

Health and Beauty in Della Porta's *Natural Magic*

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Abstract: Giovan Battista Della Porta's *Natural Magic* (1589) offers a comprehensive exploration of the intersections between beauty and health. It reflects the period's beliefs about the healing properties of natural substances and their use in enhancing physical appearance. The article will demonstrate how *Natural Magic* delineates health and beauty practices along gender lines, explicitly distinguishing between general distillation methods and specific beauty treatments for women. In doing so, it constructs gender-specific roles and applications for otherwise neutral recipes.

Keywords: Beauty, Health, Medicine, Magic, Gender, Secrets.

1. Introduction

The idea that external appearance reflects internal condition, linking beauty and health, dates back to scattered statements by ancient philosophers such as Pythagoras, Aristotle, Polemon, and Hippocrates (Lammel, Gerlach, and Hoppe, 2002, 352–58). Giovan Battista Della Porta, the Neapolitan naturalist and polymath, compiled this knowledge in his works on natural history, offering an exploration of the intersections between beauty, health, and natural magic. Central to his thinking is the belief that physical beauty and health are intertwined, a concept also evident in his *De humana physiognomonia* (1586), where external beauty reflects internal harmony.¹

In *Magia Naturalis*, Della Porta moves beyond theory to provide a practical approach for enhancing health and beauty, closely related to the genre of “books of secrets.”² His concept of the *magus* is rooted in secular practices, portraying the magician as an artisan who manipulates natural forces through empirical techniques like distillation and alchemical processes.³ Unlike earlier traditions,

¹ Della Porta 2011–2013. See, with further literature, Caputo 1990; MacDonald 2005; in relation to *Magia naturalis*, see Kodera 2010; Santoro 2016; Vaccaro and Tateo 2022.

² See Smith 2011; for Della Porta in this context, see Eamon 2010; 2017.

³ Della Porta 1669, 3; 1589, 3. See Zambelli 2007, 28–34.

Porta's *magus* eschews divine connection, focusing instead on the mastery of nature's hidden properties through observation, skill, and material resources to harness nature's occult powers for marvels and transformation.⁴ This knowledge system was increasingly connected to the institutionalization of the arts and the process of professionalization, which often resulted in the exclusion of women.⁵

Building on studies of the history of domestic recipes,⁶ this essay focuses on three key books from the second edition of *Magia Naturalis* (1589): Book IX, *De mulierum comesticis* (*On Beautifying Women*); Book X, *De extrahendijs rerum essentijis* (*On Distillation*); and Book XI, *De myropoeia* (*On Perfumery*). In these, Della Porta adopts a gendered approach, categorizing neutral remedies into separate spheres for men and women. This separation raises the question of where women fit within Della Porta's concept of the *magus*, reflecting broader early modern concerns with gender, science, and the body.

2. Beauty and Health in Della Porta's Natural Philosophy

Drawing on the works of Hippocrates, Plato, and Galen, Della Porta argues that external appearance reflects internal balance.⁷ For Hippocrates (2nd half of 5th century BCE), true beauty arises from the optimal mixture of the body's humors, manifesting in effective bodily functions rather than superficial characteristics like skin color or texture. Plato (428/7–348/7 BCE), as cited by Della Porta, similarly associates beauty with the health of the soul: a well-ordered soul expresses itself in physical beauty, while internal disharmony or moral disorder manifests as ugliness. Galen (129–c. 216) synthesizes these ideas, arguing that a body is most beautiful when it achieves balance—neither too dense nor too loose, too hard nor too soft—ensuring optimal health and function (Della Porta 2011–2013, vol. I, 433).

Della Porta reinforces this notion of harmony in his earlier work *De humana physiognomonia* (1586), where he argues that physical beauty is not merely an aesthetic trait but a sign of good moral character and internal health.⁸ He asserts that beauty is the outward manifestation of internal virtue and balance, while deformity often indicates moral disorder. In this way, Della Porta subscribes to the ancient principle that a well-proportioned and harmonious body reflects the soul's health and moral integrity. The *mediocritas*, or balance, is central to this view: beauty is not just about pleasing proportions, but about a deeper reflection of the soul's equilibrium and the body's proper functioning (for the concept, see Sammern 2019).

⁴ See with further literature Harkness 1999; Zambelli 2007; Kodera 2021.

⁵ See with further literature Cabré 2008; Green 2008; Long 2011; Strocchia 2019.

⁶ Storey 2008; Leong and Rankin 2011; Cabré 2014; Leong 2018; Smith 2022.

⁷ Della Porta 2011–2013, vol. I, 433. Cf. Sammern 2019; for the concept since antiquity, Lammel, Gerlach, and Hoppe 2002, col. 352–58.

⁸ Della Porta 2011–2013, vol. I, 433. On beauty as a fundamental concept in physiognomy, see Kanz and Sigler Schmidt 2009, col. 1183–4; critically, Kodera 2021.

In *Magia Naturalis*, Della Porta extends this theory into practical applications. He moves beyond simply interpreting nature's design and offers practical instructions for improving health as well as beauty through natural magic. This shift from theory to practice reflects Della Porta's broader engagement with natural philosophy, where human intervention, particularly through skillful manipulation of natural substances, is seen as a way to improve and refine nature. For Della Porta, beauty can be both an inherent reflection of internal harmony and a condition that can be actively enhanced through scientific knowledge and technique.⁹ His recipes for health and beauty—particularly in Books VIII through XI of *Magia Naturalis*—illustrate this practical approach. These recipes are not simply cosmetic; they aim to restore or support the body's natural balance. For instance, Della Porta includes skin care remedies for improving complexion that align with the ancient idea that physical beauty results from internal balance.¹⁰ In this way, beauty and health are treated as interconnected goals, achievable through the application of natural substances like plants, minerals, and even metals.

Unlike earlier magical traditions, which often intertwined religious or ceremonial aspects with the practice of magic, Della Porta takes a more empirical approach, focusing on the practical application of natural substances. Della Porta's empirical approach distinguishes *Magia Naturalis* from earlier traditions of magic that blended religious or ritualistic practices with the manipulation of natural substances. As Donato Verardi points out, Della Porta distances himself from the use of spells or ceremonial magic, instead focusing on empirical methods that uncover and harness the hidden properties of plants, minerals, and other natural elements. By relying on observation and experimentation, Della Porta aligns his work with the emerging scientific methods of the early modern period. At the same time, he maintains the belief that nature possesses magical properties, which can be uncovered and amplified through human intervention (Verardi 2018, 87). Della Porta's medicinal approach refers to traditional medical authorities such as Galen and Avicenna as well as Pliny and Dioscorides.¹¹ At the same time, he extends beyond conventional knowledge by exploring the hidden virtues of plants and natural materials, using innovative techniques like distillation to extract their healing properties. His medicinal recipes, while framed within the broader context of natural magic, aim at practical health benefits, marking a transi-

⁹ "It is Nature's part to produce things, and give them faculties; but Art may ennoble them when they are produced, and give them many several qualities." Della Porta 1669, 254. "Natura est res producere, ac viribus dotare; artis est productas nobilitare, ac multiplicibus viribus ditare." Della Porta 1589, 179.

¹⁰ E.g. against "black and blew marks," Della Porta 1669, 246–7; against "tettors," warts, Della Porta 1669, 248. See Della Porta 1589, e.g. against "Sugillata ac liuentia" 174.

¹¹ For Galen see e.g. Della Porta 1669, 250; Della Porta 1589, 176. For Avicenna see e.g. Della Porta 1669, 253; Della Porta 1589, 178. For Dioscorides see e.g. Della Porta 1669, 254; 1589, 180, and for Pliny see e.g. Della Porta 1669, 235; 1589, 165.

tion towards a scientific understanding of natural phenomena.¹² Della Porta's medicinal and beautifying recipes reflect the influence of ancient medical authorities like Galen, but they also incorporate new substances, such as pearls. The remedies he proposes for beautification are not merely superficial; they aim to promote health and balance, integrating physical beauty with internal well-being. Della Porta's practical application of beauty and health recipes reflects his approach that nature, when properly understood and skillfully manipulated, can be improved and perfected.

3. Beautifying Recipes

Magia Naturalis deals with medicine and cosmetics in four books, beginning with *De portentosis medelis* (*Of Strange Cures*) in Book VIII. This book is relatively brief, consisting of 14 chapters with remedies for various ailments, but its concise nature can be attributed to the inclusion of many medicinal recipes in other books, such as those focusing on plants and distillation.¹³ Following the discussion of medicine, Della Porta moves into *De mulierum comesticis* (*On Beautifying Women*). This second-longest book in *Magia Naturalis* contains 30 chapters, and much like his approach to medicine, Della Porta structures it methodically, starting from the top of the body and working downward.

The first seven chapters focus on altering hair, including changing its color (Griffey and Munn, forthcoming). After briefly addressing eyebrows, Della Porta turns to facial beauty, concentrating on maintaining clear, white, and shining skin. Four chapters are dedicated to the preparation of various substances like lead, soap, and talc, followed by remedies for common facial concerns such as sunburn, pimples, and redness. The next chapters deal with body-related issues like wrinkles, sagging breasts, skin discoloration, and remedies for body odor or tightening the uterus.

The book concludes with a curious chapter titled "Some Sports Against Women," in which Della Porta humorously describes tricks for identifying whether a woman is wearing makeup and suggests three practical jokes to play on women. For instance, he suggests that chewing saffron could tint the breath and, in turn, cause a woman's painted face to take on a yellowish hue, or that burning brimstone could darken make-up made from white lead or quicksilver (Della Porta 1669, 253; 1589, 178). These instructions not only reveal makeup use but also ridicule and distort the appearance of the wearer (Della Porta 1669, 253; 1589, 178. See Walker-Meikle n.d.).

Kathleen Walker-Meikle places these tricks within the broader context of the pranks and magical illusions Della Porta discusses in the last book of *Magia*

¹² Verardi 2018. See the humoral explanation of enchantments in Chapter XIV of Book VIII *De portentosis medelis* (*Of strange Cures*).

¹³ In fact, Della Porta himself refers to his earlier work, *Phytognomonica* (1588), as a source for this chapter. Della Porta 1669, 217; 1589, 150.

Naturalis (on *Chaos*) (Walker-Meikle n.d). However, this chapter can also be understood in relation to Della Porta's works on health and bodily care. While most of Book IX focuses on maintaining clear, healthy skin rather than make-up, the final chapter shifts the tone by portraying beauty practices as deceitful behavior worthy of ridicule. This chapter reflects a gendered judgment that limits women's agency over their appearance, framing their beauty efforts as acts of deception. By targeting women's efforts to improve their appearance with tricks meant to expose and mock them, the final chapter undermines the legitimacy of the preceding health-oriented recipes (see Sammern 2022).

This critique draws on an older misogynistic tradition that links women's activities, such as body care, with deceit and fraud. Cosmetics, often associated with vanity or moral corruption, are depicted here as tools of concealment, reinforcing the notion that women's beauty practices are fundamentally dishonest.¹⁴ Edith Snook (2011, 34–5) explores how early modern critiques of women's cosmetic practices stemmed from patriarchal anxieties, depicting them as tools for hiding imperfections, and undermining male authority. Misogynistic portrayals frequently aligned cosmetic use with vanity, deceit, and even moral corruption, casting women as victims of their own desires for beauty. However, Snook emphasizes that this perspective largely overlooks the actual experiences of women, many of whom saw beauty practices as a legitimate extension of healthcare and a means of preserving health. Women's domestic recipe collections, for example, contain numerous recipes for skin care, such as face washes and ointments, suggesting a focus on maintaining skin health rather than simply covering flaws with paint (Griffey 2021). These practices were part of "beautifying physic," a legitimate branch of early modern medical culture (Snook 2011, 22). In this context, cosmetics were not merely superficial but were integrated into healthcare, with women exercising authority over their own health and appearance. This gave women a degree of control and expertise in an area typically dominated by male physicians, highlighting their role in domestic medicine. As practitioners of beautifying physics, women actively challenged gendered boundaries in early modern medicine, asserting their expertise in natural philosophy through the practical preparation of beautifying remedies (Snook 2011, 32). Despite their expertise in household medicine and cosmetics, women's contributions were often marginalized as male-dominated fields sought to control medical knowledge. This tension is reflected in Della Porta's gendered categorization of recipes.

4. Gendering Recipes

In *Magia Naturalis*, Della Porta presents many recipes that could at first sight be considered gender-neutral, focusing on health and beauty through natural remedies. However, in Books IX–XI, he organizes these practices into clearly gendered categories. Book IX, *De mulierum comesticis* (*On Beautifying Women*)

¹⁴ For this tradition since Antiquity, see Lichtenstein 1987; Sammern 2017.

is dedicated specifically to beauty treatments for women, while Books X, *De extrahendijs rerum essentijs* (*On Distillation*); and Book XI, *De myropoeia* (*On Perfumery*), are framed as more technical, male domains. In Book VIII he addresses some male health concerns that are clearly about beauty like chapped lips and hands (Della Porta 1669, 222–23; 1589, 154). This separation reflects a tendency to classify knowledge according to gender, with beauty practices for women seen as part of the domestic sphere and distillation and perfumery aligned with male expertise (Della Porta 1669, 281; 1589, 200).

However, this gendered distinction is neither consistent nor convincing. The book on cosmetics primarily consists of recipes for treating skin issues, while the book on distillation focuses on the production of basic substances such as distilled waters and oils, which are used as ingredients in the other books. Moreover, Book IX includes only two chapters for whitening the skin, such as those using “sublimate” made from quicksilver, and the preparation of white lead, both of which promise to create “womens paints.”¹⁵ These metallic-based recipes align with Snook’s observation that women’s engagement with alchemical processes, such as the handling and transformation of metals, was central to their involvement in natural philosophy.¹⁶ The mastery of alchemical processes, such as working with quicksilver and lead, was not only a technical skill but also a deeper philosophical engagement with nature’s hidden virtues. Women’s involvement in this practical alchemy extended their reach into the broader field of natural philosophy (Moran 2006). These practices were often embedded in the domestic sphere, reflecting women’s central role in alchemy, health and body care, where their work in preparing remedies for health and beauty allowed them to navigate and expand the boundaries of medicine and natural philosophy (Cabré 2008; Rankin 2013; Strocchia 2019). Moreover, despite their marginalization by formal institutions, women were key medical practitioners in early modern healthcare, both in the household and the community. They engaged in practices such as preparing medicines, administering remedies, and managing care in various settings, from the home to hospitals. In these contexts, women developed expertise through hands-on engagement with materials, including metals, for curative and beautifying purposes (Strocchia 2014; Leong 2018). The inclusion of metal ingredients alongside herbal ones proves a form of intellectual authority that women exercised, challenging scientists’ and physicians’ attempts to impose exclusionary, gendered boundaries around knowledge.¹⁷ Della Porta’s division reflects this tension, as his categorization of cosmetics as a domestic, female domain contrasts with the broader, gender-neutral potential of many of the recipes.

¹⁵ Della Porta, 1669, 242; 1589, 172. However, Della Porta also acknowledges the potential health risks of these metals.

¹⁶ Snook 2011, 32. For the importance of metals in Paracelsian medicine, see Stolberg 2022, 371–72.

¹⁷ See the examples of the use of metals in beauty recipes. Snook 2008, 14. See also Sammern 2015, 426–27.

Edith Snook argues that the important distinctions in early modern beauty practices were not about the effects of the ingredients themselves but the gendered contexts in which they were produced and used (Snook 2011, 34–5). Texts by female healers such as Trota of Salerno (twelfth century), Caterina Sforza's *Experimenti* (before 1509), and Marie Meurdrac's *La Chymie charitable et facile en faveur des dames* (1666), which is considered the first chemistry textbook for women, demonstrate that female practitioners of beautifying physic and household medicine, were deeply engaged in the preparation and production of various remedies and beauty treatments.¹⁸ Women were often the primary users and creators of domestic remedies. The publication of books of secrets tended to reposition these practices into a male-dominated framework, redefining knowledge that had traditionally been the domain of women. Della Porta's division of cosmetics, distillation, and perfumery follows this pattern, associating women's beauty care with the domestic realm, while positioning distillation and perfumery as intellectual and technical activities, an "art" (Della Porta 1669, 254; 1589, 179), tied to male-dominated spaces of learning, such as laboratories and workshops. The recipes for beautifying remedies—many of which would have been part of women's domestic knowledge—are presented as part of a larger body of natural magic, distancing them from the domestic sphere and placing them within the realm of formalized scientific inquiry.

This framing, as Snook points out, was part of a broader cultural anxiety about women's roles in science and medicine (Snook 2011, 36–7). The fact that many of the same ingredients appear across these categories—herbs, oils, and even metals—underscores that the gendering of these recipes was less about the materials and more about societal expectations of who could practice certain kinds of knowledge.

One example that highlights this tension is Chapter XII of Book VIII, which describes a recipe for "making the face clear and shining like silver" (Della Porta 1669, 241; 1589, 169). The recipe offers options such as a distillate from *Argentina anserina* (silverweed) or from snails, shellfish, and pearls. Pearls are described as the most effective, particularly when dissolved in acid or wine—a method famously attributed to Cleopatra, as described by Pliny in his *Natural History* (9, 58).¹⁹ During a banquet with Marc Antony, Cleopatra is said to have dissolved a large pearl in her wine and drank it, an act often cited as a symbol of extravagance. Alessandro Allori depicted this scene in the Studiolo of Francesco I in Florence, a space dedicated to the ruler's fascination with natural philosophy and alchemy.²⁰ In early modern thought, pearls were considered not just orna-

¹⁸ See with further literature, Green 2008; Rankin 2013; Barker and Strocchia 2020; Cavallo 2023.

¹⁹ Cf. Pliny 1940, 242–7; also Macrobius *Saturnalia* 2, 13 (cf. 2011, 126–29); also Boccaccio 2001 368–69. See with further references Urbini 1993; Ritschard 2004; Conticelli 2007, 256.

²⁰ Alessandro Allori (1535–1607): *Cleopatra's Banquet*, 1571. Oil/wood, 83 x 121,5 cm. Florence, Palazzo Vecchio, Studiolo. It belongs to Alessandro Allori's panel of *Pearl Fishing* in the Studiolo. See Conticelli 2007, 251–8.

mental but also to have restorative powers for body and soul. Their symbolic association with purity and the moon added to their allure in natural philosophy and alchemical practices (Conticelli 2007, 254–55). The appreciation for pearls' medical virtues is not rooted in ancient Western medical traditions, but it appears to have arrived through the influence of Arab medicine.²¹ Pietro Andrea Mattioli notes that pearls were highly valued for their benefits in treating heart conditions, such as tremors and weaknesses, and for use in eye treatments to improve vision and reduce excess moisture. Pearls featured also in cosmetic recipes. According to the doctrine of signatures, precious and aesthetically pleasing ingredients were used to enhance the beauty of the skin.²²

The inclusion of Cleopatra's pearl-dissolving scene in this alchemical context reflects both the luxurious symbolism and the transformative power associated with pearls. Since antiquity, Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, has long been associated with a renowned healer of the same name, reinforcing her image as an authority of beauty and medicinal knowledge (see Cabré 2010, 134). Della Porta's recipe, with its emphasis on pearls, taps into these classical traditions while also reflecting the gendered beauty practices of the time.

Della Porta explicitly targets women as the primary consumers of these beautifying remedies, reinforcing the association of cosmetics with female vanity and domestic life. At the same time, the alchemical elements of these recipes, particularly the use of metals and pearls, suggest a deeper intellectual engagement with natural philosophy. This duality—beauty as a domestic practice and a site of alchemical experimentation—highlights the tension in early modern thought about women's roles in the manipulation of natural substances. While Della Porta reinforces gendered boundaries by assigning cosmetics to women, he also acknowledges that these practices involved a form of intellectual and experimental authority, especially in the preparation of complex remedies involving metals and distillation techniques.

5. Basic Distilling for Everyone

In *Magia Naturalis*, Della Porta presents distillation as a key method for extracting the essences, or “spirits,” of natural substances. For Della Porta, distillation was not just an artisanal technique but a fundamental means of manipulating the hidden powers of nature. He viewed natural magic as the practical side of natural philosophy, and distillation was central to this hands-on approach.²³ On the frontispiece of his 1609 treatise on distillation, Della Porta's portrait is depicted above alchemical instruments at the bottom of the print,

²¹ Mattioli 2015, 322–23, referring to Avicenna and Serapion. See, e.g., for oral hygiene, Avicenna 1973, vol. IV, 547.

²² See, e.g. Ruscelli 1555, 139; Marinello 1562, 237v. We owe the reference on Marinello to the generous provision of Erin Griffey's database on beauty recipes.

²³ Saito 2014. For the use of essences in early modern medicine, see Stolberg 2022, 570.

alongside vessels for healing or beautifying waters and a fountain, symbolizing the essential role these tools play in his scientific and intellectual pursuits (Della Porta 1609, frontispiece). Through distillation, humans could elevate nature by extracting its most potent and beneficial elements. By distilling plants, flowers, and oils, practitioners could create remedies that improved health and appearance. This focus on distillation underscores the early modern interest in mastering natural processes, linking the beautifying remedies of Book IX with the perfuming techniques in Book XI.

Book X, *De extrahendijs rerum essentijs* (*On Distillation*), begins with an overview of various distillation methods, accompanied by woodcuts of various distillation apparatuses. The text details how to extract waters and oils from different plants using specialized equipment such as alembics and stills. Della Porta juxtaposes contemporary distillation techniques with ancient methods, emphasizing the improvements made in early modern science (Della Porta 1669, 254; 1589, 180). For instance, in Book X he provides a detailed explanation of three methods to make *aqua vitae* (brandy), an important early modern solvent and cure-all.²⁴ Progressively simpler, with fewer steps and less equipment required; the final one, he notes, can be done by anyone—even idiots, or women.²⁵ Della Porta highlights the simplicity of the process, aiming to make it accessible to a broader audience, including men and women who may lack specialized knowledge. This approach is consistent with the goals of the books of secrets, which sought to engage as wide a readership as possible. Additionally, by addressing women in his recipes, Della Porta likely recognizes them as potential readers, which is significant in its own right.²⁶

Following this, Della Porta explains how to extract oils out of different substances and then moves on to essences, magisteries, tinctures, salts and elixirs. A magistry is a product obtained without separating the elements, while tinctures capture the pure color of a body. For example, Della Porta describes how to extract tinctures from coral or flowers by using a solvent like *aqua fortis*. Salts, which retain powerful penetrating properties even after exposure to fire, are key to many remedies, while elixirs are designed to preserve health. Della Porta also explains how to produce oils from salts, prepare *aqua fortis*, and, most significantly, how to separate the elements of materials. This refers to the alchemical process of breaking down a substance into its core components—such as water, spirit, oil, and earth—allowing for their distinct properties to be harnessed for various purposes. By separating these elements, practitioners could isolate the “essence” of a material, which was believed to hold its most potent qualities.²⁷

²⁴ See e.g. Stolberg 2022, 570.

²⁵ “[...] neither doth it require the attendance of a learned Artist, but of an ignorant Clown, or a woman.” Della Porta 1669, 257; Della Porta 1589, 182.

²⁶ We owe this observation to Donato Verardi.

²⁷ Della Porta 1669, 267. For the use of “quintessences” in Paracelsian medicine, see Stolberg 2022, 368–69.

Della Porta's discussion of fragrant waters, such as rose water, illustrates how distillation was used for cosmetic and medicinal purposes.²⁸ Rose water, carefully extracted through distillation, was valued for its cooling and astringent properties, which could soothe skin inflammations and contribute to a clear complexion.²⁹ Della Porta emphasizes that distilled essences, such as rose, jasmine and violet waters, were used not only for perfuming but also for improving skin health. Rose water features prominently in a recipe for whitening the face and in two recipes that whiten the hands in Book VIII, where it reduces redness by calming the skin.³⁰

Della Porta acknowledges that distillation of rose water was an ancient and well-known process (Della Porta 1669, 255; 1589, 180). In fact, it had been introduced to Europe through Arab influence during the Middle Ages and became widespread by the sixteenth century (Touw 1982). Rose water was so ubiquitous that detailed early modern recipes for its production are rare. It was often assumed to be readily available, and many contemporary books of secrets and private recipe collections treated it as a common ingredient, either purchased or already known to practitioners.³¹

The book on distillation in *Magia Naturalis* acts as a bridge between Books IX and XI, with substances like rose water playing a key role in cosmetic and perfumery applications. While the book is highly technical, focusing on methods and tools rather than practical uses, it remains largely gender-neutral, including women in its scope.

6. Scented Accessories

Perfume, originally derived from the Latin “per fumum” meaning “through smoke,” began as incense used in religious, medical, and aesthetic practices.³² In ancient Egypt, temples served as laboratories for its production, and its use continued through the Greco-Roman world. Perfume became more widely accessible in Europe during the medieval period as trade routes expanded, introducing spices that contributed to the development of new fragrances. By the early modern period, perfume had become a symbol of status and luxury, with Venice and Genoa emerging as major centers of the trade (Chapuis-Després 2015).

In *Magia Naturalis*, Della Porta refers to perfumery as a “noble” “art,” suitable for and influenced by “Kings and great Men,” highlighting its elevated sta-

²⁸ Della Porta 1669, 255–56. Cf. Della Porta 1589, 181.

²⁹ Dioscorides 3, 113–14 (cf. 2000, 51); Pliny 21, 30–1 (cf. 1951, 108–13); Avicenna 1973, vol. II, 239 and vol. IV, 378, 389.

³⁰ Whitening the face: Della Porta 1669, 239; 1589, 168. Whitening the hands: Della Porta 1669, 251; 1589, 177.

³¹ Spicer 2014, 162–63, 176, for a list of ingredients used in cosmetics, 307–22. See Shaw and Welch 2011.

³² See, with further references, Chapuis-Després 2015.

tus during the period.³³ Book XI, *De myropoeia* focuses on the art of perfumery, outlining various methods for creating scented waters and oils. The opening chapters detail how to extract fragrances from flowers such as roses, violets, jasmine, and herbs like lavender and myrtle, using distillation techniques described in Book X. These short-lived scented waters served cosmetic as well as medicinal purposes. Della Porta then moves on to describe how to perfume the skin, providing recipes for scented powders and oils. These include instructions for creating fragrant oils by infusing musk, amber, and civet. Additionally, the text also contains recipes for scented powders, which were not used on the body but to perfume clothes, skins, and personal items.³⁴

This practice of infusing personal items with fragrance was especially evident in the custom of perfuming gloves, which was particularly popular in early modern Europe (Welch 2008, 261; Redwood 2016, 15; Green 2021, 33). Gloves were an essential accessory, serving practical and symbolic purposes, for men and women. They were commonly worn to protect the hands during work and against the weather, but their role extended far beyond mere functionality. Gloves played a significant part in legal transactions, where the handing over of gloves symbolized the transfer of land or troops, as well as a plea for pardon (Redwood 2016, 6). Within the church, gloves had an ambivalent status; only high-ranking clergy were permitted to wear them as symbols of purity, and even then, they typically used textile gloves rather than leather (Redwood 2016, 6). Gloves were also popular as gifts, exchanged between lovers, nobles, and given at weddings to guests (Dugan 2011, 128; Welch 2011, 25). Their symbolic significance as markers of authority and power is evident in the elaborate decoration of gloves worn by monarchs, which were often adorned with embroidery and jewels (Redwood 2016, 5). Countless portraits from the period feature subjects wearing gloves or holding one in hand, a common attribute of nobility for men and women. In addition to their symbolic role, gloves—especially perfumed ones—were highly fashionable. Perfumed gloves became particularly popular in the sixteenth century, a trend often attributed to the influence of figures like Catherine de' Medici and Elizabeth I (Le Gu er 2005, 107; Redwood 2016, 15). The expansion of global trade routes during this period increased the availability of ingredients such as musk, ambergris, and spices, making such luxury items more accessible to European markets (Dugan 2011, 131, 136).

Della Porta provides detailed instructions on how to perfume leather gloves using floral essences, describing a process that could take up to a year to complete.³⁵ He begins by recommending washing the gloves in wine, followed by a mixture of rose, myrtle, orange, trefoil, and lavender waters to give them a light,

³³ Della Porta 1669, 281. For numerous other early modern treatises on perfumery with similar instructions, see Welch 2011, 22.

³⁴ Della Porta 1669, 287. Cf. Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994; Bimbenet-Privat 2009, Welch 2011.

³⁵ Della Porta 1669, 285; Della Porta 1589, 203. See comparable recipes for perfuming gloves, in Ruscelli 1555, 95; Partridge 1584, cap. 39, s. p.

sweet scent. Once washed, the gloves are oiled on the inside with a sponge, with particular attention paid to the seams. After this preparatory wash, he advises an elaborate process of perfuming the gloves using flowers such as violets, gillyflowers, orange blossoms, and jasmine, carefully placing them inside and outside the gloves and rotating them multiple times a day (Della Porta 1669, 284–85; 1589, 203–4; 1677, 376–77). Della Porta offers methods to enhance the scent by anointing the gloves with precious well-smelling substances like musk, amber, and civet (Della Porta 1669, 285; 1589, 203). Another, more complex recipe involves a mixture of ingredients like iris, rose powder, cinnamon, and lignum aloe, softened in rosewater and gum tragacanth, which are applied with a sponge before the gloves are rubbed with musk and amber. These intricate methods underscore the value and effort associated with crafting perfumed gloves in early modern Europe (Della Porta 1669, 285; 1589, 203).

Della Porta outlines the preparation of a variety of sweet compounds, some of which could be molded into beads or small balls for smelling or hand washing (Della Porta 1669, 286; 1589, 204). These beads were sometimes placed in a pomander, a small, often ornate container typically made of metal and worn as a pendant, attached to a belt, or incorporated into a rosary.³⁶ Pomanders were believed to originate from the East and became common in Europe by the twelfth century.³⁷ They were popular with men, women, and children as a personal accessory, often used for hygiene purposes, such as defending against foul air, which was thought to spread disease, making them especially valued during plagues.³⁸

Della Porta's recipe for a plague pomander follows this tradition and includes a variety of ingredients such as labdanum, styrax, benjamin, cloves, sandalwood, camphor, and amber, mixed with rosewater and dissolved styrax to form small beads (Della Porta 1669, 286; 1589, 204). This recipe is relatively simple but reflects the medicinal and protective uses of aromatic substances in early modern Europe.

The focus of Book XI on perfumed items, such as gloves, pomanders, and other scented objects, highlights their dual role in health and status, balancing aesthetic as well as protective functions. These practices demonstrate how fragrances permeated different aspects of life, from personal adornment to prevention of diseases. In discussing the crafting of perfumes, Della Porta bridges the gap between alchemical processes and everyday use, integrating practical applications of distillation and blending with the early modern understanding of scent's medicinal and symbolic value.

³⁶ The word pomander derives from *pomum ambræ*, which translates directly to amber apple, describing the sweet-smelling material as well as the vessel it was kept in. Dugan 2011, 111; Schmitz 1989, 86; Smollich 1983, 1.

³⁷ The first documented pomander in Europe was a gift from the ambassadors of King Balduin of Jerusalem to emperor Friedrich Barbarossa in 1174. Waitz 1880, 125.

³⁸ Dugan 2011, 98, 101, 103; Smollich 1983, 23, 89–124 for examples of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For a pomander as a child's accessory, cf. Titian's portrait of Clarissa Strozzi aged two, 1542. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

7. Conclusion

Magia Naturalis reflects Della Porta's effort to formalize beauty and health practices within the framework of natural philosophy. His work re-contextualizes practical remedies from women's domestic knowledge—such as perfumed gloves, skin treatments, and distilled waters—within a male-dominated scientific sphere. By dividing beauty recipes into gendered categories, Della Porta reinforces early modern divisions between intellectual and domestic domains. However, the actual content of *Magia Naturalis* complicates this division. Remedies for health and beauty, especially those involving distillation and perfumery, are deeply rooted in alchemical traditions, which blur the lines between the domestic and the intellectual, the male and the female.

The shift of beauty recipes from private domestic practice to public print culture, as exemplified by *Magia Naturalis*, highlights a re-contextualization of women's expertise. As Montserrat Cabré points out, women were key practitioners of beautifying physic in the domestic sphere. Their knowledge was passed down orally, through practice, and manuscripts, sustaining family and community healthcare practices (Cabré 2011; also Leong and Rankin 2011). However, by the late sixteenth century, this knowledge was increasingly appropriated and codified by male authors like Della Porta, who published it in books of secrets (Leong 2018; also Leong and Rankin 2011).

While Della Porta's work reflects the broader professionalization of science, which often marginalized women, his recipes also demonstrate an awareness of their essential role in early modern healthcare and beauty practices. *Magia Naturalis* does not overtly challenge these tensions, but it acknowledges the value of practical knowledge, including contributions from women. In this way, it mirrors the complexities of early modern health and beauty practices, where the intersection of gendered knowledge and the coexistence of ancient and modern approaches shaped the evolution of natural philosophy.

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