THE ETHOS OF MOTHERHOOD:
NOMINATING AMY CONEY BARRETT AND KAMALA HARRIS

Aaron Toscano

UNC-Charlotte

In fall 2020, two women on opposite sides of the political spectrum were promoting themselves for high-level political positions. From the court of public opinion to the hearings for nominating a Supreme Court Justice, the candidates, their supporters, and the media conveyed their qualifications and personae. Amy Coney Barrett and Kamala Harris were in the spotlight as nominees of then President Donald J. Trump and presidential candidate Joe Biden, respectively. Both were chosen based on their qualifications for their respective jobs as well as their gender. They had to project an ethos of femininity and, specifically, motherhood. The differences in the ways the candidates approached the goal of conveying credible characteristics in the public sphere demonstrate "the political potential of maternal frames" to "the rhetoric of motherhood" (Stavrianos 4). Such an analysis requires a review and update on classical assumptions of ethos to explain how culturally defined values reproduce characteristics that convey credibility and recognition to audiences. In the contemporary hypermediated public sphere, a subject's reputation is not solely the creation of the individual; instead, it is a concept audiences filter based on experience and worldview, including personal biases and cultural ideologies.

Ethos is an ancient concept that scholars usually attribute to Aristotle's classification, and it is one of the three dominant modes of persuasion along with pathos and logos. Several scholars choose to consider ethos a solely personal construction either in the moment of a speech or through a speaker's reputation (Baumlin; Corbett; Crowley and Hawhee; Hyde; Smith). Others recognize the cultural construction of ethos as a community-defined, social act (Halloran;

Holiday; LeFevre; Miller; Reynolds). In fact, both groups would appreciate the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first definition of "ethos": "Character or characterization as revealed in action or its representation; the quality of the permanent, as opposed to the transient or emotional" ("Ethos, N., Sense 1."). Although this is a good definition, it considers ethos as a permanent quality, which is inadequate for postmodernity and its fragmented delivery of communication. A variety of outlets inundate audiences with messages about topics, including personae of public figures, and audience perspectives may change over time.

Additionally, ethos is not the sole construction of an individual or even discourse community. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s second definition captures this better: "The characteristic spirit of a people, community, culture, or era as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations; the prevailing character of an institution or system" ("Ethos, N., Sense 2.a."). The recent COVID-19 pandemic highlights this well: The public received medical advice (masking, hand washing, social distancing, etc.) from a variety of sources. The messages from well-stablished medical authorities (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] and the World Health Organization [WHO]) were filtered through media outlets. Some messages came through particular outlets with less bias; whereas, other outlets, especially social media, conveyed messages incompletely and with great bias. The ethos of an established medical authority was not universally received: The important credentials and characteristics of Dr. Anthony Fauci, a well-known medical authority, signaled respect for some constituencies and disrespect for others. Furthermore, while some considered information from the CDC and WHO to be positive, others considered the messages to be authoritative, thus, the credentials and reputations the organizations conveyed were not universally appealing.

Likewise, separate constituencies received the characteristics of Amy Coney Barrett and Kamala Harris differently. Both had to convey characteristics that made them credible, and those characteristics included femininity. In particular and the subject of this article, the characteristics of motherhood (or lack thereof) were aspects of the candidates' ethea (plural for ethos). These two women, in 2020, still had to adhere to standards of femininity that a large swath of the public (Democratic, Republican, and Independent) finds essential for women in power. Much research over the past two decades has been done on how individuals and groups use a maternal ethos to advocate for political causes (Buchanan; Crowley; Greenlee; Knudson; Poe; Stavrianos). This article analyzes the way the ethos of motherhood—the characteristics culturally ascribed to the idea of mothers—constructed these candidates' personae and, perhaps, legitimized them for their nominated positions. This is not a political science review where I locate *the* messages that influenced voters. It is a rhetorical analysis that suggests how their messages might have reached Trump's and Biden's bases, which is an important distinction because both women are *used* to convey messages in support of the men running for President.

Ancient Greek Assumptions of Ethos

A thorough discussion of both ethos and its history are beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to explain how my use differs from the ancient Aristotelian notion of ethos constructed solely during a speech or solely from a known individual's reputation. In classic Aristotelian theory, ethos is the projection of one's character or credibility, and a speaker creates that message during the speech and adheres to community standards of integrity. Aristotle introduces ethos as a mode (or proof) of persuasion employed "in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence" (*Rhetoric* 1356a). Presumably, providing details about one's moral

and professional character conveys a trustworthy persona to the audience. Isocrates, the sophist who lived 98 years (making him a contemporary of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle), has a similar assumption about good character and claims that a virtuous person will “speak and write speeches worthy of praise and honor [and] will not possibly select topics that are unjust or insignificant” (276). The essence of a morally good person is having credibility, which one can project through speech.

Although modern readers will recognize the circularity of this argument (i.e., “a good person has good character”), ancient rhetoricians, such as Plato and Isocrates, believed in immutable truths and the inherent goodness or wickedness of an individual’s soul. This essential goodness according to Isocrates makes a speaker more credible to an audience:

> Who could fail to know that speeches seem truer when spoken by those of good name than by the disreputable, and that arguments acquire more authority when they come from one’s life than from mere words. The more ardently someone wants to persuade his audience, the more he will strive to be a gentleman (*kalos kagathos*) and to have a good reputation among the citizens. (278)

Therefore, a good reputation and general honorableness help persuade audiences not through nefarious means of deception and demagoguery but through the inherent goodness of a speaker’s constitution and metaphysical soul, which I will return to later in this section.

A speaker’s perceived “goodness” or “badness” is socially constructed and maintained. Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee note, at least for “the Greeks[,]…a good character could be constructed by the habitual practice of virtuous acts” because one can build up “a good reputation in the community, [and] they can use it as an ethical proof—this is situated ethos,” and “a rhetor brings it to the rhetorical situation” (149). “Situated ethos” is similar to a reputation

audiences might have of a speaker. Crowley and Hawhee adapt Aristotelian theory and refer to an ethos constructed during a speech as “invented ethos” (149). Likewise, Edward P. J. Corbett notes that “the ethical appeal is asserted, according to Aristotle, when the speech itself impresses the audience that the speaker is a person of sound sense” (80). Corbett (as would many rhetoric scholars) acknowledges that non-single authored messages, such as advertisements, convey ethos, pathos, and logos, but he privileges focusing on oratory or authorship of a fixed text. He also points to an ideal that contemporary audiences will certainly not consider universal in American political contexts when he asserts that Aristotle’s assumptions of ethos refer to an ideal ethical orator/author: “If a discourse is to reflect a person’s moral character, it must display an abhorrence of unscrupulous tactics and specious reasoning, a respect for commonly acknowledged virtues, and an adamant integrity” (81). While fairness, decency, and integrity seem important attributes for public figures, examples abound to demonstrate that populist candidates garner much support while violating commonly assumed standards of decency.

Also, speakers do not just build trust in the moment of speaking, and their reputations are not universally considered credible. As contemporary rhetoric scholars mention, ethos should include speaking and writing, but it should also include characteristics specific to community assumptions of what it means for a particular person or entity (e.g., a company) to attempt to convey character and, above all, credibility. Audiences have biases and nitpicky pet peeves that affect their reception of a speaker’s character. Conveying one’s credibility is a complex dialogic event because audiences filter speakers’ messages. Audiences and communities, in general, have intersubjective assumptions regarding who is credible, such as well-known public figures; also, they have assumptions on what characteristics are important for trusting an expert, such as medical authority.

Historically, characteristics of confidence and pragmatism convey socially acceptable trustworthiness. As Aristotle points out, "We believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt" (*Rhetoric* 1356a). Nedra Reynolds explains that "[*ethos*] is a complex set of characteristics constructed by a group, sanctioned by that group, and more readily recognizable to others who belong or who share similar values or experiences" (327). Therefore, an audience's prejudices and overall worldviews filter their reception of particular characteristics. Although audiences from different political affiliations may have common assumptions about what is generally ethical or unethical, their affinities for a particular politician or political party mediate the persuasiveness of a message.

A major area of theorizing ethos in contemporary scholarship deals with personal constructions within space and place (Baumlin; Baumlin and Meyer; Hyde; Reynolds; Smith). Craig R. Smith explains this through Aristotelian theory: "For Aristotle, it is a given: everyone has *ethos* whether it be noble or ignoble. Before one even speaks, that ethos has an *ontological* dimension because it emerges from the way one makes decisions, the way one lives on a day-to-day basis, the way one dwells" (2; first italics in source). Smith's assertion allows ethos to be negative or positive, meaning there is no reason for ethos to equate to being credible or ethical; instead, one may convey a "noble or ignoble" persona, and audiences may determine one is credible or not credible based on their worldviews. James S. Baumlin considers ethos antithetical to postmodern theory "since the very notion of the sovereign individual now falls under question" (xxi). A subject is no longer "free" to construct credibility in a *tabula rasa* way; instead, the individual is socially constructed, and the meanings associated with a speech act will be endlessly deferred in the Derridean sense of *differance*.

Although Baumlin and Meyer believe that an individual compiles an ethos through social interactions, they privilege ethos as personal: "the highest aim of ethotic discourse is, or ought to be, *to share one's story*" (17). Michael J. Hyde emphasizes the moment of speech as important because "the practice of rhetoric operates in the immediacy of the present; it seeks thought and action in the everyday world of the here and now" (xviii). Reynolds considers ethos a negotiation where "writers struggle to identify their *own* positions at the intersections of various communities and attempt to establish authority *for themselves* and their claims" (333; emphasis added), which, again, emphasizes the writer/speaker as the prevailing agent. There is room for ethos as conveyed characteristics, which I discuss later, but the overwhelming sense of ethos from most theorists is that it is a personal presentation that assembles attributes before but, mainly, during speech.

Additionally, some theorists insist that ethos as a place derives from members of a community gathering together (Halloran 60; Holiday 389; Hyde xx; LeFevre 45; Miller 112). Because rhetoric is mainly concerned with public delivery—written and spoken, active and passive—audiences will share many assumptions of community-defined attributes of character. For instance, an audience listening to a politician from the party they support most likely shares common policy assumptions; members of a particular congregation understand references to common religious norms and texts; and shoppers returning to the same grocery store trust the quality of products and believe in the efficacy of messages surrounding sales pricing (e.g., "buy one, get one free"). Members of organizations (schools, unions, neighborhoods, country clubs, etc.) will share world views to some extent, so ethos as a socially constructed idea needs no qualification.

The Difficulty in Establishing a Metaphysics of Ethos

What is difficult for theorists to defend in regard to ethos is when they cling to ancient figures' metaphysical assumptions. Plato claims, "The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable" (*Phaedo* 80b). Plato's philosophy rests in large part on the "Theory of Forms," which translator Walter Hamilton explains as "reality is to be found only in a world of eternal and unchanging Forms, of which the shifting phenomena of the sensible world are imperfect imitations or copies" (5). Although one cannot grasp perfection, one knows it exists, and objects in the world are imperfect copies of a perfect Form. Therefore, a perfect ethos exists, and a mortal could not convey such perfection; however, through strict philosophical pursuit, one's soul could reach perfection after thousands of years of reincarnation, which Plato suggests when he has Socrates explain truth seeking to Phaedrus through the charioteer metaphor (*Phaedrus* 248-249). It is difficult to defend absolute positions, and it is a fallacy to claim something exists in a spiritual sense because of the "unfalsifiability" of such statements (Withey 182). Ancient figures' definitions are fine guides for establishing theories, but they should be expanded upon and not taken literally.

However, Michael J. Hyde appears to make a metaphysical argument that ethos follows a Heideggerian assumption where "human being holds a special relationship with Being; we belong and are appropriated to it in a distinctive manner" (xix). Continuing in a Heideggerian context, he explains, "The human being is called to be true to its essential character (ethos). We are the opening of a dwelling place where *the truth* of what is—be it a stone, tree, eagle, ourselves, or whatever—can be taken to heart, appreciated, and cared for" (xx; emphasis added). Much like the ancient philosophers, Hyde's argument reveals that he believes an immutable concept of truth exists, specifically that "a dwelling place of human being—a place known to

encourage metaphysical wonder" exists and is "the *essential* character of human nature" (xxi; emphasis added). Such an argument assumes ethos deals with a universal assumption of "the good" as opposed to a culturally relative perspective. After all, Hyde asserts, "The *ethos* of rhetoric runs deep—to the very heart (and beyond?) of human existence" (xxii), and such language implies "ethos" should have positive connotations because it reflects essential human goodness.

The metaphysical approach is germane to discussions of what ancient philosophers assumed, but it is unproductive for contemporary postmodern views of meaning making and persuasion. Besides the difficulty in determining what is an "essential" human characteristic, there is no universal principle of "good character." Assumptions of truth have more to do with worldviews than immutable, universal values. A more productive exploration of ethos as it relates to persuasion asks how an audience might receive a message where a text conveys not simply "good character" but characteristics audiences may expect from a particular message. Unlike previous discussion of "situated ethos" or "invented ethos," messages attempt to persuade audiences through, potentially, a constellation of values, references, assumptions, etc. that filter meaning. Under this approach, analyzing ethos privileges the associations of a text that audiences recognize. Therefore, a message that fails to convey characteristics appropriate to a context still conveys an ethos, but it would be an ineffective ethos for a particular audience and not an ideal, universal assumption of *audience*. Additionally, the writer/speaker may still negotiate ethos, but the audience's filters—personal and community-defined—may still pre-judge the context.

Ethos can be community derived without needing to adhere to lofty, metaphysical assumptions of truth. What members of a culture consider good characteristics to have are not

autochthonous, immutable forms but intersubjective assumptions reproduced through a variety of social institutions. Therefore, ethos is situated in a sense similar to Bourdieu's notion of "habitus…considered a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (86). Smith recognizes the importance of culture, claiming that "adapting one's character to an audience is also part of *ethos*" and includes "affiliating with the audiences' political constitution and relating to the 'character' of the audience" (13). The ancient Greek audience of citizens would be much more homogeneous than contemporary American audiences where the idea of citizenship comes much closer, in theory, to universality. In *Politics*, Aristotle defines "a citizen" distinct from slaves or foreigners as one who "shares in the administration of justice, and in offices" (1275a). Official Greek citizens would know a speaker's reputation and could be moved by conventional assumptions of fair-mindedness a speaker conveys. Such homogeneity is less probable for contemporary audiences. Additionally, certain characteristics, such education level and degree attainment, are positive for academic audiences but may be off putting to anti-intellectual audiences.

When considering ethos as "characteristics," Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Susan Schultz Huxman, although privileging a strict community-based definition of ethos where an audience judges a speaker's character based on how well the speaker adheres to customs, offers a way to consider ethos as characteristics of a message. They claim that "ethos refers to the distinctive culture of an ethnic group, and the ethos of an individual depends on how well she reflects the qualities valued in that culture"; therefore, "your ethos refers not to your idiosyncrasies as an individual but to the ways in which you mirror the *characteristics* idealized by your culture or group" (232; emphasis added). Campbell and Huxman relate ethos to "*ethical* and *ethnic*" (232),

which further grounds the term in community values, but it also limits ethos to ideal interpersonal standards. They further define ethos in terms of shared mores: "Ethical principles are the norms or values in a culture that describe what its members believe are the right relationships between persons. The ethos of a rhetor refers to the relationship between the rhetor and the community as reflected in rhetorical action" (232). This definition, which most of the previously cited sources agree upon to some extent, limits ethos to an ancient concept of speaker and audience. Such a limitation does not accommodate the variety of impersonal, hypermediated messages that convey ethos through negative, positive, and indifferent attributions of local and global audiences. Just as a speaker can convey appropriate (or inappropriate) characteristics to bolster (or hinder) credibility, texts embody characteristics that make audiences consider the message(s) as relevant or not relevant to a communication situation.

Returning to Aristotelian ethos, fair-mindedness has no universal definition, but a general definition could be "level-headedness," "pragmatism," or "judiciousness"; also, its opposite could be "pig-headed," "brash," or "prejudiced." Even if most agree that a fair-minded person should convey characteristics of objectivity, temperance, and politeness, context is important, which is why ethos for this article needs an expanded definition beyond the speaker-audience moment: we must consider the before, during, and after to appreciate a robust analysis of context. After all, fair-mindedness and demonstrating one's careful deliberation on a topic that demands immediate action most likely will not persuade an audience that the speaker is credible. Nor does it mean the audience's conclusions are correct in some universal sense. The speaker could be the perfect agent to effect the change they want, but their perception, rightly or wrongly, drives their assumptions. To better understand how modes of persuasion attempt to

convey meaning(s), we must expand our understanding of ethos to include conventional characteristics that construct not only messengers but also messages.

Ethos as Characteristics

Besides having more access to information and, thus, purportedly more understanding of subjects, modern audiences (re)construct meaning based on intersubjective assumptions and individual experiences. Our postmodern condition denies universal meaning, but we still recognize agreed-upon symbols, and, especially if we are from similar backgrounds or hold similar values, we may interpret messages in similar ways. For instance, we may disagree with the validity or authority of law enforcement, but we recognize that the characteristics of these agents (badges, uniforms, vehicles with lights, etc.) convey the ethos of law enforcement. Likewise, we may disagree on the value of "professional attire," but we can locate characteristics of a generic "businessman's" outfit: suit, tie, shiny dress shoes, etc. Of course, these western-centric characteristics underscore why we must analyze rhetoric through a cultural studies lens to suggest possible and not universal meaning. Immersion in a culture allows us to recognize meaning(s) through our interactions, compiling assumptions about customs, practices, values, and all messages constructing ideology.

Therefore, we rarely, especially as long-term members of a community, receive messages without previous assumptions that filter the meanings of those messages. We already have references that clue us into a speaker's persona; we already recognize characteristics of particular messages and messengers. For instance, commercials attempt to sell pharmaceuticals and similar products through tropes of the "healthy" lifestyle backed by science. Viewers will no doubt recall phrases, such as "ask your doctor," "live without pain," and "don't miss out on life,"

alongside medical messaging: a figure in a white lab coat, mention of clinical trial efficacy, and even visuals (often animated) representing how a product "works." These commercials most likely employ all three modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—but a rhetorical analysis should be able to isolate them for discussion. Although the credibility of pharmaceutical commercials might require further medical expertise, everyday viewers should be able to recognize the characteristics of this genre. The company logo will likely appear, the actors will be having a good time (thanks to the medicine), and a narrator will provide cautions in a soothing voice. Those characteristics of pharmaceutical commercials reappear across the genre, meaning they identify the message as a pharmaceutical commercial as opposed to a car, restaurant, or vacation commercial. These characteristics clue the viewer into the message and, with the exception of irony or satire for an effect, reinforce the message's meaning: this pharmaceutical product is legitimate.

Regardless of how particular individuals assess the credibility of an entire organization based on personal assumptions, the branding (logos, jingles, color schemes, etc.) conveys the characteristics and potential credibility of the organization. The key to remember is that credibility is not universal: as with the assumptions surrounding the CDC and WHO, audiences can be prejudiced in favor of or against organizations. These entities do not create an ethos solely during the commercial that pitches their products. The organization's campaign may move a portion of the audience to believe it to be credible, but that message and the audience's history with the organization's messages construct ethos. The messenger, in this case an entity as opposed to an individual speaker, is not the sole arbiter of its ethos. The hypermediated public sphere provides fragmentary access to a variety of platforms; therefore, even a speaker

predominantly on social media can have messages broadcast through traditional media outlets, which further complicates the control one can have over *the* message.

For another contrast with Aristotelian ethos, an individual is not the sole arbiter of their own ethos: their messages may attempt to convey favorable characteristics, but the audience disposition filters the messages, meaning their credibility is unstable. However, and this underscores the contradictory nature of conveying meanings, even when broadcast news outlets criticized then-candidate Donald Trump during the 2016 Presidential Election, “Trump was able to continue to have his message relayed from his tweets to the mainstream media, even though the mainstream media often covered him negatively (and covered his claims that the media were biased against him)” (Schroeder 66). Trump’s persona as a tough guy and tell-it-like-it-is candidate got through to the audience, creating a favorable ethos, while simultaneously ignoring or rejecting the criticism of his lies and misrepresentations.

Famous people may have publicists, PR reps, and personality on their side, but they, too, cannot solely control the public’s perception of themselves. The media bombard us with images, headlines, videos, and general gossip about celebrities and other recognizable public figures. The various media, especially the talking heads from broadcast news outlets, construct the ethos of public figures. They purposely convey an “image” of the celebrity, politician, local hero, or public pariah, and different outlets will have different coverage depending on their editorial biases. In the case of political figures, party affiliation or a politician’s endorsement (or condemnation) influences perceptions of ethos. Furthermore, the media convey messages about individuals in fragmented ways: sound-bite media does not provide a complete perspective. This complicates Reynolds’s idea of “the rhetorical strategies writers use to locate themselves, their texts, and the particular discursive communities they are mediating within and between” (333)

because messages do not derive solely from a speaker; instead, they are fragmented, reproduced, and conveyed through outlets beyond the control of the originator. This is especially true for a public figure whose ethos carries the baggage of a history of public encounters (re)interpreted by the media.

Public figures offer sites for understanding the connection between character (in a traditional sense of ethos) and characteristics conveyed to the public. Ethos is a constellation of hyperreal messages mediating its construction, and the audience filters these messages based on their own worldviews. Members of a community might have similar worldviews, but a global audience is unlikely to share universal, Platonic values of right, wrong, and beautiful. Also, as S. Michael Halloran explains, “It makes sense to speak of the *ethos* of this or that person, but it makes equally good sense to speak of the *ethos* of a particular type of person, of a professional group, or a culture, or an era in history” (62). If we consider a “type” of something to be a characteristic, for instance, an 80s style, ethos is not just a personal attribute but a representation of culturally defined artifacts like genres. Additionally, even audiences that share the same definitions of something like the characteristics of motherhood or supposed essential female attributes will not be persuaded by those characteristics in similar ways. One’s political affinities and individual experiences filter messages of credibility and characteristics, thus, leading to divergent assumptions as well as conclusions even on a supposedly “universal” topic like motherhood.

The Ethos of Motherhood

Although readers may overwhelmingly share positive attributes of mothers and motherhood, prevailing assumptions are not universal, and they do not signal anything essential

to motherhood or femininity in general. In fact, “maternal rhetoric” is an unstable concept yet conveys authority in attempts to persuade on a variety of levels. Mother-as-parent may use authority to manage children in everyday situations; mother-as-anchor may project comfort and stability for families; and mother-as-activist may convey political influence in myriad ways. These contexts might be best thought of as *rhetorics of motherhood*, which signal a vast field of rhetorical analysis beyond the scope of this article. This analysis will focus on the ethos of motherhood from a political perspective, which underscores that ethos is not limited to intimate, interpersonal contexts. Motherhood, after all, is a contested site.

Consider the various conclusions one can draw from the following mother/parental groups: Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), Gold Star Families for Peace (GSFP), and the well-known current group Moms for Liberty. Each uses an ethos of motherhood to establish credibility and attempt to effect change, usually advocating the protection of children. MADD and the PMRC, established in the 1980s, have had much attention paid to their organizations and communications. GSFP and, specifically, founder Cindy Sheehan epitomize the non-universality and instability of the ethos of motherhood. A rhetorical analysis of criticism of Sheehan’s ethos can be found in Laura Knudson’s “Cindy Sheehan & Rhetoric of Motherhood: A Textual Analysis.” Knudson explains how the media’s attacks on Sheehan followed a campaign to equate Sheehan as a “bad mother” in ways similar to another “hypervisible” public figure around the same time, Britney Spears (170). In this case, the attacks attempted to construct a negative ethos.

Moms for Liberty, a well-known book-banning group, attempts to project an ethos of motherhood as a way to persuade the public to protect children by censoring LGBTQ materials. The conservative group was quite successful in promoting causes and politicians in 2021 but,

demonstrating ethos's efficacy based on time period, they were not as successful in 2023 (Strauss). Similar to the beauty myth and other double standards women deal with, the instability of an ethos of motherhood refuses to negotiate any universal or immutable ideal, including with the same mother. Lindal Buchanan complicates this with an analysis of Sarah Palin's ethos from 2008:

> The Mother, likewise, alludes to, masks, and sustains the network of power relations that undergird gender. Palin accesses that network through her references to motherhood, summoning shared scripts and beliefs…and enveloping herself in a culturally approved mantle of femininity/maternity. However, the code of motherhood also restricts the candidate through its embedded and inequitable gender presumptions…and thereby undermines her run for political office. (5)

To further complicate an essential ethos of motherhood, Buchanan explains how "Mother Teresa of Calcutta['s]…. motherhood produced positive connotations and aligned her with the venerable Catholic Madonna…. appropriating and attaching maternal qualities to her efforts" (9-10). Therefore, one can convey motherhood (or fatherhood) without biologically having children: again, ethos is not determined by essential or metaphysical qualities of a subject. Additionally, audiences receive Mother Teresa's persona (and all public figures' characteristics) incompletely. More religious audience members may be moved by her acts of generosity, but no single perception governs an entire audience's reaction.

As is the case with most political topics, party affiliation affects the persuasiveness of a message. However, Cynthia Stavrianos notes that "maternal frames"—the ways in which politically active mother's groups project maternal ethos—have cultural significance and, therefore, well-known assumptions for audiences: "Mothers are afforded a special respect and

considered especially moral and caring. These widely shared and deeply held beliefs about motherhood make maternal frames especially resonant and, therefore, potentially very politically powerful tools of mobilization" (118). Why we must consider ethos as relative to one's political worldview and not as an eternal, immutable, and perfect Form, is because, as Knudson, Buchanan, and Stavrianos demonstrate, the audience does not receive an individual or group's projection of credibility as mothers the same way. While the stories of the various founders reveal a pathos of poignancy, especially when Stavrianos "show[s] that women who have directly suffered as mothers or feel aggrieved as mothers can and do translate this anger or frustration into organization building efforts" (118), audience members on the other side of an issue may still reject the group's maternal authority even if moved by personal stories of grief. A look at pathos is beyond the scope of this article, but it is rarely absent from public projections of maternal frames.

The importance of motherhood to frame a woman's political aspirations, whether grassroots organizing or elected office campaigning, is vital and discussed further in the next section. Below, I explain how the ethos of motherhood was important to two women aspiring toward high-profile political positions around the same time. The rhetorical analysis that follows does not seek to exhaustively (re)construct the ethea of Amy Coney Barrett and Kamala Harris. Also, this analysis will not cover all the often-contradictory ways audiences could perceive some attributes as credible in one situation but reject the overall credibility of the person based on political preference of affiliation. It will be helpful to refer to the mediated construction of the public figure as a *persona* because audiences will often focus on the characteristics they privilege when assessing a public figure's ethos. This article also focuses on how a broader notion of the ethos of femininity, the assumed appropriate characteristics for being a woman, attempted to

mediate the personae of Amy Coney Barrett and Kamala Harris when they were nominated to be a Supreme Court Justice and Vice-Presidential candidate, respectively.

The Right Woman for the Job

Amy Coney Barrett and Kamala Harris conveyed not *the* ethos of femininity but *an* ethos of femininity through culturally defined characteristics. While I make no claim that the characteristics are universal to a feminine ethos, we cannot ignore that a portion of the electorate might assume that there are standard, natural, or immutable gender characteristics. Also, this analysis does not attempt to identify whether or not the subjects believe in essential characteristics of femininity; instead, I argue they convey gendered messages, especially ones related to motherhood. Although motherhood is not an essential characteristic of femininity, the maternal imperative is a prevailing social construction of *being a woman* in patriarchal culture.

Amy Coney Barrett's ethos of motherhood conveys prevailing hegemonic patriarchal assumptions. President Trump nominated Amy Coney Barrett to replace Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS). This nomination meant that Trump could claim he was advancing a woman to replace Justice Ginsberg; however, Barrett was on the list of approved choices from the Heritage Foundation (Malcolm and Smith), and she also had long-standing connections to the Federalist Society which works to promote ultraconservatives to the judiciary (Talbot). Trump campaigned in 2016 on the promise that he would appoint Justices that would overturn *Roe v. Wade* (Mangan), and he won support from Christian evangelicals and other anti-reproductive freedom groups. Although a higher percentage of women identify as "Pro-Choice" than "Pro-Life" (53% to 41% according to a 2020 survey ["Abortion Trends by Gender"]), rhetorically, the anti-reproductive freedom movement needs women's voices to

minimize the underlying hegemonic patriarchal ideology constructing this stance. Women in these groups convey an ethos of femininity that might seem to contradict the inherent misogyny in being against reproductive freedom. For Trump, Justice Barrett was a win-win because her nomination deflects potential criticism of a sexist administration that wanted to severely restrict or eliminate access to abortion, which eventually happened in June 2022 with the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision. Although it seems too simplistic, rhetorically, having a woman nominated to the Court may convey a pro-woman or even feminist ethos. The argument that parallels this is the assumption that if Obama's presidency (supposedly) "ended" racism, then Barrett's ascendency to the Supreme Court ends the assumption that conservatism is inherently misogynistic. Because Barrett is a woman, some might assume she cannot be a misogynist even though her background and previous rulings demonstrate she aligns with conservative patriarchal values. In fact, because her credentials are congruent to her colleagues on the Court, claims that she is "not qualified" run the risk of her supporters claiming such a notion is sexist (which I address below).

Even though Amy Coney Barrett's previous rulings demonstrate misogynist values, her identification as a woman allows the Trump administration to claim it promotes women, and is, therefore, pro-woman regardless of the policies advanced against women's rights and former President Trump's personal sexism as evidenced by several civil cases women have brought against him, including E. Jean Carroll's $5 million award from a jury that found Trump sexually abused her. Amy Coney Barrett's nomination did not convince everyone that the Trump administration was pro-woman, but it allows people the opportunity to counter claims of misogyny. Likewise, President Joe Biden, who had women make allegations about his inappropriate touching, can be considered pro-woman with his nomination of then-Senator

Harris. President Biden needed her identity as a woman and, especially, as a woman of color to fill the role in order to appeal to his Democratic base. Before becoming the Democratic nominee during the 15 March 2020 debate, Joe Biden declared he would choose a woman as his running mate, and Harris—who had herself run for President but dropped out—was immediately on pundits' minds as a top choice (Kornacki). After George Floyd's murder, "some activists [believed] that by choosing a black woman, Biden would make a statement about moving the country toward greater equity for marginalized groups" (Williams and Sullivan). Although Kamala Harris had vice presidential *bona fides* as both the former Attorney General and Senator of California, her type—a woman of color—was a necessary characteristic for Biden choosing her as his running mate.

Harris may mark a shift in regard to who can be an acceptable-for-the-mainstream national leader, but only time will tell. Although the Democratic base supports Harris, the risk of backlash against her because she is a woman of color is very likely. After all, President Obama, reflecting on his time in office, explains,

> It was as if my very presence in the White House had triggered a deep-seated panic, a sense that the natural order had been disrupted. Which is exactly what Donald Trump understood when he started peddling assertions that I had not been born in the United States and was thus an illegitimate president. For millions of Americans spooked by a Black man in the White House, he promised an elixir for their racial anxiety. (672)

We will have to reassess after several years and determine if Harris's presence caused a misogynist backlash and/or continued to galvanize white supremacist ideology. As I will discuss near the end of this article, Harris does not exactly follow the contemporary trend in American

politics of women's authority stemming from motherhood, but, in 2020, Joe Biden felt she was *the right woman for the job*.

Characteristics of Motherhood in Context

It may be obvious to claim motherhood defines the apex of female legitimacy in patriarchal culture. Even having a subordinate status within many religions, women's mothering contributions take precedence and are even celebrated. Lack of full leadership roles, patrilineal naming conventions, and perceived inferiority reveal the ways in which religious doctrine and mythology codify misogyny. Christian mythology even privileges male apotheosis in the Book of Genesis by explaining that the first woman came from a man, yet, after this feat of creation, human females and many females of sexually dimorphic species give birth to offspring. Although it seems likely that men would have contributed more than women in developing such a story, both men and women have reproduced gender(ed) roles in patriarchal society throughout history. In such societies, including in the contemporary United States, women must often convey an ethos of motherhood when attempting to argue their legitimacy, especially when entering a site of traditional male leadership.

Even the proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft argued that the goal for increasing women's rights was not for male-female equality but for women to be better mothers and mates. In her seminal treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* she argues equal education will guarantee continuing the progress of civilization: "If she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue" (2). However, "the more understanding women acquire, the more they will be attached to their duty—comprehending it" (3). Education for women, according to Wollstonecraft, was to socialize female intellect to be

rational and not resort to cunning which debases women. After all, she asks, "What is to be the consequence, if the mother's and husband's opinion should chance not to agree? An ignorant person cannot be reasoned out of an error, and when persuaded to give up one prejudice for another the mind is unsettled" (89). Many of Wollstonecraft's arguments for women's education are to help improve domestic life—the domestic life of middle- to upper-middle classes. Wollstonecraft was not thinking of universally educating women, and she held up *virtue* as the goal and not seeking knowledge or critical thinking *per se*. Although Wollstonecraft's "feminism" appears shallow by contemporary standards, she advocated a radical perspective for her time. Her treatise is a masterpiece in the history of rhetoric for constructing a proto-feminist consciousness that, in part, informed later women's movements.

As for women's suffrage in Western culture, both women and men opposed it, fearing that women entering public life and soiling themselves in political affairs would damage the domestic sphere. Continuing Wollstonecraft's argument 100 years later, suffragettes were careful not to argue on the premise of gender equality but "that women will become companions for men if they can discuss political questions and general topics of the day" ("Sisters Plead for Vote"). In the mid-1950s, Roland Barthes's essay "Novels and Children" identifies how important the maternal ethos is to convey legitimacy in work outside the home. Barthes discusses *Elle* magazine's photoshoot from the December 1954 issue that portrayed women novelists with their children. Barthes explains that the scene implies women can work outside the home but reassures men, "women will not be taken from them for all that, they will remain no less available for motherhood by nature" (51). Having women surrounded by children maintains the primary purpose of being female: Barthes explains that women may "write, if you want to…but don't forget…to produce children, for that is your destiny" (52). Motherhood was (and still is) a major

characteristic for being a credible woman in patriarchal culture. In our hypermediated public sphere, women are often portrayed with children to convey a maternal message.

Furthermore, the visual rhetorical message that images of women with children convey is legitimacy for working outside the home. In the 21st century, this idea of women's power stemming from children, following Barthes argument that the visual speaks to patriarchy and assures them women can work outside the home *after* fulfilling their maternal destiny, continues when Nancy Pelosi surrounds herself with children as she raises her gavel high, becoming the first woman Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2007. Certainly, both women and men use their families in campaign literature, but Pelosi's ascendency—60 years after Barthes's commentary—includes the visually rhetorical message of children. A year later, Sarah Palin's maternal ethos and large family was celebrated overtly by conservatives, legitimizing her as John McCain's running mate. In addition to her celebrated motherhood, right-wing pundits were extremely happy with her conventionally beautiful characteristics, and the late Rush Limbaugh pointed out "[Palin]'s not shrill…. She's not going to remind anybody of their ex-wife, she's going to remind men, 'Gee, I wish she was single.'" In the same 2008 interview he exclaims, "Sarah Palin: babies, guns, Jesus. Hot damn!" (Limbaugh). Such a statement reinforces how important the maternal characteristic is for pursuing public office. Although not having children does not automatically prohibit women from seeking office, the assumption that women should have children was clearly on display when Julia Gillard became the first female Prime Minister of Australia. The vitriol appears more pronounced on the right-wing side of the political spectrum because, after Gillard was chosen, "conservatives deplored that she is Godless, husbandless, and childless"; furthermore, one opposing senator "said she was unfit for leadership

because she is 'deliberately barren'" (Zerbisias). Even supposed liberal democracies have a constituency that wants women to have maternal aspects in order to hold office.

Amy Coney Barrett's maternal ethos along with her anti-reproductive freedom stance were extremely important for a right-wing constituency when she was nominated in 2020 to SCOTUS. Interestingly, Amy Coney Barrett is the only current Justice without an Ivy League degree, but her educational background is prestigious (BA from Rhodes College and JD from University of Notre Dame), and she was both a United States Court of Appeals Judge as well as a clerk for Justice Antonin Scalia, making her qualified by her credentials alone. Additionally, the American Bar Association rated her as "well qualified" for SCOTUS (Noel). However, it would be the height of incredulity to claim the pick had nothing to do with her perceived anti-reproductive healthcare stance: she is against women's reproductive freedom to choose abortion as a healthcare option. Both Democrats and Republicans (as well as the news media) referenced her "large family and overall qualifications as a judge" (Snell). And, in classic sexist fashion, Senators at the nomination hearings asked her many questions about how her house duties get done, including (and perhaps one could consider that this was just to add some levity to the tense nomination hearings) Louisiana Republican Sen. John Kennedy's question, "It's a sincere question. I'm genuinely curious. Who does laundry in your house?" Summing up the focus on Barrett's family questions, NPR's Ailsa Chang points out, "Even if some members of the Senate Judiciary Committee are mystified by how she does it all, it is clear the nominee was ready to field questions that many of the men who have sat in that same chair have never had to answer" ("Amy Coney Barrett Faces Gendered Questions"). Clearly, Justice Barrett's seven children and the assumptions of which gender in a heterosexual partnership usually does the majority of the

housework help convey her maternal ethos. Of course, the ultimate vote for Barrett fell along party lines in the Senate.

In theory, opposing a SCOTUS nominee is supposed to be *objective* even though the practice is partisan. Proponents of Barrett insinuated that it was sexist for opponents to be against her. During her confirmation hearing, Tennessee Republican Sen. Marsha Blackburn, obviously ignoring the anti-reproductive freedom values Barrett holds said, “You’d think my colleagues would jump at the opportunity to support a successful female legal superstar…who is a working mom” (Chen). Of course, during the confirmation hearings of Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, the nominees also got questions about their children, and it would be wrong to claim the questions are only from conservatives. The point to underscore is that claiming one is automatically not sexist because they are promoting a woman is, itself, sexist. The rhetoric of sexism in that assumption relies on essentialism.

Promoting a person based on gender in order to fulfill a role is sexist and ignores, as in the case of Justice Barrett, that women can be against women’s rights. Phyllis Schlafly spoke out against women’s rights, and before her there were women against women receiving the right to vote. As women’s suffrage scholar Corrine McConnaughy notes, “What women anti-suffragists produced to appeal to ‘ordinary’ women more broadly was a logic of suffrage as a threat to femininity…to the protection of the value of domestic life—most notably to the vocation of motherhood” (Weeks). Women can internalize patriarchal values and reproduce them, working against a logic of liberation. Phyllis Schlafly spoke against the Equal Rights Amendment in 1977, claiming, “What I am defending is the *real* rights of women…. A woman should have the right to be in the home as a wife and mother” (Gregorian; emphasis added). Schlafly and other women against women’s gains then become figures—role models in fact—for conservatives to

claim their ideologies are not inherently sexist because, after all, women agree. Following that logic, one might assume that Ben Carson as Health and Human Services Secretary in the Trump administration makes that administration automatically not racist because Carson is African American. Such logic promotes tokenism and essentializes the myth that a single member of a group speaks and/or represents the entire group.

The Rhetoric of Essentialism

Race and gender constructions happen within a hyperreality where messages define only part of the subject. Unlike the construction of Aristotelian ethos that takes place during a speech, an audience's *a priori* assumptions condition their perceptions. Most likely, their perceptions of the subject (e.g., the candidate) will be incomplete, and they may rely heavily on both positive and negative stereotypes. In the case of identity constructions, a subject's persona is not a *tabula rasa* one; instead, the audience's worldviews not only judge the candidate's (possibly essential) qualities but also demand a type of candidate. Although Amy Coney Barrett and Kamala Harris might have wanted to be chosen only based on their merits, which are not in question in this analysis, their gendered personae messages most likely contributed to their selection. In addition to Joe Biden's debate pledge to choose a woman of color as his running mate, following the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, then-President Trump announced, "I will be putting forth a nominee next week. It will be a woman" (Associated Press). Both speech acts construct the gendered message of the future, yet-to-be-named nominees. The public, specifically the base constituencies of the respective Parties, will then receive messages that convey the ethos of femininity—including stereotypical essentialist characteristics.

As mentioned earlier, Amy Coney Barrett's persona conveyed the ethos of motherhood, which was most likely imperative for a group expecting a *traditional* woman. The rhetorical construction of Kamala Harris's ethos is less traditional, but her female embodiment is important for the messages she conveys. Her body, because of Joe Biden's pledge to choose a woman of color, is important for constructing both her ethos of femininity and her credibility to assume the role of Vice President. Again, unlike Aristotelian ethos that is constructed during a speech, Kamala Harris's persona is mediated by a myriad of messages (re)constructed by audiences. One event that demonstrates how a modern subject can only partially convey ethos—because the audience's *a priori* assumptions complicate (and assist) the subject's message—was the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate. The debate itself may not have changed the minds of the Party faithful, and it probably did not change viewers' perceptions drastically. After all, "Partisanship exerts a stronger psychological bond than affiliation with racial, religious, linguistic, or ethnic groups—even when those cleavages are highly conflictual and are the principle [*sic*] basis for the parties' ideological positions and electoral appeals in the first place" (Westwood et. al. 334).

Both Kamala Harris and then-Vice President Mike Pence had to not embarrass themselves and avoid becoming fodder for sound bite media. The two opponents managed to engage in a relatively boring 90 minutes of discussion. Of course, the two were judged by cultural assumptions, meaning a clear double standard for male and female politicians materialized. Linguist Deborah Tannen, analyzing the debate for the BBC, claimed, "[then Senator Harris's] challenge throughout the whole debate was to avoid coming across as aggressive": the subtle difference in Harris saying "Mr. Vice President…I'm speaking" as opposed to an "accusatory" tone like "stop interrupting me" was needed to avoid being labeled disrespectful and rude (Cheung). Anecdotally, pro-Trump posts on social media still claimed

Harris was rude to the Vice President, so, not surprisingly, partisan bias filters the message. Overall, the debate was even because neither speaker overwhelmed their opponent's message or had a "gotcha" moment. According to news outlets, there was only a slight discrepancy between the number of times Pence interrupted Harris and vice versa: NBC claims Harris interrupted Pence nine times, and he interrupted her 16 times; CBS has her interrupting Pence five times to his ten instances (Cheung). These pale in comparison to the Presidential debate where Biden interrupted Trump 22 times, but Trump made 71 interruptions in the first Presidential Debate (Blake). Neither then-Vice President Pence nor future-Vice President Harris could be said to be considerably rude or disruptive. Pence conveyed a conservative, masculine persona, and Harris conveyed a serious (but not too serious) feminine persona.

However, Vice President Pence attempted to delegitimize Kamala Harris's ethos, specifically in regard to motherhood. Culturally, and Pence's identity as a fundamentalist Christian exacerbates this, women being mothers conveys an appropriate feminine ethos. Patriarchal culture, as demonstrated in Barthes's analysis of *Elle* magazine's photoshoot of "women novelists," wants women to convey a maternal ethos to be legitimate for work outside the home. Vice President Pence made a comment conveying a woman's preferred maternal ethos. Responding to the question on Amy Coney Barrett's recent nomination, Pence remarks, "President Trump and I could not be more enthusiastic about the opportunity to see Amy Coney Barrett become Justice Amy Coney Barrett. She's a brilliant woman, and she will bring a lifetime of experience and a *sizable* American family, to the Supreme Court of the United States" ("October 07, 2020"; emphasis added). Clearly, Pence made a subtle dig at Harris, who has two stepchildren, but his belief that Barrett's maternal status is equal to her professional experience demonstrates the essentialism he holds for ideal femininity. During the confirmation hearings of

Barrett's mentor, Antonin Scalia, no one insinuated his "bringing a sizable American family to the Supreme Court" was important, yet he had nine children.

From *Elle* magazine's photoshoot in the 1950s to Nancy Pelosi's ascendency to Amy Coney Barrett's nomination, the ethos of motherhood is important for legitimizing women in leadership roles. There may be more of an acceptable range in left-leaning circles than conservative ones, but the maternal ethos still appears important for women in the national spotlight. Immediately after the 2020 election, the search for "Does Kamala Harris have children" increased dramatically (Google Trends). Kamala Harris wrote an essay about being a stepmom that came out around Mother's Day 2019 in preparation for entering the race for president; also, "closer to the election, *Glamour* set up a Zoom call and launched into an hour-long chat "about the important stuff—how [her stepchildren] got to know [her]'" (Tsigdinos). This essay had the following introduction most likely written by an editor: "But aside from being a United States Senator and a 2020 presidential candidate, she's also a stepmom to her husband Doug's children, Cole and Ella. In honor of Mother's Day, Sen. Harris writes about what it's like to be a stepmom—or, as her kids call her "Momala" (Harris). The essay was in *Elle* magazine. Seventy years after the women novelists being legitimized by images of children, the first woman to become Vice President of the United States chose to convey an ethos of motherhood in preparation for her presidential run. Although Harris's ascendency was not thwarted by her not having birthed children, the ethos of motherhood continues to be a specter for the rhetoric of women in power.

Conclusion

Regardless of who receives and interprets the characteristics of a public persona, rhetorically analyzing the message requires context and cannot rely on universal notions of credibility. A variety of perspectives will provide a robust yet still incomplete tableau of reasons for audience conclusions. Amy Coney Barrett and Kamala Harris were just two figures in the spotlight during the 2020 Presidential election, but their ethea were extremely important. Both dominant parties appealed to their base constituents using female bodies. On face, both acts seem to be revolutionary and signal women's gains—particularly coincidental 100 years after women's suffrage in the United States. However, both choices conform to patriarchal boundaries for women's prescribed gendered roles. Justice Barrett's celebrated motherhood status projects ideals of "proper" femininity to patriarchal culture, and then-Senator Harris's (now Vice President Harris's) identity as a woman of color appealed to the Democratic base constituency. Former President Trump and current President Biden, fully entrenched members of the patriarchy, chose the nominees, in part, because of gender. Their public personae, which are diametrically opposed on the political spectrum, conform to assumptions of "proper" femininity, thus, legitimize them for their respective offices.

Although rhetorical scholars may want to refocus ethos in support of ethics, any analysis has to consider the context in which one defines "ethics." As eugenics, phrenology, and systemic racism demonstrate, scientific authority has no inherent morality even if we earnestly hope it does or will. Judy Holiday advocates ethos as ethics, privileging assumptions of universal morality, and concludes, "any teaching of rhetoric (including writing as rhetorical practice) that divorces rhetoric from ethics, then, is not only impoverished pedagogy but may also constitute unethical practice" (404). However, ethos is not concerned with any inherent sense of credibility

or being ethical: one conveys an ethos (positive or negative), but the audience determines character based on culturally defined attributes and may have particular expectations of a speaker depending on the context—including the time period. No universal definition of credibility exists, but we can consider prevailing cultural assumptions and types of character as guides. Of course, we must critique those "assumptions" to deconstruct the ways in which they demonstrate hegemonic values.

As this article advocates, rhetorical theory should incorporate more analyses of ethos as characteristics and not just ethos as synonymous with credibility that is essential to one's ontology. The ancients provide us with a guide, but even they are susceptible to contradiction. Therefore, it is more advantageous to consider ethos and their other terms expansively to better incorporate their theories into twenty-first century discussions of hypermediated global messages. Aristotle further defines ethos when discussing virtue and the nature of things in *Nicomachean Ethics*, claiming that one can grow intellectually through being taught, but "moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ēthikē*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit) …. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do virtues arise in us; rather, we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit." (1103a17-26). A subject's good or bad characteristics form habitually and will change. The only constant is that meaning is not the sole purview of the speaker/author but mainly that of the audience, which is also prone to change.

Audiences ultimately determine credibility by accepting or rejecting characteristics, and they filter messages through their own terministic screens. If, as Kenneth Burke explains, "much that we take as observations about 'reality" may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (46), the meaning we assume to be inherent in a subject (i.e.,

the feminine subject) is actually an interpretation. Our interpretations are based on the meanings we compile, and we expect certain subjects to have certain characteristics. Even though readers may reject essentialism as unfair stereotyping, we cannot ignore that audiences may rely on stereotypes to (re)construct meaning, including the meaning of an individual they support. For instance, Italian Americans may have an affinity for those they perceive as conveying "appropriate" Italian-American qualities. The assumption of a shared heritage or mythic membership in an assumed universal *panitalianismo* conveys credibility to members of the audience who identify as Italian American or, simply, of Italian descent. The mediated Italian-American identity, which has been used to foster romanticized images of hard-working immigrants to cold-blooded criminals, does resonate with some audience members and may convey favorable, unfavorable, or neutral assumptions. Likewise, the characteristics of a subject's motherhood (or lack thereof) will also be judged differently for different audiences and at different time periods.

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