

Early America's Guide to Sex: Aristotle's Masterpiece



Woodcut illustrations of female conjoined twins from the end of the second part of Aristotle's Master-piece, printed by Daniel Greenleaf (Worcester, Massachusetts, 1801), pp. 86-87. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Think of [*Aristotle's Masterpiece*](#) as the seventeenth- (eighteenth- and nineteenth-) century's version of *The Joy of Sex*...but with more religion. And babies. And monsters. The pseudonymous author's introduction to *Aristotle's Masterpiece* presented the work as a home guide intended to inform the modest and chaste about the purpose, pleasures, and particulars of sex, sexed and gendered bodies, reproduction, and childbirth. All of this information is framed by the context of Christian belief in an omnipotent divinity that designed sexuality as an incentive to populate the human race with more Christians.

The author expressed concern that his book would be used by the unchaste for

less wholesome purposes, for aside from its religious discourse, sex is not metaphorized. Sex, the sexual body, intimate relationships, desire and pleasure, and reproduction are addressed frankly and with specificity. Therefore, *Aristotle's Masterpiece* could easily be considered a "dirty book." It is not hard to imagine the allure of such a work for readers—modest or otherwise—for it provided a rare detailed discussion of sex. It even included illustrations.



Woodcut illustrations of joined twins and a figure with "members wanting...supplied by other members" from *Aristotle's Master-piece* (New York, 1802), pp. 36-37. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

And surely the long print history of this book attests to its popularity and appeal, even if only in private. First published in England in 1684, *Aristotle's Masterpiece* shared its pseudonym with *Aristotle's Problems*, a sixteenth-century work that detailed sex in frank language, and the text of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* consists of spliced together excerpts from midwifery guides (as historian Mary Fissell has noted). Thus, *Aristotle's Masterpiece's* popularity was based on previous popular works. Unlike its predecessors, however, *Aristotle's Masterpiece* remained in print in America for over two centuries, and the number of editions is in the hundreds. Perhaps because this work is not often mentioned in literature of the same periods, its existence (even ubiquity) might surprise scholars working in this period, especially considering the sheer number of copies that were in circulation. Aside from references to *Aristotle's Masterpiece* in scholarship on home medical guides and midwifery, the text has not received extensive critical attention (the exception being Mary Fissell's ongoing [research](#)).



Woodcut illustrations of “monster children” representing a hairy child from France in 1597 and Nazara in 1530 which “had four arms and four legs” from Aristotle’s *Master-piece* (New England, 1813), pp. 26-27. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Aristotle’s Masterpiece hovers behind the scenes of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century discourses on love, intimacy, marriage, romance, sex, gender, family, religion, midwifery, health, and embodiment. Thus, scholars and readers of all types with an interest in these broader themes can find rich content in this work. This text is especially unusual in its references to women’s sexual desire and pleasure (which the author estimates may be twice that of men’s), concerns about women’s powerful imagination and its impact on the children she bears, and the discourse of “monsters and monstrous births.”

The acknowledgment of women’s sexual pleasure and concern about women’s power of mind may strike readers as revolutionary, yet the sensational and voyeuristic treatment of people with extraordinary bodies speaks to a normative embodiment, which dehumanizes those with physical anomalies.



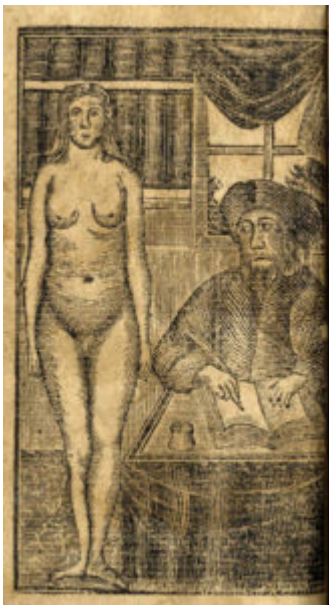
Additional woodcut illustrations of “monstrous births” including conjoined twins and a child born with “four arms and four legs” from *Aristotle’s Master-piece* (New York, 1788), pp. 28-29. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Additionally, these three threads—women’s desire, women’s imagination, and “monstrous” embodiment—actually have a cause and effect relationship in this text. A woman’s unsatisfied sexual desire/pleasure may cause her to imagine non-normative sexual partners or acts, which can then be manifested on the body or bodies of her offspring in the form of marks, extra or absent limbs, and more (bodies that would constitute “monstrous births”).

Of course, *Aristotle's Masterpiece* supplies countless other threads of potential analysis that scholars should feel encouraged to pull on.

Contemporary readers can access digital copies of hundreds of editions online through the [National Institute of Health National Library of Medicine](#), and some are available on [Google Books](#).

Scholars who wish to explore the text should plan on consulting multiple editions to get a sense of the revolving content from one edition to the next—including the images. For instance, in the chapter “On Monsters and Monstrous Births,” content in the opening pages in one edition might not appear until the end of another, and others will not include examples that seem to be otherwise standard features of most editions. Also, the many images included in this chapter differ depending on the edition.



Frontispiece relief print from the 1796 *Aristotle's Master-piece* (New York). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

When taking the multiple editions of this text into consideration, *Aristotle's Masterpiece* seems to have its own organic vitality—changing shape, growing, retracting, touching... like the very bodies described within it.

Further Reading

Mary Fissell's ongoing research on *Aristotle's Masterpiece* is the best place to begin. Her articles “Hairy Women and Naked Truths: Gender and the Politics of Knowledge in “Aristotle's Masterpiece” (*William and Mary Quarterly* 60:1 [2003]) and “When the Birds and the Bees Were Not Enough: *Aristotle's Masterpiece*” provide readers with both analysis and print history of the text. Both provide

a glimpse of her extraordinary in-progress book-length cultural history of *Aristotle's Masterpiece*.



Frontispiece illustration from *Aristotle's Master-piece*, printed by Zechariah Feeling (likely Fowle) (Boston, ca. 1766). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



Woodcut illustration with poem, "Nature to us does sometimes monsters show..." from *Aristotle's Master-piece*, printed for the company of flying stationers (New York, 1812). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.3 (Spring, 2017).

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