

# American Womanhood and the New Woman: A Rhetorical Consideration of the Development and Circulation of Female Stereotypes, 1890–1920

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This article studies the emerging trope of the American “New Woman” in the popular press dating from 1890-1920. The New Woman served as the aggregate stereotype of modern women during the progressive era. Magazines and newspapers depicted the New Woman as a sharp distinction from the esteemed Victorian “True” Woman, who was submissive, pious, and virtuous. Using archival examination of Progressive Era newspapers and magazines, and feminist rhetorical historiography, this project found that this discussion possessed the same argumentative features as the conversation about True Womanhood—women were lumped together as a whole and were all thought to be following the same roles. In addition, the term was derisively enacted. The rhetoric surrounding the New Woman has been understudied by rhetorical scholars; rhetorical analyses of feminist conversations in history bear significance today in understanding the appeals used in feminist movements and in understanding how current notions of gendering are heavily influenced by the past.

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When a phrase previously unknown suddenly appears in print, and is often heard in conversation, it becomes in order to ask what it means. How shall we precisely define so nebulous a being as the new woman? For nebulous she certainly is, melting away into thin vapor when one demands of her who and what she is, whence she hails, and where she is going. Among the thousands and tens of thousands who jostle us as we walk on the crowded highway, which is the new woman, and what business has she in the path, and whither is she leading those who follow in her wake?

“The New Woman,” *Harper’s Bazaar*,  
July 27, 1895 (594)

From 1890 to 1920, a new conversation about the behaviors of women evolved from

the nineteenth-century fanaticism with “the woman question.” Along with the push for women’s rights and access to new occupations came an alternative understanding about woman’s role and function within society. During the Progressive Era, the stereotype that arose from this transformative definition of gender was called the New Woman. Coined initially by Sarah Grand in *The North American Review* in 1894, the New Woman was instantly a recognizable figure in a world that was changing quickly. On the surface, the New Woman was an educated, economically independent woman who followed a life path different from the traditional path laid out for women—that is, to be married, have children, and live quietly in the home (Welter 21). She became known in the press for the activities in which she participated, which included sports, politics, business, and the growing workforce. A contrast to the ideal

Victorian woman (the True Woman), the New Woman's identity and influence on American life sparked a zealous debate on the new choices women were making. Although the phrase "New Woman" represented the independence women were pursuing in their careers and personal lives, the rhetoric surrounding the New Woman's identity extended from the Victorian obsession with women's behaviors. The nineteenth century saw a huge movement to structure women's lives by strictly regulating their behavior. But by the fin de siècle, women began to be a part of the workforce, marry later or not at all, and gradually rely on men less and less. The debate surrounding the New Woman performed a significant function in redefining women's place in the outside world and in domestic life. In many ways, this debate was the catalyst that would pave the way for new lifestyles and experiences to be made available to women. And yet, as I will argue, the term "New Woman" circulated in the press primarily as a conduit to condemn the new choices women were making.

The New Woman has been a topic of study for historians, who have examined the prose and literature surrounding its meaning. For example, Carolyn Christensen Nelson in 2000 was the first to edit a collection of drama, prose, and fiction from the Progressive Era that chronicles the contentious debate about the New Woman, titled *A New Woman Reader*. Jean V. Matthews in 2003 wrote *The Rise of the New Woman: The Woman's Movement in America, 1875–1930*. Her work documents the course of the women's suffrage movement, the trials faced by the suffragists' campaigns, and their eventual victories in securing women's rights. Martha H. Patterson in 2005 wrote *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American*

*New Woman, 1895–1915*, where she challenged the typical perception of the New Woman as a white, affluent, educated, and politically progressive woman, and explored the ways in which women from other ethnic, regional, and socioeconomic backgrounds also led lives indicative of modern women. In addition, Patterson also edited an anthology of New Woman texts in 2008 titled *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894–1930*. This collection of texts and images sought to define the New Woman. These scholars applied a historical focus when studying the New Woman; however, another layer of understanding the New Woman and its function as a stereotype in Progressive Era conversation can be uncovered through a rhetorical study.

Such feminist rhetorical studies on the history of the New Woman would extend from the existing work of scholars' analyses of nineteenth-century women's rhetorical practices. For example, in *Appropriate[ing] Dress* (1998), Carol Mattingly discusses the ethos created by women depending on what they wore and the value placed on women because of their appearances. The rhetoric of fashion, she argues, played a huge role in the reception of women's messages. Kimberly Harrison, in "Rhetorical Rehearsals: The Construction of Ethos in Confederate Women's Civil War Diaries" (2003), makes an argument for diaries as rhetorical spaces in which Confederate women crafted ethos. Jacqueline Jones Royster (2000) looks at the rhetorical proficiencies of African American women in the nineteenth-century. In addition, Nan Johnson in *Gendering Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866–1910* (2002) demonstrates that the domestic spheres in which women were placed gave them their own authority when they conformed to the

feminine ideal. Sarah Hallenbeck more recently (2016) analyzed the rhetorical connotations placed on new technology—like bicycles—and women’s use of it to transform social constructions about gender.

These works have provided a critical understanding about how nineteenth-century women have constructed messages, how those messages were received, and how successful women’s attempts were to enter male domains. While these works have mainly focused on women rhetors, understanding female stereotypes as constructed through public conversation is crucial to understanding the context for women’s rhetorical activity. These conversations on womanhood were rhetorical acts themselves in the way that they granted and limited women’s participation in rhetorical spaces. Studying the discourse about womanhood during a momentously progressive time, as in the New Woman debate, offers a clearer and deeper cognizance of the reception of women’s words that provides more context for further research in feminist rhetorical studies. Still, the significant figure of the New Woman, the fundamental representative of the change in women’s behavior throughout the nineteenth century—who was in fact rooted in the discussion of women’s rhetoric—has not been given enough attention by rhetorical scholars.

The New Woman was an important development in the progression of societal conceptions of femininity, so to fully understand women’s rhetoric, we must understand the stereotype of the New Woman and the consequences of her historical moments in the press. Yet, the New Woman is difficult to study according to typical rhetorical research methods because no individual woman in the Progressive Era was the

quintessence of the New Woman. While Mattingly, Johnson, and Hallenbeck have each grappled with “True Womanhood” and “New Womanhood” in their studies, as they have explored the competing influences in the nineteenth century surrounding women’s conduct, their studies keep the New Woman peripheral in the purview of their research. Unlike the other movements of rhetorical study—e.g. the abolition movement or the suffrage movement—there was no organized “New Woman movement” whose main goal was to redefine femininity for a new age. Consequently, the New Woman had a different meaning in the Progressive Era than contemporary scholars attribute to her. Typically, when scholars speak of the New Woman of the Progressive Era today, she is illustrated as an emblematic icon of feminist reform. Knowledge of feminist achievements over history has led some scholars to focus on the progress the New Woman represents today rather than on her reception in the Progressive Era, and this focus ignores the influence these stereotypes had. Jessica Enoch has called for “a new feminist historiographic practice, one that examines the rhetorical process of gendering. This mode of historiography interrogates the rhetorical work that goes into creating and disturbing gendered distinctions, social categories, and asymmetrical power relationships that women and men encounter in their daily lives” (115). This article responds to that call by examining the development of the stereotype of the New Woman and the reactions to the New Woman during the Progressive Era in the United States, particularly by considering the influences of the conversations that arose as a response to women who assumed agency over their own lives. Applying a rhetorical methodology to

the construction of the New Woman allows us to have a more accurate view of the social implications the stereotype had in the press. In applying this methodology, I argue that writers in articles and columns in periodicals in the American popular press from 1890–1920 fashioned the term “New Woman” as a stereotype of the modern woman to denounce the choices modern women were making, while depicting the New Woman as the antithesis of the acclaimed True Woman of the nineteenth century.

To understand the discourse about the New Woman, it is important to understand how formative True Woman ideas were during the nineteenth century in dictating the preferred roles women ought to pursue. I begin by sketching the key rhetorical features of True Woman discourse, then I turn to explore the origin of the term “New Woman” as created by Sarah Grand in March of 1894. I next analyze the rhetoric surrounding the New Woman, specifically focusing on the common arguments used against the emergence of modern womanhood, followed by an analysis of the complicated relationship between Progressive Era feminists and the phrase “New Woman.” I conclude by discussing how a rhetorical study of the New Woman provides further insight into the progression of gender reform and how stereotypes such as the New Woman are circulated in conversations about womanhood.

### **The Genesis of the New Woman**

Ideal womanhood in the 1800s was titled “True Womanhood.” According to Barbara Welter, “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and

domesticity” (21). The Cult of True Womanhood included “society’s emphasis on training young ladies in the arts, especially vocal and instrumental music, literary study, drawing, painting, and dance,” as Karen Blair writes (qtd. in Kitch 20). Though elite and middle-class women were educated, the areas in which they were educated did not lend themselves to careers in the outside world. Rather, marriage and motherhood were the defining staples of women’s lives.

As the century progressed, the ideals of true womanhood were called into question; thus arose the “woman question,” an overarching discussion about who women ought to be and what they ought to do. As Blanche Lane acknowledged about the New Woman debate in 1896, “We aver that the modern woman is an evolution from all previous types, and represents in her fullest growth the nineteenth century phase of woman-kind. But she is not an abnormal excrescence of the social structure” (124). Here, Lane signaled the major questions surrounding the existence of the New Woman—who is the New Woman, is she new, and furthermore, would her identity single-handedly lead to the downfall of society?

The debate about the New Woman started out as a critical analysis of the current arrangement of gender roles and how these gender roles were disadvantageous to women. Sarah Grand in 1894 put this conversation on gender into the term the “New Woman.” Grand had published successful novels with protagonists that resembled modern women. *Ideala* (1888) and *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) pointed out flaws in the traditional domestic structure and the sexual double standard prevalent in society’s understanding of men and women. Grand’s

“The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” published in *The North American Review* in 1894, further discussed the woman question and called for women to take action against the constructs that kept them in the home. Grand began this article by criticizing men’s dichotomous and limiting categorization of women. In one category, there were the “cow women,” those who mindlessly conform to the standard set out for them, and the other category, the “scum women,” were those who may be prostitutes or beggars, whom men used and took advantage of and then “judge[d] us all by them” (30). Grand wrote:

Both the cow-women and the scum-women are well within range of the comprehension of the Bawling Brotherhood, but the new woman is a little above him, and he never even thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she saw the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere and prescribed a remedy. (30)

This remedy that Grand spoke of is the New Woman’s role as an educator of man.<sup>1</sup> Her job was to give men insight into women’s capabilities and their inherent equality with men. This was not to say who exactly the New Woman was, but rather to call upon women to indicate the fallacies of the patriarchal structure to men in hopes that they will see the error of their ways. Grand designed the New Woman character to enlighten men about their unfair perceptions of women in a gentle way; the New Woman was not to embody characteristics of men as a means of achieving equality. The emblematic caricature of the mannish, grotesque

New Woman would not develop until later into the 20th century.

Grand revealed the basis for the problems within a patriarchal structure and how the New Woman was a response to these problems. She set up men as the perpetrators of gender inequality, then ended the piece with an interesting metaphor that called for women to clear out the “dark corners”—meant to represent the inequality men had thus far fostered. The “woman question” to which she refers was the term that housed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conversations on the role of women. Grand extends and revises the conversation on the Woman Question to the Marriage Question, radically posing the idea that women will finally be free once they forego marriage: “We are bound to raise the dust while we are at work, but only those that are in it will suffer any inconvenience from it.... For the rest it will be all benefits. The Woman Question is the Marriage Question, and shall be known hereafter” (“New Aspect” 34). Thus, Grand set the tone for the decades-long debate about the New Woman. In 1894, the New Woman was not yet the independent, career-driven suffragist the popular press would later make her out to be but rather indicative of the responsibilities of a new class of women in changing gender dynamics. The response of the audience in years to come would do the work for Grand in depicting the New Woman in terms of her vocation, virtues, and demeanor. The debate would create a stereotype of the New Woman to make it a figure that is easy not only to understand, but also to vilify as a direct contrast to the True Woman.

## The New Woman as a Stereotype

The New Woman was often portrayed as a legendary creature, who could not solely index all modern women. The numerous texts questioning who the New Woman was and where she was to be found reflected the mythic nature of the New Woman. As Patterson writes, the New Woman could be characterized as a combination of many different identities, such as a “suffragist, prohibitionist, clubwoman, college girl, American girl, socialist, capitalist, anarchist, pickpocket, bicyclist, barren spinster, mannish woman, outdoor girl, birth-control advocate, modern girl, eugenicist, flapper, blues woman, lesbian, and vamp” (*Revisited* 1). Nonetheless, the New Woman was a stereotype that gained traction through a cultural obsession with women’s roles and behaviors and reduced all women by defining them in short terms, such as “mannish woman,” “suffragette,” and “flapper.” Teresa Perkins explains that “the strength of a stereotype results from a combination of three factors: its ‘simplicity,’ its immediate recognizability (which makes its communicative role very important), and its implicit reference to an assumed consensus about some attribute or complex social relationships. Stereotypes were in this respect prototypes of ‘shared cultural meanings’” (qtd. in Kitch 5). Thus, the New Woman did not accurately represent all women, but uprooted people’s understanding of womanhood. As a columnist for *Harper’s Bazaar* wrote in 1895, the New Woman could be so easily described in clear terms as an educated, career-driven woman who may have abstained from marriage, “but so elusive when she is sought.... She is absent from our drawing-rooms, where to-day, as in former years, gracious matrons and fascinating maidens impart to society the ease, the flavor, the sweetness, which make

the intercourse of well-bred people with one another equally reposeful and stimulating” (“The New Woman” 594). While perhaps a critique of the New Woman as a serious topic of discussion, the writer here indicates the conceptual and abstract nature of the New Woman as a figure. Because the New Woman was an aggregate term for all the various choices women were making outside of the historical place society provided for them, the debate about the New Woman likely did not accurately reflect the behaviors of women at the time.

To unpack the meaning and circulation of the term “New Woman,” it is important to reconsider how contemporary scholars have defined it. Most commonly, they’ve used the phrase to refer directly to the modern woman—her identity and her involvement in education, politics, and workplace—of the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century. To today’s reader, she may appear to be a feminist icon who was indicative of the ways women were changing. However, the ways in which the Progressive-Era public used the phrase took on a different connotation, as the term was most often used in the press as a means of criticism. Patterson briefly mentions in *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895–1915* that “the popular press used the term more often as an accusation than as an accolade” (2). Because the term “New Woman” was, by definition, a direct response to the old ways of womanhood, rhetoric that specifically used the phrase “New Woman” tended to be derisive against modern women.

Even as this term was meant as an act of criticism, a significant aspect of the New Woman conversation was that it possessed the same rhetorical style as the adulating conversation about True Womanhood—women

were lumped together as a whole, and they were all expected to follow the same roles. An example of this style comes from Jesse Pice in an 1853 article about the characteristics of the True Woman, or to him, the “universal woman”: “But woman, timid and shrinking, is meant for kindlier labor, universal woman may find ample scope for her most profound abilities ... in the works of piety and benevolence ... The home is her sanctuary” (337). Though Pice acknowledged that there are “many manifestations of universal woman,” he implied that these manifestations complied with the current societal structure: “they accord with the general sense of humanity” (337). By contrast, in Ella W. Winston’s 1896 article “Foibles of the New Woman,” she summarized who the New Woman was by referring to her in third person in a narrow way, lumping all progressive women together:

The New Woman tells us that the present century is her own ... ‘Woman’s vote will purify politics.’ This is her favorite cry.... The New Woman has a mania for reform movements.... The New Woman refuses to believe that duty, like charity, begins at home, and cannot see that the most effectual way to keep clean is to not allow dirt to accumulate. The New Woman professes to believe that all women are good and will use their influence for noble ends,—when they are allowed the right of suffrage.... It was the New Woman’s earliest, and is her latest, foible that woman is superior to man (100-101).

Winston’s long list of criticisms lumped all modern women together into the amplified, antagonistic character of the New

Woman. Winston attempted to characterize all modern women by having constructed a list of traits that the New Woman had. The rhetorical tools that writers like Winston in the New Woman debate possessed when discussing societal conceptions of women’s actions were the same as those used in the nineteenth century—mass, complex regulation of women’s behaviors according to society’s dictation.

### **Marriage, Motherhood, and Morality**

The main concerns that opponents had about the ramifications of modern women’s choices centered on how women would go about marriage, motherhood, and morality. These concerns were also relevant in the nineteenth-century conversation about “the woman question”—though the difference is that as time went on, this fear seemed to become reality as more and more women assumed agency over their own lives. Many feared that the possibilities now available to modern women would encourage them to forego marriage and motherhood, and therefore prompt them to lead immoral lives. A classic representation of the New Woman in the press was either as a bad wife and mother or as a foolish woman choosing not to have that traditional life. Opponents of the New Woman who disliked the implication that gender roles were shifting often wrote dramatically about the effect the New Woman would have on men and children. Concurrent through these texts were arguments about how newly available options for women would prompt them to stray from their respective spheres and corrupt the outside world in which men dwell.

For example, in 1900, William Lee Howard, M.D., used his scientific ethos to argue that women are best suited in their traditional role:

The female possessed of masculine ideas of independence; the viragint [sic] who would sit in the public highways and lift up her pseudo-virile voice [and] ... the female sexual pervert, are simply different degrees of the same class—degenerates.... When a woman neglects her maternal instincts, when her sentiment and dainty feminine characteristics are boldly and ostensibly kept submerged, we can see an antisocial creature more amusing than dangerous.... Should this female be unfortunate enough to be a mother, she ceases to be merely amusing, and is an antisocial being. She is then a menace to civilization, a producer of nonentities ... until disgusted Nature, no longer tolerant of the woman who would be a man, or the man who would be a woman, allows them to shrink to death. (280-81)

Howard was not simply contending that modern women should just surrender their modernity and get married and bear children, but that they should renounce their more masculine traits not to corrupt society. According to Howard, if these masculine women were to reproduce, they would breed a new generation of “degenerates” that would lead to the downfall of society.

Writers like Howard especially sought to concisely organize women’s lifestyles into two categories—that of the New Woman or that of the True Woman. A woman was either modern or traditional, and one lifestyle was clearly better than the other—in their minds, there was no wife and mother who also went to college or now fought for women’s suffrage. The adulation of the True Woman was, again, a rhetorical strategy

borrowed directly from nineteenth-century conduct books, and the True Woman appeared in discussions of the New Woman as the epitomic standard for women. For example, a writer for *Appleton’s Popular Science Monthly* in 1897 compared the New Woman and the True Woman in terms of her sphere in the home:

Then as to the home. Here is where we want woman with new knowledge, but not—we speak with all due fear and trembling—“new” women. The “new woman” would set every one discussing rights; but the true woman with adequate knowledge would see what the best women have always seen, that the home requires a principle of unity and not a system of scientific frontiers or an elaborately arranged balance of power. (“Editor’s Table” 120).

Therefore, gender determined one’s life path, and for American women, that life path was heavily structured and reinforced all throughout the nineteenth century. Woman’s role as wife and mother combined closely with her identity as a pious Christian, as both were the defining functions of women in their respective spheres. As Barbara Welter contends, in the nineteenth century, “religion or piety was the core of woman’s virtue, the source of her strength” (21). For instance, a collection of quotes about True Womanhood that appeared in an edition of *Beauty and Health* in 1904 said, “The woman who faithfully assumes the duties of motherhood is attempting the greatest work in which human skill and power can be employed ... which shall not only please the eye and charm the hearts of men, but on which God and angels shall look with complacency and

delight” (“The Value of True Womanhood” 443). The True Woman was certainly thought to be a vital aspect to the function of society, as dictated through scripture. As a mother, she ensured the continuation of the human race. As a wife, her role as a housekeeper, cook, and supporter of her husband allowed him to go out in the world and create his own life. The New Woman threatened this secure reliance men had on women and prompted many to believe that the New Woman was a sinful being.

### **Rejection of the Term “New Woman”**

As contemporary scholars use the phrase “New Woman” to refer to the modern woman of the Progressive Era, to today’s reader, she may seem like a feminist heroine pushing the status quo and breaking new ground. She may seem to be the Rosie the Riveter or the Nasty Woman of the day, but to people in the Progressive Era, “New Woman” was not an icon of hope and inspiration to young women. Rather, “New Woman” was a term that belonged to conservatives who were critical of modern womanhood. Many of the texts that included the phrase “New Woman” are a direct reproach of the modern woman and the various ways in which she was living outside traditional standards. As a writer for *Maine Farmer* wrote in 1896,

The phrase [New Woman] itself suggests the cartoons of the comic papers. One thinks of bloomers and other semi-masculine experiments in dress, of unfeminine voices, of various grotesque assumptions of the place and power that belong to man and the relinquishment of whatever is attractive. Perhaps the attitude of the comic papers is not entirely unprovoked, but the woman’s movement surely means

something better than this. (“The Real ‘New Woman’” 3)

Because the phrase “New Woman” drew to mind a hyperbolic version of the vulgar and the unfeminine, this writer indicates that its connotation may not necessarily correlate with the intentions of the suffragists. Likewise, Ella W. Winston in 1896 criticized modern women with the label “New Woman” and indicated how modern women typically resisted being associated with the New Woman and how some—regardless of whether they approved of the behaviors of modern women—saw the New Woman as an imaginary being: “[The New Woman] has christened herself the ‘new,’ but when her opponent speaks of her by that name she replies with characteristic contrariety that the New Woman, like the sea-serpent, is largely an imaginary creature” (99). Thus, praise for the New Woman was less frequent and more nuanced—it specifically addressed the ways in which people were wrong about the New Woman, while also extending beyond the conversation about the New Woman into more specific subtopics of the feminist movement.

Many texts that were instrumental in promoting the feminist movement did not incorporate the term *New Woman*. Given that it was a term used by dissenters of the women’s movement, feminist writers and speakers during this time did not seek to co-opt it for their own use. Grand coined it as a way of launching progressive reform, but conservative writers appropriated it to condemn such progressive movements. Rather, feminists spoke in favor of the modern woman or the suffragist to normalize the new decisions women were making without a mention of the New Woman. For example, Mona Caird (1888, 1889) and

Gertrude Atherton (1899) wrote specifically about the “marriage question”—a sister debate to the “woman question.” Julia M.A. Hawksley wrote in 1894 about a woman’s right to a higher education. Olive Schreiner in 1899 debated that women should be allowed to enter the workforce in the same vocations as men. Most prominently, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked at great length throughout their lives to enforce new legislation that would grant women the right to vote in the United States. Though these texts dealt directly with the ways in which womanhood was changing, progressive texts steered away from using the term “New Woman” because of the way the phrase was popularly enacted. As the aforementioned writer from *Maine Farmer* implied, the term “New Woman” typically conjured up a foul and negative representation of the ways in which women were changing. Furthermore, the New Woman was a stereotype—an aggregate symbol that stood in for numerous modern women. Though the phrase “New Woman” was mostly used in portraying a negative image, feminists were not particularly interested in repurposing it for their uses. To them, the “New Woman” was an exhausted term that did not encapsulate their mission. Rather, they were interested in promoting various opportunities for women and calling attention to the ways in which women were oppressed by the current societal structure. For them, a definition of womanhood—old or new—was not quite the goal. Members of the first wave of the feminist movement sought to broaden women’s prospects so that each woman’s individual life could be lived out free from socially sanctioned conventions. Dissenters who were trying to

grapple with the withering of a concrete definition of womanhood were the ones who used the term *New Woman* the most.

Some supporters of the feminist movement rejected the common use of the term *New Woman* for their understanding of modern womanhood and redefined the feminist movement based on their own progressive stance. Blanche Lane in October of 1896 sought to redefine the way in which womanhood was changing: “We agree that the femininity of today possesses its own special allotment of peculiarities. But the term ‘new woman’ is a misnomer, and designates no established existence” (124). In this, Lane stated that the way that the New Woman was typically defined was not indicative of the intentions of modern women; that is, “[the] modern woman is not masculine, she is not striving to become a second man, but is testing and proving those faculties for strength and usefulness” (124). The modern woman was now employing the abilities that she has had all along in a realm outside of the home. In the same way, a writer for *The Independent* in 1898 sought to take the phrase “New Woman” away from its conventional definition and use it to praise the ways in which the New Woman was economically independent: “The ‘new woman’ has come to stay. Not the so-called new woman whom none of us likes ... but the new woman who appreciates to the full that her work in the good world is made up of the positive as well as the negative, and who brings to that work a spirit and ability as ‘new’ is admirable” (“The New Woman” 25).

Likewise, Alice Hilton, who spoke favorably for egalitarianism, in 1895 disregarded the canonical characterization of the New Woman in the press to try to understand the

origin and significance of the stereotype amid a world that was redefining gender: “Taking off certain ornamental features from ‘the new woman’ of current discussions, I make out that this delightful creature is essentially a woman who is the equal of man” (621). Perhaps most prominently, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1899 wrote an article, which, although entitled “The New Woman,” did not use the phrase “New Woman.” Stanton used her voice instead to discuss the dichotomous organization of masculinity and femininity: “Difference [in gender] does not argue disability. Nature knew what she was about when she made man and woman to differ; if the masculine and feminine elements, the positive and negative electricity ... were alike, they would have been no use whatsoever” (3222). Here, Stanton argued that such polar differences between men and women are vital for the sustainment of society; however, these differences do not render women inferior. Her omission of “New Woman” reinstated her idea that women have always had the capabilities that the current “new women” are now actively living out; it was just that no one had ever realized it. She indirectly implied that there simply is no “New Woman”—just women who were reaching their full potentials. By enforcing the idea of equality, Stanton was speaking in the fashion of other feminists in this time: promoting egalitarian viewpoints offered a more nuanced interpretation of who women are as humans. Therefore, Stanton and those like her presented a disinterest in contributing to the narrow conversation about the New Woman.

However, both opponents and supporters of the feminist movement often rejected the New Woman by saying that she did not exist.

For example, a writer for *Maine Farmer* in February of 1896 touched on a common question in this debate: Who exactly is the New Woman, and does she really exist? “Who is she? She is but a creature of imagination; she does not really exist. Woman is woman and always will be, whatever her vocation” (“The Real ‘New Woman’” 3). Opponents tried to address the New Woman by simply smiting her existence. The idea that there might be a New Woman left people confused about how to now singly classify all of womanhood. Traditionally, nineteenth-century rhetoric about womanhood featured a unanimous, concise conception about how women were to behave. As a result, an attempt to wipe out the existence of the New Woman was an attempt to enact the same rhetorical style of nineteenth-century discourse about womanhood. For example, in an article for *The American Farmer* in January of 1895 titled “IT IS EVERYWHERE. The Sphere of the Woman—The New Woman is not New,” the writer eradicated an idea of the New Woman: “It is becoming a little tiresome—this incessant talk about ‘woman’s sphere’ and the ‘new woman.’... As for the ‘new woman,’ there is no new woman” (“It Is Everywhere” 6). The writer goes on to list numerous examples of strong women throughout history—Hypatia, Joan of Arc, and Queen Elizabeth I—to show women’s capabilities within a patriarchal society to imply that women do not need special rights to be great. “All of this was in the days when women had no time to shine, because of the drudgery in her home and everywhere ... she probably could have done as much long ago, being given equal opportunity” (“It Is Everywhere” 6). This writer’s argument, though in favor of women’s equality, was

that the New Woman in the way that she typically was described was not a phenomenon.

Articles such as these clearly denoted the discrepancy between the more modern woman—a discernable figure in society—and the illusive legend of the New Woman who seemed to have grand intentions in reforming gender power dynamics. As a nebulous stereotype, the New Woman was meant to represent the various new ways in which women were living in response to the rigidity of nineteenth-century womanhood but ended up being the butt of conversation in the popular press and was refashioned as a destructive caricature. Sarah Grand's original idea of the New Woman is not of a certain stereotype, but of an activist whose duty is to press against the power structure of the traditional patriarchy. Over time, visionaries of an egalitarian society abandoned the term to directly address the ways in which society was unfair to women. In the same ways that the public defined the True Woman as pious, submissive, and virtuous, the New Woman was mannish, immoral, and an abomination to her sex. The New Woman seemed to reduce modern women to the certain features that society valued—namely appearance and aptitude for obedience.

### **The Nebulous New Woman: Who is She?**

After all, it may be that the New Woman is a recurring decimal, as the arithmeticians would say, appearing at certain intervals with a constantly shifting value to civilization.

Maurice Thompson, Oct. 1, 1895 (380)

Though New Woman prose and literature has been a topic of research (studied, for example,

by Matthews, Nelson, and Patterson), the rhetoric surrounding the debate of the New Woman has largely gone overlooked by rhetorical scholars. Historians have typically attributed the New Woman to the rallying suffragists and the ambitious college women, which—though not entirely inaccurate—is an approach that ignores the argumentative undercurrents of the dissenters who used the term in this conversation and overlooks the typical rhetorical strategies used in conversations that employ female stereotypes. This understanding of the New Woman eschews the term's function as a stereotype and muddles the true definition and usage of the term. Reading New Woman texts from a 21st century perspective prompts one to study feminist activism from 1890 to 1920 in terms of their progress—we already know that the feminists were successful eventually in procuring women's rights. However, studying the debate about the New Woman from the rhetorical perspective of those who contributed to conversations about womanhood offers a new understanding of what the New Woman represented—namely the ways that people constructed arguments to resist new concepts of gender and the New Woman's identity as the antithesis of the esteemed True Woman.

Attending to the contentious debates about womanhood, as I have done here, can provide a foundation for further women's rhetorical studies. Such consideration provides context for interpreting the reception of women's words, and helps in comprehending how stereotypes are fashioned to exemplify popular opinions on the conduct of women. Thus, the methodology used in this project can be applied to other constructed stereotypes of women that hindered their progress in gender reform—for example, the True Woman of the

nineteenth century or the “feminazi” of third-wave feminism. The structure of these stereotypes prompts those who doubt the intentions of feminists to not take their arguments seriously; furthermore, stereotypes are especially effective in minimizing the reasoning behind women’s call to action. In the

same way that women’s arguments are analyzed by feminist rhetorical scholars, we must further analyze the gender norms that influence the efficacy of women’s messages by further researching the rhetoric of those resistant to gender reform.

## Note

1. While Grand asserted that women were to educate men on women’s true capabilities as productive members of society, this role of woman-as-educator does not necessarily line up with the imperative of Republican Motherhood—as Republican Motherhood still clung to the values of traditional, Victorian motherhood.

## Acknowledgments

Endless thanks to Dr. Carolyn Skinner at The Ohio State University for her support and guidance in bringing this project to new heights. I would also like to thank the English department at Ohio State Mansfield for their faith in my future and their instrumental advice and encouragement throughout my time as an undergrad.

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