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## Speaking, Writing, Organizing: Matilda Gage's Parrhesiastic Acts

Caitlin Martin

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, [martc148@erau.edu](mailto:martc148@erau.edu)

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# Speaking, Writing, Organizing: Matilda Gage's Parrhesiastic Acts

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Caitlin Martin

**Abstract:** *Drawing on a rhetorical framework of parrhesia, this article discusses the work of nineteenth century feminist Matilda Gage, who was largely lost to history until recently when women's studies and rhetoric scholars began to uncover her part in the woman suffrage movement. Gage considered speaking out against organized religion to be her life's work, but little research has concerned her beyond woman suffrage activism. Through a framework of parrhesia, Gage's forgotten anticlerical work opens new doors for understanding women rhetors and activists, as well as for research on the rhetorical practices of nonreligious individuals.*

**Keywords:** *Matilda Gage, parrhesia, woman suffrage, women's rights, anticlericalism, 19th century*

Dedicated to all Christian women and men, of whatever creed or name who, bound by the Church or State, have not dared to Think for Themselves. – Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church and State*, 1893

Women's studies and rhetoric scholars are slowly starting to remember Matilda Joslyn Gage at a time when her ideas—her legacy—are badly needed. From her first appearance at the 1852 Women's Rights Convention, Gage became a leader in the early women's rights movement. She was one of three key figureheads of the movement alongside Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Today, however, few people recognize her name or her contributions to the woman suffrage movement. Gage was criticized as a "man hater" and deemed "too aggressive and bitter against men." She aimed to make people, especially women, uncomfortable with the status quo (Wagner 32-33). It is likely for these reasons that her work was written out of suffrage history by her one-time colleagues. Indeed, understanding Gage gives us a way to understand women's rights beyond Anthony's grand narrative of woman suffrage. Gage's expansive view of women's rights was inconsistent with the more limited focus on suffrage that prevailed in the time period and in historical documents written about the movement. Specifically, her anticlerical work alienated her from a movement that embraced women's religious virtue as a

reason for their right to vote. In the last twenty years, Gage's work has begun to come back into the spotlight. While many individuals have focused on her early work, like her 1852 address at Syracuse, and others have taken up her final work, *Woman, Church and State*, there is value in looking at rhetorical acts between those two pieces. Particularly, we can see Gage's rhetorical knowledge at play when we consider her 1890 speech "The Dangers of the Hour" and her organization of the Woman's National Liberal Union Convention, at which she delivered this speech.

In this analysis, I employ Renea Frey's framework of parrhesia to further understand Matilda Gage's rhetorical practices and complicate this framework by considering Gage's relationship with virtue. Parrhesia is a complex rhetorical concept tracing back to classical Greco-Roman rhetorical traditions, with examples that include Pericles, Demosthenes, and Isocrates (Frey 28). In his 1983 lectures, published in 2001 as *Fearless Speech*, Michel Foucault articulates the long history of parrhesia and its relationships to rhetoric. Drawing on Foucault and others in rhetoric, philosophy, and political science, Frey defines *parrhesia* as the rhetorical concept of "speaking truth to power," particularly when doing so is risky and the audience does not want to receive the message (3). From this definition, she builds a rhetorical framework for analyzing potentially parrhesiastic rhetorical situations that includes new ways of looking at the audience, constraints, and exigence rather than the traditional rhetorical situation analysis focusing on audience, context, and purpose (98).

In the remainder of this article, I will analyze Gage's founding of the Woman's National Liberal Union and the speech she gave at its inaugural convention, in order to understand the broader context that influenced Gage's rhetorical practices. Ultimately, I argue for a contextual understanding of parrhesiastic rhetoric that may illuminate the choices a rhetor makes in his or her attempts to "speak truth to power." In addition to parrhesia, I draw on Arabella Lyon's discussion of deliberative acts, Jacqueline Jones Royster's discussion of situated and invented ethos, and Kathleen J. Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones's discussion of feminist ecological ethos construction to better understand how parrhesia is at play in Gage's life and work. Together, these frameworks encourage us to reconsider what successful rhetorical practice looks like. Gage's work illustrates why we must look to larger cultures and ongoing systems of events rather than limiting our analysis to one or two single texts and the immediately seeable context. Gage's rhetorical choices surrounding the WNLU are informed by a variety of factors that one must look at deeply, beyond the text and into the history of Gage's life, in order to truly understand. Based on this analysis, we begin to see opportunities for further historiographic work, including among less prominent woman suffrage activists and among individuals who work to change the frame of current conversation.

Further, this analysis encourages us to reconsider what constitutes “successful” rhetorical practice.

## The Anticlerical, Anti-Patriarchal Work of Matilda Joslyn Gage

A rhetorical framework of parrhesia is useful for understanding the life and activism of Matilda Gage, an abolitionist and woman suffragist who spoke out against organized religion in the late 1800s. Gage was a tireless activist for much of her life, though it may be her relationship to L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, that accounts for her initial recovery from history. Born in 1826 as Matilda Joslyn, Gage was an only child who was intellectually supported by her abolitionist parents. In addition to woman suffrage and anticlericalism, Gage was an advocate for abolition, Native American rights, and “the legal protection of multiple disenfranchised groups, including workers and prostitutes” (Frey 128). She married her husband at 18, and their home, in the Joslyn family tradition, was a station on the Underground Railroad. She had four children, including a daughter who would marry Baum. Gage was adopted into the wolf clan of Mohawk nation in 1893 (Wagner 34), and when she died in 1898 she and others believed her work would live on to inspire future women (Wagner 66). It did not. Through recovery, we now have access to much of her suppressed work.

Gage was a prolific writer for much of her life, in addition to being a public speaker and organizer. She was the editor of the suffrage journal *The National Citizen and Ballot Box* and co-edited volumes I, II, and III of *History of Woman Suffrage* with Stanton and Anthony. She helped to write the *Declaration of Rights of Women*, delivered with Anthony during the American Centennial Celebration in 1876. She also wrote many articles and public letters in support of her causes. In 1893, she published *Woman, Church and State*, a comprehensive work in which she outlines the oppression of women at the hands of organized religion. In terms of public speaking, Gage is best known for her address at the 1852 National Woman Suffrage Association Convention, though she is certainly responsible for a variety of other addresses related to women’s rights. In 1890, she organized the Woman’s National Liberal Union Convention where she delivered “The Dangers of the Hour,” in which she detailed publicly many of the ways that religion, organized by men, had prevented the progress of women’s rights.

However, Gage was more than just a public speaker and writer. She was also a national organizer who worked to create real institutional changes at

a time when women were only beginning to assert their public voices.<sup>1</sup> Like woman scholars before her, Gage had to reject traditional notions of women's place in American society. This situated ethos<sup>2</sup> positioned women as less than men and frequently centered on maintaining a woman's purity and virtue. Gage, instead, rejected these attitudes and invented an ethos that allowed her to be active in many causes. In doing so, she comes to embody the concept of parrhesia rather than simply employing it in her work. We might miss this notion of embodiment if we fail to look beyond the text and into its larger cultural-historical context.

### **Centering the Text: “The Dangers of the Hour”**

Gage founded the Woman's National Liberal Union (WNLU) in reaction to the merger of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), an act that ended her long-time collaboration with Anthony and Stanton. The goal of the WNLU was to bring together other like-minded individuals, including “suffragists, labor organizers, anarchists, freethinkers, and prison reformers” (Wagner 57). These are the very kinds of people the newly formed National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was distancing itself from as it embraced a more conservative platform than a Gage-led NWSA had.

To open the inaugural convention of the WNLU in 1890, Gage delivered her speech “The Dangers of the Hour,” one of her first radically anticlerical texts. While she *had* denounced organized religion as an oppressive force in earlier works, the context of this speech explains Gage's more forceful argument. At

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1 Although feminist historiography is beginning to challenge this idea, this statement is true within current understandings of the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition. Looking beyond that tradition, and digging into forgotten rhetors, may illuminate Gage's position in a much larger tradition of women activists and rhetoricians.

2 Drawing on work by Sharon Crowley, Jacqueline Jones Royster distinguishes between two kinds of ethos. The situated ethos is the culturally prescribed ethos that is “more often than not deeply compromised, especially when they seek as one of their target audiences those outside their immediate home community.” The situated ethos might be understood as the “reputation” that precedes a speaker; it draws on the characteristic markers like race and gender that may contribute to whether individuals have power to speak in a particular situation. The invented ethos, on the other hand, is a way for rhetors to “create their own sense of character, agency, authority, and power” (Royster 65).

the WNLU, her audience is more radical, and she is able to take a more radical position in her own speech than she had when discussing religion in speeches for the NWSA. For example, Brammer explains that Gage's 1875 speech in response to *The Minor Decision*, which upheld Missouri's ban on women registering to vote, was less radical than her other speeches. While she certainly enacted parrhesia, Gage tempered her argument because her response represented not just herself but the entire NWSA organization. In this speech, Gage uncharacteristically used first person to "attempt to separate her beliefs from those of the [NWSA]" because she "had determined that the National platform was not the place for it" (Brammer 69).

Though this speech is 15 years before the merger of NAWSA, the rhetorical differences between her speech on *The Minor Decision* and other previous speeches show Gage beginning to present her personal values as distinct from those of the NWSA. Gage understands the value in acting "despite risk or audience reception" (Frey 141), but she also knows how to distinguish her own views from the organizations she represents. This makes her other parrhesiastic work all the more important.

No longer a representative of the NWSA, Gage is able to speak more openly about the injustices she perceives at the WNLU Convention. In "Dangers," Gage identifies the church as having stood in the way of passing woman suffrage, calling clericalism one of "the great antagonists to liberty." It was organized religion, not religious faith, that Gage denounced. She explains that the church had opposed "woman's anti-slavery work—her temperance work, her demand for personal rights, for political equality, for religious freedom." Gage systematically works her way through both the Catholic and Protestant faiths, but boldly asserts: "Because of this blind faith in the purity of Protestant motives – a belief in their devotion to liberty – the present danger from Protestant effort towards the destruction of secular liberty in the United States, is much beyond that of Catholicism." It is blind faith, the kind cultivated when women are forced to understand the Bible as interpreted by men in positions of religious power, that makes organized religion so dangerous to American liberty. What Gage argues for here is a shift away from the religiously defined values she saw as hypocritical to the values asserted in the U.S. Constitution, such as freedom of religion, separation of church and state, and that all individuals are equal. Gage saw religion's values and its hold on public knowledge and opinion as directly at odds with the values articulated in the Constitution.

Gage specifically speaks out about proposed legislation mandating Sunday observance. She summarizes the 1888 American Sabbath Union national convention, at which individuals emphasized that "Christians do not keep Sunday as they ought" and that "Other people do not go to church as they ought." Gage says "The grounds for this demand are purely religious" and that such a

mandate would directly restrict individuals' religious freedom and set a dangerous precedent for separation of church and state. While Gage's speech passionately lays out these injustices, Brammer notes that "The Dangers of the Hour" lacked a clear and forceful call to action because "such direct calls would have been contrary to her purpose," which was to "indirect[ly] challenge...the National American Woman Suffrage Association and its embracing of church women and moral arguments" (79). Instead of mobilizing a diverse and inclusive group of radical listeners who were well prepared to receive her argument, Gage's 1890 speech falls flat, leaving listeners feeling helpless at the current state of church integration with American laws. Brammer's point will take greater significance as we consider a parrhesiastic rhetorical analysis of "The Dangers of the Hour," the organization of the WNLU Convention, and their greater historical context.

Using Frey's framework, we can better understand both the rhetorical contexts of "Dangers" specifically and the WNLU convention at large. I will begin by analyzing the speech, and then turn to a discussion of the organization of the convention. It is not her speech itself but the actual formation of the Woman's National Liberal Union that functions parrhesiastically. When we look at this speech through more traditional rhetorical analysis, it is easy to call it unsuccessful, as Brammer does (79). By limiting our discussion of "Dangers" to the exact rhetorical moment it was given, it feels like neither effective traditional rhetoric nor effective parrhesiastic rhetoric. In order to truly understand "Dangers," we must open our discussion to include more of the contextual features that become apparent in a parrhesiastic rhetorical analysis.

Frey's framework asks us to consider the exigence, constraints, and audience of a parrhesiastic rhetorical situation. In terms of exigence, parrhesiastic rhetorical acts require the violation of norms and values, as well as a specific kairotic moment typically usurped from someone with greater power. As organizer of the conference speaking on the opening day, Gage herself is in the position of power. Though the convention serves as a specific kairotic moment, there is no sense from either its transcripts or the discussion of this speech that Gage violated any particular norms through her delivery. In terms of constraints, a parrhesiastic rhetor must be speaking from a position of less power to an entity with more power. Her gathered audience, those in attendance in the WNLU, is likely a mix of other individuals with a range of power outside of the convention. However, because the speech is given at a convention organized by Gage, it is difficult for us to see her as having less power than the gathered audience. While we might argue that Gage's speech is actually directed at the institutional structures and non-attending individuals who would advance clericalism in legislation, an analysis limited to this specific text and its immediate kairotic moment does not lend itself to basing Gage's

rhetorical effectiveness on an audience that simply does not have access to her speech at the time it was given. It seems that there are no members of this target audience gathered at the WNLU Convention. Though circulation of print text is a possibility, research on this speech does not indicate whether NAWSA, Stanton, Anthony, or the Church ever encountered or acknowledged the speech itself. When we limit our application of Frey's framework of parrhesia to this particular speech, we cannot see parrhesia at play in one of Gage's defining works.

However, we must ask ourselves if one could "appropriate" another's kairotic moment without that individual knowing. To answer, we must look beyond the individual text to a much broader context. The question here is: could de-centering the speech as a text and expanding our analysis to the larger system of events and texts around it shed different light on Gage's rhetorical savvy?

## **De-Centering the Text: The Formation of the WNLU as Parrhesiastic Act**

If we apply this framework to the Woman's National Liberal Union Convention itself, we begin to see Gage's signature use of parrhesia. While Brammer says Gage's goal with "Dangers" and the conference were to "indirect[ly] challenge" NAWSA, the rhetorical lens of parrhesia makes the formation of the WNLU seem more like a direct challenge. Within Frey's framework, the inaugural meeting of NAWSA serves as the kairotic moment to be appropriated by Gage, who organized the WNLU Convention to be the week after the inaugural NAWSA meeting. In "The Call for the Liberal Woman's Convention," Gage writes: "Existing women suffrage societies have also ceased to be progressive. The new-comers, and many of the old ones, fear to take an advance step, and from motives of business or social policy, cater to their worst enemy, The Church" (Gage, "The Call" 221). In her final paragraph, she states: "Therefore not alone to aid her own enfranchisement—valueless without religious liberty—but in order to help preserve the very life of the Republic, it is imperative that women should unite upon a platform of opposition to the teaching and aim of that ever most unscrupulous enemy of freedom—the Church" (Gage, "The Call" 221). The description of this convention calls out Anthony, Stanton, and NAWSA in ways that are subtle to a general reader but would be obvious to those familiar with how the National Woman Suffrage Association merged with the American Woman Suffrage Association.

As the story goes, the approval of this merger at the NWSA Convention is somewhat sneaky and underhanded. At this point, Gage was the chair of the executive committee of the NWSA, who would typically preside over the



convention. However, she had traveled to visit her family, counting on money to be provided by the NWSA for her to travel back for the conference, as was customary. Anthony, who oversaw these funds, did not provide the money to Gage and stranded her in South Dakota (Brammer 98, Wagner 51). Anthony oversaw the 1889 convention in Gage's absence, where she pushed through approval of the merger on the last day after many of the representatives had left. Some attendees attempted to prevent the measure, but Anthony persevered and the merger passed with 30 of the 41 voters in favor of it (Wagner 50-52, Brammer 31-32). Many of the NWSA members were frustrated, including Gage, but there was little to be done to resolve the problem. While Anthony pushed this merger to secure women's voting rights, it did not happen in her lifetime.

Before this series of events, Anthony had attempted to distance herself from Gage's more radical, anticlerical perspective, so it is unsurprising that Gage saw this merger as an attack. While Gage attempted to fight back by denouncing the merger and alerting other NWSA members to what had happened, she also recognized that the NWSA as she knew it had been lost. It had a new name, a new set of governing bylaws, and ultimately a new approach to fighting for woman suffrage that aligned more with the organizational structure of the former AWSA. As a final frustration, Stanton, who had opposed the merger alongside Gage, accepted the nomination for president of NAWSA<sup>3</sup>, turning her back on her one-time friend for unknown reasons. By looking at Gage's call describing the WNLU convention, we see parrhesia at play in the actual organization of this event—but only if we understand the long and relatively rocky history surrounding NAWSA's formation.

Brammer explains that the WNLU Convention garnered more media attention than that of the NAWSA; thus, it seems that Gage successfully appropriates their moment. When we consider organizing the convention, it is easier to see Gage potentially reaching her wider audience, including NAWSA, Stanton, and Anthony. Inevitably, there would have been mixed reactions to coverage of radical thinkers meeting to discuss women's rights. That Gage was essentially written out of history by Anthony, who controlled the publication of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, feels like a harsh reaction from an upset and unsettled audience. Before the WNLU Convention even convened, Anthony had written to other activists calling the organization "ridiculous, absurd, sectarian,

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3 Stanton may have been attempting to bring the broader rights focus to the new organization, but she was unsuccessful. Brammer notes that Stanton was largely alienated by NAWSA members who disagreed with her, and it seems Anthony ran the organization in the background while Stanton was president in name only (16, 32).

bigoted, and too horrible for anything” and went as far as attempting to forbid<sup>4</sup> others from attending Gage’s convention (Wagner 56). Finally, Gage and the WNLU might be seen as less powerful than Anthony and NAWSA. In this way, the smaller and less recognized organization must speak back to a larger organization led by suffrage leaders of notoriety. While Gage was a suffrage figurehead, one leader does not necessarily compare to the three to four noted individuals who executed the merger of and helmed the new NAWSA. When considered among Gage’s other work, the founding and organizing of the WNLU reads as a parrhesiastic act, speaking back to multiple injustices at the hands of society and other suffrage leaders.

When we look at Matilda Gage’s leadership work—that is, the culmination of her writing, speaking, and organizing—we see parrhesia as a rhetorical tactic frequently employed by women and feminists who did not have the ability to be heard through traditional speaking platforms. In her discussion of thirty-five women leaders and their unique uses of rhetoric, Stephens notes that women in leadership positions have found ways to “talk back.” Stephens explains, “Talking back is the trump card of privilege. In traditional organizations and cultures, women, as well as people of color, are less free to use it. Whereas for men it can be a sign of power. . . for women, it suggests insanity and misdirection. . . Women cannot afford to show anger” (57). Nevertheless, the women Stephens interviewed “seem to have reinvented ways of talking back without losing power” (57).<sup>5</sup> Though Stephens does not draw on the classical tradition of parrhesia, her sense that women must employ a unique rhetorical strategy for talking back in order to gain power—at risk of losing any existing power—is consistent with the framework of parrhesia delineated by Frey and as applied to Gage. Gage “cannot afford to show anger,” yet the content of her speech “The Dangers of the Hour” and her organization of the WNLU show that Gage takes this risk. In the late nineteenth century, women like Gage used organizing as one way to speak truth to power.

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4 Henry Blackwell, husband of suffragist Lucy Stone and founder of the AWSA, also attempted to prevent others from attending the WNLU convention (Wagner 56), thus attempts to suppress Gage’s viewpoints extend beyond Anthony.

5 Unfortunately, Stephens does not explicitly detail what these ways are.

## Successful Parrhesiastic Rhetoric

Unfortunately, many people today are not familiar with Matilda Gage or the WNLU. After a powerful start, the organization fizzled out largely because of financial reasons. Although Brammer asserts that “Dangers” was ineffective because it lacked a call to action (79), one somewhat ineffective speech is not the sole reason an organization falls apart. Gage’s ideas were wildly radical for their time—indeed, her anti-religious arguments may seem radical by today’s standards, even—and it can be difficult to garner resources and support when the entity being critiqued is as ubiquitous as organized religion. If, as Gage asserts, religion leaders were teaching men to view women as unequal from the start, and if religion leaders were attempting to influence American legal practice, it makes sense that these power structures, along with a few disgruntled individuals like Anthony, might have quashed Gage’s attempts. The failure of the WNLU should remind us that single instances of parrhesia alone cannot institute change, but the failure of this organization should not be seen as a rhetorical failure, *per se*.

Momentary success is not necessarily a defining feature of parrhesia. Key examples, like Isocrates, were often less known and might be seen as having “failed” because of their intentional suppression from history (and thus the rhetorical canon). In her discussion, Frey notes that “parrhesia creates disruptions that contribute to larger social changes and realignments of power structures” (107) and “that the ramifications of these acts may not be measurable in the moment of the act itself, but may instead continue to ‘ripple’ through the field of conventional social practice, affecting and influencing multiple audiences across time and place” (107). That is, the effects of parrhesiastic rhetorical practices need an opportunity to ruminate, to cut “across time and place” until they are taken up by others who share the same value systems. Along these lines, parrhesiastic work is consistent with Arabella Lyon’s discussions of deliberative acts. Shifting from rhetoric simply as words to considering the *performative* side of rhetoric would enable us to look at parrhesia as *actions* that *speak* truth to power, a shift that would truly emphasize the ongoing nature of parrhesiastic work.

For Lyon, deliberative acts create change through their performance, and acts that protest or challenge norms are the link that move a rhetor’s “invented ethos” (Crowley, Royster) into the culturally prescribed, situated ethos by conceptualizing and presenting a world where that invented ethos is valid. Lyon discusses suffragists who casted illegal ballots to enable a world where women voting was acceptable as an example of a deliberative act, and these illegal votes might be seen as parrhesiastic acts. Their results are not felt for some time—decades, in fact, as many of the early suffragists, including Anthony and Gage, had died before women received the right to vote. Parrhesiastic acts fit

well within Lyon's discussion of deliberative acts because they are sustained, iterative performances whose results are best understood as an accumulation rather than as individual rhetorical events.

Looking at parrhesiastic rhetorical situations through the frame of deliberative action, we see how Gage's rhetorical savvy contributes to systemic changes that are still ongoing. Like other women rhetors who came before her, Gage had to establish her right to speak. Given the content of her work, she faced an uphill battle for the right to be heard. That Gage was relatively unknown until Wagner began publishing on her in the 1980s indicates the dismissal she faced. While Gage certainly had sympathizers and fans who believed she would influence future women for years to come, those in positions of greater power did not see a credible or worthy ethos because she did not fit the ideal society presented for women public speakers at the time.

Gage rejects the situated ethos that values the woman's role only as mother and wife, because embracing that ethos would be to embrace the very ideals she rallies against. Rather than merely speaking out against injustices, Gage and her actions call for a radical frame shift that moves from the subjugation of women, slaves, and other classes to the total equality of men and women in the eyes of man, law, and religion. She must invent an ethos that allows her to be heard while rejecting the situated ethos—a move that rhetorical analysis of other women rhetors, like Sarah and Angelina Grimke before her and Ida B. Wells after her, illustrates is quite difficult. Gage "negotiat[es] existing norms. . . creat[es] and transform[s] public spaces" and "interrupt[s]. . . male hegemony," all of which Lyon says is required for women to establish public agency (177). Considering her varied speaking, writing, and organizing acts as deliberative acts, we begin to see Gage's work as constitutive of the world she believed in.

In "The Dangers of the Hour," Gage asserts that the church teaches that "woman is secondary and inferior to [man], made for him, to be obedient to him" and that these beliefs are taught in all religions. The very act of speaking challenges these notions. Gage and other suffragists deliberately disobeyed men at a variety of points; in sharing the *Declaration of Rights of Women* at the American Centennial Celebration, attempting to register to vote, and casting "illegal votes," as well as in other protest events aimed at garnering attention, women like Gage challenged the norm that a woman's place was in the home. In so doing, they challenge the idea that woman is inferior to man. They powerfully demonstrated the disconnect between the values presented in the US Constitution and the lived experiences of individuals in the United States. They may not have achieved full equality in their time, but by asserting their equality with men, Gage and other women of her time set the stage for future action.

Systemic change takes time. In the century since Gage's life, women have made significant strides toward equality. Achieving the right to vote did not immediately create equality for women or other groups of people previously denied such rights. By looking at Gage's organizational work as a deliberative act, we can see how she enacted the kind of ethos she wanted to see valued in women. In organizing, Gage took a lead role challenging the society she lived in. While this was becoming more acceptable for women to do, this was often because women were seen as the moral standard, and their activism was meant to balance the perceived lack of morality in the public sphere. Considering parrhesia as a deliberative act enables us to look at the work across time, evaluating Gage's rhetorical practices as a whole rather than in isolation. This theory enables us to see her shift from parrhesiastic rhetor in organizing the WNLU to a rhetor of authority in giving the opening remarks at the convention. Taken alongside her previous speeches and considerable publications, we see Gage stand firm in her convictions, regardless of her audience, and those convictions sometimes lead to her speaking parrhesiastically. By recovering Gage, we can see how her rhetorical acts caused rifts in the systems that enabled the oppression of many individuals.

It is through the framework of deliberative acts that we can see Gage complicate notions of ethos and its relationship to parrhesia. Frey says that the parrhesiastic rhetor shows how virtuous they are by speaking out against injustices, but I see Gage challenging this idea in her rejection of commonly held values. For Frey, the ethos of the parrhesiastic rhetor seems firmly rooted in the accepted values and beliefs of their time: by making others uncomfortable, parrhesiastes show just how well they actually fit their culturally prescribed situated ethos. In looking more deeply at Gage's later work, we see her attempt to negotiate those beliefs through an invented ethos that explicitly rejects them. This invented ethos works as the kind of "interruption" discussed by Kathleen J. Ryan, Nancy Meyers, and Rebecca Jones, as "counters to traditional ways of behaving or conversing" that "change the status quo of dominant values and practices" (23). They propose a feminist ecological understanding of ethos construction and identify interruption, advocacy, and relation as three "rhetorical maneuver[s]" for women to establish their ethos in order to make themselves heard. Ryan, Myers, and Jones note that "women who 'interrupted' gained reputations as nonconformists, rabble-rousers, and traitors to the 'feminist' ethos" (23). Through interruption, however, Gage and rhetors like her create new possibilities for feminine ethos construction that rejects dominant value systems. These "interruptions" through Gage's invented ethos create the parrhesiastic ripples that allow her arguments to be taken up decades later in a long struggle to shift the dominant cultural frames about what it means to be a woman.

Gage's parrhesiastic work does not show her fitting the acceptable role for women because that very role is what Gage hoped to change through her activism. Gage certainly embraces some of women's situated ethos in her time—she does not, for instance, seem to challenge norms for how women dress. However, she does not seem concerned with whether her audience perceives her as “virtuous” and thus “worthy” of being heard. The formation of NAWSA is a direct attempt to distance the woman suffrage movement from people whose “virtues” did not align with the prevailing religious opinion. NAWSA's rejection of Stanton even though she was elected its president underscores this. Stanton's first speech at the inaugural convention seeks to maintain the call for opposing religion in the name of equality (Brammer 16). But after that speech, Stanton seemed to be president in name only. Gage's refusal to support NAWSA and her decision to form the WNLU, actively aligning herself with the kinds of people NAWSA rejected, is a step toward opposing society's conception of what makes someone worthy of being heard. In the century since Gage's formation of the WNLU, her audience—radicals, atheists, anarchists—is still on the fringes of society and is largely viewed in a situated ethos defined by prevailing religiously dominated cultural frames. Gage does not so much illustrate her virtuosity by speaking out; rather, she challenges the very notion of what it means to be “virtuous” through her use of parrhesia.

## **Conclusion**

An understanding of parrhesia generated by studying Gage can help us turn a critical eye to the present day. While the United States may have passed voting and civil rights since Gage's time, there are still considerable issues to overcome on the quest for true equality of all people. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) remains unratified, though many of its protections have been passed in other legislation. Symbolically, the rejection of the ERA signals that we have not yet achieved the work that Gage and her forgotten contemporaries worked toward. A rhetorical framework of parrhesia could be applied to look at a variety of organizations and groups working to secure equality. The mobilization of feminists protesting President Donald Trump's election is one place ripe for parrhesiastic analysis. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign, born out of systemic police violence against African American men, is another movement for parrhesiastic analysis. This organization would be particularly interesting to research as it functions differently than past rights organizations in that there are no designated leaders, at least on a national scale. Looking at how BLM protests function in individual cities and nationally to speak back to systemic racism, as well as the institutions and societal structures that foster white supremacy, would be a worthwhile and productive task in which parrhesia could certainly play a part.

Gage's work also leads us to additional research venues, some related to parrhesia and some not. While I and others have discussed some of her key works, there is still more to look at from a rhetorical perspective. Using the lens of parrhesia to look at her anticlerical work serves as an entry point for scholarship on anticlerical, nonreligious, and atheist rhetorical practices that are currently under-researched. While not all of these rhetorical practices will be parrhesiastic, having a language and a framework for analyzing nontraditional rhetorical situations will be useful for these particular groups of individuals. While the Pew Research Center reports that the number of Christians in the United States dropped between 2007 and 2014, and the number of religiously "unaffiliated" individuals rose in the same time period, nonbelievers are still in the minority in the United States. A parrhesiastic analysis of atheist and nonreligious rhetoric might help us understand why and how the religious demographics in the United States are changing, especially when there are few uniting factors—like traditions, services, and key guiding texts—for atheists and nonreligious individuals. There is a long history of connection between rhetoric and Christianity in the Greco-Roman tradition; employing a parrhesiastic analysis to intentionally uncover nonreligious rhetorical texts may lead us to currently missing historiographic work.

There's certainly more than just rhetoric historiography research to take away from our discussion of Gage. The current United States political climate presents a critical need for understanding how individuals speak against institutions and individuals within unequal power distributions. Insofar as the study of rhetoric is about the improvement of the polis, Matilda Gage's work is an example ripe for study. It would be unfair to call Gage unsuccessful, though she certainly faced setbacks in spreading her messages and achieving her goals. However, with over a hundred years between Gage's work and the present day, her messages still resonate and her delivery and rhetorical acts would certainly generate attention if shared today. Gage's life and work carry many powerful lessons that remain relevant: how to organize and mobilize, how to maintain your beliefs and integrity in the face of adversity, and how to begin fighting for the changes necessary to overcome the status quo. In addition to groups and organizations, this framework could be applied to a discussion of individual rhetors, like Senator Elizabeth Warren, who is frequently praised for her powerful speeches against Wall Street and Donald Trump. If "talking back" is a sign of privilege as Stephens asserts, how do we distinguish "talking back" from parrhesia, which seems to require a lack of privilege to use? Significant contextual analysis is necessary to understand whether parrhesia is at play, particularly when considering an individual rhetor and their relative positions of authority. Just as Gage sometimes held a position of power and thus did not enact parrhesia, so too might speakers like Warren sometimes

work parrhesiastically and sometimes not. Her attempts to amplify Coretta Scott King's 1986 letter against Jeff Sessions during his 2017 attorney general nomination proceedings is a key rhetorical event that would benefit from a multilayered analysis that considers expanded cultural-historical systems surrounding a single text. Frey's framework for parrhesiastic analysis provides a way to understand when and where parrhesia is at play, an understanding that is necessary if we wish to employ parrhesia ourselves.

Like Stanton, Anthony, and many other suffragists, Gage had died before women officially received voting rights on the national level. Undoubtedly, the story might have looked much different both if Gage had never been involved and if she had had opportunities to truly work toward equality rather than merely suffrage. We cannot know for certain how her success or legacy, had they been known sooner, may have changed the direction of women's rights in the United States. What we can do is learn from her and what we know of her now. Gage ultimately sacrificed notoriety as a leader in suffrage for the rights she deeply believed in, namely the true and total equality of men and women. She spoke, wrote, and organized passionately to create a world where those beliefs were the norm. Brammer says, "the loss of [Gage's] work was a loss for all women" (91), while Frey contends that Gage's work is relevant to the issues of inequality we face today (128). By understanding Gage's parrhesiastic acts, perhaps we, too, can learn to speak truth to power in our own time.

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## About the Author

**Caitlin Martin** is a doctoral student in composition and rhetoric at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Her research interests include writing across the curriculum, writing assessment, and feminist rhetorical practices and pedagogy.