greatest and most occult of the divinity, and of which nothing greater can be found. As the famous physician Herophilus had thought, I likewise thought that nothing could be affected but through the power of plants, most of which are unknown. For if the founder is to be considered, our God is great, and his power is great, and of his power there is no number. And if we will consider what the ancients have mandated about plants for the memory of the future, they seem portentous. It is reported by Pythagoras that *Coriacesia* and *Callicia* freeze water, and by Democritus that the root of *Achemenidon*, made into a pastille and drank in wine in the daytime, makes the afflicted confess everything during the torments of night through various divine imaginations. And if you were to apply *Adamantida*, lions would recoil with a great gap, and if I had *Arianidem* with a fiery color, I could kindle firewood anointed with oil by its touch. Drinks with *Theangelida* produce divinations, if *Gelotophyllida* is drunk with myrrh and wine mixed with various species, there will be no end of laughing, and there is a plant whose touch completely returns love, or puts it down with hatred, as we have from Pliny. Theophrastus mentions a plant growing among the Indians which is able to diffuse blood and, it seems, drive it away, and each thing acquires the same from a different one and draws it to itself. The root of *Baraas*, according to the teaching of Josephus, shines in the evening as if a light, and repels those who approach, and unless menstrual blood is spread over it, frees those who are oppressed by the cacodemon. Democritus said that Theophrastus believed there was a plant whose contact carried by a fan would cause one to leap over a wedge driven into a tree by shepherds. Ethiopian grass dries up all the lakes and ponds when thrown in, laying everything bare by its touch. *Achimenide* thrown into enemy lines confuses the columns and turns their rear. The author of the histories Xanthus reports that a slain babe of a dragon was brought back to life by the parent plant *Bali*, and that same Thylon who died by the dragon was restored to health. And with the plant Juba King of Mauretania brought the revived man back to life. Therefore, if our elders had openly discovered such great virtues from such small plants, why should we fear that similar or greater things could be found by us investigators? It would be of utterly foolish and stupid judgement to think that the great founder of those things would have made these hidden to men, for then he would have created in vain, especially since he did this so clearly with animals lacking intellect. Who taught the Dictamnus plant to be strong by releasing thorns into the deer so that, when hit by that weapon,

they eject them from the pasture? What swallow saw the *chelidonium* plant to be so healthy and heal the troubled eyes of those darlings? By feeding on *cunilae* the tortoise restores its strength against serpents. The weasel, crowded in battle with mice, is fortified by Rue (*ruta*), oregano with the stork, and wild boars heal themselves from disease with ivy (*hedera*.) The snake, with vision obscured by its hibernation den, refreshes its eyes in the plow grass, but if it loses feeling in its scales, it scratches itself on juniper thorns. The dragon relieves spring nausea with the juice of wild lettuce. The elephant charges the chameleon devouring the wild olive tree with its own venom. Deer resist eating grass from venomous pastures. Doves, jackdaws, blackbirds, and partridges clean the annual foliage of the laurel tree. Pigeons, turtles, and fowls eat pellitory plants. Ducks, geese, and other aquatics are quenched by *siderite* plants, cranes by marsh reeds, crows by dead chameleons, an infective virus by laurel, and six hundred other such things. Therefore, if animals can tell profitable plants from harmful ones by their marks, why must we imagine that humans would lack the types with which they would also have been able to investigate? Nor can we imagine lacking the means of divine and supreme wisdom, by which one could easily do so: they are not lacking therefore, they are not lacking. From the remote countryside, impassable peaks of mountains, groves, and forests, all of which must be traversed, with all my strength I contemplated the manifold forms of plants, the variegated colors of flowers, the number of leaves, the dissection and likeness of roots, of trunks, and of limbs, and not only their manner of springing from the earth, but of growing and fruiting too, so varied from one another, and different, thinking that nothing happens at random or by chance, but everything with reason and an ordered cause, just as the great Ptolemy said, and especially in these most beautiful animals and plants; nor is there in nature such a thing so base that something wonderful does not shine. Fascinated I contemplated a plant so cheerful and smiling with vivid color, exhaling such a sweet, fragrant odor, and in short of such wonderful charm and elegance that it seemed to smell of heavenly majesty and, as if it provoked the great eyes of the beholders to contemplate the opulence of nature, the same had powers friendly to man and most welcome for the use of medicine. On the other hand, there was one so unattractive and deformed that it would strike terror into observers from afar due to its foul odor and color, this very one later being found to be a deadly gift and of most certain death. I marveled at the congenial plants, in which intervened so much likeness and similarity, the remedies being nearly the same, that physicians put down one for the other. Contrary to the one in which there was no kinship, nor collusion of virtue. And if there were any which seemed composed of different things, they would have the composed faculties of both. There agreed a consensus by a certain tacit, natural divination of men that everyone should take plants to overcome their illnesses, which appeared

to do so with a certain similarity. Upon careful consideration of which, with divine assistance suggesting, it fell upon my mind that our internal habits can be traced from the external marks of the body, and that hunters, horsemen, shepherds, and birders know the propensities of behavior from the appearance of animals and accordingly make their decisions, thus from the external signs of plants man can be reminded of their internal powers. Supported by this rationale, I began to consider in my mind whether the established gifts corresponded to the stated remarks, and if there were any virtues unknown to us, I sought them out from the Physicians' books, which by chance the learned had written, thus I began by sustained comparison, and on the matter there was a wonderful response and connection. Thus afterwards, by the grace of confirming the truth, if I happened upon plants still unknown and untested for medical use, having taken many risks on our part, leaving nothing unexplored, it has come to be so useful and so noble that I will never apologize for the accuracy of the posited work. And from this, like a harmonious bunch of grapes, one by one a multitude of wonderful contemplations poured forth, so that the delights and riches not only of plants but also of animals, metals, gems, and stones might be investigated and contemplated, and a much broader and unencumbered approach to our hopes than we had imagined became clear. And if the divine Minerva had not forbidden the writing of harmful and evil things, perhaps through a desire of learning wonderful things we would have been obliged to a more full obedience to genius. We have set examples in Medicine above all, not because we wish to preach Medicine, for we intend this less, but in order that we do not give the wheel to impious men for contriving evildoers. The learned and perspicacious understand things other than these. Finally, by the auspices of God, the matter was brought to him because the rules were collected by inquiry, and if they were not sufficiently prepared for us, however little we are, however few there will be, we give to the remembering age, to none of the ancients nor, should I mention, to the more recent memorable ones, showing not an air of fortune or of vain boasting (for my mind holds contempt for empty glory, as those who know me testify.) But so that posterity may be consulted and God's supreme benevolence be cultivated, let this work be venerated. In this investigation of causes, the qualities of hot, cold, wet, and dry, frequently repeated and chanted by philosophers and physicians, will not occur, nor that which has been drawn from others, received in a compendium, either enlarged or arranged in various ways, but only that which has been discovered by us. Hence if there remains something to be known or is not demonstrated exactly (for who dares to promise this?), know that knowledge of noble and new matters, and of the less demonstrable divine, is certainly more useful and more exceptional than that of anything well proven, and is to be ascribed to our ingenious rashness rather than to the truth of the matter. It

is an arduous task and full of difficulty, one intended for the rest, but I know that after me there will be no want for methods of this kind, and that they will produce a deeper and more accumulated knowledge. But we have done what we could, and the readers will see that will was not lacking.