

THE IMPACT OF SOUTHERN HERITAGE AND SOCIALIST IDEOLOGY ON THE RHETORICAL STYLE OF MYRA PAGE

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In 1954 Lillian O'Connor published *Pioneer Women Orators*, in which she details Aristotle's theory of rhetoric and how women carved their own rhetorical sphere out of it. She asserts that the Bill of Rights launched these attempts in the United States and that "it is time they were examined" (98). However, it was not until decades later that many scholars began seriously devoting time to the study of women's rhetoric. Recent works such as Jacqueline Bacon's *The Humblest May Stand Forth* and Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetoric Retold* chronicle women's use of rhetoric and the struggles they have faced in establishing themselves as "capable and influential rhetors" (Bacon 112). My study builds upon this body of important scholarship by exploring the postsuffrage era rhetoric of a woman, Myra Page, who was compelled to reconcile her Southern heritage and socialist ideology. In the process, she further expanded the sphere of women's rhetoric.

Page's innovative rhetorical style can be seen through her heavy use of logos, as favored by the male leadership of the socialist movement, and the absence of modesty topos associated with Southern femininity. However, she is also able to maintain her Southern femininity through using pathos, which allows her to adhere to the standards of socialist rhetoric. Page's 1937 article "We Want Our Children," which addresses the controversial issue of abortion, serves as a useful site for charting her rhetorical acumen. First, though, it is important to understand the broader context in which Page was situated and her personal history.

Social Change and Rhetorical Exploration

The 1920s and 1930s marked the beginning of an era of radical change in the social atmosphere of the United States. The ratification of Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 was an important milestone for women, who had been challenging traditional gender roles and demanding their political rights for decades. Unfortunately, after they won the vote, women no longer had a united cause around which to rally (Campbell 189). Along with the fight for suffrage, women had banded together to fight for the abolition of slavery, for temperance, for women's property rights, and a host of other causes. While working on behalf of these causes, women rhetoricians, especially those from the South, drew heavily upon modesty topos.

Modesty topos, which dates back to the Middle Ages, is the literary convention many women use to humble themselves so that their audience will accept and acknowledge their public expression (Glenn 108).¹ Even queens of England, such as Catherine Parr and Elizabeth I, were forced to rely on modesty topos because of the "deliberate and systematic marginalization from rhetorical activity" that they faced as women (143). Women of the abolitionist movement used modesty topos in their struggle to appear both "virtuous" and "rhetorically authoritative" (Bacon 112). The effort to seem virtuous was especially important in the American South, where women were forced to create a new type of rhetoric in order to cope with their special social circumstances. Even though the Nineteenth Amendment

was a milestone, social constraints still forced women to excuse themselves to establish legitimacy for participating in the public sphere. The modesty topos remained a powerful rhetorical resource for female rhetoricians.

However, the 1930s presented a new time for women, and they started to “find themselves” (Baker 157). As a result, many women joined the socialist and communist movements in their search for a new identity. The socialist presence had firmly taken root in American society by the 1930s, and many women adopted socialist ideals as their own as a way out of the “cult of domesticity” that had enslaved them for generations. However, socialism in America during this time period did not fully practice the true equality that it preached. This can be seen through the rhetorical style that many women adopted as a result of the pressures they faced as members of the socialist movement. In contrast to many Southern women writers, socialist women focused on establishing legitimacy through using logos and a more masculine form of pathos based on nationalism, rather than domesticity. Myra Page, a native Southerner and an advocate for social justice, represents a unique voice in the study of women’s rhetoric because she adopted the logos of the socialist movement and abandoned the feminine tradition of modesty topos. Page’s unique stance makes her an important example in studying women’s rhetoric.

Myra Page: Southerner and Socialist Advocate

Dorothy Page Gary was born on 1 October 1897 and spent the majority of her youth in Newport News, Virginia. She later took the pen name “Myra Page” for her literary career. The daughter of a doctor, she was raised in a white, upper-middle-class family and enjoyed many of the typical comforts of her race and socioeconomic class, such as financial security and greater opportunities for higher education. Page was not, though, oblivious to the race and class tensions that existed within her hometown. Biographer Christina Baker states that Dr. Gary opposed the Ku Klux Klan and because of this many Klan members and supporters discriminated against the Gary family (21). Baker details how a neighbor would ask Dr. Gary for medical aid, but refused to let his kids play with young Dorothy and her siblings for fear that they would “corrupt” his children simply because they were raised with the belief that there was “no harm in black and white people mixing together” (21). Instances such as these caused Page to balk at the “southern way of doing things,” and she gradually began gravitating toward more socialist views (29).

Page was greatly influenced by her father’s sense of social justice, but it was another man, a neighbor by the name of Alfred Hauser, who exposed her to the socialist ideology that she later adopted. Hauser, a Frenchman with strong socialist ideals, had escaped to the United States and settled in Virginia in 1881. He had been arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment for his involvement in the Paris Commune, the socialist government that briefly ruled Paris in the spring of 1871. Hauser jumped overboard en route to the notorious French prison, Devil’s Island, and found asylum in Switzerland before immigrating to the U.S. (Baker 220). At the beginning of World War I, Page was seventeen years old. Throughout the war, she and Hauser often talked and “cried together” over the travesty that they believed the war to be (42). He taught Page the “truth” of the war and that wars would continue to occur “as long as imperialism and capitalism existed.” Page was influenced by his beliefs and adopted them as her own. She became increasingly vocal in her opinions and even refused to celebrate the end of the war because she believed it had been fought in vain.

This point of view was not easily accepted by the traditional Southern society in which she lived, and it was a “scandal” for her family, who “didn’t like fusses” (Baker 42). Page’s family members

could never fully understand nor accept her views, and she gradually realized that she would have to “break away” to avoid continuing to “get them in trouble over things they didn’t believe in” (42). This realization solidified her position as a political outcast in her family, but Page’s concern with protecting her family also reaffirmed her status as a traditional Southern woman. Despite her deviance in political opinion, Page’s adherence to the important Southern value of protecting family shows the continuing influence of her upbringing on her behavior.

The importance of Page’s Southern upbringing is also illustrated by the fact that she did not become an outspoken activist in her youth despite her fervent adoption of socialist values. Throughout her college career she came in contact with several prominent women in the female suffrage movement whom she greatly respected. However, she and her colleagues had a more passive attitude about the movement because “as women, [they] were taught not to make scenes” (Baker 32). The suffrage movement was known for the outlandish actions of many of its advocates, but Page was “too traditional in [her] thinking to break away.” Page’s inaction was not the result of an ideological disagreement with the issue of women’s right to vote; rather, her traditional Southern upbringing influenced her so strongly that she simply could not bring herself to participate overtly in the movement.

The traditional values that had been instilled in Myra Page during her youth did not dissuade her from continuing her education. Page, in fact, became a very well-educated woman, receiving her MA in sociology from Columbia University in 1921 and her PhD in the same discipline from the University of Minnesota in 1928. The research for her dissertation, “Some Behavior Patterns of Southern Textile Workers,” later became the basis of *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor*; which was the “first piece written about the South from a progressive-Left point of view” (Baker 98). This marked the beginning of Page’s literary career, although she had taken a few creative writing courses as an undergraduate (Baker 38). Page is best known for her longer works, such as *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* (1932) and *Moscow Yankee* (1935), which focus on the labor movement and workers’ rights.

During her academic studies, Myra Page met John Markey, a fellow student, and they wed in 1925. They later traveled together to the USSR as part of their interest and involvement in the socialist movement (Baker 95). Page and Markey had two children, one of whom they adopted (173). Her marriage and family affirmed her success as a Southern woman, but her socialist ideology and her journalism career “defied the expectations” of her family (xviii). In her professional career, however, Page began using a pen name, partially because she did not want to cause problems to her family (109), again underscoring her status as a Southern woman in her focus on protecting her family despite their ideological differences.

Myra Page had other reasons for adopting a pen name. One, she felt that it would give her a “greater sense of freedom and the advantage of anonymity” (Baker 109). She also believed that it would be difficult—or rather, improper—for her to “teach sociology in a university and write radical journalism and fiction at the same time.” Her use of a pen name had a profound impact on her life, as it essentially became a second name and she would readily answer to either. The prominence that she gained as Myra Page is exemplified by the fact that her collection of papers in the Southern Historical Collection archives is known as the “Myra Page Papers,” not the “Dorothy Markey Papers.”

Southern Women and the Rhetorical Power of Modesty

For Southern women, the modesty topos was a particularly powerful rhetorical resource. Southern women like Page were put on “pedestals” and expected to behave in a certain manner (Baker 27). Anne Goodwyn Jones elaborates on the ideal of the white Southern woman and states that she is

“compliant, deferential, sacrificial, nurturant, domestic, quietly and uncontroversially intelligent, chaste, beautiful, cultured, religious, and loyal to her region and to its definition of herself” (352). Southern women, therefore, represent a more regionally specific version of “True Womanhood.” In *The Humblest May Stand Forth*, Bacon defines “True Womanhood” as being “self-effacing, noncompetitive, unassuming, and modest” (112). All of these characteristics outlined by Jones and Bacon explain the standard to which Southern women were held and also echo traditional axioms pertaining to women, such as that they should “be seen and not heard.”

Another important aspect of life for Southern women was the domestic sphere—marriage and family. The social hierarchy of the American South discouraged women from working outside the home and pursuing career goals. Marriage, therefore, was “the goal” for every girl growing up; it was the “only success” they could hope to attain (O’Connor 8). Family and the home were essential to the identity of Southern women and it was incumbent upon them to protect this ideal. According to O’Connor, “failure to marry was synonymous with failure in life,” a statement that illustrates the strong sway the cult of domesticity had over women.

However, instead of merely limiting themselves to these traditional ideals, Southern women embraced them, using them to their advantage to justify their place in the realm of rhetorical authority. For instance, the motto of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, “For God, and Home, and Native Land,” affirms women’s traditional status and expands it to justify their public involvement (Mattingly 40).² The “Native Land” aspect of the motto instills a sense of nationalism and makes it permissible to claim that women are acting out of a moral duty to their fellow man. Women sought to cultivate a new sphere of influence for themselves, and successfully, albeit paradoxically, did so by upholding the ideals of “True Womanhood.” Additionally, Southern women developed their own rhetorical style in order to better establish credibility within their traditional social milieu. Their rhetorical style is marked by a heavy use of modesty topos, which, as noted earlier, is the literary convention many women use to humble themselves so that their audience will accept and acknowledge their public expression.

Women, Literary Expression, and the Left

In great contrast with the modesty topos that Southern women had been using to great advantage, the language and literature from the socialist movement heavily emphasized logos as a rhetorical device. The Left, including socialists and communists, in the United States had a strong influence on society during the 1920s and 1930s. Many women adopted socialist ideals in their quest for women’s rights, economic equality, and social justice. However, in the 1930s gender discrimination existed within the socialist movement just as it did within the rest of society, especially in the South. 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. How could a political ideology that so vehemently preached the value of equality blatantly deny women equal status with men?

In her article “Women and the Left in the 1930s,” Barbara Foley presents arguments to explain why gender stereotypes and discrimination existed within socialist political parties and social movements. The most pertinent of these is the idea that “Marxism does not require a confrontation with sexism” (156).

Leftist men of the 1930s, and some leftist women, carelessly reproduced the behaviors, assumptions, and iconography of mainstream bourgeois culture because Marxism is essential-

ly blind to questions of gender and needs to be supplemented by an autonomous women's discourse that has at most a coalitional relation to the class-based left. (156)

In other words, socialism was based on ideals of the purest equality possible and simply did not take petty matters such as gender into account. However, if this argument is sound, then it is also a testament to how entrenched traditional gender roles were in American society during this time period.

As a result of traditional gender roles permeating the socialist movement of the 1930s, "the left press often presupposed male readership or at least adopted a male gaze" (Foley 153). In doing so, the rhetorical requirements for leftist authors centered on a heavy use of logos instead of other literary devices—certainly not any kind of modesty topos. This made it difficult for women who shared many of the same fundamental ideological viewpoints to write and publish in a manner that would allow them to fully express themselves. The notion of "equality" that proletarians passionately preached about apparently did not apply to gender equality. When women did write, they were often "cautioned not to sound too much like women" (154), which constituted a problem because women already had the difficulty of presenting themselves as legitimate authors on the basis that writing in general "unsexed" (Ty) them and made them less credible to a general audience. These types of social constraints that Page faced as a writer on the left had an effect on her rhetorical style.

Surprisingly, many women accepted their inferior role in the realm of writing proletarian literature, just as many women have accepted their inferior role throughout history. In an effort to maintain a united front in the labor movement, many women "glossed over" gender issues and attempted to write like their male counterparts (Foley 155). For many, the issue was simple: "The relationship between gender and class was integral; men and women were to be united in the struggle for a better world because they could not conceive of a route to women's emancipation that did not presuppose the liberation of the proletariat from the wage relation" (165). This idea is decidedly related to the argument that socialism simply does not have an ideological standpoint on matters of gender. Myra Page is an example of a woman who firmly supported the labor movement and was not overly concerned with the gender inequality within the socialist movement. The labor movement played an important part in Page's development politically and as an author, but it did not cause her to accept an inferior role, as many women of the time period did. A close reading of Page's "We Want Our Children" highlights the rhetorical style she developed in contrast to her female contemporaries.

A Closer Look at Page's Rhetorical Acumen: "We Want Our Children"

In 1937 Page wrote an article entitled "We Want Our Children," published in an unidentified newspaper. The article can be found within an assortment of newspaper clippings in Page's inventory in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but unfortunately the original publication information has been lost. This article focuses on the dangers and difficulties of having children. It argues that "socialism" is the only way to alleviate these problems (5); however, Page's socialist political views do not keep her Southern upbringing from influencing her arguments or rhetorical style. Page represents a unique case, in that her rhetorical style is influenced by her Southern heritage, but the special social constraints she faced as a woman in the socialist movement prevent her style from completely adhering to typical Southern women's rhetoric.

Throughout "We Want Our Children" Page uses many instances of logos and pathos in order to convey her message, establishing her credibility through these rhetorical means instead of using strategies common to many Southern women, such as the modesty topos. Page's lack of a modesty topos is an example of how her writing differs from typical Southern women's rhetoric because of the influ-

ence of gender inequality within the socialist movement. As discussed earlier, many women were told not to “sound too much like women” in their writing (Foley 154). This presented a credibility problem because many women adopted strategies such as the modesty topos in order to reaffirm their womanhood and establish legitimacy by proving that writing did not “unsex” them. Page’s unique case is shown by the fact that she strongly uses logos and a neuter form of pathos, notably nationalism. Page adheres to the social constraints she faced in both the South and the socialist movement by replacing the modesty topos with pathos and logos in order to establish her credibility.

In the beginning of her article Page uses pathos when she asserts that children are the “heart and temper” of a nation (5). This is pathos because it is eliciting a nationalist emotion in her audience in order to render it open to persuasion. The way she uses nationalism as pathos is important because it prevents her from being overly feminine. She continues with a universal appeal, stating that “one love has compelled men to vast dreams and acts: passion for its young.” Page is again trying to elicit emotion from the audience before using logos to establish her credibility. Also, Page’s appeal to the value of family is something that Southern women especially should hold dear to their hearts, and her use of the word “men” should be interpreted in the universal sense of “humankind,” which includes women. However, by choosing the word “men” she avoids making a pointed comment about how women, especially, were traditionally obliged to promote the importance of family. Through her initial use of pathos focused on the nation, Page is able to begin establishing credibility in an acceptable way for both a female socialist author and a Southern woman.

Page again elicits a sense of nationalism as she launches into her use of logos in the next section of her article. Following the format of her title, “We Want Our Children,” she asserts that “we Americans” appreciate the value of life, “we” love children, and “we” want them (5). Her continual use of “we” creates a sense of solidarity with her audience that is not only part of an emotional appeal, but also a way to establish credibility. After creating an atmosphere of camaraderie Page lists facts, such as “Eight thousand women die from abortions,” in order to prove her legitimacy in writing this article. Page successfully establishes her credibility while adhering to the informal rules for socialist female writers, but without losing her femininity because of the nature of her article.

“We Want Our Children” presents an interesting claim that is appropriate considering both Page’s Southern heritage and her socialist ideology. Page claims the problem with the state of women’s health care is that “its roots are enmeshed in the very foundation of our society”: “American society and its laws—economic and civil—are directly responsible for their deaths” and “only socialism” can solve these problems (5). Essentially, Page is blaming capitalism for creating the poverty and lack of access to health care that drive women to seek abortions. Obviously, this is directly correlated with her socialist ideology, but her overall focus on women’s health care from the perspective of creating and protecting families shows how Page’s Southern upbringing had a strong influence on her thinking. The importance of family and protecting the household is a common Southern value that has pervaded through to Page’s socialist ideology and adapted to become a central aspect of her argument for reform.

As an example to prove her claims in the article, Page relates an anecdote about “Martha D.” in order to elicit pathos. Page repeatedly claims that there is a problem with the health care system in the United States and that socialism is the only way to remedy it. Abortion was hotly contested in the 1930s, and Page uses this anecdote to show that the typical woman seeking an abortion was not the “young girl ‘in trouble’” but one who simply could not afford to feed another child (5). In this anecdote, Martha D. and her husband, Jack, discover that they are going to have their fifth child. They both “hated the idea” of having an abortion, but they decided it was necessary because it was not “fair” to

their other children to “divide their two quarts of milk five ways.” Martha D. dies as a result of the operation and Jack, a blue-collar worker, is left to feed four children. He is described by Page as one of the “most dogged sit-downers” in a strike, thus illustrating the relationship between women’s health care and workers’ rights. This also affirms Page’s claim that the problem, inherent within the American capitalist system, can be solved only by socialism.

Page demonstrates that she still holds traditional Southern values while upholding basic socialist principles throughout her evaluation of the different health care systems in the United States and the Soviet Union. Page denounces abortion, a position congruent with popular opinion throughout the conservative South, when she says that women suffer from “serious physical and mental consequences” as a result of the operation (5). However, instead of advocating the outlawing of abortions based on this reasoning, she asserts, as a socialist, that clinics should be established in order to provide better and cheaper health care to women who seek birth control methods in order to render abortions “unnecessary.” As much as Page promotes the idea of clinics in America, she criticizes the way they are run in the Soviet Union. There, free clinics had caused many women to take on a “very casual attitude” about abortions because they did not have to worry about the social, emotional, or legal repercussions of them. Page abhors this attitude because in the Soviet Union all children can be “well cared for” and their mothers can continue to live “full-rounded lives.” The Soviet Union itself, under the rule of Joseph Stalin, outlawed abortion in 1936 in order to promote the growth of families (Evans). The social and political atmosphere in the Soviet Union differed greatly from that of the United States, illustrating how it was safe for Soviet society to have abortion outlawed. Cases like Martha D., according to Page, did not occur in the Soviet Union with the same frequency that they did in the United States.

In her criticism of the free clinics in the Soviet Union, Page shows a decidedly traditional Southern attitude in the importance that she places on family, but she maintains that American capitalism is to blame. Page states that in America many women believe that Soviet women are being “robbed” of their rights because of this new Soviet law. According to American women, Soviet women are losing their “right *not* to have children” (5). Page shows her own emotion when she comments that this statement causes her to feel a “deep anger” at “what capitalism can do to people.” By showing her own emotion, Page can continue to elicit the same feelings from her audience. From a rhetorical perspective, Page attacks this viewpoint, eliciting pathos by calling it a “negative, fearful approach to living” and a “perversion” of humankind’s “natural passion for its young.” She uses these phrases in the middle of her article to elicit a more masculine, nation-based pathos from the audience in order again render it open to persuasion before she makes her last major point.

Although she criticizes the “casual attitude” that Soviet women had regarding abortion because of the existence of free clinics, she still affirms that they need to be established in the United States. Abortion is a “necessary evil” in the U.S. because its capitalist society causes women to live in constant fear of having more children than they can afford. Women in the Soviet Union could freely and safely get abortions, but they were “unnecessary” because the socialist system allows all children to be well provided for (5). The 1936 law in the USSR effectively showed how unnecessary abortions were and prevented women from taking advantage of the socialist health care system. Essentially, for Page, socialism is really the only long-term solution to the problem of a women’s health care system. She does not support the idea of abortion, but she recognizes its place in American society so that families can have longer and healthier lives together. Page proves her claim that reform of the women’s health care system is necessary through the distinctive rhetorical style she cultivates specially for the social constraints she faces.

Conclusion

Page's unique rhetorical style makes her an important figure to consider in the study of women's rhetoric. Her Southern upbringing firmly grounded her in traditional values, such as the importance of family and the need to protect it. Her commitment to the socialist movement gave her the fuel to speak out against the injustices she saw around her, which in this case is the need for the reform of the women's health care system in the United States. These two different facets of her life caused her to reconcile their respective rhetorical requirements and create a new style of argumentation. Page furthers the rhetorical efforts of women by replacing the modesty topos ingrained in women's rhetoric with a heavy emphasis on logos and a pathos that taps into nationalism, rather than domesticity. "We Want Our Children" provides an important illustration of the significance of this type of rhetoric. Her value and contribution to the study of Southern women's rhetoric, and women's rhetoric overall, are due to the rhetorical style that she developed as a socialist, Southern woman.

Notes

¹ Modesty topos does not refer to modest behavior or sexual decorum. It is a literary and rhetorical convention used to refer to humility that allowed women to be appropriately feminine and not overly assertive. For further explanation, please consult Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetoric Retold*.

² It must be noted that the WCTU does not represent a specifically Southern group, as women were highly involved on a nationwide scale. This is an important detail to highlight because there were not many regionally specific groups for Southern women. Groups that did exist, such as the Daughters of the Confederacy, still do not have a large amount of scholarship devoted to them, especially not regarding their rhetorical attributes and activity.

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