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Financial Distress in the Hands
of an Authoritarian Government

Abigail Adams, wife of American statesman and the country's second president John Adams, exchanged various letters with her husband around the time of the American Revolution. In Abigail Adams's letter to John Adams written on May 7, 1776, the writer uses rhetorical questions, metaphors, claims of substantiation, and claims of evaluation to appeal to the audience through ethos; inductive reasoning and claims of policy to appeal to the audience through logos; and these same claims of substantiation to gain sympathy, and to appeal to the audience through pathos. She uses these strategies to eloquently explain why the government urgently needs to offer more financial support to its people in order to save the colony of Massachusetts from further hardship and anguish.

In Adams's letter, she argues that the colony of Massachusetts is in great distress due to the authoritarian British government's lack of financial support. She expresses her negativity surrounding the situation in the quote, "The eyes of our rulers have been closed, and a lethargy has seized almost every member. I feel a fatal security has taken possession of them" (Adams para 2). She continues to explain why the fall of a country so great would be the cause of an even greater tragedy: "If our country perishes, it is as impossible to save an individual, as to preserve one of the fingers of a mortified hand" (Adams para 1). She writes to her husband, a member of

the Second Continental Congress, that “a government of more stability is much wanted in this colony” (Adams para 3), and that “they are ready to receive it from the hands of the Congress” (Adams para 3). Another noteworthy subject that Adams brings forth is the wives and women of America being mistreated by the government and their male counterparts; she says, “I cannot say that I think you are very generous to the ladies; for, whilst you are proclaiming peace and good-will to men, emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives” (Adams para 5). The writer makes her arguments convincing using a thoughtful mixture of rhetorical strategies throughout her written message.

The entirety of the letter is constructed using claims of substantiation, mostly near the beginning, to express what has gone wrong, as well as claims of evaluation and claims of policy to explain what is right, ethically and morally, to do in the future. These claims help to appeal to the audience through ethos and pathos, forcing the reader to consider what is right and wrong through sympathy and distress. Additionally, these claims of policy assist her in appealing to her audience through logos; they are brought forth from logical reasoning after reviewing mistakes made in the past, and deciding what changes should be made for the future. The author uses rhetorical questions such as “Why not proclaim to the world, in decisive terms, your own importance?” (Adams para 3). She uses this questioning in an attempt to keep her spouse thinking about her words and considering her ethics, and to appeal to him through ethos. She uses metaphors, such as her comparison between the difficulty of saving an individual in the perishment of America to saving a finger on a mortified hand, to emphasize the urgency and seriousness of the situation at hand (Adams para 1). These metaphors are also used to appeal to the audience through ethos. Additional metaphors used in the passage include “The people are all

in a flame” (Adams para 2), and her comparison of power and liberty to heat and moisture (Adams para 2). A utilization of inductive reasoning is primarily seen in the second paragraph, and is used to appeal to the audience through logos. She goes through many particulars before reaching her conclusion: “Power and liberty are like moisture. Where they are well mixed, every thing prospers; where they are single, they are destructive” (Adams para 2). Adams uses these strategies very effectively in light of the rhetorical situation.

Adams’s claims of substantiation, claims of evaluation, and claims of policy help to establish an understanding of the situation. They also assist the writer in explaining her reasons for believing that change must take place, and emphasizing the distress that citizens of Massachusetts, such as herself, are experiencing. Her use of inductive reasoning helps to create suspense in each paragraph, and keeps the reader interested. The rhetorical questions she offers force her ideas to be considered and personalized by her reader, and help to create a better understanding of her stance. Her usage of metaphors in the passage aid her in showing the urgency and realness of the situation in which the people of Massachusetts have found themselves. Her efforts to achieve sympathy, understanding, and a sense of urgency from her husband are well-given through the appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos. Every strategy used by Mrs. Adams is essential to achieve a thoroughgoing comprehension of the situation.

Adams’s efforts to elucidate why the government acutely needs to render more monetary aid to its colony’s inhabitants in order to save Massachusetts from further deprivation were, with the help of many rhetorical strategies and the three appeals, very successful. She puts emphasis on points that she finds to be particularly important, and makes her claims and points with great confidence, and solid evidence to back them up. Overall, she stayed on topic, maintained her

stance, and made excellent utilization of carefully selected strategies such as metaphors and inductive reasoning. Her purpose was clearly shown all throughout the letter, and her points were very well-made.