

Aristotle's Masterpiece (excerpt from the 2015 Annual Report of the Library Company of Philadelphia)

Aristotle's Masterpiece was the best-selling guide to pregnancy, childbirth, and sexuality in England and America from its first publication in 1684 through the mid-19th century, and it stayed in print until the 1930s. Apart from the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*, it is hard to think of another book that had such a long run. It was not written by Aristotle, of course, but his name was used to suggest deep learning and ancient wisdom, and it became a brand, almost a genre. Mary E. Fissell of Johns Hopkins University has identified some 372 editions of its various avatars. This year Charles Rosenberg gave his collection of seventy-five *Aristotles* and Michael Zinman gave us eleven more. William Helfand gave another seventeen editions in 2005. We now have about 160 copies, representing about 120 different editions; and we can say with some certainty that thanks to this unique collaboration with three great collectors, we have the largest collection of *Aristotles* anywhere.

So, what can we learn from 120 editions of the same book? It makes some sense to say the same book because most editions copied a previous edition verbatim, so the book hardly changed over the centuries, despite several revolutions in medical practice, knowledge, and social mores. This sameness is the most striking feature of the collection, but only at first glance. When we have this many editions to compare, important differences begin to emerge.

The most obvious difference arises from the fact that in most cases *Aristotle's Masterpiece* was actually a compendium of several different books, some also published separately, which were issued in various combinations. The four main books were *Aristotle's Master-piece*, describing “the secrets of nature in the generation of man”; *Aristotle's Experienced Midwife*, described as “absolutely necessary for surgeons, midwives, nurses, and child-bearing women”; *Aristotle's Book of Problems*, a catechism of “various questions and answers relative to the state of man's body”; and *Aristotle's Last Legacy*, at first a sort of fortune teller, but later evolving into a summary of the main points in the *Masterpiece* about sex, marriage, and childbirth. All of them were cobbled together from older books. The *Book of Problems* was by far the earliest, with a manuscript history dating back to the 13th century, which accounts for Aristotle's reputation as a sex expert. Some editions contain the first two of these parts, or the first three, with a general title such as *Aristotle's Complete Masterpiece*; but the most common form is all four parts under a title such as *The Works of Aristotle in Four Parts*.

Another kind of difference emerges when we compare the texts of the various editions. As Mary Fissell has pointed out, there are four different versions of the *Masterpiece* alone. The first edition of 1684 was compiled from earlier works on midwifery, and on generation and monstrous births. It was so popular that in 1697, the London bookseller Benjamin Harris brought out an expanded version that incorporated a long section on how to treat women's reproductive illnesses, called “A Private Looking Glass for the Female Sex.” This addition made it more of a self-help book, like those featured in our 1998 exhibition, “Every Man His Own Doctor.” (Harris, the originator of the *New England Primer*, made a specialty of publishing for the American market and even lived in Boston for a number of years, which perhaps accounts for *Aristotle's* popularity in the colonies.) Then, sometime around 1710, a third version emerged,

which continued this trend by adding a section of general medical recipes called “The Family Physician.” The first two versions began with a rather pious discourse on the benefits of marriage, but the third version drastically rearranged the order of the chapters, so the book began with a discussion of sexual intercourse, more explicit than in the earlier versions. It also added some mildly erotic verse. All three versions continued to be published throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Presumably most readers did not know or care about the versions of *Aristotle*. But we can see how these different versions take different approaches to the perennial issue of what was proper to say in print about matters that were of deep concern to everyone and yet rarely discussed openly. And yet, what does it mean to talk about propriety or popular attitudes when the book itself was sold under the counter or by peddlers in the country (often with false or fictitious imprints) and read in secret and alone, or at least seldom by men and women together. Much of the text is aimed at a female reader, anxious to learn about her body, but young men were just as likely to read it, and even though the text is not pornographic, men’s knowledge about women’s bodies was often regarded as fraught with danger. Jonathan Edwards certainly thought so in the 1740s, when he denounced several boys from his pulpit for taunting the girls of Northampton by saying things like, “You need not be scared, we know as much about ye as you, and more too.” They had been reading *Aristotle*.

Aristotle’s reputation as a bad book was based not only on the text in its many different forms, but also on the pictures. The anatomical diagrams that appeared in many editions were among the very



Aristotle’s Complaynt Master Piece. In Three Parts . The Twenty-third Edition ([London]: Printed and Sold by the Booksellers, 1749). Gift of Charles Rosenberg.

Aristotle's Compleat Master-Piece, in Three Parts. The Thirty First Edition (London: Printed and Sold by the Booksellers, 1776). Gift of Charles Rosenberg.

few images of female nudity available to non-elite readers in the 18th century, and the pictures of monstrous births that appeared in almost all editions were even more disturbing. The woodcut blocks from which they were printed were used over and over again, and when they wore out or another publisher wanted to enter the field, they were redrawn and recut. The first edition of 1684 has a woodcut frontispiece showing a hairy woman and a black child, meant to illustrate the old idea that what a woman sees during pregnancy can affect the appearance of the child. It seems the hairy woman's mother looked at a picture of John the Baptist dressed in skins, and the black child's mother, though she and her husband were white, happened to look at a picture of a black man. This image appears in



The Works of Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher. In Four Parts. (London: Printed for Cocker, Harris, and Finn, ca. 1840). Gift of Charles Rosenberg.

The Works of Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher (London: Miller, Law and Carter, 1826).

one place or another in almost all editions, serving as a virtual trade-mark for the work. The 1697 edition, the Benjamin Harris version, has a frontispiece depicting Aristotle, the famous philosopher, lost in thought, surrounded by books, a globe, a skull, and other philosophical appurtenances. Then in later editions, including our 23rd edition (London, 1749), the two figures are combined: the woman and the child are being examined by Aristotle, or at least they are in the room with him, while he is busy writing. In our 31st edition (London, 1776) the hairy woman has become a naked Eve, with a g leaf. In our London, ca. 1840 edition, the child is gone, the woman is holding her diaphanous garment seductively, and Aristotle is trying not to stare, protected as he is by the eye of Providence hovering over his head-dress as he writes his book on the Secrets of Nature.



Aristotle's Master-Piece, Completed in Two Parts. (London [i.e. New York?]: G. Davis, 1846). Gift of Charles Rosenberg.

The Works of Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher. In Four Parts (New York: Published for the Trade, 1849). Gift of Charles Rosenberg.

In the late 18th and early 19th century, we find much more variety in the images and in the medium. In our 1826 London edition the frontispiece and other plates are lithographs, a new technology seldom used at that time in popular books. The graphic style is unlike that of any other edition we have seen, almost reminiscent of William Blake; and the mood is decidedly creepy, with Aristotle looming over the woman like a predator, while she shrinks away. In this London [i.e., New York?], 1846 edition the bawdy image of the “amorous Widow” yearning for “forbidden fruit” shows the use of hand coloring. The final image from a New York, 1849 edition is a chromolithograph, and it is typical of Victorian attempts to rebrand the book as an accessory to blameless domesticity without changing the text.

With so many editions, it should be possible to construct genealogies of images as well as texts. We expected the three kinds of difference noted here (the permutations of the four parts, the versions of the text of the *Masterpiece*, and the various forms of the frontispiece) to map onto one another, but they do not at all. The family tree of *Aristotles* is astonishingly complex. Plus, it seems likely that as we look more closely at this amazing collection, more differences will appear. We started by thinking they all looked the same, but now we are wondering if they are all different. These differences make meanings, but what those meanings are remains to be discovered.