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Hart, Jonathan Locke. Aristotle and His Afterlife: Rhetoric, Poetics and Comparison

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Hart, Jonathan Locke.

Aristotle and His Afterlife: Rhetoric, Poetics and Comparison.

Bibliothèque de littérature générale et comparée 161. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2019. Pp. 320. ISBN 9782745351722 (paperback) €48.

Jonathan Hart's recent book *Aristotle and His Afterlife: Rhetoric, Poetics and Comparison* is an ambitious, demanding, thought-provoking, and interesting text that is ultimately worth reading and engaging with despite the fact that in its early chapters (and to some extent throughout) it needed closer attention from a copy editor. That being said, the material Hart covers and the ideas he raises in the reader's mind make this an important book. Indeed, the book would not leave my mind. As I focused—or tried to focus—on other tasks, I would find myself distracted by thoughts of natural slavery and zones of slavery, the survival in and deployment of Aristotelian arguments in early modern secular and religious history, hybridity and otherness, Shakespeare's probable ignorance of Aristotle, the prevalence of printed commentaries on Aristotle in the Renaissance, and the use made of Aristotle by writers as diverse in style and time as Rabelais, Lodovico Castelvetro, Spenser, Sydney, John Dennis, Addison, Fielding, Hugh Blair, Coleridge, DeQuincey, Hegel, Emerson, Matthew Arnold, Kenneth Burke, and Roland Barthes. Nor is this anything close to a complete list of the writers and thinkers to whom, collectively, Hart ascribes Aristotle's afterlife. In his Acknowledgements, Hart thanks his editors for helping him "to focus these studies." It is easy to imagine this having been a massive tome had Hart not recognized the need to focus his study; even in its current form, it is sprawling in its historical and intellectual coverage. It would be well placed in a graduate-level course on Western poetics, but less well-read readers might find it too daunting.

Ironically, the copy editing seems weakest in the first chapters, where the concept of style—primarily as it is addressed in book 3 of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*—is discussed. Hart calls attention to the fact that this section of *Rhetoric* has become understudied and little known in recent years, and that it is style that connects "rhetoric and poetics" in the philosopher's thinking. In his examination of *Rhetoric's* book 3, Hart argues that Aristotle "is setting out a prose stylistics worthy of poetics" (58), which alone gives us reason to devote more time individually and collectively to *Rhetoric's* book 3 because, as Hart also rightly picks up from his study, any use of language that "calls too much

attention ... [to itself] begins to work against persuading others” (48). It takes little effort to think of scholarly examples.

After the opening section on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, Hart turns his attention to material that feels more familiar to him. Aristotle still provides the occasion for his writing, but the topic becomes early modern Europe and its first encounters with the Americas. Here is where the author discusses uses made of Aristotle’s notion, from his *Politics*, of natural slavery. While Hart is on very familiar ground with an admirable command of the terrain, it will likely be new to most readers, as it was to me. Even now, after having finished the book, I believe this section to be the most worthwhile and best handled. From there, *Aristotle and His Afterlife* turns to discussions that include both familiar and unfamiliar figures in the study of English literature and history; for the most part, these figures are used to demonstrate that Aristotle as cultural icon and Aristotle as thinker continued to be used, cited, and (occasionally) seriously engaged with up to the early twentieth century. What changed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that “the Greek admission and matriculation requirements ended in major American and English universities” (231). Hart suggests that “we might use this as a marker of the end of classicism, of the importance of Plato, Aristotle and others in education in the heart of the English-speaking world” (231), and I find no fault in that suggestion. But the partial list provided above—of those in whose work Aristotle puts an appearance—includes Kenneth Burke and Roland Barthes, both of whose publication dates lie well past the end of classicism just mentioned. Nor does Hart suggest that these are exceptions that prove the rule: quite the opposite, in fact. Hart argues that the afterlife of Aristotle continues up to and including our own time and that it continues to be “one of richness, ambivalence, contradiction and ambiguity” (273). In *Aristotle and His Afterlife: Rhetoric, Poetics and Comparison*, Jonathan Hart offers glimpses of all those characteristics in the afterlife of one of the West’s most foundational thinkers.

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