

# “FOR ALL OF US”: FEMININE STYLE IN THE RHETORIC OF ROSALYNN CARTER

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In her essay “A Woman of Power: Rosalynn Carter and the Mental Health Scene,” Marie Whelan provides an insightful neo-Aristotelian analysis of Rosalynn Carter’s rhetorical tactics as she campaigned for mental health care reform in the United States. Whelan’s investigation provides an excellent context for Carter’s feminine persona and role as a mother of the nation figure, though her neo-Aristotelian framework does not fully address the connection between Carter’s rhetorical tactics and her public image. This paper examines Carter’s rhetorical tactics of using personal anecdotes, encouraging unity between herself and her audiences, and inviting audience participation through the lens of the feminine style. Specifically, I examine how Carter utilizes these rhetorical tactics in two newspaper op-eds to effectively support her point while fulfilling her role as a mother of the nation figure. An analysis of Carter’s rhetoric through the lens of the feminine style allows for a more nuanced understanding of Carter’s rhetoric in the context of her public persona and better accounts for the historical period in which she campaigned.

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In “A Woman of Power: Rosalynn Carter and the Mental Health Scene,” Marie Whelan contextualizes and explains Rosalynn Carter’s role as a rhetorical First Lady and presents an analysis of Carter’s rhetoric as she campaigns for mental health care reform in the United States. Though Whelan’s argument is framed by a strong contextual understanding of Carter’s role and her image as a mother of the nation, Whelan’s strictly neo-Aristotelian analysis does not fully bridge the gap between Carter’s rhetoric and her public persona. Analyzing Carter’s use of “feminine style,” a rhetorical lens developed by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, allows for a deeper understanding of Carter’s interactions with her audiences. When analyzed through this lens, Carter’s

tactics of using personal anecdotes, encouraging unity between herself and her audience, and encouraging her audience to participate and support her cause become more meaningful. This lens allows for an understanding of Carter’s rhetorical choices in the context of her role as a mother of the nation.

Whelan begins her essay by establishing context for Carter’s role as a rhetorical First Lady, highlighting Carter’s focus on mental health care. Whelan states that “since many women were still more active in the home world than in the public world, first ladies championed causes that were directly connected to the American woman’s concerns” (16). Carter’s focus on mental health care, especially for children, fits into this category, appealing

to American mothers' concerns and firmly supporting her role as a motherly figure. Though Whelan does an effective job of outlining the history and persona of the rhetorical First Lady, in the analysis that follows, Carter's role as a mother of the nation—and her appeal to American women specifically—acts as an extension of other modes of analysis rather than a frame in and of itself.

Whelan's neo-Aristotelian analysis, though compelling and insightful, focuses mainly on *ethos* and *pathos*, which do not fully account for the context of Carter's persona. Whelan defines the scope of her analysis by saying that Carter utilized "traits that people would expect to come from the republican mother first lady, such as character and emotional appeal" (17). While it is certainly true that Carter's rhetoric includes abundant *ethos* and *pathos*, focusing on these appeals does not allow for a thorough investigation of Carter's role as a mother figure for the nation and her appeal to American women and mothers.

An analysis of Carter's rhetoric through the lens of feminine style, a mode of rhetoric that "emerged out of [women's] experiences" (Campbell 12) and the ways that some women communicate, supplements Whelan's Neo-Aristotelean analysis by connecting an examination of her rhetoric with the context of her persona. This lens of analysis, developed by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in her 1989 book *Man Cannot Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric*, reflects women's rhetorical practices relevant around Carter's time as First Lady. Campbell describes the characteristics of the feminine style, saying, "such discourse will [rely] heavily on personal experience ... invite

audience participation ... and efforts will be made to create identification with the experiences of the audience and those described by the speaker" (13). These characteristics are all abundant in Carter's rhetoric. Further, though people of all genders use the feminine style (Borchers and Hundley 222), Carter's feminine and motherly persona aligns neatly with characteristics of the feminine rhetorical style. Some aspects of the feminine style were identified by Whelan under the umbrella of *ethos* and *pathos*. Though they can be classified as such, analyzing them through the lens of feminine style is more relevant to Carter's public role and persona. An analysis of these elements through the lens of feminine style allows for a more nuanced understanding of Carter's rhetoric as it relates to her persona.

Carter displays an aspect of the feminine style when she uses "personal experience" (Campbell 13) in the form of anecdotes to support her claims, allowing her to make rhetorical choices relevant to her role as a mother of the nation. In a piece written for the *New York Times*, Carter shares a personal anecdote about a family member:

I remember vividly when my cousin came home once to visit his family. I suppose I remember the occasion with such clarity because he chased me down the road—and I have never been more terrified. I do not know why I had to get away. It hurts me now to consider that my cousin probably needed nothing more than friendship and recognition from another child. Yet he was 'different,' and when he ran toward me, my compulsion was to flee. ("Removing")

In this story, Carter reflects on a personal experience relevant to her goal of removing the stigma surrounding mental illness. This personal approach aligns both with feminine style and with what is expected of her as she upholds her motherly persona, displaying the values associated with that role. Specifically, she appeals to her audience's emotions and tells a story about a child, emphasizing her motherly role and appealing to the concerns of wives and mothers across the nation. Whelan states that this story is an example of *ethos* and *pathos* and commends Carter's rhetorical choice because "[a] story is much more engaging than statistics" (18). Though true, this strictly neo-Aristotelian approach to analysis is limited, as it misses an opportunity to connect Carter's rhetorical choices to the motherly role she is adopting, overlooking some of the nuances of the rhetorical tools Carter is employing.

Carter utilizes another aspect of the feminine style when she "create[s] identification" between her rhetoric and her audience (Campbell 13), suggesting that her goal of mental health reform is a universal concern. When discussing the stigma surrounding people with mental illness, Carter states, "we are discriminating against ourselves" ("Removing"). The use of first-person plural pronouns is significant in this piece, as Carter is essentially dissolving the line between rhetor and audience, assuring her audience that they not only share the same concerns but that they are no different from those they should be fighting for. Carter's personal and unifying tone displays characteristics of the feminine style while allowing her to uphold the persona. The same technique is employed when she says, "we reject those who are the most vulnerable because

they have been branded by the old labels that evoke fear or repulsion" ("Removing"). Continuing her use of such a personal tone, Carter pushes this tactic further by including herself when discussing a negative action. Carter admits to wrongdoing while using a tone that is not accusatory but unifying, ensuring that she is not elevated above her audience. This choice allows them to identify more closely with Carter and her cause. Carter uses an aspect of feminine style by encouraging connection between herself and the audience and, by extension, assuming a shared goal of removing the stigma surrounding mental illness.

In an extension of the previous tactic, Carter uses feminine style to encourage the audience to participate and, by extension, to support her cause. This is truly the crux of Carter's rhetorical choice to use feminine style. According to Campbell, "the goal of such rhetoric is empowerment, a term that contemporary feminists have used to refer to the process of persuading listeners that they can act effectively in the world" (13). When discussing her goal of mental health care reform, Carter states, "we are at a crossroads, where we have the opportunity to bring mental health into the mainstream of our nation's health-care system. We must ensure that mental health is integrated into any overall health-care package" ("How We Make"). Here, Carter is continuing her use of personal tone and encouraging audience identification with her cause, though now it is a direct call to action. She does this through empowerment, assuring her audience that they have an "opportunity" to act and reach a shared goal. This empowering rhetoric is also seen when she discusses stigma surrounding mental health and treatment. Carter writes, "we need

to adopt a new attitude that affirms that the mental health of a nation reflects the quality of our lives. A national mental-health cure commitment must not be for ‘them’—but for all of us” (“Removing”). Again, Carter unites her audience, though now she urges them to action to support her cause through empowerment. Carter displays characteristics of feminine style when she encourages her audience to participate and support her cause. By using rhetoric that falls under this classification of feminine style, she can uphold her motherly persona and display the values associated with that role.

Whelan’s neo-Aristotelian analysis provides a strong examination of the *ethos* and *pathos* that Carter employs in her rhetoric, but it does not fully connect Carter’s rhetorical choices with her role and persona. In analyzing Carter’s rhetoric as it relates to feminine style, her tactics of using personal anecdotes, creating identification between herself and her audience, and encouraging her audience to participate and support her cause reveal deeper meaning than if they were considered strictly as examples of *ethos* and *pathos*. By using these tactics of feminine style, Carter encourages her audience to act in support of her cause while simultaneously upholding her role of rhetorical

First Lady and mother of the nation. By analyzing Carter’s rhetoric through this lens, her rhetorical choices are more closely connected to her role, allowing for a more thorough understanding of Carter’s rhetorical choices in context and acknowledgment of the rhetorical period in history in which she campaigned.

While appropriate for Rosalynn Carter as someone whose rhetoric was so closely linked to her feminine and motherly persona, this lens is limiting and potentially reductive today as we move beyond strict gender binaries in all areas of life. Though undeniably used by people of all genders, the feminine style insists upon analyzing rhetorical characteristics as they relate to and ultimately reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Further, as the feminine style is generally used to analyze women’s rhetoric, the rhetorical and persuasive implications of people other than women (such as men and nonbinary people) using the feminine style have gone largely unacknowledged. Modern scholars may find more value in examining how the feminine style is used by people other than women and how the feminine style could be utilized to subvert traditional gender roles instead of supporting them.

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