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# *Sex in Education* and the Rhetoric of Meta-Reception

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**Abstract:** This article proposes meta-reception as a rhetorical concept that can support feminist efforts to recognize the dispersed, collective nature of much rhetorical activity. Whereas reception refers to the effects that texts have on audiences and to what audiences do with texts, meta-reception is defined as commentary on that direct reception, or reception of the reception. The meta-reception of Clarke's *Sex in Education* (1873) serves as an example that demonstrates that references to earlier receptive texts are themselves rhetorical, deployed in the service of arguments or in contexts that can be quite different from those of the initial text. In the case of *Sex in Education*, meta-reception was first used to characterize advocates of advanced education for women as unwomanly aggressors in a warlike debate, and, later, to craft a progress narrative for the history of the women's rights movement. Because meta-reception acknowledges that the work of meaning-making involves not just supposedly independent rhetors making great speeches or publishing significant texts but also those who comment on and thereby reshape the public's understanding of texts, it has the potential to help scholars identify a wide range of rhetors and forms of discursive work that are not accounted for by canonical interpretations of rhetorical activity.

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In recent years, scholars have explored *reception* as a rhetorical phenomenon that acknowledges the dynamic and dispersed nature of rhetorical activity and rhetorical effects (Blair; Kjeldsen; Kjeldsen and Andersen; Skinner, *Rhetorical* and "Theorizing"; Willis). These endeavors seek to understand how rhetors, audiences, and social and material contexts interact to affect how we make meaning and understand our world. In doing so, they align with the efforts of feminist rhetoricians to decenter the autonomous rhetor and to recognize the collective nature of rhetorical activity (for examples of this work, see Buchanan; Ede and Lunsford; Fredlund, Hauman, and Ouellette; Foss and Griffin; Hallenbeck, "Toward a Posthuman" and "Resituating"; Royster and Kirsch 98–109). In this article, I contribute to these endeavors to explore the collective, dispersed, and evolving processes by which rhetoric affects audiences and alters worldviews by analyzing what I call *meta-reception*.

Whereas *reception* refers to the effects that texts have on audiences and to what audiences do with the texts they read, watch, or hear, I define *meta-reception* as commentary on direct reception, or reception of the reception. Although reception and meta-reception can occur exclusively within the mind of an audience member, they can also take the form of outwardly expressed responses, rebuttals, confirmations, or amplifications of the original text that serve the receivers' own rhetorical purposes, purposes that might align with or differ widely from those of the received text. As rhetors engage in reception and meta-reception, they alter or confirm the perceived meaning and value of the original text, reflecting the contexts, purposes, and perspectives of the receivers. In previous work, I argue that reception offers feminist rhetorical scholars a means of challenging the canonical model of rhetorical activity (the independent rhetor persuading an audience) and of expanding the people and processes recognized as contributing to public decision-making. I maintain that the analysis of reception supports these goals because it illuminates the ways that determining what a text means and how it is valued are distributed across rhetors and audiences (*Rhetorical*; "Theorizing"). Building on this, I contend that meta-reception, as a species of reception, presents similar opportunities to feminist scholars of rhetoric.

To illustrate how attending to meta-reception extends feminist rhetorical interests and rhetorical theory, I examine the commentary on the short-lived but contentious debate over physician Edward H. Clarke's *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* (1873). Relying on his expertise and authority as a physician, Clarke (1820-1877) presented women's reproductive physiology as extraordinarily complex and delicate, especially around adolescence (Clarke focused on the years between 14 and 20 [47]). Consequently, he proposed different educational models for men and women: male students should study intensely every day, while female students should study fewer hours per day than men on all days and observe a "remission" in study and exercise every fourth week (157). Women who did not follow this regimen risked not only their own health, but also their fertility and the health of their future offspring; consequently, women who studied too much imperiled "the future of the [white middle-class] race" (45).[1] Clarke presented seven case studies (only five of which were students; the others were an actress and a bookkeeper) selected from the records of his own practice to demonstrate the consequences, which might include "dysmenorrhoea, headache, neuralgia, and hysteria" (84) among other ailments, that could befall young women who did not reduce their efforts or refrain altogether from studying while menstruating.

*Sex in Education* immediately generated an intense and voluminous debate that intersected with several contested issues in the nineteenth-century U.S.: women's education, work, and political rights; evolution and social Darwinism; and the role of science in public rhetoric (Skinner, *Rhetorical*; see also Zschoche; Newman). Reviews, editorials, articles, and books all commented on, amplified, or opposed Clarke's ideas about how "science" might help resolve "the woman question." After about 18 months of intense debate, however, the firestorm initiated by *Sex in Education* largely dissipated. Although the book continued to be published through its 18th edition in 1889, people effectively stopped arguing about it, judging by the precipitous decline in the number of references to it in the periodical press. Of course, some opponents of women's rights continued, enthusiastically, to support Clarke's claims about the dangers of extended education for women. However, American women's college enrollment increased through the end of the nineteenth century. Drawing together data from several sources, Barbara Solomon reports that 11,000 women were enrolled in institutions of higher education in 1870 (making up 21% of all students enrolled), before the 1873 publication of *Sex in Education*; by 1900, 85,000 women were enrolled (36.8% of all enrollments) (63). In practical terms, it seems that many women and their families had not been persuaded by *Sex in Education*.

Even though the question of women's physical fitness for continuous effort seemed to be settled by the increasing numbers of women completing college and pursuing careers, Clarke's book continued to be cited occasionally in the public press through the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s. Sometimes writers sought to re-engage with the question of higher education for women, but often, writers meta-receptively invoked the *debate* around *Sex in Education*, not the content of the book itself. In other words, instead of arguing whether Clarke's thesis was right or wrong, these writers pointed to the rhetorical work that had been done by the

1 It is important to acknowledge the racism underlying *Sex in Education*, which is often identified by contemporary scholars as a key supporter of the nineteenth century's "separate spheres" gender ideology. Clarke's argument depended on the idea that "more evolved" races manifested greater differences between men and women, and his concern that white middle-class women were not having enough healthy babies was an expression of his fear that white Americans would not survive and progress evolutionarily as a "race." Clarke's construction of gender was embedded in his racist beliefs about evolution. For more on the racism, classism, and anti-immigrant sentiment undergirding *Sex in Education*, see Skinner (*Rhetorical*).

controversy surrounding *Sex in Education* to make various women's rights arguments.

In what follows, I first elaborate on my initial definition of meta-reception and briefly explain the methodology employed in the research presented here. Then, I demonstrate the intensity of the immediate (1873–1874) debate over *Sex in Education* by surveying the numerous meta-receptive characterizations of it as "war-like." Next, I analyze the rhetorical purposes that meta-reception served once the initial debate had passed (1882–1898). In the conclusion, I discuss the rhetorical nature of meta-reception and suggest its special relevance to feminist rhetorical scholarship.

## Defining Meta-Reception

The principle that rhetorical activity and rhetorical effects are dispersed across rhetors and audiences that is evidenced in reception and meta-reception is shared by other rhetorical concepts that have been fruitful for feminist rhetorical scholars, such as circulation, rhetorical ecologies, and public memory. As one of Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch's "terms of engagement" for feminist rhetorical scholarship, *social circulation* acknowledges the "*evolutionary* relationships" that reflect "connections among past, present, and future" (23; see also Briggette; Gries; Royster). Similarly, tracing the interconnections that emerge in studies of meta-reception responds to Sarah Hallenbeck's call not to limit our studies to "discrete, organized locations" of rhetorical activity so that we may "capture the broadest possible range of rhetorical practices… emerging both from individual women and men and from the larger systems of power in which they are enmeshed" ("Toward a Posthuman" 14). Meta-reception, with its layers of argument, response, amplification, criticism, and repurposing, allows us to see the effects of rhetorical acts by and about women well beyond their immediate context, as they reverberate across time and space.

In its recognition that rhetorical acts cross contexts, meta-reception complements *rhetorical ecologies* as articulated by Jenny Edbauer. As a framework for understanding rhetorical activity, rhetorical ecology allows us to "begin to recognize the way rhetorics are held together trans-situationally, as well as the effects of trans-situationality on rhetorical circulation…. In other words, we begin to see that public rhetorics do not only exist in the elements of their situations, but also in the radius of their neighboring events" (20). By its nature, meta-reception occurs across times, places, and exigencies, so it is one means by which rhetorical ecologies might manifest. Studies of *public memory*, which often attend to the ways that past and present affect one another, offer an additional approach to recognizing the dispersed and dynamic nature of rhetorical activity. For example, Carol Mattingly's examination of the fate of memorials dedicated to the Women's Christian Temperance Union illustrates how recent re-writings and erasures of history revise our sense of ourselves and our history. In discussions of public memory, we can see a commonality with meta-reception's tenet that rhetorical acts and rhetorical effects are very often subject to revision.

Even though analysis focused on meta-reception shares principles with other rhetorical concepts that have proven useful to feminist researchers, it also draws on methodological practices that differ from many common historiographic approaches. For example, rather than foregrounding the ways that *Sex in Education* reinforced the misogynist and racist context in which women wrote, spoke, and pursued political and edu-

cational rights as much nineteenth-century feminist historiography does (in rhetoric and other fields), this study of meta-reception asks what audiences-turned-rhetors *did* with not only *Sex in Education* but also with descriptions of the controversy it generated. Like Hallenbeck, I seek to shift attention "from the clean and constant demarcation between rhetor and surround, which instead [of being separate] transform one another through constant interaction" ("Resituating" 81). Additionally, meta-receptive analysis does not look "inside" the text to identify its appeals and epistemological world-making as conventional rhetorical analysis often does (Jasinski and Mercieca); instead, it seeks to identify the uses to which receptions of the text have been put. In other words, rather than asking how Clarke marshalled claims to authority (Douglass; Bateman), how he relied on and extended evolutionary theory (DeLuzio; Rosenberg), or how the formal features of *Sex in Education* mirror those of his pharmacology lectures (Fiss), I ask how characterizations of the reception of *Sex in Education* were used as evidence in support of arguments other than those that Clarke himself made (for more on methodological approaches relevant to studies of reception, see Skinner, *Rhetorical*).

Although reception and meta-reception can take various forms, including unrecorded thoughts, feelings, and conversations, historical studies of reception and meta-reception typically rely on instances in which a text was produced. To pursue the analysis below, I collected all the instances that I could find of references to the controversy surrounding *Sex in Education* (not simply references to or reviews of the book itself) in databases of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century periodicals. I then looked for patterns in how the initial reception of *Sex in Education* was described, why it was invoked, and what purposes characterizations of the book's reception served in the context of the rhetor's own argument and context.

The examples I selected for this analysis share two important features: first, the meta-reception is based on collective instances of reception; second, the meta-reception supports an argument addressed to an audience outside of the rhetor. In other words, because I am interested in meta-reception as a persuasive resource, my understanding of meta-reception differs from simply learning from past communicative experiences, which might occur within an individual mind. Someone evaluating a previous conversation might think, "The last time I told her something like this, she reacted badly, so I'm going to take a different approach this time." In this case, the reception (whatever the person's interlocutor said or did) and the argument ("I should take a different approach") based on the person's characterization of the reception (the meta-receptive interpretation "she reacted badly") are both individual, not social, events. Such a scenario might be characterized as a form of "self-rhetoric" (Harrison), but in this article, because my focus is on meta-reception as a strategy or resource for shaping public attitudes and beliefs, I'm interested in rhetoric that draws from and is addressed to audiences composed of many people.

## Characterizing the Immediate Reception as a War

Starting almost immediately after *Sex in Education* was published, the debate it instigated was frequently described in militaristic terms. Although the choice of this metaphor to portray the reception of *Sex in Education* reflected the common characterization of argument as a form of war (Lakoff and Johnson 5), the frequency and vividness with which the reception of *Sex in Education* was described as a battle indicate that

the debate around Clarke's book was perceived to be particularly intense. Characterizing the reception of *Sex in Education* as a battle additionally served to portray the women refuting Clarke as unwomanly, because physical combat was incompatible with nineteenth-century American notions of femininity. The initial meta-reception, appearing soon after *Sex in Education*'s October 1873 publication, was not merely an objective description of the features of the book's reception; instead, it was itself an argument that shaped readers' perceptions of those participating in the debate, especially the women.

For example, a review (26 Mar. 1874) in *The Congregationalist*, a Boston-based periodical published for members of the Congregational church, was overt in its use of military metaphors. Referring to two of the books published in 1874 in opposition to *Sex in Education*, Julia Ward Howe's collection *Sex* and *Education* and Eliza Bisbee Duffey's *No Sex in Education*, this reviewer[2] wrote, "At the sight of [these two books] in manifest alliance, we find a military mood coming over us, and the metaphors of the battle-field offering themselves for service." The reviewer then described the women's rights debate as a David and Goliath story:

> To take up our parable, it will be remembered that some time since there stepped forth from the ranks of the reformers of this nineteenth century a champion named Woman's Rights, a very Goliath in bravery.… "Come on," cried this doubty warrior to the timid army of conservatives, "and set your battle in array!" In due time there appeared, in answer to this challenge, a youth of ruddy countenance, who, rejecting the heavier armor of other knights, essayed to meet the adversary with the simple sling of a logical process and the smooth stone of a physiological fact, therewith smiting the arrogant Philistine in so vital a part as to bring him—perhaps we should say *her*—fairly to the ground. ("Literary Review")

According to this reviewer, Howe and Duffey were part of the giant warrior Goliath, eager for battle, while Clarke, who was in his mid-fifties and acknowledged as a professional authority, was characterized as the young David wearing no armor. This description of the reception of *Sex in Education* (indeed, of the whole women's rights debate) painted the advocates of women's higher education as bullies who could be defeated by a "simple" slingshot composed of scientific fact and logical thinking.

Shifting battlefields but maintaining Clarke's position as the underdog in this war, the review concluded, "And we strongly suspect that after the smoke of this fusillade of musketry has cleared away, the little Doctor will be generally discerned still in possession of the field" ("Literary Review"). This meta-receptive characterization of the debate around *Sex in Education* as an unevenly matched battle encouraged readers to sympathize with Clarke as a David or as a "little doctor" victorious against women's rights, the better-armed giant that no one else wanted to fight. In contrast, the "Goliath" of women's rights (and the women it represented) was described as unfeminine in appearance (as a giant) and in behavior (as Goliath provoked "the conservatives" to violence). Taking a step beyond simply commenting on Howe's and Duffey's books (the primary purpose of the receptive act of a literary review), this reviewer crafted a meta-receptive characterization of *Sex in Education*'s reception to shape readers' perceptions of the debate around Clarke's book and of those who participated in it.

2 This text, like many of those cited in this essay, reflects the common practice among nineteenth-century periodicals of publishing unsigned reviews, editorials, or opinion pieces. I have provided names and biographical information when writers are identifiable.

In contrast to *The Congregationalist*'s characterization of Clarke as the underdog, three months later (25 June 1874), in an article titled "The Replies to Dr. Clarke," *The Nation* (a wide-ranging journal covering news, politics, economics, education, social issues, literature, and the arts published in New York) described Clarke as a strategic, overpowering fighter. This writer said that proponents of advanced education for women had been focused on achieving co-education at Harvard when they were surprised by Clarke's book:

> They were all busily engaged in operations against President Eliot at Harvard; had driven him, as they supposed, into his last stronghold; and were preparing with ferocious whoops for what they expected to be a final rush at him, when the Doctor suddenly, and without a note of warning, began to drop shells in their rear, at easy range and with a coolness which showed that he knew his ground. The disorder which followed was for a time very dreadful. The rank and file broke and got under cover.… Mrs. Howe and Colonel Higginson [two writers who refuted Clarke] reconnoitered the Doctor carefully.… While they were watching him, the book kept running through new editions, so it was plain that no time had to be lost. President Eliot had to be let alone for the present, and active measures taken to extinguish Doctor Clarke's fire. ("The Replies to Dr. Clarke" 408; see also "Literary Review" 484 in *Congregational Quarterly*)

This account of the reception of *Sex in Education* presented a particular characterization of Clarke, the reformers, and the debate following the publication of *Sex in Education*. Clarke was "cool" and efficient in his assault, through which he came to the aid of his colleague at Harvard, who was portrayed as being under attack by the reformers.[3] The reformers were disorganized and fled from hard battle; their "ferocious whoops" were likely read at the time as connotations of "uncivilized," "savage" behavior, which consequently cast Clarke as the protector of "civilization" in putting down a rebellion. The meta-receptive description of the advocates of women's education as at first "ferocious" aggressors and then as "disorder[ed]" in their initial reception of Clarke, gave readers the impression that the proponents of women's education were aggressive, disorganized fighters, neither appropriately feminine nor effective in battle.

In addition to describing the advocates of women's education collectively in negative terms, the writers who commented on the debate around *Sex in Education* often characterized individual opponents of Clarke in ways that undermined their femininity. For example, in November 1873, one commentator, writing in *The Daily Graphic*, a New York publication that claimed to be "the only illustrated daily newspaper in the world" ("The Graphic"), said that Caroline Dall[4] "knows how to use her weapons so as to draw blood every time." She was also said to have "explode[d] some of Dr. Clarke's manufactured 'facts'" ("Sex in Education"). Even though the writer was speaking metaphorically, the violence attributed to Dall was not consistent with nineteenth-century ideals of domestic femininity. In April 1874, the San Francisco *Daily Evening Bulletin* described another of Clarke's opponents, Eliza Bisbee Duffey,[5] in similar terms. The newspaper characterized

3 Some of Clarke's contemporaries suspected him of having written *Sex in Education* in support of Harvard's decision to exclude women; however, it seems that at least some of Clarke's colleagues at the medical school were dissatisfied with his methodology and conclusions (Wells 172-173; Bittell 126-127).

4 Caroline Wells Healy Dall (1822-1912) was an abolitionist, suffragist, and prolific writer. Her women's rights books include *Woman's Right to Labor* (1860), *Woman's Rights under the Law* (1861), and T*he College, the Market, and the Court* (1867). Dall helped found the American Social Science Association in 1865 and served in several leadership roles in that organization.

5 Eliza Bisbee Duffey (1838-1898) contributed *No Sex in Education* (1874) to the controversy around Clarke's book. Duffey wrote prolifically on women's health and rights, including the books *What Women Should Know: A Woman's Book about Women, Containing Practical Information for Wives and Mothers* (1873) and *The Relations of the Sexes* (1889).

Duffey's rebuttal of Clarke as delivering "what she evidently considers a *coup de grace*—the final finishing-up and annihilation of the unhappy doctor" ("No Sex in Education"). Although such an act of violence might be understood as an act of mercy to relieve suffering, it was not compatible with the ideas of women as delicate and sensitive.

Likewise, in its April 1874 review of Julia Ward Howe's[6] edited collection *Sex* and *Education* (1874), the *Liberal Christian*, "An Independent Journal of Religion, Literature, Science and Art" published in New York ("The Liberal Christian"), called her book "one long cry to battle." It then extended the martial language: "Mrs. Howe's introduction and her opening essay bristle with swordspoints, daggers and bayonets. She is nothing if not antagonistic. And her sentences are sharp and cutting two-edged swords" ("Reviews"). Though the characterization of women's rights advocates as unfeminine was common in this era, in the meta-reception of *Sex in Education*, the depictions of Clarke's opponents as violent and bloodthirsty suggested that they posed a real threat to society; they certainly weren't women with whom most Americans would want to associate. Even when the writers seemed (sometimes begrudgingly) to acknowledge the intellectual prowess of women's rights advocates, as in the reviews of Dall, Duffey, and Howe cited here, the war-like meta-receptive commentary undermined statements about the validity of the women's arguments.

As these examples illustrate, in just the first ten months after *Sex in Education* was published, the responses it evoked were vividly described in terms of war. Many of the commentators using this metaphor characterized women's rights supporters as violent, and even as the aggressors in the conflict. In one sense, this was in keeping with the notion that Clarke and his supporters were "defending" the status quo and that the advocates of higher education for women were the "aggressors" in demanding change. Such a characterization of the reception of *Sex in Education* promoted the idea that social reform required at least metaphorical violence, which meant that someone would be hurt in the process of expanding women's rights. If violence and injury were the costs of reform, then perhaps the price was too high, and the women should "retreat."

Moreover, the language of war highlighted the idea that women seeking greater rights were moving out of their appropriate spheres: a woman in battle was not in keeping with nineteenth-century U.S. notions of femininity or domesticity. In this sense, the meta-reception characterizing the women who responded to Clarke as engaged in war suggested the extreme gender role-reversals posited by those opposed to expanding rights and opportunities for women (Behling; Rouse). Even when the writers acknowledged the validity of women's objections to Clarke's argument and expressed support for women's education, placing women in the context of a metaphorical war reinforced the idea that women were "unsexing" themselves and endangering white middle-class society.

## Characterizing Opposition to Women's Rights as Obsolete

Even though the early meta-reception characterizing the reception of *Sex in Education* as a war at least implicitly opposed women's education, later meta-reception (from 1882—nine years after *Sex in Education* was first published—through the end of the century) relied on the public's memory of that early "battle" to

6 Famous for writing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) was a well-known pacifist and suffragist who co-founded the American Woman Suffrage Association and edited *The Woman's Journal*.

assert women's rights to education, work, and political participation. Often, *Sex in Education* was characterized as having produced an "alarm"—a momentary state of heightened awareness of possible danger—among the people. Importantly, the choice of the word "alarm" implied that, while there had been a brief time of concern, that time had passed. Some writers engaged in meta-reception to describe current rhetorical situations in the aftermath of that alarm, and some used it to characterize those who were still caught up in the "alarm" as old-fashioned or out of touch.

For instance, in June 1882, the Boston *Sunday Herald* published "Education of Girls." In it, the writer noted the effect that *Sex in Education*, now nine years old, continued to have on discussions of girls' and women's education:

> It is impossible to satisfy a public alarmed by the late Dr. E. H. Clarke's sentimental work on "Sex in Education," and always ready to pronounce woman "the weaker vessel" and shield her from mental exertion, that the girls are not overworked at school, and the fear that they may do too much is still a most serious drawback in our Boston homes, when parents are urged to use the advantages of the public schools in the education of their daughters. Unintelligent sentimentalism is still the greatest drawback to the proper education of young women in the Boston schools.

In the context of an article that critically assessed Boston's schools for young women but accepted women's right to a thorough education, the reference to *Sex in Education* served to identify the historical source of the "alarm" that continued to hinder parents' support of their daughters' education. This meta-receptive commentary characterized the after-effects of the reception of *Sex in Education* negatively: the book was still a "drawback" hindering widespread education, because it had fostered an "Unintelligent sentimentalism" among the people of Boston.

Just as characterizing the reception of *Sex in Education* as reflecting a state of "alarm" was used to explain the hesitancy of some parents, meta-reception was also used to dismiss physicians who tried to follow in Clarke's footsteps. In 1898, a brief editorial note in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* relied on Clarke's failure to stop women's educational progress to suggest that a similar argument by Dr. J. S. Flagg[7] would not succeed:

> Dr. J. S. Flagg has made the startling discovery that the tendency on the part of women to enter into the avocations [sic] heretofore monopolized by men will have an effect, if not checked, ultimately to modify the physiological and psychological distinctions between the sexes; in short, to abolish women. Oh wise and wonderful Dr. Flagg! But he is not exactly first in the field. About a quarter of a century ago Dr. Clarke produced no small alarm by his book, "Sex in Education," whose burden was to prove that if women were to receive a liberal education in colleges of equal grade with those provided for men, a multitude of terrible consequences would result, among them the consignment of the health of womankind to hop[e]less rack and ruin. ("Editorial Suggestions")

The rhetorical situation into which Flagg and this writer entered was shaped by the "alarm" that Clarke had evoked. As this writer told the story of *Sex in Education* and its reception, the initial receptive "alarm" meant that readers 25 years later were already aware of the physiological arguments against continuous effort at school or at work by women, so further arguments along these lines would likely not draw the kind of atten-

7 I have been unable to locate biographical information on Flagg, beyond evidence that he was a physician in Boston who lectured to medical students.

tion that *Sex in Education* had. Furthermore, because colleges continued to admit women and the result was not the "rack and ruin" of their health, readers had experiential evidence contradicting Clarke and his successors. This writer used meta-reception to foster a hostile rhetorical situation for Flagg's claims by referring to the initial reception's "alarm" and its subsequent rejection.

Commentary on the reception of *Sex in Education* that described people opposed to women's rights as old-fashioned and ill-informed supported one of the most common uses of the book's meta-reception: to craft a narrative of progress toward increasing women's rights and opportunities. In 1883, writing for the suffrage newspaper *The Woman's Journal*, which he co-edited, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) incorporated a characterization of the reception of *Sex in Education* into a long version of such a narrative:

> What always strengthens reformers is, that the arguments which meet their most advanced demands are the same that originally met their mildest demands; it shows that the whole affair is a matter of continuous development. The trouble usually is that after a certain point in the advance is carried, people forget that it ever was opposed…. Was there ever any objection to the higher education of women? It is of great value to have some worthy, but rather fossilized gentleman volunteer to place himself on record as still representing the old obstruction. ("Gauges of Progress")

Higginson noted that objections to women's owning property had been overcome and that "even the stoutest conservatives accepted the present property laws [acknowledging women's property rights] as a finality." Then he turned to the success of the Harvard Annex, the precursor to Radcliffe college, where women were taught by Harvard faculty: "So when…we see the Harvard 'Annex,' as its projectors say 'working so simply and easily that its success has hardly attracted attention,' it is difficult to realize that it is only ten years since the battle raged round Dr. E. H. Clarke's 'Sex in Education.'" With these past victories in women's property rights and education in mind, Higginson turned to a recent opponent of women's education, confident that Clarke's defeat when that "battle raged" foretold a future victory for women's education. Higginson concluded by suggesting what a "fossilized" opponent of women's rights might say: "If these worn-out arguments are so valueless in my hand against the higher education [of women], what are they when you use them against Woman Suffrage?" ("Gauges of Progress"). According to Higginson, not only was this opponent's argument doomed to fail against women's education, but it also foreshadowed his failure when opposing votes for women. In this article, reference to the "battle" over *Sex in Education* a decade ago set up a pattern that Higginson maintained would repeat: just as past opposition to women's rights was overcome, present and future opposition would be overcome as well.

Higginson confirmed the narrative he constructed, again referring to the *Sex in Education* controversy, three years later in an article for the *Critic*, a New York-based weekly focused on drama and literature. In "The American Girl-Graduate," Higginson cited the Association of Collegiate Alumnæ's statistical evidence demonstrating the health of women who had graduated from college. Consistent with the narrative of progress for women's rights that he posited earlier, Higginson concluded that the question of women's right to education had been resolved: "As a result of these investigations, or of the state of facts developed by them, the 'sex in education' controversy may be regarded as being in this country dismissed from the arena" (274). Importantly, Higginson's argument relied on "the 'sex in education' controversy" as a whole rhetorical phe-

nomenon. Higginson was no longer receiving Clarke by arguing with him as he had when the book was first published (see, for example, "II"; "Physician and Pedagogue"; and "Sex in Education"); instead, Higginson meta-receptively referred to the body of texts receiving *Sex in Education*—the controversy—as a landmark supporting his argument about how far the women's rights movement had advanced.

Similarly situating doubts about women's education in the past, Helen H. Backus (1852-1906), a faculty member at Vassar College and president of the Association of Collegiate Alumnæ, opened her 1899 discussion of the appropriate curriculum for women in the *Outlook*, a New York weekly, with a reference to *Sex in Education*:

> That intricate web of sophistry and sentimentality which prejudice wove throughout the ages, and to which Dr. Clarke's 'Sex in Education' added the finish, has been torn and discolored by the practical experiences of the past quarter-century. Now and then a conservative theologian or an old-fashioned nerve-specialist tries vainly to patch it up. But, for the most part, mothers and fathers, students and scientists, neglect it entirely. (461)

Backus described those who supported or attempted to revive Clarke's arguments as futilely trying to mend a web, only to have those most involved in women's education ignore their efforts. Echoing the language of other writers who maintained that the "alarm" in the initial reception of *Sex in Education* had long since been cast off, Backus went on to say that "The daughters of this generation are encouraged to work out their own mental salvation, little influenced by the fears of the past" (461). Backus used commentary on the reception of *Sex in Education* to craft a narrative in which worries about women's fitness for higher education were all in the past.

Although several writers in the 1880s and 1890s insisted that not just *Sex in Education* but also the alarm over women's health that it represented was obsolete, the "battle" over women's education had not yet been "won." As late as 1904, the medical journal the *Medical Record* cited *Sex in Education* and its reception in support of its claim that education was physically injurious to women: "Is a collegiate training harmful to women? The majority of medical men are of the opinion that such is generally the case—at all events, that co-education is harmful to women—and hold the view that women are not fitted physically for the strain put upon them by strenuous professional or business careers" (17). In the course of citing nearly a dozen physicians and scientists confirming this conclusion, the article referred not only to *Sex in Education* but also to its reception:

> The work [*Sex in Education*] appeared at the height of the movement to secure collegiate opportunities for girls, and was suspected of being unofficially inspired by the unwillingness of Harvard University [where Clarke taught in the medical school] to receive them. It reached a seventeenth edition in a short time, but the views expressed therein were warmly combated by a number of ladies distinguished in the movement for the higher education of women. (17)

Despite the doubts raised about Clarke's motivations and the "combat[ive]" objections made to his argument, this writer for the *Medical Record*—presumably an authority on matters of health—asserted that higher education was dangerous for women.

When the supporters of higher education for women used meta-reception to craft a narrative that suggested that the debate over women's education had been resolved, they weren't merely recounting facts. They were using a version of rhetorical history as an argument, contending that their audience should ignore anyone who still questioned the safety of higher education for women as "old-fashioned" (Backus) or "fossilized" (Higginson, "Gauges of Progress") and not to be taken seriously. The description of the initial reception of *Sex in Education* as an intense battle served later commentators well because they could treat it as a momentary commotion or "alarm" that had passed. Moreover, because women's enrollment in college continued to increase, the advocates of higher education for women could claim victory.

## The Rhetorical Nature of Meta-Reception

In the case of *Sex in Education*, its initial reception, and the commentary on that reception, we can see that meta-reception—how the initial reception was received and interpreted—was used rhetorically. Meta-receptive comments were utilized to shape rhetorical situations and to serve rhetorical purposes at some remove from both Clarke's situation and purpose for publishing *Sex in Education* and his initial readers' situation and purpose for writing about, quoting, and referring to the book. Up to 25 years after its initial publication, advocates of women's education cited the reception of *Sex in Education* in a new context, not to refute Clarke directly, but to make different arguments in support of women's education and other rights. Where they first argued that women could safely pursue a college education, they later argued that because the issue of women's education had been resolved in their favor, the question of other rights and opportunities for women would soon be resolved in women's favor, too.

Other rhetorical contexts might rely on meta-reception for their arguments. As an everyday example, consider how a potential movie-goer might use reviewers' positive commentary on a film to persuade her friend to watch it with her. We might also think of meta-reception in an academic context: A scholar might publish a book that redefines a fundamental concept in her field, prompting her readers to re-think that concept. That process of collective re-thinking (occurring in the published reception—the reviews and the citations of the book) might later be characterized by someone meta-receptively as a breakthrough moment for the field, supporting an argument that the field has made a "turn." In this case, the writer arguing that the field has "turned" is selectively crafting a narrative: not everyone in the field will have read the book, and even among those who have, not everyone will have been persuaded by its redefinition. Finally, feminist historiographers who recover marginalized rhetors often engage in meta-reception, as they examine the immediate responses to speeches and texts in order to make claims about how and why a rhetor has been dismissed or erased. Meta-reception is rhetorical, used in contexts for purposes like making arguments and shaping worldviews. The process by which an initial message prompts reception, which opens an opportunity for a meta-receptive characterization of that reception, which is then deployed to support an argument, is outlined in Table 1, using these examples alongside of *Sex in Education*.

| Original Message | Direct Reception | Meta-Reception | Arguments Supported by Meta-Receptive Characterization |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Sex in Education* | Refutations and support of Clarke's argument | Descriptions of the direct reception as a battle (early); descriptions of the direct reception as an "alarm" that is now obsolete (later) | Women are engaged in un-feminine rhetorical activity, and reform entails violence, therefore women's rights reforms are undesirable and dangerous (early); fears about the threats posed to women's health by education are in the past, and present-day acceptance of women's rights is assured (later) |
| Movie | Reviewers' positive and negative commentary on the film | Referring to positive reviews as evidence that the movie is worth watching | Because reviewers seem to agree that this is a good movie, you will enjoy it, so you should watch it with me |
| Book that redefines a central concept in an academic field | Collective re-thinking of that concept, based on the ideas presented in the book, appearing in reviews, presentations, books, and articles; adoption of or resistance to the new definition | Characterization of the uptake of the redefinition as a "breakthrough" for the field | The field has made a "turn" and so should develop new research questions and methods |
| Speech or text by a historically marginalized rhetor | Criticism, ridicule, and dismissal; alternatively, praise and acceptance | Depiction of negative initial feedback as reflecting prejudices and assumptions of the time; alternatively, description of positive initial feedback as evidence that the rhetor adapted effectively to the rhetorical situation | We should recover this rhetor because she was unfairly erased, either by her immediate contemporaries or by shifts in taste and values in the intervening years |

Table 1. The Rhetorical Use of Meta-Reception

Importantly, the act of meta-reception is an interpretative act that serves rhetorical ends. As I have demonstrated, in the meta-reception of *Sex in Education*, references to the debate around Clarke's book were used to characterize the rhetorical situation as war-like, to cast women's rights advocates as unwomanly aggressors in that war, and, later, to craft a progress narrative for the history of the women's rights movement. These uses of meta-reception were selective representations of the direct reception of *Sex in Education* that served the writers' rhetorical purposes: describing the published reviews, articles, and books responding to Clarke's book as participants in a war may have excited readers and increased periodical sales; portraying the women who wrote those texts as vicious (or ineffective) combatants supported negative constructions of women's rights advocates; and declaring that the opposition to women's rights had been vanquished in the 1880s—simply because Clarke's thesis hadn't been widely accepted—was more wish than reality.

Meta-reception is a phenomenon that is related to circulation, public memory, rhetorical ecologies, and other concepts that foreground the dynamic and dispersed nature of much rhetorical activity. Meta-reception illuminates the ways that rhetorical effects can far exceed a specific context and purpose, and it demonstrates that analysis focused on a supposedly independent rhetor's choices is insufficient to account for the collective

efforts by which rhetoric often shapes or maintains worldviews that support or resist social change. As an analytical tool, meta-reception can also help us trace how arguments change over time as the material and social context evolves, how "old" arguments maintain their relevance in "new" contexts, how "old" arguments might be used as a shortcut for dismissing related arguments, or how supposedly resolved debates continue to influence how rhetors interpret and react to current controversies. Although this study of the meta-reception of *Sex in Education* is relatively limited in place and time, the scope for meta-reception could be quite large, engaging in what Deborah Hawhee and Christa J. Olson call "pan-historiography," which describes "studies that leap across geographic space, tracking important activities, terms, movements, or practices as they travel with trade, with global expansion, or with religious zealotry" (90). Meta-reception, therefore, presents an opportunity to think beyond the model of the supposedly autonomous rhetor persuading an audience to instead consider how variously positioned audiences-turned-rhetors interpret, revise, and redeploy rhetorical acts as they contribute to the dynamic, multifaceted, and evolving processes of shaping rhetorical effects.

## Biography

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