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## **The Functions of the Rhetoric of the Feminist Discourses of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: *The Destructive Male* (1868) and *The Solitude of Self* (1892)**

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### **Abstract:**

This article deals with the functions of the rhetoric of Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the *Destructive Male* and the *Solitude of Self*. It seeks in particular, to shed light on the way Stanton's use of logical style and persuasive abilities was significant for audiences at that time and continue to be of paramount importance for today's literary critics studying discourse. In order to convince American women and American political leaders about the legitimacy of her struggle, Stanton, through the use of pathos and logos, personal tone and inductive reasoning, uses the laws set forth by the Founding Fathers to show that discriminating against one half of the population based on their sex and keeping the vote from women is an unlawful act. In her attempt to make audience participate in her struggle and make a change in the world, Stanton also uses high level of diction as a rhetorical device. The language used by Stanton in these two addresses reflects the culture and identity that she hopes for the future generation of women and girls in the United States of America and around the world.

**Keywords:** Rhetoric, légitimation, identity, logos, pathos, ethos, mobilization, audience, language, women.

### **INTRODUCTION**

From the old school of the founding father of the rhetoric that is Aristotle to that of Perelman, we have realized that the main purpose of rhetoric has hardly changed. The search for persuasion through the means of logos, pathos and ethos remains one of its constants. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), one of the Founding Mothers of American Feminism, made good use of this rhetoric in her long and exciting struggle for the recognition of the civil and political rights of women in the United States of America during the XIX century. Her

speeches such as *The Solitude of Self* (1892) and *The Destructive Male* (1868) bring into play arguments but also pathos for explanatory and mobilizing purposes.

What makes the charm in Stantonian rhetoric and American feminist rhetoric in general is that they are part of that of the American Revolution of 1776, which is also a legacy of the British liberal political tradition. Stantonian rhetoric, like that of the American Revolution, has in common the desire to redress an injustice that has lasted too long by using language effectively and persuasively. Until the Jacksonian era (1820 - 1830), the British heritage is very present in American public speaking. Kenneth Cmiel's study of American democratic eloquence shows that Jefferson, Madison, Franklin and Washington have maintained this neoclassical rhetorical tradition of the "best speech of the best man" of perceived eloquence reflecting as the gentleman's ethos, its culture, its liberal education and thus its presumed ability to take care of public affairs. Stanton's rhetoric follows this same dynamic as it aims to break the long historical continuum of male dominance over the female sex. His language takes us to the metaphor "discussion is war".

However, we note that despite these many speeches about the fate of women in the United States, Stanton has not attracted much attention from many linguists and speech scholars. His contribution to rhetoric seems to be largely marginalized in the field of rhetoric studies. When one studies the works on Stanton's rhetoric, one is surprised to note the lack of studies on this monument of American feminism. According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in "Hearing Women's Voices", among the public speeches and textbooks in the United States that focus on the study of the discourse "women are grossly under-represented in the study of US rhetorical history and as models for public speaking "(Campbell 1991: 34) This marginalization is not only linked to the fact that the study and analysis of feminist discourse is not a very worrying issue for the social sciences in the United States, but also that most traditional or modern societies are still refractory to the emergence of female leadership and her discourse. Zaeske opens a corner of the veil by saying that

women attempting to break the public sphere boundary through their addresses on women's rights and suffrage had, surprisingly many detractors. These critics were especially disappointed of speeches given amongst crowd that were labeled as "promiscuous audience (Zaeske 1995: 191)



The choice made on the two discourses mentioned above is justified first of all by the fact that they betray neither the end nor the means of the rhetoric but then by the fact that the two speeches claim a modification of the American Constitution in view of a sixteenth amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote. We finally found that by the lexical choice and the work of the self-image that is to say the ethos, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, through *The Solitude of Self* and *The Destructive Male*, is able to wake up a lively emotion in his listeners. Which means that Stantonian rhetoric is in perpetual quest for membership, and to obtain it, it has resorted simultaneously to ethos and pathos. *The Destructive Male* is featured at the Washington Women's Convention in front of a predominantly female audience, while *The Solitude of Self* has an only- male audience.

The enthymeme in these two discourses and their demonstrative value have not only attracted the confidence of those who listened to them but also seek to convince the members of the judicial committee of the US Congress of the futility of continuing to give additional evidence to push them to grant the right to vote to American women. So she says:

Mr. Chairman and gentlemen of the committee : We have been speaking before committees of the Judiciary for the last twenty years, and we have gone over all the arguments in favor of a sixteenth amendment, which are familiar to all you gentlemen; therefore, it will not be necessary that I should .....them again". (Stanton 1892: 1)

This article attempts to examine the rhetorical functions of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's feminist discourse. We are convinced that each situation of enunciation implies a discursive market characteristic of a conjuncture, and we know very well that, with historical hindsight, we are confronted with discourses whose charms resist the wear and tear of time. The two discourses that we propose to study continue to speak to us more with all the movements of pathos which, formerly, conferred on them their strength. The effects of speech are linked to production conditions that are no longer there, but have actually survived over time. We want to find the rhetorical efficiency behind the set of topoi structuring the speeches of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Our main objective is to reassess these discourses by working to reconstruct their conditions of production and to analyze the legitimizing, mobilizing and identity functions of Stantonian rhetoric.

## I. The Legitimizing Function

The primary function of Stantonian rhetoric, from the Declaration of Feelings and Resolutions (1848) to his farewell speech *The Solitude of Self* (1892), is first and foremost a function of legitimation. Since American society was both patriarchal and stuck to cultural and religious beliefs that did not favor the emancipation of women, it was necessary to find rhetoric that made women and men believe that there were unalienable rights that one can not deprive of a human being in a just and egalitarian society. To do this, Elizabeth Cady Stanton uses rhetoric that directly attacks the legal and political order as a whole in order to push the American people to change some institutions, to make them more just. This rhetoric, which seeks also to guide the collective conscience, strives in the first place to establish its legitimacy by democratic doctrines, by the enhancement of the speaker's ethos and also by the fact that the word of the speaker is a mandated word. "That we have inaugurated this National Equal Rights Association to complete the work of the American Revolution," said Stanton at the first official meeting of the AERA.

The legitimizing function of Stanton's speech appears through his sources of inspiration. The Founding Fathers, the Declaration of Independence, and the philosophy of natural rights form the doctrinal basis of Stanton's rhetorical edifice. In *The Destructive Male*, Stanton begins her speech with the need for a sixteenth amendment or a change in the Constitution to grant the American woman the right to vote. This obligation to revise the Constitution shows the legality or legitimacy on which the rhetoric of the quest for political power that Stanton claims for the American woman rests. The use of the verb "urge" shows that the Stantonian speech is persuasive speech in which pathos, logos and ethos are present. It is a countered speech on the listener and adapted for the listener.

In her quest for a doctrinal basis for legitimizing her struggle, Stanton most often refers to the philosophy of natural rights of the eighteenth century. Having inspired the Declaration of Independence of the United States and the Founding Fathers, Stanton not only paraphrased the Declaration of Independence in her Declaration of Feelings, but we also note in her speeches an immeasurable love of the ideals of the Enlightenment. If we take the second paragraph of *The Solitude of Self*:

The point I wish plainly to bring before you on this occasion is the individuality of each human soul; our Protestant idea, the right of individual



conscience and judgment – our republican idea, individual citizenship. In discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual, in world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny, an imaginary Robinson Crusoe with her woman Friday on a solitary island. Her rights under such circumstances are to use all her faculties for her own safety and happiness (Stanton 1892:1)

We conclude that Stanton is also in tune with the oratorical era that ushered in the 1820s - 1830s in the United States. An era that Peter Gibian calls "Golden Age of American Oratory". Stanton's rhetoric is at the same time based on intertextuality/intersexuality since there is no doubt that the United States offers something for the pioneers of American feminism. Stanton's admiring look at the Declaration of Independence is a good example of this. Take, for example, this passage from the work of a well-known French democrat. "Nowadays, the principle of the sovereignty of the people has taken in the United States all the practical development that the imagination can conceive. (...) the people rule the American political world as God on the universe. This representation of the United States by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French parliamentarian, gives a good idea of the attractiveness of the American union for feminists of the time such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The speeches of Elizabeth Cady Stanton seek, from a schematization of the real, a representation of the world, to give meaning to the experiences of American women, to open the eyes, to understand, to mobilize, but also " to solidarize, to shake apathy, to convince and to act ". Stanton strongly shakes apathy in *The Destructive Male* using too dry language and alliteration which is a figure of rhetoric well loved by rhetoricians. In this perspective, it aims the pathos of its audience but also of its readers. She qualifies the man as being:

Masculinity or manliness is a destructive force. It is stern, selfish and thinks only of itself. It loves war, violence, and is concerned with taking things. It breeds disagreement, disorder, disease and death in the world. See what a record of blood and cruelty the pages of history show us! (Stanton 1868:1)

Stantonian rhetoric also coincides with a period of political romanticism that is germinating and developing in the United States. In the poetry of the time and in the political discourse, the images of a solidarity struggle to the oppressed peoples are very present. It is

this rhetoric that we wish to reveal, in the midst of its historical and social context, as a constructor of a social and productive identity "of an image of historical agents".

To analyze Elizabeth Cady Stanton's feminist discourses is to consider them as a questioning of the social product, a questioning of the thinkability of the society of the time. This questioning is most visible in *The Destructive Male* when Stanton rebels against a patrician society that restrains the woman's emancipatory impulse by trying to immobilize her in traditional shackles. Straight forward, Stanton incriminates society as a whole. "People object to women making demands. They say they are too strong - minded. They say "the right of suffrage will make the men." That's just the difficulty we have today. (Stanton 1868: 2)

In this perspective, Stantonian rhetoric aims more than mere information or proposition of a vision of the world. She wants to convince the man by putting him in front of the *fait accompli*. Stanton's feminist rhetoric rhymes with the revalorization of women. It is directly associated with nature. In the last paragraph of *The Destructive Male*, Stanton tells us that "Nature is like a loving mother. It is always better to keep it balanced, and mountain and valley. Nature tries to keep each of these in their place. (Stanton 1868: 3) Through this comparison, Stanton means that the protective role of nature is therefore inseparable from that of women in a more global perspective of the rehabilitation the nature of female condition. Indeed, nature, through its components, that is to say, the earth, the sea, the waves, the beings, the animals and the plants, is confused with the various functions of the woman as a nourishing sap. The theme of valuing women through rhetoric or writing is the common denominator of all those who advocate for the feminine cause. In this universal dynamic of the valorization of the woman with the *senhorienne*, Flora Nwapa, one of the pioneering women of the English-speaking African literature, through her first novel *Efuru* (1966) strives to show a positive image of the woman. "When I do write about women in Nigeria, in Africa, I try to paint a positive picture of women who are very, very positive in their thinking, who are very, very independent, and very, very industrious" (Umeh 1995: 27).

The Stantonian discourse is obviously that of a monopoly gnoseological, a monopoly of judgments on the world, and implicitly aims to stabilize a vision of the world that will allow her social class to ensure his social ancestry. It is from this angle that Stantonian rhetoric seeks to justify, to act on its recipients, to influence interpretations of the real. "When all trammels are removed, and women are recognized as individuals, responsible for their own environments, fully educated for the position in life they may be called to fill; with all the



resources in themselves "(Stanton 1892: 5). Stantonian discourse seeks its legitimacy first by presenting itself other than what it is not really, that is to say other than the simple judgment of a man on the world. Stanton's word is inscribed in the light of the transcendence of the great democratic principles, transcendence symbolized by the idea of public opinion and by the reforming torrent for the defense of women's rights. As Fernand Dumond has pointed out, "elites borrow from circumstances the pretexts and the legitimacy of their statements".

The legitimacy of the speech is also linked to the legitimacy of the speaker of speech, in this case the person of the speaker. The recurrence of allusions to Stanton's ethical character prompts us to analyze this aspect of the leader's speech. The true recipient of the rhetoric of legitimation is indeed the man, the only person who must be convinced that he is the only one who has the capacity to solve this situation. It is the man who is targeted, that it is necessary to convince through this rhetoric of legitimation. For this, three main pillars are at the center of the rhetorical edifice and have complementary functions of legitimation, mobilization and identification.

## **II. The Mobilizing Function**

The faculty of language is innate to the human being, but the ability to make good use of it is not. To understand the mobilizing function of Stanton's rhetoric, one must necessarily make a small overview of the theories of language. According to the philosopher Austin who is the pioneer, language is a form of action or saying is doing. In other words, "How to do things with words. Stanton's rhetoric is in the same vein as Stanton's message in *The Solitude of Self* is a message of hope, triumph and victory. The discourse teaches American women that it is possible to grow up or grow old with true happiness and a life full of meaning. Analyzed from this angle, we see that this kind of discourse gives hope to women and pushes them to action.

The recurrence of "self - reliance", "self - development" and "self - preservation" in *The Solitude of Self* shows that Stanton encourages women to take action to create a better future or the safety and happiness of women. They will no longer depend on the laws and policies of patriarchal society but on their own talents and intellectual resources. She argues in her speech program that:

Stimulated to self-support by the knowledge of the world and the pleasure that pecuniary independence must ever give; when women are trained in this way, they are, in a measure, as in our extremity we must depend on ourselves, the dictates of wisdom point of complete individual development.

(Stanton 1892: 4)

Stanton indirectly tells us that humanity has arrived at a decisive phase of its evolution and that it is high time to rehabilitate woman for a better future as well as for man. This view of Stanton is in perfect congruence with the idea of social progress, which is one of the key principles of the American democratic system.

In *The Destructive Male*, Stanton's rhetoric raises the debate on the status of women. The oppression and marginalization of women are addressed in a very pathetic speech. The pathetic character of the Stantonian discourse is at the same time a way of appealing to a revision of old conceptions towards women. "Men have been in control so far. Men have taken over from the beginning. Males and masculinity have overpowered the ways of the female everywhere." In this painting, Stanton invites her audience to take a closer look at all the codes, behaviors and perceptions that are inextricably linked to the oppression in the world of women in American society.

Rejecting the social habits and customs that leave girls "vacant" and "restless" and old idle women, Stanton, with a melancholic tone, pushes women to avoid what she calls "the whirl of fashion" or "the idle life of dependence" "to finally discover this notion of" nobler state of true womanhood ". Stanton's rhetoric of mobilization is through actions that are contemplated but also through a speech that tells us what is happening now and what should be done. It is a rhetoric based on the aesthetics of contrast to crystallize a lot of attention around the woman. In this respect, we are convinced that Stanton implicitly says to American women the changes and reforms that must take place in society. "Woman must look at everything from the point of view of money. If she does not, she is said to be dreaming. She must accept things as they are and make the best of them." (Stanton 1868: 2).

The rhetoric of legitimation shows us that discourses are not only local in scope, they are not limited to representative / represented interaction. The rhetoric of legitimation



therefore necessarily needs to be supported by mobilizing rhetoric. To speak of the mobilizing function of Stanton's speeches is to speak of the pragmatics of the discourse of "the analysis of the relations between signs and their users". To understand Stanton's mobilizing rhetoric, it is necessary to recall a minimum of reception conditions in the midst of which these discourses take place, in the middle of which the discourse becomes significant as G. Vignaux explains: "there is no Intrinsic "force" of an argument other than that comparable to a power of conviction that depends entirely on the construction of the discourse in which it takes place, on the place of the subject who states it and the situation that makes it possible to use it ". (Vignaux 1998: 72).

Stanton's mobilizing rhetoric draws on the themes offered by Romanticism from the 1820s to 1830, at the same time that they are inundated with them. At this time, during which "great importance is attached to the fate of the oppressed peoples". The nineteenth century of Stanton is "freedom of the press" "education for all", "recognition of vox populi" and "fundamental rights". Resistance to oppression and the popular will are significant expressions for a contemporary of Stanton and even Stanton whose thought is necessarily inflected by the circumstances of the enunciation.

In the search for a certain "retrospective coherence", Stanton aims to recognize and persuade of her social vision of the world. By this very fact, that is, by evoking a historical dynamic, Stanton's narrative can only incite action. As J. P FAYE points out, "narrative is the function of language that brings object and action closer together, and which constantly refers to action and object" (Faye 1972: 45). Stanton's rhetoric produces "social effects". This is its effectiveness. It undeniably has a function that gives an identity to those who recognize themselves as recipients of the speech, those who recognize their fate in the examples that Stanton gives them. Stanton's rhetoric in providing the female subject with a "historical consciousness," establishes basic identity parameters. According to C. Désy and J. Letourneau, historical consciousness is "the expression of a search for meaning through which the person or the collective takes note of his or her journey in a performative mode and gives it a retrospective and recitative coherence that is the basic thread of his identity."

### **III. The Identity Function**

The identity function of Stanton's discourse is through the rhetoric of the deconstruction of the religious, political and cultural discourse that assigns American women to their role and their place in society. In *The Solitude of Self*, Stanton runs counter-current to

this nineteenth-century ideology which makes believe that the true virtues of women are found in these four pillars "purity", "submission", "piety" "domesticity". This ideology advocates a tacit or overt oppression of women, and the socialization of each other is the cement that consolidates it. In the American context, this ideology has for a long time restricted women's freedom and scope of action. This strategy of keeping women in the private sphere is not just an American reality. She is universal. Fatou DIOUF KANDJI in *The experience of women in the stories of Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa* (2015), through a very colorful Wolof saying, shows how society preaches the submission of women. "Ku begg jur mbaxana dafay doon dall", meaning: if you want to be the mother of someone who will be placed high, at the top, at the top of the social hierarchy, you have to accept to be treated like a savate, it means to be humble. Stanton protests against this vision by proposing another identity for the woman.

Fourthly, it is only the incidental relations of life, such as mother, wife, sister, daughter, that may involve some special duties and training. In the usual discussion in regard to woman's sphere, such as men as Herbert Spencer, Frederic Harrison, and Grant Allen uniformly subordinate her rights and duties as an individual, as a citizen, as a woman, to the necessities of these incidental relations, some of which a large class of woman may never assume. In discussing the sphere of man we do not decide his rights as an individual, as a citizen, as a man by his duties as a father, a husband, a brother, or a son, relations some of which he may never fill. Moreover he would be better fitted for these very relations and whatever special work he might choose to do to earn his bread by the complete development of all his faculties as an individual. (Stanton 1892:1)

As Belinda Stillion Southard reminds us, Stanton's rhetoric "incorporated predominant beliefs regarding natural rights, which date back to eighteenth century political thought" This philosophy of natural rights makes use of the principles of individualism, reason and democracy policy. Stanton frequently uses this rhetoric of natural rights to challenge the political and social system of his time, advocating equality based on the notion of "universal humanity".

Stanton's identity rhetoric challenges the myth that a woman is submissive, virtuous, pure, and at home. It shows that the woman can and must exercise any profession, express



herself and express her point of view for the affairs of the city without bothering with false modesty. It encourages women to take responsibility by getting rid of the oppressive identity that society offers them. This is how Stanton offers in his imagination an innovative perspective on the role and place of women in society.

No matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone, and for safety in an emergency they must know something of the laws of navigation. To guide our own craft, we must be captain, pilot, engineer; with chart and compass to stand at the wheel; to match the wind and waves and know when to take in the sail, and to read the signs in the firmament over all. It matters not whether the solitary voyager is man or woman. (Stanton 1892: 5)

In *The Destructive Male*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton rejects the conformism, passivity and indifference of the American woman and affirms their individuality. She aptly emphasizes the right and the duty of women to give their opinion on everything that concerns them but also not to take the words of men as gospel words. "To keep a foothold in society, you must have a woman as much as possible. She must reflect her ideas, opinions, good points and bad points.

The mobilizing function of speeches can only be understood on the basis of identity rhetoric. The identity function of Stanton's rhetoric continues and completes the two preceding ones (legitimization and mobilization "by seeking to cement a vision of the world by the invention of a" convivium "which is a definition of the social world but also a motor of speech.

## CONCLUSION

The interest of a study like ours is certainly to contribute to the application of the methods of socio-discursive analysis to various corpora, but also to revive the problematic around a historical figure whose social group has marked the American feminist and political thought from the nineteenth century to the present day. Through our rhetorical analysis, we have tried, as best we could, to make Elizabeth Cady Stanton's feminist discourses feel moving, mobilizing and identity-minded during the nineteenth century.

The choice of these two discourses depends on our appreciation of the relevance of Stanton's speeches as well as their historical significance. In a letter written to his daughter Maggie, three days after the pronouncement of *The Solitude of Self*, Stanton explains how pleased she was with the event and self-assesses that her remarks were well received.

The discourse is, according to G.Vignaux, "representation that one can analyze technically since having its own space-time unit" (with its actors, its processes between actors, its situations). The discourse stages the world, and this staging is framed by production conditions, "principles" ("values, rules, ethics, physical or socio-cultural axioms"), which only further demonstrate the link between the language and the cognitive. We join forces with G.Vignaux to say that "every discourse is an actor [of the world] each time carrying strategies orienting the reading of objects in relation to the determinations that will find the recognition and the setting in representation ". The said is in this sense definitely a way of access to the historicity of speech.

According to Campbell, *The Solitude of Self* is a universal discourse that addresses all strata of society. Campbell continues his argument by saying that the Stantonian speech "speaks for all women, of all ages, in all roles, and in all conditions of life; indeed, it speaks to all persons, educated and uneducated”

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