



# The Theory, History, and Practice of Parrhesia

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The Rhetoric of Resistance

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Renea Frey  
Xavier University  
Cincinnati, OH, USA

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*To Monica Miller—never a flatterer and always a friend, without whom  
this work would have been decidedly less parrhesiastic.*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# What to Expect and Why

*“Every society honors its live conformists and its dead troublemakers.”*  
(Mignon McLaughlin)

This book is about the theory, history, and practice of parrhesia, a type of free speech that entails frank, bold, and risky truth telling. Parrhesia can occur as actual speech or be embodied in action, articulated through text, or transmitted in a variety of expressive mediums. Parrhesia disrupts and critiques the status quo, which is why it involves danger as well as courage to enact. However, despite risks that can range from social ostracization, incarceration, or even death, the parrhesiastes acts anyway because of deeply held values, coming from a place of *needing* to speak the truth, regardless of the risks. Parrhesiastic acts are often “pleasing” to those who witness it, but because parrhesia arises from a place of strongly held truth claims that are often shared by the community, these acts of courage can have significant effects, both at the time that they occur and well beyond, depending upon how these moments are captured, circulated, and redeployed.

While new work on parrhesia comes out more regularly today, when I first stumbled upon the term by accident as a graduate student studying rhetoric in 2012, very little had been said beyond Foucault’s lectures on

the topic from near the end of his life. From the moment I saw and understood the term parrhesia, I realized that it was the most important concept I had encountered, that it was, in fact, the only thing I had ever cared about, what I had been researching all along without having a name for it. With every inquiry, I became more excited—this was it, the big idea, the concept that gave people tools to undermine and shift the seemingly immovable structures of oppressive power in order to propel humanity toward a more egalitarian future. The more I looked, the more I realized that parrhesia was an underlying part of every justice-oriented change that has occurred in human history, that it was at the foundation of a healthy democracy, and that while it operated in more covert terms during times of oppression, it would sometimes explode out from under stifling tyranny in risky acts of truth telling and rebellion that could shake empires. Parrhesia even exists in the best friendships, the ones with people who are straightforward in their feedback, not as a bludgeon or way to mask uncaring selfishness, but out of love and genuine concern, even when we may not be ready to hear the difficult truths they have to tell.

There are different manifestations of parrhesia depending upon the context or rhetorical situation in which it occurs. In this book I'll talk about how these multifaceted strands of parrhesia arose and how they have woven themselves throughout our ideology, history, and ideas of Who We Are. Even though we have largely stopped naming these courageous acts "parrhesia" (and I will explain why along the way) we remember moments of brave audacity because we care deeply about the truths they point to. Moments of risky truth telling matter to us because they are central to our identity and to becoming the best versions of ourselves that we can be, whether that is politically, socially, or personally.

We *need* parrhesia as a means of productively challenging the status quo, and yet we can barely talk about parrhesia as a concept in itself, much less see its true effects—how it networks across time and location to undermine structures of power, eventually forcing power to shift in response. Today, when parrhesia is mentioned at all, it is often cloaked in esoteric language, buried in a history few people read or understand, discussed by academics rather than wielded by all citizens in a healthy democracy. Parrhesia is the most capable tool for disrupting entrenched power relations, and yet it is a concept very few people can articulate or point to. Parrhesia was meant to be understood, used, and evaluated by the citizens of a democracy, and it is in that spirit that I have written this book.

To make sure that I stay on track with my intentions for this book, and so readers know what to expect, I've created Knowledge Goals, much like I would for a syllabus when designing a course. At the end of the book, we will come back to these goals, making sure that we have covered the information I promised at the beginning.

By the end of this book readers will be able to:

- Recognize the various types of parrhesia woven through Western history and know how, where, and when these meanings arose;
- Grasp the complicated relationship between parrhesia and rhetoric over time and be able to view parrhesia rhetorically by examining its networked effects upon audiences in the moment of parrhesia, as well as across time and place;
- Recall the history of parrhesia and compare its manifestations to contemporary examples;
- Articulate the conditions and effects of parrhesia when they encounter situations of risky truth telling;
- Interrogate the truth claims made by those seeking to enact parrhesia to discern the veracity of those claims;
- Trace the networked paths of resistance across time and place to recognize the ongoing ripples of parrhesiastic disruption across fields of power;
- Understand the way parrhesia is mediated by technology, as circulation and distribution influence parrhesiastic effects across time and place;
- Effectively enact and/or analyze parrhesiastic actions that seek to undermine and disrupt injustice in today's world.

### WHO IS MY AUDIENCE? TO WHOM AM I WRITING?

This is an “academic work” based in years of scholarly research, but it is not written with only a traditional academic audience in mind, nor with a wholly academic tone. In fact, I would argue that writing in conventional academese is somewhat antithetical to parrhesia, which is frank, straightforward, and less rhetorically polished than typical academic writing would demand.

While this book does cover the use of parrhesia historically, it is also not attempting to take the place of works that situate parrhesia within particular disciplines, such as history, Classics, philosophy, or political science.

Without works from these disciplines on parrhesia (along with Foucault who is important enough to get his own section), this book would not have been possible; my own understanding of parrhesia has been informed and guided by scholars who came before and who continue to write in and across various disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Parrhesia is an expansive topic that is not owned or constrained by a particular discipline, nor can (or should) it be confined within academia itself. I encourage anyone who wants more specific information about parrhesia to continue reading works from the talented Classicists, historians, philosophers, and political scientists who have discussed parrhesia in their works, many of which are cited in this book.

Because this book offers a networked, rhetorical theory of parrhesia, I draw upon the field of rhetoric to inform my take on the conditions and effects of parrhesia and argue that to fully understand it, we need to also grasp how parrhesia works rhetorically to propel change in the world. However, this book is not written solely for, or wholly in the tradition of, the limited scholarship on parrhesia in rhetorical studies. I reference pertinent rhetorical scholars in this book, especially as they inform my understanding of concepts related to parrhesia (Kinneavy, Enos, Burke) or to the way rhetorical action moves across domains (McCorkle, Porter) but I am not attempting to build upon the scholarship of parrhesia produced by others in my field, with a few notable exceptions (Hauser, Kennedy). Some of the work pertaining to parrhesia in the field of rhetoric has focused on critiquing Foucault (Walzer) or critiquing the critiques of Foucault (Gehrke, et al.) while debating detailed aspects of parrhesia—or rather, parrhesia as Foucault presented it—and do not lead to rhetorical action or *using* parrhesia in any meaningful way. While not limited to rhetorical studies, this book argues for the need to understand parrhesia from a rhetorical standpoint and traces the conflicted relationship between parrhesia and rhetoric from their concurrent conception in ancient Greece through centuries of contested affiliation. Parrhesia and rhetoric have a complicated relationship, one that must be mediated and resolved so that parrhesia is rhetorically available for use in the public sphere today where it might meaningfully work to shift entrenched systems of power.

I strongly believe that parrhesia is a concept that citizens need to understand, one that should not be hidden, esoteric, or difficult to grasp. In that spirit, this book is written for two audiences, or the space where two

<sup>1</sup>Work by Arlene Saxonhouse, Dana Fields, and Elizabeth Markovits have been especially informative to this research.

audiences overlap. On one hand, I want this book to be useful to people in academia, including professors, researchers, and students across a variety of disciplines. This work is based upon years of scholarship and research and I have used what I know about constructing evidence-based arguments (my primary discipline is rhetoric, after all) so in that sense this is a scholarly work. On the other hand, I utilize straightforward talk about parrhesia so that this information is accessible to non-specialized readers. *The Theory, History, and Practice of Parrhesia* is meant to be useful to people beyond the walls of the academy, readers who want to know how to analyze, understand, or enact parrhesia in their own lives and communities. At its heart, parrhesia is about engaged citizenship, speaking out in service of values that best serve the community, and protecting the truths we hold dear at the center of our democracy. Parrhesia is too important to be isolated inside the confines of academic language, and because of that, this book aims to describe its complexity fully, but do so in a way that is accessible and clear.

### WHAT ABOUT FOUCAULT?

Michel Foucault delivered multiple lectures about parrhesia that were posthumously published as *Fearless Speech* (2001), *The Government of Self and Others* (2011), and *The Courage of Truth* (2012). These lectures by Foucault are central to theoretical work on parrhesia so that his ideas have become, at least in some fields, viewed as foundational or definitive, so that his theories must be given centrality in order to say anything new about parrhesia, whereas in other disciplines, he is cited like any other source, given a footnote, and mentioned in passing. *The Theory, History, and Practice of Parrhesia* falls somewhere between these extremes. This is not a book *about* Foucault's theory of parrhesia, but rather one that uses those ideas to create a new framework for analyzing and understanding parrhesia, and there are times I disagree with Foucault about some of his fundamental assumptions.

Foucault had brilliant, important things to say about parrhesia, but that should not be the end of our discussions, nor should it always and forever be central to our understanding or limit what we *do* with parrhesia. In his lectures, Foucault articulates hope that others will take up his ideas and apply them to contemporary times, noting that revolutionary discourse “when it takes the form of a critique of existing society” enacts parrhesia, that even scientific discourse “deployed as criticism of prejudices, of

existing forms of knowledge, of dominant institutions, of current ways of doing things” likewise initiates the work of parrhesiastic action (*Courage* 30). One of the primary ways that my work “differs” from Foucault is that I am trying to *do something* with parrhesia, to make it accessible and understandable, to show how it works rhetorically to *make things happen* in the world to disrupt entrenched power structures, and how to *analyze and understand* parrhesiastic action when we see it.

In many ways I agree with Foucault’s ideas and conclusions, but in other ways I differ, notably (and strongly) in his limited view of rhetoric and its possibilities. (See Chap. 3 for a more detailed discussion.) I make my disagreements clear when they arise, but I also use Foucault as a source or reference point when his work is applicable and salient to what I am trying to say. There are excellent works that take deep dives into detailed critique and conversation with Foucault’s take on parrhesia, in particular Dyrberg’s work on the political implications of parrhesia and the relationships between knowledge, ethics, power, truth telling, and the self, the aforementioned work by Walzer with follow-up from Gehrke, et al., or Maxwell’s examination of the always-political implications of truth telling as viewed through the lens of gender in ancient Greece. If understanding or critiquing Foucault’s perspectives on parrhesia is your main objective, I highly recommend reading these sources for that kind of intellectual stimulation, and of course read Foucault’s lectures on parrhesia if you haven’t already.

Another critique I have encountered is that many of the texts I examine are mentioned by Foucault, who already made his proclamations about their meaning, so why bother to examine them closely again? While I do consider texts Foucault referenced (though I also look at other texts, too) I do so for a couple of reasons. First, these are the extant historical texts *that mention parrhesia*, so if one is going to discuss a “history of parrhesia,” one must examine the texts where parrhesia is referenced. My goal is to show not only that parrhesia existed and how it worked in particular contexts, but also to demonstrate how the idea of parrhesia is networked and spreads, how parrhesia enacted in one place and time influences the likelihood of parrhesia arising again in the future. To do that, I must look at the instances that still textually exist in order to elucidate that networked effect—some of those texts were also known to Foucault so it should not be surprising that I review them as well.

Second, while Foucault points to or mentions texts in passing, he does not often pause to show his audience specific passages or explain how he arrived at his interpretation of these texts. Works by Foucault on parrhesia

are taken from lectures; his ideas are not presented as completed, polished texts that were necessarily intended to become books, thus they are not organized or explicated in the same way. Instead of relying on Foucault's interpretations, I want to know where ideas of parrhesia come from, to examine and analyze those texts directly, and to offer readers quotes and passages to back up the claims I make, some of which align with Foucault's conclusions and some of which do not. In this book I look at historic texts that discuss parrhesia and show my work, explaining how I come to these conclusions, and allow readers to decide for themselves if those interpretations are correct.

The long answer to the question "What About Foucault?" is woven throughout the rest of this book, in references and passages that pertain to his ideas. Much of the time, I agree with his conclusions and am building upon and adding to that work, extending and applying these concepts to a networked, rhetorical frame so that we can more readily understand the effects of parrhesia across time and place. In other instances, I disagree completely, believing that he had limited understandings of certain ideas, in which case I will mention that and/or not rely on his conclusions in order to draw my own, work I undertake more fully in Chap. 3. On many other occasions I will look at texts that Foucault omits and that were not included in his initial work on parrhesia at all.

## WHY THIS BOOK IS DIFFERENT AND HOW TO USE IT

Since I began researching parrhesia more than a decade ago, I have been struck by how enthusiastic people become when I start describing what I study. Academics are used to blank stares and eye-rolls when asked what we do, but when I mention parrhesia and start to explain it, people are almost universally excited, regardless of whether that is at an academic conference, a public talk, or standing outside of a nightclub having a random conversation with a stranger. People are drawn to the idea of speaking truth to power, of speaking out despite risk, but packaging that idea into a text that contains its scholarly complexity *and* its straightforward, direct simplicity is not an easy task. While academic books are open to the complexity of an idea and an abundance of research, they are also typically written to be nearly inscrutable to a wider audience. My goal with this book is to provide a comprehensive view of the theory, history, and practice of parrhesia but to do so in a way that is accessible and interesting to a variety of audiences.

The first way that this book is different is that I have attempted to make it both scholarly and straightforward, giving readers the option to read the parts that are relevant to them and skip the parts that aren't, and to have ideas reinforced at multiple points. Think of this arrangement as a "knowledge sandwich" where readers decide how much, and what, they would like to consume. Each chapter begins with an "Overview" describing what is coming up in a direct, concise way and ends with a "Take-Away and Moving Forward" section that sums up the chapter and points toward how these concepts are applied to upcoming ideas. The "Overview" and "Take-Away and Moving Forward" sections are the "bread" of the knowledge sandwich and serve as a container to keep all of the contents organized.

For readers who are not as interested in the nitty-gritty of analysis and textual evidence or who get bogged down by academese, you can read the chapter "Overviews" and decide which sections to dive into more deeply. If you are a reader with a "lighter appetite," be sure to read the entire framing pieces of the book as a whole, too, by which I mean "This Chapter" and "Chapter 10: The Courage to Speak and to Listen" at the end. Reading the framing portions of *The Theory, History, and Practice of Parrhesia* (Chapter 1 in its entirety, the "Overview" and "Take-Away and Moving Forward" sections of each subsequent chapter, and then the entirety of Chap. 10) should allow readers to attain an abridged version of the Knowledge Goals outlined at the beginning of this chapter and provide a general understanding of the theory, history, and practice of parrhesia.

While I consciously frame the beginning and end of each chapter with the "bread" of the knowledge sandwich, the "meaty contents" are in the textual examples, analysis, research, and connections that are explicitly made in between. The middle sections of each chapter are written in a more conventional scholarly voice and include footnotes, citations, and follow-up for readers who expect an academic exploration of the theory, history, and practice of parrhesia. In some cases, readers may come to different conclusions or interpretations than I have; parrhesia is a wonderfully complex constellation of concepts and practices with a deep history and multivalent potential. Readers are invited to take this information about parrhesia and do something else with it, make it their own, and expand or contradict my conclusions. As long as the idea continues to circulate and promote critique, methods of analysis, and deeper understanding of parrhesia then the goals of this book will be met.



The title of this work calls parrhesia “the rhetoric of resistance,” which is precisely how I see parrhesia operating. As discussed in upcoming chapters, parrhesia is a force that resists entrenched practices of power, embodied in human actors and rhetors, that eventually compels power to change in response. This process explains how parrhesia is “the rhetoric of resistance,” as parrhesia pushes back on power in ways that transform how power manifests, influencing people, ideologies, and institutions along the way, making it rhetorical action. How this works, though, is a complex story, one that will be told in three parts—theory, history, and practice. In the “Theory” part, I’ll talk about the discursive history of parrhesia, its relationship to rhetoric, how parrhesia is affected by orality, print, and digital distribution, how it moves between the domains of the private and the public, and what I mean by a “networked rhetorical theory” of parrhesia. In Part II, the “History” part, I’ll take a deeper dive into the history and genealogy of parrhesia, tracing the various strands, meanings, and occurrences of parrhesia in the ancient world to show how the concept of parrhesia is at the foundations of our thinking about democracy, free speech, and citizenship, but also how those meanings fragmented, moved into new domains, or hid behind rhetorical devices in times of autocracy. Then, in the “Practice” part, I’ll examine what it means to examine and enact parrhesia today, addressing the historic problems that arose alongside parrhesia, as well as how to interrogate truth claims and the ethos of speakers in today’s world, before moving on to provide a selection of case studies to apply the networked rhetorical theory of parrhesia proposed in this book. Finally, at the end, I will recap the goals we have met and consider how listening may be just as courageous as speaking, especially in instances where we ourselves may be benefitting from the entrenched systems of power we otherwise hope to challenge.

The overarching goal of *The Theory, History, and Practice of Parrhesia: The Rhetoric of Resistance* is to not only describe what parrhesia was or is, but also to explain how to recognize, analyze, understand, and *use* parrhesia in our everyday world. While parrhesia is a concept as old as democracy itself, we do not typically talk or think about parrhesia *as parrhesia*, nor do we readily grasp its profound ability to disrupt power through its networked effects, circulating across time and place, to inspire ongoing acts of risky rebellion. *The Theory, History, and Practice of Parrhesia* asks readers to learn about the tradition and meaning of parrhesia *and* to participate in this ongoing practice by making the meaning of parrhesia relevant to us here and now. I want readers to become a conscious part of the

parrhesiastic tradition, naming and analyzing parrhesia when it occurs, noting how moments of parrhesiastic action connect to other moments and effects, and to interrogate these moments through a critical lens, evaluating the truth claims and the ethos of the rhetors who make them. Perhaps inspired readers may even become risky truth tellers themselves, embedding their own lives, words, and actions within this disruptive but necessary act of speaking out, which is especially important for populations who have been traditionally silenced, marginalized, or denied the equal rights upon which we claim our democracy is based.

If parrhesia interests you then I invite you to read on, choosing your reading adventure as your interest, focus, and time constraints allow. As you read, think about parrhesia in your life and in the world around you. Who comes to mind when you think about a “risky truth-teller”? What values or truths does that person represent? Can you recall times you have stood up to defend an important ideal, a marginalized person, or a human right? Have you ever wanted to but feared the consequences or felt alone in challenging the status quo? These are the questions I hope readers will ask as they read *The Theory, History, and Practice of Parrhesia*. The goal of this book is to make a difference in the world and to pass along or amplify a powerful tool for creating change, but before we can skillfully use a tool, we must first understand what it is, how it works, where it comes from, and how we can use it. The upcoming chapters provide readers with a user’s guide to parrhesia so that we see clearly how this tool has been with us all along, though often hidden, just outside of reach and our discursive ability to name it.

PART I

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# A Rhetorical Theory of Parrhesia



## CHAPTER 2

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# What's in a Word? Parrhesia, Rhetoric, and Discursive Fields of Meaning

### OVERVIEW

As with all words and concepts, the idea of parrhesia didn't arise in a vacuum all by itself, but instead came about as part of a constellation of ideas that arose together. While the "History" section of this book deals more directly with the use and users of parrhesia in the Classical Age, to understand the term we have to take a short detour through ancient Athens to talk about the meaning of parrhesia and how it developed alongside other terms and ideas, before following its use and meaning through Western history.

The concept of parrhesia arose as part of a cluster of interrelated ideas such as equality before the law, the equal right to speak before the law, freedom of speech, democracy, and rhetoric in the fourth and fifth centuries BCE in Greece. Parrhesia was a specific type of free speech that involved the duty to enact frank, brave speech and to speak truth for the good of the polis. Because parrhesia and its related concepts deal so closely with governance and the collective decision-making of the community, the original parrhesiastes existed in the public, political realm as orators associated with the practice of rhetoric who were willing to speak the truth to the people of Athens in service of the larger community.

Orators who enacted their duties as citizens utilized parrhesia and it was thought that for a democracy to function, they had to be willing to say

what they meant and say it plainly, honestly, and courageously so that the people could make wise, informed decisions. Orators in Athens took immediate risks in angering the crowd, which could potentially turn on a speaker and become violent or shout down an orator if they didn't like what he was saying (and it was always a "he" in those days). Because the audience had so much power, orators might want to flatter the crowd or tell them what they wanted to hear, so that parrhesia was necessary in order to have the courage to speak, to the point that oratory itself was viewed as a way of developing courage, where speaking truthfully and bravely was part of one's civic duty as a citizen in a democracy.

The use of parrhesia by orators means that, once upon a time, parrhesia and rhetoric worked together to govern the polis; however, this relationship quickly became complicated and diluted, largely because of how parrhesia was discussed in various rhetoric manuals in the first century BCE and shortly thereafter. The idea that parrhesia was a figure of speech that "sounded like" risky truth telling but was preceded by permission and/or followed by flattery is one that was recorded in rhetorical manuals and passed down for centuries. Additionally, the difficulty of translating "parrhesia" into a single Latin word muddied the meaning even further, as sometimes parrhesia was translated as "libertas" and sometimes as "licentia." Further obfuscation of parrhesia came about over the years as Western humanities (which liked to look back to the Greeks and Cicero) went through centuries of monarchic rule, where ideas of liberty and speaking out against power were not encouraged or tolerated, and yet writers, translators, and publishers still had to grapple with the word. The New Testament also mentions parrhesia repeatedly and points toward Jesus and the martyrs as exemplars, but again, as texts were translated throughout the centuries amidst political and religious constraints that discouraged disobedience, the idea of parrhesia was diluted, blurred, and largely lost.

The inconsistent and sometimes contradictory ways of referencing parrhesia represented in texts produced over the centuries since parrhesia first arose, combined with the lack of a single word or concept in Latin-based languages that many in the Western world speak today, is one of the reasons that the potential power of parrhesia and its original meanings have been lost, or at least muddied, over the centuries. As citizens, we have not been able to talk about parrhesia *as parrhesia* for a very long time. Once we are able to recognize and communicate about parrhesia, its effects and influences become clearer, allowing us to see the wider implications of speaking out despite risk when doing so serves the greater good of the community.

## PARRHESIA: A WORD WITH A HISTORY

Neither language nor ideology change quickly, and to understand the concept of parrhesia, it is helpful to grasp a sense of the discursive field in which it emerged along with the terms, ideas, and social practices to which it was closely related and from out of which parrhesia developed. Words—like people, institutions, or ideas—have a history, and while that history is not always apparent to us when we utter a word in conversation, that conceptual past is lurking beneath the surface, whispering connotations and hidden meanings, silently influencing the constellation of ideas brought into that utterance. To speak a word is to insinuate its history.

Parrhesia is no different, excepting its relative disappearance in non-Greek Western languages that makes it so difficult to discuss or analyze today. To recover and understand this term, we must examine the historic meanings of parrhesia, which changed throughout time and across socio-political contexts in the Classical Age and beyond. By doing this, we can trace the alterations in Western consciousness as it grappled with ideas such as freedom, democracy, rhetoric, equality, justice, and power. Understanding the iterative meanings of parrhesia begins the work of grasping the complex tensions between these multiple domains so that in our exploration of the term itself, we unravel age-old struggles and contested priorities. Ongoing debates between social disruption versus maintaining peace, upturning the will of the many over the rights of the few when doing so is in the best interest of society, the conflicts over who is and is not entitled to speak for the polis—all of these struggles are wrapped up in the history of one word, long forgotten in our vernacular, that has been so central to these disputes since the conception of democracy itself. Parrhesia was a significant idea to thinkers, writers, politicians, orators, and philosophers of the ancient Western world, and while we may not use this term often today, it exists repeatedly in the texts that make up our historical past. The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* lists more than 8300 instances of parrhesia (παρρησί-α) or related cognates, 5000 of which occur in the dative and accusative cases, from 676 different authors. The prolific use of parrhesia in these texts points to its importance in the Western, Greek-speaking past and further indicates the importance of recovering this concept for use in the present.

If we look up the meaning of parrhesia today or seek out references to it in rhetorical or philosophic works, we find contradictory representations, and without understanding the history of parrhesia in its original

context and its complex relationship with power, this appears confusing; however, once we grasp the transformations, challenges, and repurposing of the term “parrhesia” in the Classical Age, its multi-layered meaning emerges, its conceptual iterations explained by political and social exigencies of the time. Through interrogating the iterations of parrhesia, we investigate the unfolding of power in the Classical Age, a formative time for many of the Western institutions and political ideals that still influence thought and practice today. The history of parrhesia parallels and is intertwined with changes in human society, thought, and political organization that occurred in the Greek world that made a concept like democracy possible, so it is in this time and place that we begin our examination.

Changes in ideology that made practices such as free speech, parrhesia, and equality possible began centuries before Athens became democratic, beginning with a transition from a clan- and family-based system of aristocratic leaders to the constitutional power of the demos, which eventually led to the need for a concept like parrhesia. The practice of *isonomia*, or equality before the law, had roots going back as far as eighth century BCE Athenian colonization, which included equally distributing parcels of land amongst colonists that disrupted traditional forms of aristocratic authority (McInerney). In these colonies, because all owned equal amounts of property, more citizens were included in assemblies and political practices, and virtues such as truthfulness and justice were clearly embedded culturally.<sup>1</sup> While there is not necessarily a simple, direct line from these early Athenian practices, which varied across the colonized cultures they founded, it is arguably where ideas of equality took root and that this marks the “marriage of equality (to *ison*) to public speaking (*agoreuein*) and hence to *isegoria*,” the equal right to speak before the law, that would come to be identified with Athens a few centuries in the future (McInerney 37–38). Changes in the worldview of some groups of Greeks planted the seeds for later democratic practices, which is the ground in which parrhesia was also able to take root.

The ideological shift toward democracy that gave rise to parrhesia and classical rhetoric can also be viewed as a transition away from older ways of

<sup>1</sup> McInerney’s work, entitled “Nereids, Colonies, and the Origins of Isegoria,” specifically examines the links between mythologies, colonization, and the ways in which early Athenian settlers set up political systems in remote areas. The names given to various nereids and myths of sea-faring from that time point to the importance of these virtues to these early colonists.

thinking about the cosmos as externally controlled by gods, to one of rationally based inquiry and ideas of greater human agency. This change in outlook is apparent when comparing the texts of Protagoras, Thucydides, and Democritus to those by Homer, so that the transition toward democracy coincided with a shift in thinking about the cosmos at large, as a move from external to internal control where, “the transition from an externally-imposed order in which man figures as an all-but-unwitting agent to conscious participation in or ratification of an order still external and mysterious, and eventually a self-determination which declares its virtual independence of *tuche* or external control, is ultimately a political transition” (Farrar 20). The transition from oligarchy to democracy likewise coincided with an alteration in the view of human beings within the cosmos where personal agency played a significant role in the daily life of Athenian politics. As humans’ place in the cosmos changed in the worldview of Athenians, the political order reflected that, showing a congruent paradigm shift at both the cosmological and political level.

Linked to these shifts in ideology was the trend toward greater freedom for citizens, which led to reforms in the Athenian constitutional government by Solon, Cleisthenes, and Ephialtes. These controversial reforms undermined the traditional power of aristocrats, giving citizens more control of government through direct voting procedures, and changed the property requirements for holders of public office, which increased the power of the Assembly. The reforms also implemented the institution of ostracism, whereby any citizen whose power was becoming too great could be voted out of Athenian society for ten years so that no single person or small group of people could hold overwhelming power that could pose a threat to the growingly democratic politics of Athens. These measures set up a governmental system that put power (*kratos*) in the hands of the people (*demos*), or at least those considered citizens.<sup>2</sup> Parrhesia was an integral part of Athenian freedom (*eleutheria*) and “in democratic thinking freedom of speech appears to be one of the most important and necessary ingredients of *eleutheria*” (Momigliano). Parrhesia was a foundational representation of freedom and equality so that “the idea and practice of parrhesia was thought

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that parrhesia in the classical, political sense was part of a complicated hierarchy where the ability to speak in the Assembly was dependent upon multiple factors, such as citizenship, gender, socioeconomic, and immigration status. Additionally, Foucault, Saxonhouse, Maxwell, and others note the complex interplay of reputation, lineage, and/or gender implicated in the practice of parrhesia, as reflected in the plays of Euripides, where issues of political status decide who has the right of free speech.



to be at the very heart of Athenian democracy's coherence as a *politeia*" (Monoson 54). These particular ideas, which address related but distinct concepts, existed in a discursive constellation that articulates the foundational ideology of Athenian democracy.

Parrhesia arose contemporaneously alongside the concepts of democracy, the rights of citizens, and the importance of rhetoric to shape public policy in fourth and fifth centuries BCE Athens and was initially considered to be intricately interwoven with, and necessary to, these related ideas. In its simplest terms, parrhesia is translated as "freedom of speech," though of course its connotations are much more complex than that. More specifically, it can be defined as arising etymologically from "'parrhesiazesthai' [which] means 'to say everything— from 'pan' (everything) and 'rhema' (that which is said)'" (Foucault, *Fearless* 12). The definition given by Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon expands on the specific parts of the word and gives hints about the complexity of usage, defining parrhesia (παρρησί-α) as, first, "outspokenness, frankness, freedom of speech, claimed by the Athenians as their privilege," a definition supported in the upcoming analysis of this practice. Liddell and Scott also note some of the more problematic uses of parrhesia that arise later, including the negative connotations of saying that which is not beneficial, including the idea of parrhesia being a "licence [*sic*] of tongue." Further definitions hint at the power of parrhesia and its complicated relationship to both power and freedom where it includes "freedom of action, power of life and death, licence [*sic*], permission, without fear, openly," as well as a sense of "liberality [and] lavishness" (Liddell and Scott). These definitions show the range of parrhesia but cannot encompass its complexity in practice nor its central role within the context of Athenian democracy, though already ideas of power, life and death, and fearlessness are included in this simple representation, as well as the link between parrhesia and citizenship.

Parrhesia is a specific type of speech that moves beyond typical discursive limits, speaking outside of that which typically is or can be said. Power relations are implicit in this term as the type of free speech connoted is one where the parrhesiastes speaks freely in situations where doing so may be dangerous to his or her well-being, where that which is spoken in some way threatens the majority and/or those in power. Because of this, parrhesia is linked to values such as duty, freedom, social criticism, leadership, resistance, and courage in the face of danger that make it distinct from other forms of speaking.

Parrhesia in the classic sense is typically equated with Athenian democracy<sup>3</sup> and the unique specialized language that arose in that context demonstrates the importance placed on particular kinds of freedom in speaking, including parrhesia, for fifth century BCE Athenian society and politics. In this context, we can see parrhesia in its original form, distilled into a virtue that coincided with democracy, the equality of citizens before the law, and the right of all citizens to speak in public and share opinions. Parrhesia, as a distinct activity that involves a risky critique of power, is strongly linked to these concepts, as well as virtues like courage, bravery, and civic duty. Parrhesia was a central, connecting concept within this constellation, as speaking out even at risk to the self was viewed as a necessary act if or when the polis was about to make a detrimental choice. In a situation where the majority rules as it did in classical democracy, there were times that an individual would need to step forward and speak out, even when most were against him.<sup>4</sup> This was the role that parrhesia played, and it was integral for the ongoing health of democracy as it was initially conceived.

The earliest uses of parrhesia portray it as a virtuous civic duty, central to effective governance in a democratic context. While parrhesia does denote a type of free speech, it was not without bounds or wisdom; a particular kind of ethos and purpose were expected on the part of the speaker, so that even though “speaking parrhesia (meta parrhesias) meant, broadly, ‘saying everything’ ... [and] ... speaking one’s own mind, that is, frankly saying what one thinks” it was often within the context of “uttering a deserved reproach,” especially to those who held a great deal of power (Monoson 52). This type of free speaking did not equate to slanderous or audacious speech, and in fact there were rules against these practices. Rather, parrhesia was a kind of “frank speech ideally expected of [orators] in their roles as advisers to the demos” and reflected the “intellectual autonomy” of these speakers (Monoson 53). This use of parrhesia also points to the importance of rhetoric and oratory in the context of Athenian democracy and the central role that parrhesia played within this context.

While in the later part of Athenian democracy we will see a splintering off of the idea of parrhesia from rhetoric as it moves from the public/

<sup>3</sup> Other contemporaneous Greek cultures (e.g., Sparta) also likely had freedom of speech in their private, and to a degree their civic lives, but they lacked the specialized language to describe either free speech or parrhesia (Raaflaub).

<sup>4</sup> The use of the masculine pronoun is intentional here because in its original context, only males could be citizens and enact the privilege and right of parrhesia. This will change, however, as meanings of parrhesia alter across time and political contexts.