

# Speaking truth to power: a rhetorical biography of elizabeth cady stanton

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## Speaking Truth to Power: A Rhetorical Biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Our forefathers' proclamation in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" has held little value in the eyes of the countless citizens belonging to oppressed groups. The years following the summer of 1776 and the social inequalities that we as a people have collectively endured demonstrate that the notion of equal rights for all is an apocryphal assertion. Fortunately, America has been blessed with a select group of unrelenting leaders eager to stand at the vanguard of social movements. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's efforts in the women's movement unquestionably have positioned her as a prominent social activist. The selfless decision of Stanton to devote her life to women's suffrage impacted the course of our nation's history and is deserving of our study. With this analysis, I will examine speeches delivered by Stanton in an attempt to equip the reader with a more thorough understanding of the speaker's rhetorical persona. A preliminary historical context is needed to fully comprehend and appreciate the reformer's oratory. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born in 1815 to a notable family of social standing. Her family's good fortunes allowed for her to receive a quality education, a rare opportunity for women of the era. Perhaps even more uncommon than her ability to attend school is the nature of her education. Being the only girl in the class allowed her to benefit from a "boys" curriculum focused on academic advancement and not domestic servitude. She would go on to study law with her father, Judge Daniel Cady, who was a sitting justice of the Supreme Court of New York. It was at this time that Stanton's awareness was heightened as to the mountain of inequity women faced. Much to her conservative family's dismay, she wed

abolitionist Henry Stanton in 1840. As a married couple, Elizabeth and her husband crossed the Atlantic to attend a worldwide antislavery convention being held in London. It was here that she met and formed a bond with the social reformer Lucretia Mott. The two women were indignant at the fact that women were excluded from participation in the convention on the basis of their gender, and that indignation would result in a discussion about holding a woman's rights convention (Campbell 76). Justifiably frustrated over this gross act of hypocrisy, a fiery alliance had been forged in the early woman's movement. The initial wave of the women's rights movement is said to have begun roughly in the year 1840 and lasted until 1925. The events of the London convention sparked the wick of the cause, but it was not until 1848 that this intellectual fire grew to a roaring blaze. The signature event considered to be the birth of the suffrage movement was a gathering of concerned female activists met in Seneca Falls, New York (Wood 66). The Seneca Falls Convention was organized by Stanton and others who had experienced the deliberate exclusion of women's voices in the antislavery battle. The reformers decided to narrow their focus to the rights of women. Consequently, the movement became almost lily white, both in interest and membership (Wood 68). The infant stages of the women's movement did not have a restricted, single issue focus. Stanton's rhetoric demonstrates her realization of the fact that women were being oppressed in all aspects of their lives. Coeducation, women's sports, job training, equal wages, labor unions, birth control, cooperative nurseries and kitchens, property rights for wives, child custody rights for mothers, and reform of divorce laws were among the many issues confronted by the movement (Wood 67). While most

women were not opposed to voicing opinion on these matters, many were fearful of the suffrage issue, an idea perceived as more radical in nature. Yet, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's education and background provided her with a lucid political vision. She knew that women stood little chance of advancement without political recognition or the right to vote. The organizers of the Seneca Falls convention — Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Sojourner Truth — were optimistic that the meeting would trigger “ a series of conventions embracing every part of the country. ” They were exactly right. Women's rights conventions were regularly held from 1850 until the start of the Civil War (Gurko 27). After the war's conclusion, the movement suffered a temporary deceleration. The primary political reform in the time following the war was mainly devoted to suffrage for African-Americans. This development had a direct impact on the cause of women's suffrage. The abolitionists, whom the women had fought for and mistakenly believed to be their allies, had previously betrayed them (Gurko 28). To state it plainly, the abolitionist wanted nothing to do with the woman's movement until their own cause had been secured. It was at this crossroads that women heeded the advice of Elizabeth Cady Stanton in placing an importance on the task of being extended the right to vote. “ Women's rights ” had now become synonymous with “ suffrage ” (DuBois 88). The disaffiliation with the antislavery movement served as a deep breath for the female reformers; Stanton and other leaders shifted the basis of their argument from universal suffrage to one that sought suffrage only for women. No stranger to criticism, Stanton held bold, controversial beliefs that many of her detractors used to disingenuously assault her accountability as

a great leader (Banner 159). One example of these controversial views was her idea of organized religion negatively impacting society (Campbell 55). She was of the opinion that the church was a major source of oppression and that it trained women to submit to authority. Dissension in the ranks occurred in the wake of these comments as the outspoken Stanton, now tagged as a "radical", realized that her time as the torch bearer of the movement may soon come to an end. Having conducted an extensive overview of the historical context in which the rhetor functioned, the rhetorical strategies of Stanton's works warrant a separate, supporting analysis in a rhetorical biography. Stanton's "The Declaration of Sentiments" focuses on women's right to demand political equality, a strategy that gave feminism a clearly defined purpose. Upon initial observation, it is obvious that the author intentionally drafted the document to closely resemble the Declaration of Independence. This strategy connected the women's campaign for equal rights to a treasured symbol of American liberty. Using the 1776 version of the Declaration of Independence as a model, Stanton composed a list of eighteen grievances for each of the eighteen points of conflict to further convey the message of the parody. "The Declaration of Sentiments" is actually more analogous to Thomas Jefferson's letter to King George than different, as both documents are written on behalf the oppressed demanding freedom. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" reads the Declaration of Independence. Stanton's work alters the phrase to say, "all men and women are created equal." As harmless as that sentence may be perceived in the present day, it was an inflammatory charge in 1848. An additional editing of the original

text was the removal of the words " among men" in the stanza " to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men". Elizabeth Cady Stanton believed that the government involvement should no longer be a male-only arena; the time had come for women to gain the right to political power, as well. A final notable variation is found in the concluding sentences prior to the listing of grievances. Just as Jefferson was voicing the nation's desire to be free of the tyrannical rule of King George, Stanton spoke for American women desperate to be freed from the tyranny of its own government. The feminist Declaration also included a list of women's grievances. A brief statement, not found in Jefferson's document, is introduced in the form of a list. The statement read as follows: " The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. " She then details women's specific complaints. Among these were women not being allowed to vote, married women being dead in the eyes of the law and having no property rights, a requirement to submit to laws in which they played no role in its passage, and husbands having such broad legal power over their wives to as to beat or imprison them if they felt it to be necessary. These were just among the few of the eighteen grievances that were listed. Stanton was most likely attempting to show that these sins had weaved a culture of mistreatment in the seventy brief years after the newly formed democracy was formed. Stanton's " Home Life" is a public address concerning the topics of marriage and divorce speaks of morality, motherhood, and the shaping of children's character (Dubois 131). The rhetor acknowledges the role that religion serves in keeping women

oppressed. As previously stated, this controversial belief would eventually be the cause of Stanton losing many followers. " Home Life" begins by addressing about the problem at hand. " Whether a man and woman are equal, joint heirs to all the richness and joy of earth and Heaven, or whether they were eternally ordained, one to be sovereign, the other slave..." (DuBois 132). Ultimately, this is an identical complaint also found in " The Declaration of Sentiments. " Rhetoric of immediacy could now be employed as the movement was no longer new. People had grown accustomed to hearing about the subordination of women. Stanton was cognizant of the fact that she had to devise newer, innovative angles to her message with the objective of enlightening the people as to the injustices that pervaded society. The subject of marriage is central to the discourse. Stanton offers a valid reason why, despite all the progress women have made thus far, inequality still acts as a friction between women in the church and state, because " men are not ready to recognize it in the home". Man's accepting women's desire to gain political equality, will create a " domino effect" that will lead them to demand a greater degree of influence in the home, too. If voting rights signaled political liberation, then domestic liberation would surely soon follow. Men were fearful, to say the least, of this possible new reality. Stanton argues for reforms on the idea of whether marriage need be an indissoluble tie, writing in what may be the most powerful section of the speech, " from a woman's standpoint, I see that marriage as an indissoluble tie is slavery for women, because law, religion, and public sentiment all combine under this relation, whatever it may be and there is no other human slavery that knows such depths of degradation as a wife chained to a man

whom she neither loves nor respects. " In making an appeal to all the married women who are unhappy, mistreated, abused, the rhetor put into words the feelings of helplessness so many women were experiencing. On the concern of marriage as a sacred contract of the church, Stanton is quoted as saying, " the Bible can be quoted on both sides. " She raises the point that if marriage truly were a civil contract, " it should be subject to the laws of all other contracts, carefully made, the parties of age, and all agreements faithfully observed. This is a an argument rooted in sound logic, as marriage is often entered into, without legal consent of their parents, by boys and girls twelve and fourteen years of age. Stanton is quite effective at addressing any doubts or questions the audience may have without them ever having to question her. A final plea is made in the speech's conclusion — when marriage is based more on equality, a " nobler type of manhood and womanhood will glorify the race! " This declaration may be interpreted as an attempt to widen the scope of the movement by suggesting that the equality of women will have an immensely positive impact on all of mankind, not just women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a pioneer in the modern quest for women's rights. Her social vision was of liberating society from false perceptions, outdated customs, unjust laws and false religious doctrines is easily identified in all of her rhetorical activities (Foss 133). Unfortunately, Stanton did not live long enough to see her ultimate goal of the end of women's suffrage. In my personal opinion, however, the rhetoric of Stanton's works that propelled the movement to success and provide the women of this nation with the rights and dignity they so richly deserve. BIBLIOGRAPHY Banner, Lois W. Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Radical for Women's Rights. New



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