

# Della Porta Natural Magic

Learning Leaflet: Starting Points  
**Lynx Open Ed**  
History of Science Collections  
University of Oklahoma Libraries



Giambattista della Porta, *Natural Magick* (London, 1658).

## What is the difference between science and magic?

## Renaissance Magic

1 Of the Causes of Wonderful things.	11 Of Perfuming.
2 Of the Generation of Animals.	12 Of Artificial Fires.
3 Of the Production of new Plants.	13 Of Tempering Steel.
4 Of increasing Household-Stuff.	14 Of Cookery.
5 Of changing Metals.	15 Of Fishing, Fowling, Hunting, &c.
6 Of counterfeiting Gold.	16 Of Invisible Writing.
7 Of the Wonders of the Load-stone.	17 Of Strange Glasses.
8 Of strange Cures.	18 Of Statick Experiments.
9 Of Beautifying Women.	19 Of Pneumatick Experiments.
10 Of Distillation.	20 Of the Chaos.

### *Natural Magick*, 1658, Table of Contents

Giambattista della Porta was one of the most widely-known European Renaissance magicians. In 1558, at the age of twenty-three, the first edition of his book *Natural Magic* was printed. Due to its popularity and Della Porta's increased fame, he published an expanded second edition in 1589, increasing the original four books to twenty books.

The topics discussed in the book cover a wide range of magical feats, such as the art of distillation, perfumes, fireworks, cookery, fishing and hunting. In the preface to the second edition Della Porta mentions the number of translations that his book underwent: Arabic, Spanish, Dutch, English, and Italian. The image on the front page reflects the English translation of the text, published in 1658.

During the Renaissance, as the humanists focused their efforts on the recovery of ancient texts, the quest for magical knowledge became a topic of increased attention. One humanist of particular repute during this time period was the Dutch physician Cornelius Agrippa, whose investigations of magic were widely studied. It is within this humanist tradition that Della Porta fits, searching for the "secrets of nature", whereby individuals could uncover and manipulate the natural, yet hidden, processes of nature. The Latin word used to refer to this was *occultō* from where the English word "occult" is derived. Many of those in the early modern period who investigated nature utilized magical texts and insights, leading to a blending of early modern science and magic.

One well-known example which Della Porta includes was the optical trick whereby an individual could project an image into the air using a particular arrangement of mirrors. At a time in which the production of lenses and mirrors was becoming more widespread, this particular type of trick was of immense interest.

At the time of Della Porta, in the context of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, both the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches were determining which areas of magic were licit and which were illicit. Despite the fact that he was never convicted by the Inquisition, his first edition of *Natural Magic* (1558) was placed on the Spanish Index of Forbidden Books, likely because of suspicions that he had included elements of demonic magic. His second edition was never banned, and received widespread utilization throughout the seventeenth century. In addition to writing *Natural Magic* Della Porta was also a playwright and the founder of the Academy of Secrets.

Scott Galliant and Brent Purkaple

Developed from Scott's class project in HIST 4083, Fall 2016, University of Oklahoma



lynx-open-ed.org  
@lynx\_open\_ed

#galileosworld  
@ouhoscollection

