



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF  
MEDICINE AND THE BODY  
IN THE RENAISSANCE

INSTITUTIO SANTORIANA  
FONDAZIONE COMEL



YALE UNIVERSITY  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences



University  
of Exeter

Julius-Maximilians-  
**UNIVERSITÄT  
WÜRZBURG**



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PARMA



**STUDIO FIRMANO**  
PER LA STORIA DELL'ARTE MEDICA E DELLA SCIENZA

CSMBR  
ONLINE  
EVENTS

# YOU LOOK WHAT YOU EAT

**11**  
FEBRUARY  
2025  
5.00 pm CET

## RENAISSANCE PHYSIOGNOMICS OF FOOD

**CECILIA MURATORI** • University of Pavia

In *Della fisonomia dell'huomo*, Giovan Battista Della Porta proposes a method for reading the body in order to detect virtues and vices of the soul. A discipline with authoritative roots in the (Pseudo)Aristotelian tradition, physiognomics assumes that body and soul entertain a 'sympathetic' relationship, such that they can influence one another: if the body is affected, for instance by a disease, this will have repercussions on the soul, and vice versa: a passion of the

soul can alter bodily appearances. From a diagnostic point of view, the assumption of such a close connection between body and soul raised the appeal of physiognomics as an essential tool at court. An expert physiognomist could allegedly select the best councilors, and avoid potential traitors, thanks to the promise of being able to detect the external signs of the real, internal character, despite the human tendency to lie. Yet Della Porta

was one of the main proponents of a philosophical use of physiognomics, as a theory that did not simply offer the theoretical framework for diagnosing others (and for detecting unwanted tendencies in oneself, too). Rather, in Della Porta's version, physiognomics demonstrated its full potential when a diagnosis became the foundation for an intervention directed at correcting the faults and reinforcing the strengths of the soul. My paper will discuss this surprising approach, placing it in the context of Della Porta's theory and in the broader context of Renaissance physiognomics.