

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1854 'Address to the Legislature of New York' and the Paradox of  
Social Reform Rhetoric

[P]ut identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric.

~ Kenneth Burke

As historians have studied the rhetoric of 19<sup>th</sup> Century social reformers, Elizabeth Cady Stanton has been the subject of much scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> Although somewhat overlooked in many early histories of women's rights movements (DuBois and Stanton 257), Cady Stanton was a prolific and influential writer and speaker in America for more than half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and her legacy as a "preeminent advocate of women's legal and political rights" (Gordon xvii) and the "[Woman] movement's philosopher and chief publicist" (Campbell 2: 42) has been significantly recovered by feminist historians and historians of rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Cady Stanton is widely credited with paving the way for future generations of women to engage in public debates regarding women's place in society.<sup>3</sup>

In 1848, Cady Stanton organized the Seneca Falls Convention with Lucretia Mott, and over the next several years built a national reputation as a women's rights reformer and abolitionist by publishing extensively in newspapers and women's rights periodicals. In 1854, in conjunction with the New York Women's Rights Convention, Cady Stanton wrote and delivered her first landmark speech, the "Address to the Legislature of New York" (hereafter "Address").<sup>4</sup> Cady Stanton considered the "Address" one of her finest speeches (Banner 79), and it burnished her reputation as a radical social reformer. In the speech, Cady Stanton called on legislators to

grant women equal civil status with men, especially the rights to vote and sit on juries; the right to equal inheritance; and the right to file for divorce (DuBois 19). Beth Waggenpack describes the speech as “[o]ne of the most important addresses given in the early years of the women’s movement [...], the first appeal ever made to a legislature for woman suffrage” (50). And, in The History of Woman Suffrage, the speech is marked as especially groundbreaking in that “there was never a year afterwards when this appeal was not made by the women of New York” (Harper 440). By all accounts, Cady Stanton’s “Address” was significant for opening rhetorical spaces for subsequent female rhetors to make public addresses.

By and large, scholars reading her “Address” have attributed to Cady Stanton a brilliantly devised, deliberate, and theoretically informed rhetorical act, which was carefully calculated to drive the women’s movement forward. Recent work on Cady Stanton has sought to explain her innovative attention to pathetic appeals (Engbers) or her shrewd adoption of a “masculine” delivery style (Buchanan) to explain her successes in establishing the women’s movement within a hostile cultural environment. However, in many ways, scholars have failed to account for the conflicting rhetorical demands Cady Stanton encountered as a social reformer. Social reformers throughout American history have faced an inexorable paradox—how to acknowledge their fundamental difference from the dominant class even as they seek to demonstrate their fundamental sameness. Social reform is predicated on meeting this challenge. Reformers have to make evident the ways in which they differ significantly enough from the dominant classes such that their needs are not being met by the status quo. If reformers do not demonstrate how they differ from the dominant classes, there is no impetus for reform. They are concurrently charged with demonstrating sufficient similarity to members of the dominant class (whether on ideological, political, or some other grounds) to merit the expansion of protections at the hands

of the people in power.<sup>5</sup> That is, a display of similarity carries the implicit message that if the petitioners are the same as the people they are petitioning, they deserve the same rights. Cady Stanton, though certainly a gifted rhetor, was nevertheless constrained by the sameness/difference paradox in her 1854 “Address” in ways that have not yet been accounted for by historians of rhetoric. The essential tension throughout Cady Stanton’s “Address” is the need to convince members of her audience that she was essentially no different from men even as she tries to convince them that she would never try to be the same. In other words, she had to convince her audience that she wanted to maintain the status quo by way of revolution. Cady Stanton’s strategies for coping with this paradox in this early speech are revealing in that she often employed subtle rhetorical appeals that reified the social hierarchy her speech was intended to undermine.

Therefore, instead of reading the “Address” as an example of Cady Stanton’s rhetorical mastery, it is necessary to situate the speech at what Barbara Biesecker calls the “interstices between intention and subjection, choice and necessity, activity and passivity” (56). According to Biesecker:

[T]he project of rewriting the history of Rhetoric would be required to come to terms with rather than efface the formidable differences between and amongst women and, thus, address the real fact that different women, due to their various positions in the social structure, have available to them different rhetorical possibilities and, similarly, are constrained by different rhetorical limits. (157)

More simply, Biesecker calls for historians of rhetoric to investigate the ways that female rhetors have been complicit in some forms of systematic inequality even as they contended with gender inequality. In this paper, I take up Biesecker’s call by analyzing how Cady Stanton’s brilliance in

her 1854 “Address to the Legislature of New York” often hinged on rhetorical moves that, whether intentionally or not, exploited existing social inequities. In contradistinction to other rhetorical critics, I argue that Cady Stanton’s appeals, what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell calls “careful, strategic maneuver[s],” actually comprise racist, classist, and paternalistic resonances that were crucial for establishing common ground with her audiences as a way to mitigate their resistance to her cause. She attempted to rhetorically redirect her audience’s attention away from their hostility to women’s rights toward the impropriety of maintaining legal statutes which held “inferior” races and immoral citizens in higher regard than moral, white women. Rhetorical moves that have been read as inspired in light of the subsequent development of the women’s rights movement in fact reified the system of naturalized degradation Cady Stanton “Address” was meant to reform. As a result, Cady Stanton’s “Address” has profound implications for scholars interested in looking at the rhetorical choices of all social reformers and reform movements, especially those advocating equality.

### **Reading Intention and Mastery in Cady Stanton’s “Address”**

Historians have memorialized Cady Stanton’s “Address” as masterfully crafted to meet her rhetorical needs, exemplified by Campbell’s elevation of the speech to “rhetorical genius” (1:97). However it was not so uniformly regarded by her contemporaries. The speech itself was highly confrontational in that she makes explicit demands for women’s rights that she knew were strongly opposed by the men in her audience, and Campbell suggests that Cady Stanton spoke knowing her cause was hopeless (1:93). Even Cady Stanton’s allies were not universally supportive. For example, Sarah Grimké, Cady Stanton’s friend and fellow feminist orator, deemed the speech “too caustic” (Campbell 1:103n4). And, Elisabeth Griffith argues that Cady Stanton’s appearance before the legislature was actually preceded by threats from Cady

Stanton's father, New York Supreme Court justice Daniel Cady, that he would disown her if she made the speech (82).<sup>6</sup> In fact, although the speech was adopted by the women's rights convention and 50,000 copies of the text were printed for distribution, it was only narrowly adopted because it was considered so provocative. She carried through with the speech, but none of the changes Cady Stanton sought were adopted by the legislature, and she faced ridicule in local newspapers for audaciously transcending her proper sphere to speak in public.<sup>7</sup>

The notion that Cady Stanton's speech opened rhetorical spaces for women because her "Address" was so skillfully crafted belies the hostility she faced from both opponents and supporters of her reform agenda in 1854. Cady Stanton would have expected Grimké and her father's responses to be largely representative of the responses she could have expected from the legislators. She could reasonably have anticipated that her speech would end in utter failure, regardless of how powerfully written and delivered it was. "Genius" and "mastery" have been read into the "Address" in light of the subsequent reforms achieved in women's rights and have perhaps been too sympathetically bestowed. Cady Stanton's project of demonstrating sameness and difference caused her to make rhetorical moves that covered over differences in race and class among women in order to attack differences in gender between women and the legislature. In order to situate Cady Stanton's "Address" at the interstices of intention and subjection, it is first necessary to understand how critics have explained Elizabeth Cady Stanton's ability to deliver a caustic speech to a hostile group of male legislators in which she made polemical demands and still managed to open rhetorical spaces for future generations of female rhetors. Different historians have accounted in different ways for how Cady Stanton managed to establish common ground with her auditors, and in the following section, I outline two representative readings of Cady Stanton's mastery.

The first example of Cady Stanton's mastery is offered by Campbell. According to Campbell, Cady Stanton's "Address" demonstrates her adeptness at balancing a complex mixture of adaptation and confrontation: "adapt[ing] to the legal character of the issues and to the legal training of her audience [...] and to traditional notions of women" but "also point[ing] out the misogyny lurking behind the statutes defining the legal position of married women" (1:94). Cady Stanton appealed to the legislator's rational, legal manner, but she also challenged them for upholding a system that degraded women. Campbell analyzes Cady Stanton's introduction as a characteristic example:

The tyrant, Custom, has been summoned before the bar of Common Sense. His Majesty no longer awes the multitude—his scepter is broken—his crown trampled in the dust—the sentence of death is pronounced upon him. All nations, ranks, and classes have, in turn, questioned and repudiated his authority; and now, that the monster is chained and caged, timid woman, on tiptoe, comes to look him in the face, and to demand of her brave sires and sons, who have struck stout blows for liberty, if, in this change of dynasty, she, too, shall find relief. ("Address" 146)

Within these first lines, Cady Stanton praises the men to whom she spoke by insinuating that they were direct descendents of the revolutionary heroes who threw off the tired authority of Custom and demanded their freedom. Campbell believes that her introduction is designed to comfort her audience. Cady Stanton avoids accusing men of ill-will, proclaiming that the freedom-opposing tyrant is not men, but Custom, to which men were once beholden, but whose power and authority men have "questioned and repudiated." Men are brave sires and sons striking blows for liberty, and their righteousness is amply demonstrated by Cady Stanton's tribute to their achievement of freedom. According to Campbell, the introduction is carefully

crafted to avoid directly attacking her audience members and perhaps even to lull them into a false sense of comfort by acknowledging women's proper roles even as she shrewdly demonstrates her understanding of the legal situation. As Campbell puts it, "The scene was a courtroom. Custom [...] has been overthrown. Now that he has been mastered by males, 'timid woman' dares petition her male champions for relief" (94).

Campbell believes that Cady Stanton displays her understanding of her rhetorical situation by appealing to men's better nature with a picture of "timid woman, on tiptoe," characteristically demure, coming to look the chained and caged Custom in the face, "and to demand of her brave sires and sons...if, in this change of dynasty, she, too, shall find relief" (146). She claims Cady Stanton's opening was a "careful strategic maneuver" that shifted any blame for any evils against woman off of men and onto the personified villain, Custom (1:94). And yet, by the end of the passage, Cady Stanton makes clear that her appeal is not to Custom, but to the men in her audience. Times have changed, a new status quo is in place, but, she charges, women are still groveling at the feet of men as they did at the feet of Custom. Custom is chained, his authority usurped, and women are still without relief from their servitude even though "righteous" men are in charge. In addition to an appeal to men's heroism, which the introduction first seems to offer, Cady Stanton's introduction develops into a direct indictment of the men in the chamber. Custom is rendered powerless, so women do not even bother asking Custom for relief—they demand men grant women equal rights. This is made clear when she begins her next paragraph, "Yes, gentlemen, in republican America, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we, the daughters of the revolutionary heroes of '76, demand at your hands the redress of our grievances—a new code of laws" (146).<sup>8</sup> Custom is off the hook; men are now under Cady Stanton's scrutiny, and she makes evident that she is fully aware of the legal circumstances in

which women are situated. Campbell argues that Cady Stanton's opening was conciliatory and an acceptance, for the purpose of soothing her audience, that she would make demands which were modest and proper to the traditional roles of both males and females (1:94). But she also believes that Cady Stanton "recognized that the issue was a legal one and that the committee members were lawyers [...]. For that reason, her speech was replete with specific legal citations from the Bill of Rights, the New York state constitution, legal sourcebooks, and other legal authorities" (95). Campbell equates Cady Stanton's brilliant balancing of confrontation and adaptation to building a bridge between women and men by adapting her knowledge of women's domestic responsibilities to her audience's legal training.

Susanna Kelly Engbers provides a second characteristic example of Cady Stanton's rhetorical mastery in her "Address." Engbers argues that Cady Stanton employed pathos, particularly "innovative" appeals to sympathy, to reach her audiences most effectively. Describing Cady Stanton's 1854 "Address," Engbers writes of the multiple ways Cady Stanton worked to gain legislators sympathies, by "engaging in direct description," telling stories, using "powerful sensory language," and employing "sensational" examples which "indicate her wish to seduce her auditors into feeling—emotionally and physically—the pain" of being a woman (314). For Engbers, Cady Stanton's most successful, and largely unacknowledged, rhetorical ability was moving unwilling audiences to see and sympathize with the degradation of women. Throughout her "Address," Cady Stanton gives hypothetical examples of women being abused by their position in society. In one instance, she carefully describes the degradation of mothers whose children have been willed away by dying fathers. These mothers are helpless at the hands of the law, and Cady Stanton wants men to see and sympathize with their misfortune. In another example, she describes in heart-wrenching detail the decision of a hypothetical mother driven to



toss her newborn into the sea “to save herself and child from exposure and disgrace” resulting from her lack of rights (151).

Using these and other examples, Engbers argues that Cady Stanton’s appeals are skillfully designed to direct male audiences to see the plight of women, deprived as they are of equal rights. And, as Cady Stanton’s career progressed, writes Engbers, “she began to shape her audience members, training them in the practices of sympathy” (315). For Engbers, Cady Stanton is unsurpassed in her ability to evoke audiences’ sympathies. She carefully constructs emotional appeals that refract descriptions through third party examples which model sympathetic responses for the auditors (323). This strategy also deflects blame away from audience members who are invited to look sympathetically upon this third-party interaction while “allow[ing] the audience members to position themselves comfortably away from the intimate relationship.” Engbers argues that Cady Stanton, over the course of her long speaking career, developed “more sophisticated” appeals to sympathy than her best known male peers and predecessors (329). According to Engbers, Cady Stanton’s innovative appeals were masterfully crafted to suit her own particular circumstances as a marginalized speaker.

In addition to Campbell and Engbers, other critics have ascribed to Cady Stanton brilliantly conceived rhetorical moves. Whether critics have argued that Cady Stanton was brilliant because of her legal citations, sympathetic appeals, stylistic choices, or other rhetorical skill, they have almost universally read her “Address” as demonstrating masterful intentionality—as “complex,” “careful,” “innovative,” “brilliant,” and so on. Cady Stanton’s rhetorical genius is certainly defensible, and she was undoubtedly an extraordinarily successful and enduring force in 19<sup>th</sup> Century reform. However, even as Cady Stanton appeared before the legislature in 1854,

inviting them to recognize the degradation of women, she was faced with a more complex rhetorical situation than “genius” can possibly account for.

The examples of brilliance that historians have identified and analyzed are powerful appeals to Cady Stanton’s male audience, to be sure, but they were still subject to the tension of sameness and difference faced by any reformer—the tension of establishing a connection with her auditors at the same time she attempted to undermine the system they valued. Cady Stanton had to convince her audience they could simultaneously read women’s equality to men and women’s difference from men as reasons to change the state constitution. However, she knew, as is evident in her speech, that she was addressing an audience largely unsympathetic to the idea that women needed legal rights. This tension made her rhetorical task virtually impossible in spite of her best appeals, and arguments to the contrary impart to Cady Stanton a level of mastery that belies the constraints of her subjection as a woman and a social reformer.

The balance reformers faced between making demands for equality and fulfilling the demands of their subject positions marks speeches by most of the women working for women’s rights in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Ernestine Potowski Rose, Clarina Howard Nichols, Angela and Sarah Grimké, and Sojourner Truth made speeches that equated women’s needs with men’s as a way to negotiate the tension of sameness and difference. In an 1851 speech to the second national women’s rights convention, for example, Nichols declares that women must be educated and granted property rights because “her rights are the rights of men also” (127). If Cady Stanton expected to have any effect on the men in her audience, the rhetorical situation demanded that she establish some sort of common ground with them. While she minimized appeals for women’s rights on the basis of men’s needs, analysis of her “Address” reveals that she instead established common ground with her male auditors by playing to their race and class biases.

### **Shifting Attention to Race**

Cady Stanton needed to establish some sort of common ground with the men in her audience if expected to have any effect on them. Whereas many other women's rights activists, including those noted above, relied on a traditional male/female opposition to stake their claims to equality, Campbell is right to note that Cady Stanton made wide-ranging use of legal evidence and appeals in her "Address" to establish a sense of sameness with her male audience. On the subject of women's suffrage, Cady Stanton writes, "It is not enough for us that by your laws we are allowed to live and breathe, to claim the necessities of life by our legal protectors...we demand the full recognition of all our rights as citizens" (147). She continues, "We are persons; native, free-born citizens; property holders, tax-payers; yet are we denied the exercise of our right to the elective franchise." As with her introduction, Cady Stanton balances the need to show women's essential sameness to men even as she indicts the members of her audience for their role in maintaining an inequitable system of difference—visible in the contradiction of needing to ask men to grant women equality by demonstrating at length the fundamental equality of women. She itemizes the qualities of women's legal claim to citizenship as a way to highlight the ultimate lack thereof. To further bolster her case, she details the legal implications of women's subjection to taxation without representation, a situation to which no other citizen, no matter how degraded, was unconditionally subjected. Her appeals on the basis of women's citizenship are grounded in a mixture of legal statutes, natural rights doctrine, and United States founding documents that would have been familiar to her audience.

Cady Stanton unquestionably relies heavily on legal appeals. Near the beginning of the speech she opines: "[Women] have every qualification required by the constitution, necessary to the legal voter, but the one of sex" (147). She details the similarities between men and women

followed by a brief illumination of the one difference dividing reformers from legislators—women, unlike the men in her audience, cannot vote. What begins as a legal comparison, however, soon subtly shifts the focus of opposition off women’s fundamental right to legal representation and onto the unacceptable way in which the laws hold black men in higher regard than white women.

Cady Stanton contends that women are “moral, virtuous and intelligent, in all respects quite equal to the proud white man himself,” and she is therefore incensed that “by your laws, we are classed with idiots, lunatics, and negroes” (147). She continues by explaining the laws by which “idiots, lunatics, and negroes” can acquire voting rights. Although couched in an extended exposition of women’s equal abilities and accomplishments and still based in legal statutes, Cady Stanton’s message shifts, if briefly, away from a legal appeal. Her comparison, instead, encourages her auditors to consider the injustice of laws by which women, especially white women, are held in lower regard than other classes of people generally held in the lowest regard. Cady Stanton’s comparison of women to “idiots, lunatics, and negroes” can be read as an appeal to the legal expertise of her audience because the laws of New York defended the rights of “idiots, lunatics, and negroes”. And yet, such a comparison also implicitly introduces an enthymeme of sameness: white women are “quite equal to the proud white man himself,” and the men in her audience clearly hold themselves above “idiots, lunatics, and negroes.”

Later in the “Address,” this enthymeme reappears. Again decrying the system of taxation without representation, Cady Stanton allows that unmarried women have rights to property they inherit and the money they earn. “[B]ut she is taxed without representation. And here again, you place the negro, so unjustly degraded by you, in a superior position to your own wives and mothers” because propertied men of color could vote and those who could not vote were exempt

from taxes (149). Even as Cady Stanton decries the unjust degradation of “negroes,” she is distressed that white women, “your own wives and mothers,” should be regarded as legally subordinate to black men. Her comparison again rests on an enthymeme of sameness: white women are acceptable as members of men’s families, they must clearly be sufficiently similar to be protected by equal laws.

In addition to directing her audience’s attention to the debasement of women, this enthymeme rests on a racial commonplace that reappears throughout the speech, namely that “colored men,” though “unjustly degraded,” are essentially inferior to white people in general. In her attempt to establish a sense of sameness between white women and the white men in her audience, Cady Stanton subtly (and probably inadvertently) casts black people as the Other against which all white people might define their interests. The not-so-subtle message to her auditors is that white men are more like white women than they are like black men, and the only sensible recourse is for legislators to grant white women the right to vote and restore the proper balance of racial inequality.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in light of the fundamental sameness of white men and white women, the legislators cannot deny white women equal rights. Although there is no way to know exactly how Cady Stanton intended her comparison to function, her fundamental need to establish common ground with her audience caused her to reaffirm the system of racial hierarchy which held white people superior to non-whites. Whether intentional or not, her carefully constructed appeals to legal statutes carried with them a host of assumptions and values that appealed to legislators’ racial opinions as much as to their legal training.

Cady Stanton’s reliance on an enthymeme that reinscribed racial inequality might easily be read as an early indication of her own racist tendencies which manifested themselves more visibly in “antiblack, antimale, profemale” arguments she made after the exclusion of women

from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments (Griffith 124).<sup>10</sup> However, her appeals seem not to be deliberate hostility toward black people so much as deliberate appeals to common ground for men and women. That is, Cady Stanton's subtle appeals to racial inequality do not necessarily invalidate her rhetorical brilliance. Rather, they expose the limitations of intentionality within her "Address". Cady Stanton could not simply present legal evidence of women's personhood and convince the men in her audience that laws should be changed to allow women the full rights of citizenship. The legislators, all lawyers, would not have been ignorant of the law. And even if they were unaware of the extenuating inequalities of men's rights, they could not have been expected to appreciate a didactic rehashing of the New York Constitution from Cady Stanton as evidence of the need for action. Cady Stanton needed to redirect their opposition away from women's rights in a productive way. Her repeated reminder to the legislators that "the negro, so unjustly degraded" was better protected legally than were their "wives and mothers" indirectly asserted white women's sameness to the legislators on racial grounds and displaced her auditors' hostility against women to other, different, "inferior" groups of people.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of the sameness/difference paradox, she attempted to convince legislators that women's reformers were the same as white men on the basis of race, which she maintain is more important than the gender difference responsible women's lack of legal protection. Perhaps Cady Stanton intended to achieve equality for all marginalized groups of people, but in her attempt to negotiate the sameness/difference paradox, she traded away her ability to speak for black citizens by casting them in the role of Other. Her enthymeme of sameness may have created necessary common ground with her audience, but in so doing, she reveals the limits of her mastery of legal citation, adaptation, and confrontation extolled by Campbell. Furthermore, she reinforced the social hierarchy fundamentally responsible for women's legal subjugation.

### **Shifting Attention to (Moral) Class**

As with Cady Stanton's reliance on enthymemes that evoked legislators' racial biases, analysis of her "Address" reveals that she also established common ground with her audience by evoking legislators' biases on what might best be called "moral class." Not to be confused with socio-economic class, moral class signifies the hierarchical classification of people by their adherence to codes of moral virtue, in this case as defined by Christian doctrine.<sup>12</sup> In Cady Stanton's "Address," she makes wide use of moral differences to argue for women's rights.

Gender was often essentialized by reformers, but Cady Stanton apparently recognized the benefit of differentiating the men in her audience from immoral men—a class of men she illustrated at length. For instance, Cady Stanton explains that laws exist whereby immoral men can bind their children to rumsellers and brothels to "cancel [...] debts of honor" (emphasis in original 160). According to Cady Stanton, a man can "apprentice his son to a gamester or rumseller;" "he may bind his daughter to the owner of a brothel;" he may do anything he wants with his children as he nears his death, even maintaining the right to "will away the guardianship of all his children from the mother." Although "Nature has clearly made mother the guardian of the child," laws accord parental decisions wholly to fathers, regardless of their moral fitness to make good decisions for their children. By introducing the example of men who immorally bind out and deny mothers access to their children because "the child is the absolute property of the father, wholly at his disposal in life or at death," (161) Cady Stanton calls into question the value of laws that support fathers without regard for their moral character and casts subtle dispersion on men who did not live up to the moral codes of respectable people, regardless of gender.

Cady Stanton offers several examples of the possibility of men's moral inferiority throughout the "Address." In another example, she narrates the predicament of a woman,

impregnated out of wedlock by a man “freely abroad in the dignity of manhood” (151). This “frenzied mother,” who “wildly tосse[s] her helpless babe into the cold waters of the midnight sea,” is forced to choose between a life of certain disgrace and the possibility of prosecution under laws made for and executed by men while the man “who by false vows thus blasted this trusting woman” lives with impunity. Cady Stanton’s introduction of immoral males shifted attention off the male/female opposition onto debased individuals taking advantage of comprehensive protections for men without regard to their individual capacity to make good decisions—“no matter what his character or condition” (161). She infers that her audience members, like her, are lucky to be separate from the conditions of those that are affected by these “cruel, vindictive” men, but she invites legislators to imagine their own daughters facing trial for drowning a child born out of wedlock even as she pronounces their own daughters “guarded by your affection” (152). Drunkards and gamblers who held little regard for the well-being of their wives or children clearly existed in a separate moral class than did Cady Stanton and her audience. In this instance, she turns to an enthymeme of sameness that evokes moral class: the women Cady Stanton represents are “noble, virtuous, well-educated” and have “a grandeur and attitude worthy the noble Roman matron in the palmiest days of that republic” (161); similarly, the men in her audience hold themselves up as moral, honorable citizens. Yet, “drunkards, libertines, and fools” possess rights greater than, and therefore retain power over, even the noblest women. Her message is not particularly subtle. If legislators hold women to be their moral equals, laws have to be passed that enact that equality. Cady Stanton accepts that she and her audience are members of the same moral class, and she invites legislators to join with her as concerned guardians of good women and children debased by inequitable laws.



We may reasonably conclude that her appeals to moral class were intentionally and masterfully designed to resonate with legislators. Intentional or not, her moral-class appeals demonstrate the limits of her intentionality. Although Engbers believes Cady Stanton established common ground through innovative emotional appeals, the sameness/difference paradox obliged Cady Stanton to convince legislators that they were in some way the same as women. In conjunction with powerful emotional appeals, then, she established sameness between women and legislators on the basis of moral class. By inviting legislators to join with her to protect debased women against cruel, vindictive men, she attempted to deflect men's hostility to women's rights and focus on their moral equality. She aligned herself with men by demonstrating how women could be abused, one consequence of which was that she redirected the men's hostility from her gender to other men's moral transgressions. While perhaps more acceptable than casting another racial group as Other, the upshot was the same. She essentially affirmed the systemic hierarchy that she sought to change.

Her appeal to moral class was an appeal to the status quo. She sought to convince legislators that women were similar enough to men to warrant protection, but different enough that they were not already protected. That is, in Cady Stanton's "Address," moral women asked not for revolution so much as for help redistributing class privilege, which is tacit insistence that the system could be made right with the inclusion of women. Regardless of intention or mastery, and in spite of powerful rhetorical appeals, Cady Stanton's moral-class resonances resulted in the reinscription of the social hierarchy at the heart of women's subjection. Cady Stanton cast women as victims of inequitable laws, but because she was constrained to appealing to men on bases other than gender, she essentially detailed for legislators the ways that equal rights would correct a malformed social hierarchy without overturning it.

### **Conclusions for Social Reform Rhetoric**

The sameness/difference paradox of social reformers is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the first wave feminist movement, and Cady Stanton's "Address" demonstrates well the limits she faced in addressing a hostile audience. Indeed, Cady Stanton's "Address" demonstrates the limitations on all reformers who appeal to the dominant classes for respite. On the one hand, women's rights reformers worked to convince male legislators that women were unprotected by existing laws because of the fundamental differences between the sexes. On the other hand, reformers had to argue that women, like legislators, were sufficiently invested in a collective national (white, Christian) identity that equal rights would enable them to support the status quo. The ways Cady Stanton negotiated the conundrum of sameness and difference have important implications for the rhetorical situations of reformers throughout American history because they call into question the possibility of achieving equality within the existing hierarchy.

Cady Stanton's "Address" contains much evidence of the friction between her obvious intention, to secure rights for all women; and her subjection, a woman with little recourse for establishing common concerns with men on the basis of gender alone. She was forced, again and again, to seek common ground with the legislators in ways that shifted their attention away from their fundamental opposition to her message on the basis of proper spheres for men and women. The depth of her legal and philosophical knowledge, the forcefulness of her delivery, and the intensity of her emotional examples certainly helped impress upon her audience the depth of her knowledge and conviction, but she nevertheless constructed a speech permeated with appeals that reinforced the hierarchy Cady Stanton was trying to reform. That Cady Stanton's appearance before the legislature opened spaces for women to address other governing bodies in ensuing years indicates her success in convincing her audience that women's rights advocates shared

some common ground with the men from whom they sought institutional recognition of their demands.

Reform movements have long established their own identities by aligning their interests with the dominant classes in opposition to another scapegoat, and as long as appeals for equality are predicated on maintaining hierarchy by doing little more than realigning class privilege, there is little chance that much will truly change. The process of effacing one kind of difference to establish a sense of sameness apparent in Cady Stanton's "Address" needs to be considered closely by scholars interested in looking at the communication behaviors of competing groups in history, especially as historians of rhetoric look to assess the role of reformers in the development of rhetorical practices. She may well have intended to be caustic, confrontational, logical, and direct as other historians have argued; and in practice, her explicit arguments implicated the men of her audience in the constant, institutionalized degradation of women. But, her enthymematic arguments, arguments necessary to open the rhetorical spaces she required, ultimately reinscribed the social structure she hoped to upset by recalling for her auditors the value they placed in the unequal relationships maintained by system they were responsible for upholding. In so doing, she affirmed the validity of the system of hierarchical relations based on gender, race, and moral class distinctions her speech was supposed to transform.

**Notes:**

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<sup>2</sup> I do not mean to imply, of course, that “feminist historian” and “historian of rhetoric” are mutually exclusive.

<sup>3</sup> Although I am focusing on Cady Stanton because she is so widely recognized by contemporary scholars for her rhetorical ability, Carol Mattingly suggests that some of the most influential women during the 19<sup>th</sup> century are now less well recognized than they perhaps should be. For example, she writes that Amelia Bloomer was one of the most visible women in debates over temperance, suffrage, and women’s dress; and better recognized women like Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were referred to in newspaper reports as “her assistants” (40).

<sup>4</sup> There is some question about whether Cady Stanton actually delivered the address in front of the New York Legislature or not. According to Ann D. Gordon, Cady Stanton’s speech was adopted by the women’s rights convention taking place in Albany at the same time the legislature was meeting and that the text was printed and distributed to the legislators (240). However, most other texts, including Cady Stanton’s own reminiscences (80 Years 187-189), claim that she made the speech to the legislators in person.

<sup>5</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell believes that a major issue for women’s rights reformers was whether women were fundamentally the same as men in that they were all human beings or

fundamentally different from men on biological or cultural grounds (1:87). I argue, however, that the sameness/difference paradox actually requires that they do both.

<sup>6</sup> In 80 Years and More, Cady Stanton relates reading her father the speech before she went to Albany. She claims he was so moved by her description of the plight of women that he helped locate additional evidence to help support her case. Griffith contends, however, that Cady Stanton misrepresented the meeting with her father that night, and generally covered up her ongoing rift with her socially conservative father to legitimize her feminist activism (82).

<sup>7</sup> Susanna Kelly Engbers begins her article with an example of the kind of ridicule Cady Stanton would have faced as a result of her speech to the legislature.

<sup>8</sup> The link between Custom's oppression and men's responsibilities for redressing it would have been even more apparent in the spoken version because her audience would not know there was a paragraph break.

<sup>9</sup> Although I do not have room in this paper to draw out the full implications, Cady Stanton's message also rested on an appeal to the paternalism which is so evident in separate spheres ideology. Further research could certainly address the paradoxical situation whereby Cady Stanton and other woman's rights activists essentially made the appeal to their male interlocutors that only powerful men could save the "weaker sex" from degradation. I am indebted to Judy Holiday for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Davis argues that Cady Stanton's legacy as a racist has been mischaracterized as a weakness in her political philosophy. Davis does not deny Cady Stanton's racism, but rather seeks to complicate it and contextualize it as a product of her time and place as much as a fundamental flaw of her nature.

<sup>11</sup> In On Rhetoric, Aristotle calls this type of argument an appeal to “friendliness” (philia). For Aristotle, friendliness is “wanting for someone what one thinks are good things for him [sic]” (124). He argues, people are friendly to those for which “the same things are good and bad and who have the same friends and enemies”; and to people that “have the same enemies [...] and who hate those they themselves hate and who are hated by those they hate” (125). However, Aristotle implies that speakers choose to make appeals to friendliness rather than having them arise as a byproduct of other appeals.

<sup>12</sup> My thanks to the reviewers for compelling me to clarify this point. Although certainly used other places, I take the term “moral class” from Rebecca Moore Howard’s “The Ethics of Plagiarism” in The Ethics of Writing Instruction (84). Howard argues that educated classes in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century believed themselves to be, by virtue of their intellectual development, of a higher moral class than the uneducated masses. I particularly like Howard’s use of the term because of the resonances of morality with socio-economic class, which may be mutually exclusive, but which was often not conceived of separately in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. That is, although moral class can and should be distinguished from socio-economic class, it is not hard to imagine that in the minds of many 19<sup>th</sup> Century reformers and their audiences, they were closely aligned.

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