

The Rhetoric of Fear through the Use of Prolepsis in "Mrs. America"

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Mrs. America is a TV miniseries of nine episodes created by Dahvi Waller which firstly aired on April 15-May 27, 2020. The series reflects the fight between feminist and anti-feminist groups over the history of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the United States. The amendment sought to make sure that “equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United or by any State on account of sex”. The protagonist of the series is Phyllis Schlafly, Mrs. America, who embodies the conservative organiser whose Eagle Forum, STOP (Stop Taking Our Privileges) ERA movement and other antifeminist organisations succeeded in halting the ERA.

In the TV series, Phyllis unfolds her anti-ERA views through an array of utterances that can be analysed and further interpreted by applying a rhetorical argumentation model, one that enhances, on the one hand, the rational and linguistic mechanisms that can be found in her speeches and, on the other, the persuasive effects of those speeches upon her audience (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969). Attention is thus paid to the devices used between Mrs. America and her considerably female public, and how this specific group of citizens may be influenced or compelled by their efficacy.

In the course of her speeches, Phyllis selects several figures that aim at a specific choice of words that may become, as a result, an effective persuasive strategy. This article seeks to analyse Phyllis’s anti-ERA views mainly through the use of prolepsis, a rhetorical figure that has been characterised as forecasting and foreseeing objections in different ways (Tindale 2004, 53; Lanham 1991, 120; Quintilian 1920, 9.2. 16-18). Yet this definition is just one of several related meanings that this figure possesses. For Mehlenbacher (2017, 234), prolepsis can be identified both as a rhetorical figure and as an argument strategy in that it “aids the construction of some future event or moment in present-minded, concretised items, a kind of foreshadowing or predicting”. Prolepsis is in this sense related with the argument from the consequences, also called pragmatic argument, already being found in Aristotle’s *Rhetorica* as that used by one party to persuade the other party of the good or bad consequences that something may have (Walton 1999, 255).

As to the methodology used in this paper, we have watched all of Phyllis’s speeches dealing with her anti-ERA position and have carefully transcribed her words. We have analysed her utterances looking for instances of prolepsis and have commented upon them.

The conclusions of this study show how Mrs. America makes use of prolepsis to advance a list of negative effects that will inevitably take place if the ERA succeeds and, throughout the episodes analysed, she highlights all the possible calamities that will occur to American women in that fateful circumstance.

Keywords: Mrs. America, rhetorical argumentation, prolepsis, rhetorical figure, argument from the consequences.

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