

COMMENT AND RESPONSE

A RESPONSE TO LAURA NORTHCUTT

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In her article “The Impact of Southern Heritage and Socialist Ideology on the Rhetorical Style of Myra Page,” Laura Northcutt seeks to illustrate and explore what she believes to be Page’s particularly unique rhetoric, a hybrid born of her conflicting roles as Southern woman and socialist. Northcutt first identifies some rhetorical conventions that had traditionally been deployed by each group. Southern women, she writes, had often made great use of the modesty topos—expressions of humility that served to ingratiate female speakers with their audiences while simultaneously preserving and reinforcing gender boundaries. She also draws a strong association between Southern womanhood and the use of pathos, particularly pathetic references to family and family structures. Conversely, traditional socialist rhetoric had been deeply rooted in logos, with minimal use of emotional appeal.

Northcutt posits that Myra Page straddled the two categories, appropriating from and negotiating between the traditions while carving out a rhetorical style all her own. However, characterizations of masculine and feminine appeals in Northcutt’s piece are sometimes slippery. Page deeply valued the family, but this value is alternately characterized by Northcutt as masculine and socialistic when it concerns “the youth of the nation” as an abstract, and as feminine and Southern when it concerns individual families.

Northcutt writes that the young Page hid her nascent socialist views from her family because she didn’t want to create unnecessary tension, asserting, “Page’s concern with protecting her family also reaffirmed her status as a traditional Southern woman” (18). However, she notes also that, in the 1930s, “the socialist presence had firmly taken root in American society . . . and many women adopted socialist ideals as their own as a way out of the ‘cult of domesticity’ that had enslaved them for generations” (17). She later establishes that “the traditional ‘cult of domesticity’ that is usually associated with the South permeated society so deeply that even socialism could not break away from the gender roles that it entailed” (19). While these statements note that domesticity is “usually associated” with the South, they describe all of American society at that time as being deeply domestic. Additionally, Northcutt writes that, when Page takes on the subject of abortion in her article “We Want Our Children,” Page’s general “focus on women’s health care from the perspective of creating and protecting families shows how Page’s Southern upbringing had a strong influence” (21). If American society at large was mired in the “cult of domesticity,” it would seem misleading to characterize concern for protecting families as markedly Southern and problematic to offer such views as evidence of a uniquely Southern rhetoric.

A similar issue arises in the attribution of Southern values to Page’s use of a pseudonym. Northcutt writes that Page began using a pseudonym “because she did not want to cause problems to her family . . . underscoring her status as a Southern woman in her focus on protecting her family despite their ideological differences” (18). Again, regard for the family is categorized as Southern.

However, Northcutt then quotes Christina L. Baker's biography of Page, where Baker writes that Page adopted her pseudonym to achieve a "greater sense of freedom and the advantage of anonymity" (109), and because "she also believed it would be difficult—or rather, improper—for her to 'teach sociology and . . . write radical journalism and fiction at the same time'" (Northcutt 18). Each of these reasons would seem to be congruent with or even to supersede Page's desire to protect her family, yet they are not characterized as Southern; thus it would seem difficult to cite Page's use of a pseudonym as indicative of a distinctly Southern, female rhetoric.

Northcutt hypothesizes that Page omitted the traditional modesty topos—itsself a curious intermingling of ethos and pathos—in favor of socialism's logos and nationalistic pathos, but preserved her Southern identity through her concern with family. However, the evidence of Page's nationalistic pathos is her concern for the youth of the nation. Northcutt writes that "the way [Page] uses nationalism as pathos is important because it prevents her from being overly feminine" (21). Here, concern for the well-being of the nation's youth is characterized as masculine, or, at the least, not feminine. Northcutt goes on to posit that Page's language concerning humankind's "natural passion for its young" is evidence of a "more masculine, nation-based pathos" (22). That the similar concepts of "the nation's young" and "the family" are ascribed opposite gender characteristics is troublesome, particularly when each concept can easily be understood to represent an expression of the national "cult of domesticity."

Northcutt offers compelling evidence that Myra Page represents a departure from traditional female rhetoric, particularly Southern female rhetoric, in her tight evaluation of the modesty topos, and she demonstrates skillfully that Page adopted the heavily logos-oriented style of contemporary socialist writers. However, to mark Page's interest in protecting the family as unmistakably regional and female is a difficult proposition, particularly when also presenting her socialist rhetoric of "the youth" as distinctly masculine and nationalistic.

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Works Cited

- Baker, Christina L. *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1996.
- Northcutt, Laura. "The Impact of Southern Heritage and Socialist Ideology on the Rhetorical Style of Myra Page." *Young Scholars in Writing* 5 (2008): 16–23.