

## COMMENT AND RESPONSE

### ETHOS AND EPIDEICTIC SPEECH: A RESPONSE TO HOCKERSMITH

*Emily Paige Pusser*  
*Furman University*

In her essay “A New Deal for the American People: A Marxist Analysis of FDR’s First Inaugural Address” in Volume 1 of *Young Scholars*, Lindy Hockersmith notes that the rhetorical “power in Roosevelt’s hands [as he gave the address] . . . was enormous” (35). Hockersmith points to several reasons for this power, most notably the American people’s openness to persuasion due to widespread economic hardships. She then engages in a Marxist analysis of Roosevelt’s speech, and, in doing so, deals mostly with the why of Roosevelt’s rhetorical power. However, an Aristotelian analysis complements Hockersmith’s work by addressing Roosevelt’s use of the artistic proof, ethos, and epideictic speech with elements of “*epainos*” (praise) and “*psogos*” (blame) (Aristotle 1358b). FDR uses the rhetorical strategies of epideictic and political rhetoric in a genre fusion to persuade the American people that “he [knew] best” (Hockersmith 46) how to deal with the economic crises.

Epideictic speech involves “speakers prais[ing] or blam[ing] in regard to existing qualities, but . . . also . . . reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting the course for the future” (Aristotle 1358b). The argument for identifying FDR’s speech as ceremonial rhetoric involves the issues of praise and blame, vice and virtue, and rooting the speech in the present while drawing from the past and looking toward the future. But there is one more element that places this speech in the category of epideictic rhetoric: the audience whom Roosevelt is trying to persuade is the American people, not policy makers or legislators, which would be the case if the speech were exclusively a deliberative (political) speech.

Although Hockersmith never directly states that Roosevelt praised any aspect of the American culture, her references to Roosevelt “invok[ing] the image of the American Dream” (40), much like Pericles invoking the image of the Athenian ideal in his epideictic funeral oration, shows how Roosevelt also used “*epainos*” (Aristotle 1358b) when he spoke about the virtuous aspects of American culture. Likewise, when Hockersmith notes that Roosevelt “ends his speech by reassuring the American people that they have done nothing wrong and that democracy has not failed” (38), she clearly shows Roosevelt praising the American people and democracy. Roosevelt is continually discouraging the vices of past and present American business practices while encouraging the virtues of American society in the people and democracy.

Also consistent with epideictic speech is Roosevelt’s attempt to provide solutions to the problems that had harmed America in the past, hence the birth of the New Deal policy. Roosevelt plainly “project[s] the course for the future” (Aristotle 1358b) when Hockersmith states that “he suggests there is an abundance of goods that, with the help of human efforts, can be produced and distributed to help

revitalize the county” (38). Hockersmith even includes a list of “actions that will be taken to remedy the most important task facing the nation—putting people to work” (38).

By providing a brief history to FDR’s speech, Hockersmith places the reader in the correct context of a panic-stricken U.S. in the midst of economic turmoil and general uncertainty. At the same time, the context supplies support for her explanation that the Depression was one reason why Roosevelt was able to persuade Americans to support his New Deal policy. The times called for a president willing to extend a policy to reinvigorate the U.S.’ domestic scene, and Hockersmith accurately distinguishes this aspect of Roosevelt’s rhetorical power. Likewise, she focuses on another rhetorical power of the speech when she identifies one of the artistic proofs, “established ethos” (42), that Roosevelt develops by invoking “his own credibility as a strong leader” (42). However, an Aristotelian analysis extends the definition of ethos beyond just credibility. For Aristotle, the aspect of character is much more central to the idea of ethos than credibility because even a person with little character can still be “credible” at times (1356a). Yet the mere appearance of believability is not to be desired in one’s speakers. They must have character first so as not to abuse their credibility and then accurately convey that character in the speech to establish ethos. Furthermore, an examination of the aspects of ethos, “practical wisdom (*phronesis*), virtue (*arête*), and good will (*eunoia*)” (1378a), in FDR’s speech shows how he presents himself as someone competent to handle the crisis with the integrity to deal fairly with the poor while attacking the parasitic businessmen. Therefore, recognizing the rhetorical power in Roosevelt’s use of ethos and epideictic, and thus ceremonial, speech extends Roosevelt’s rhetorical power beyond the material circumstances of the time.

### **Works Cited**

- Hockersmith, Lindy. “A New Deal for the American People: A Marxist Analysis of FDR’s First Inaugural Address.” *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 1 (2003): 35-46.
- Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Trans. George A. Kennedy. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.