

**THE ARTS AGAINST STEREOTYPES**

**STARTING WITH SCIENCE**

**THE “MATILDA EFFECT”**

**Matilda Joslyn Gage**

An activist and a nonconformist, this American suffragette has dedicated her life to the struggle against injustice. She was involved in cases such as abolitionism or the defense of native Americans, ma si è distinta particolarmente struggle for universal suffrage and emancipation of women.

Matilda Joslyn Gage was a suffragette who fought for providing the right to vote to women in the USA, she actively participated in the abolitionist crusade and, like her father, she reported the abuses that the church committed to women and children, and she supported the claims of native Americans, a society that she considered superior to hers. Everything before the end of the 19th Century.

The contemporary journalist and feminist activist Gloria Steinem wrote that she was «an avant-garde woman among the avant-garde women of her time». Gage was a determined woman, well known because of her ability to push the cases she believed in (for example, for some rights and freedom) to the extreme consequences.

Born in March 1826 near New York, Matilda had a good education, first thanks to her father, then thanks to her studies at the Clinton High School. In 1845 she married Henry H. Gage, with whom she had four children.

Like it happened to the house where she grew up, her home as an adult woman became a point of reference to the Underground Railway, the nickname associated to the undercover network to support fleeing slaves. In many occasions, Gage hid people escaping from slavery in her house, collecting numerous fines and imprisonments.

The interest in the protection of social rights and freedoms that she had cultivated in childhood and youth brought Gage closer to the suffrage movement in the United States. It was a crucial moment for suffrage, in full expansion after the first convention in Seneca Falls, in 1848, in which Matilda could not participate. Instead, she managed to attend the third meeting of the Women's Rights Convention in 1852, during which she proved to be an excellent speaker and writer and confirmed her leadership skills.

Even though she was not as famous as other members of the movement, Gage founded the National Association for Women's Suffrage (NWSA), together with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who are represented by two sculptures in Central Park. She served as president for one year and held other senior positions for another two decades. Among other things, she ran the organization's official newspaper, the National Citizen.

**The '"Matilda effect" in science**

Gage worked for several publications, but it was during her time at the helm of the National Citizen that she was able to write more freely about issues relating to women's suffrage and feminism in general. In each issue of the newspaper, there was a space reserved for a column that focused on women who had played key roles in the course of history, since Gage had set herself the goal of giving back a central position to forgotten historical female figures.

This, more than all of Matilda Joslyn Gage's other battles, is what made her most famous. Following her example, in 1993 the science historian Margaret W. Rossiter used her name to create a concept that she defined the "Matilda effect". The researcher observed how, over the course of history, women had received less and less recognition for their scientific work than they objectively deserved. Recently, the Asociación de Mujeres Investigadoras y Tecnólogas (AMIT) launched the #nomorematildas (“enough with Matildas”) initiative, referring to the effect described by the historian W. Rossiter, to claim the names of many other Matildas forgotten by science.

Unfortunately, like many of her fellow suffragettes who raised their voices in the mid-19th century, Matilda Joslyn Gage was unable to enjoy the results of her lifelong fights. The United States approved the extension of the right to vote to white women in the 1920 presidential election, but the activist died in 1898. The epitaph engraved on her headstone, in the Fayetteville cemetery, perfectly sums up the life and character of this pioneer, activist and fighter: “THERE IS A WORD SWEETER THAN MOTHER, HOME OR HEAVEN. THAT WORD IS LIBERTY”.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/285482>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGiyCl8aZW0&ab_channel=%23NoMoreMatildas>