

THESIS

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?:
THE RHETORIC OF “SCORNED POLITICAL WIVES”

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY MAL REEDER ENTITLED SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?: THE RHETORIC OF “SCORNED POLITICAL WIVES” BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?: THE RHETORIC OF “SCORNED POLITICAL WIVES”

This thesis examines the rhetoric of Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford, two “Scorned Political Wives.” In the wake of their husbands’ extramarital affairs, Edwards and Sanford needed to respond to embarrassing and identity-challenging rhetorical situations. Forced to defend their choices as wives and mothers, Edwards and Sanford answered the question, “Should I stay or should I go?” Although their persuasive purposes were quite different, Edwards and Sanford each employed effective rhetoric to heighten their credibility and restore their place in society. Elizabeth Edwards chose to preserve her marriage, while Jenny Sanford decided to sever her marital bonds. By examining the themes and persuasive strategies each woman used to meet her overall goals, this thesis uncovers lines of argument, or *topoi*, that may be characteristic of an emerging genre of “Scorned Political Wives.”

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CHAPTER ONE

Should I Stay Or Should I Go?: The Rhetoric of “Scorned Political Wives”

An image of a man and woman walking hand-in-hand comes into focus. The woman is dressed in a stylish, grey-and-black, cropped jacket and a conservative grey skirt, the man in a dark black business suit. On the ring finger of the woman's left hand we see an exceptionally large diamond wedding band. As the doors to the corridor open, the couple is bombarded by reporters and camera flashes. The man steps through the crowd and approaches a podium situated in front of a state seal. The camera's view moves around from behind and zooms in on his face. Behind the handsome man's right shoulder is the woman, his wife, looking drab and melancholy. Within seconds the eager reporters quiet in anticipation of the politician's statement. The politician announces his resignation from office, arguing that, while he never abused the powers affiliated with his office, he did, in fact, fail his children, his wife, and their marriage. The camera then focuses tightly on the politician's wife, looking grave and stoic in the light cast by the blinding camera flashes. As she watches sweat roll off her husband's brow, the wife takes a deep breath, as the image of her husband and his mistress run through her mind. While her husband asks the public for forgiveness and privacy, the wife slowly starts to crack. She notices a small piece of string on her husband's coat and reaches her hand in an effort to remove the string. Before she is able to pluck the string from his coat, her husband finishes his remarks and grabs her hand mid-air. Stunned, she has no choice but to follow him, hand in hand, as his aides usher them both out the doors. Once behind closed doors, the wife slows her pace and falls behind her husband and his minions. She reflects on what has just happened. Once the politician notices his wife is not by his side, he turns around and walks back to her. He asks her, “Hey, are you all

right?” At that moment, a smack is heard echoing through the corridor as her hand makes contact with his cheek.

--*The Good Wife*¹

In August of 2004, New Jersey Democratic Governor Jim McGreevey stood before a gaggle of reporters and admitted before God, his country, and his wife, Dina Matos, that he had indeed had an extramarital affair with a man (McGreevey *Marriage Profile*, 2). Sadly, marital infidelity is nothing new in the political arena, as evidenced by the infamous extramarital affairs of President John F. Kennedy and Hollywood actress Marilyn Monroe, and President Bill Clinton and intern Monica Lewinsky (Clinton *Marriage Profile*, 2). In 1992, Hillary Clinton joined her husband for an interview with *60 Minutes*. During that interview, allegations of Bill Clinton’s extramarital affair were aired, to which Hillary responded:

You know, I’m not sitting here like some little woman standing by my man, like Tammy Wynette. I’m sitting here because I love him, and I respect him, and I honor what he’s been through and what we’ve been through together. And you know, if that’s not enough for people, then heck, don’t vote for him. (Garofoli, 2)

However, Hillary Clinton was not the first or the last political wife to see her husband’s infidelities made public. The sheer volume of political marriage scandals in recent years is downright shocking. Political writer, Tony Castro remarked “When something like this occurred the first time, society was disapproving. But then there’s a second time and a third and so on, and society gets accustomed” (Castro, 1). Needless to say, Dina Matos’ public humiliation in late 2004 was just the start of a long line of revelations about extramarital affairs and their correlating scandals that would come to mar the face of politics and the institution of marriage. Wendy Vitter remained by her husband’s side after news broke in July of 2007 that her husband, Louisiana Republican

Senator David Vitter, was involved with a Washington, DC, escort service run by the “DC Madam” (Austin, 1-2). Later that summer, Idaho Republican Senator Larry Craig was issued a lewd conduct charge, to which he pled guilty, after soliciting sex in a men’s bathroom. Late in August of 2007, Craig’s wife, Suzanne, gently wept and held his hand, while he addressed the media.

By 2008, political marriages gave new meaning to the phrase, “trouble in paradise.” Carlita Kilpatrick sat by her husband in January of 2008 as he announced via television interview that he too had an extramarital affair. The Detroit Mayor, Democrat Kwame Kilpatrick, openly admitted that he had an affair with his Chief of Staff, Christine Beatty. Weeks later, a teary-eyed Silda Wall Spitzer watched as her husband, New York Democratic Governor Elliot Spitzer, was identified as the mysterious “Client 9” in a federal wiretap prostitution ring (*Spitzer Marriage Profile*, 1-2). Heartbreak set in later that year when *The National Enquirer* broke the scandal involving former presidential nominee and North Carolina Democratic Senator John Edwards’ extramarital affair. His wife, Elizabeth, dying of terminal cancer, watched as news of the affair took over political airwaves days before the Democratic National Convention. By the following June, Darlene Ensign had fallen victim to public disgrace when her husband, Nevada Republican Senator John Ensign, resigned as head of the Republican Policy Committee, after an eight-month extramarital affair with campaign staffer, Cynthia Hampton (*Ensign Marriage Profile*, 1). And a week later, Republican Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina disappeared, only to turn up days later at the State House and announce his affair with Argentinean citizen Maria Belen Chapur (*Sanford Marriage Profile*, 1-3).

As of today, the state of a politician's marriage is always under scrutiny. As Professor Paul Apostolidis explains to *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Joe Garofoli, "the rise of cultural conservatives in the 1980's created the need for politicians to perform a public confessional if they got caught with their pants down." When a scandal breaks, the public expects both the politician and his wife to rise to the rhetorical situation and issue a "fitting response" (Bitzer, 64). Automatically, audiences anticipate that the politician will address his infidelity, the cause for the scandal, and his apparent disregard for his political office. The scandal surrounding the husband's affair (and its impact on the wife) is considered public knowledge, and, as elected officials, the public holds the couple accountable. But in the wake of the scandal, what is the politician's wife supposed to say? Or, even more importantly, what is she expected to say to meet the demands of her curious public?

I maintain that a new genre of personal/political discourse is emerging: the rhetoric of a scorned politician's wife. This new genre of rhetoric has been created in the wake of public curiosity and an insatiable news cycle that constantly seeks sensationalism and scandal. Society knows what to demand of the politician and how to judge whether or not his response is effective, but what do they demand of the politician's wife? As she struggles to pick up the pieces of her failed marriage, her tarnished husband's career, and her struggling family, scholars must examine what, according to Bitzer, comprises a full and fitting response.

Scorned Political Wives

The study of first ladies and politicians' wives is not a new concept within academia. Political wives Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Hillary Rodham Clinton have

been the subject of critique. Rather than analyzing the persuasive discourse of Onassis and Clinton, however, the majority of these studies focused on the wives' choice of clothing and their role as First Lady.² An Academic Search Premier database search of the words "Jackie Kennedy" and "Hillary Clinton" yielded over eighty responses. Eight of the twenty articles revolve around the key words "fashion," "lifestyle," "White House," and "glamour." Four articles involve key words related to their husbands, and one article discusses Mattel's Barbie doll. A Communication and Mass Media Complete database search yielded eleven results, and only one discussed the women's rhetoric: "The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady: Politics, Gender Ideology and Women's Voice, 1798-2002," by Shawn Parry-Giles and Diane Blair.

By broadening the topic from just "Kennedy" and "Clinton" to "first ladies" and "political spouses," a database search reveals more themes and issues surrounding the rhetoric of women and politics. Lisa Burns examined the public perception of first ladies by looking closely at the rhetoric of the 2004 presidential campaign season (Burns, 684). She found that first ladies are linked in comparison to one another and, through this comparison, become a "predetermined type" of first lady (Burns, 684). Tasha Dubriwny looked at strategies within feminist discourse by focusing on Laura Bush's rhetoric from 2001 and 2002 (Dubriwny, 84). She noticed liberal and maternal feminist ideals within Bush's rhetoric.

Karrin Anderson has rooted her study of political wives in popular culture and media. Her study "Hillary Rodham Clinton as 'Madonna': The Role of Metaphor and Oxymoron in Image Restoration" argues metaphor and specific media frames and rhetorical strategies shaped Clinton's public persona (Anderson, 2). While much of

Parry-Giles' and Anderson's work is comprised of rhetorical studies surrounding women in politics, I argue that, due to the increasing number of publicly exposed extramarital affairs that have occurred in the last five years, the rhetorical strategies of political wives are in a state of transition. Examining exactly what scorned political wives are attempting to accomplish using these new strategies will serve as a driving force behind this study. By publicly defending herself, her husband, or her family, the rhetoric of a scorned political wife can contribute to the study of public communication and the rhetoric of accusation and defense.³

This thesis will critique the rhetoric of two scorned political wives: Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford. By selecting Edwards and Sanford, I will analyze two of the more notorious scorned political wives in the last five years. Naturally, any political scandal is going to produce headlines for gossip magazines. Edwards and Sanford are no exception. They have dealt with an overzealous media frenzy, feeding on the fallout from their husbands' extramarital affairs. While there is a plethora of interviews, magazine articles, blog entries, newspaper editorials, and books surrounding these two women, few if any have focused solely on their rhetorical strategies and resulting responses. "Tabloidesque" stories comprise the majority of these messages and are not scholarly, but these sources but can provide additional information in the overall narrative.

By analyzing Edwards' and Sanford's political discourse, I hope to contribute to the construction of a "road-map," or rhetorical guide, for future scorned political wives. By shifting the conversation from fashion and lifestyle to rhetorical criticism, this study can serve as a bridge between older commentary on Kennedy and Clinton, and future

scholarship on the genre of scorned political wives. Unlike the mass media representations of the Edwards and Sanford scandals, this study will present their responses as rhetorical strategies that sought to shape the public's views of themselves, their husbands, and their families, as well as perhaps reclaiming or defining new personal identities for themselves.

Objects of Study

To best illustrate the characteristics of this new genre, this study will evaluate three types of texts. The first type of critical object is the public statements released by Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford. The Associated Press was the first news outlet to release Edwards' statement on August 8, 2008, at 9:20 pm EST. It was simply titled, "Elizabeth Edwards Statement on Affair" (Edwards Statement). Jenny Sanford's statement was released on June 24, 2009, at 5:19 pm EST, shortly after her husband's afternoon press conference. Her "Statement from First Lady Jenny Sanford" was released nationally by the First Lady's Office and by Sanford herself (Sanford Statement). The second type of rhetorical text is television and print interviews with Edwards and Sanford. Elizabeth Edwards appeared on *The Oprah Show* on May 7, 2009 (*Oprah*). The transcript from that interview, along with the interview that ran in *O: The Oprah Magazine* in June of 2009, provides ample text for critique (*O Magazine*). Jenny Sanford's first interview is her hour-long, sit-down interview with Barbara Walters on *20/20*, on February 5, 2010 (*20/20*). Sanford's second interview with *Vogue* magazine in September of 2009 serves as an additional text (*Vogue*). The third type of communication is the autobiography: Edwards' book, *Resilience*, released in May of 2009 and Sanford's book, *Staying True*, released in February of 2010.

Review of Literature

This thesis will analyze the public statements of Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford as persuasive texts that have clear-cut goals. In order to achieve those goals, I will argue, each political wife used particular rhetorical and argumentative strategies that aimed to influence audiences. To begin to fully understand each woman's rhetorical strategies and be able to judge her response as fitting or not, I will draw from Lloyd Bitzer's theory of "The Rhetorical Situation." Bitzer argues rhetorical discourse is created in response to a situation. In other words, when a situation arises, a response is warranted. Bitzer goes further, defining the rhetorical situation created as a "complex of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance" (Bitzer, 61). Rhetoric, in this case, is situational and has the ability to change "reality through the mediation of thought and action" (Bitzer, 60). A speech given in response to a situation, like the remarks of Edwards and Sanford, is given rhetorical significance by the situation: their husbands' extramarital affairs. The discourse, or, in this case, the remarks, of a scorned political wife, become rhetorical "insofar as it functions (or seeks to function) as a fitting response to a situation which needs and invites it" (Bitzer, 61). Edwards and Sanford were called into action by their curious public and were invited to speak in defense of their own role within the scandal. This thesis will analyze whether Edwards', and Sanford's remarks were "fitting." I will evaluate and illustrate Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford's fitting responses and their effectiveness in achieving the overall persuasive goal of preservation and severance, respectively.

The Rhetoric of Social Movements

In addition to employing a “situational analysis” to evaluate whether the scorned wives employed “fitting responses,” I will use some of the methods of social movement studies to expose the recurring themes and emerging motifs from the press conferences, public statements, and interviews Edwards and Sanford conducted. Rather than giving well-developed addresses of state, the scorned wives relied on diverse channels of communication that unfolded over time. This is quite similar to the nature of critical artifacts that social-movement scholars analyze. Stephen Lucas, in his book *Portents of Rebellion* states “that public discourse operates most powerfully as a mode of social influence, not in its capacity to resolve discrete situations, but in its cumulative impact across time” (Lucas, xviii). Following that belief, this study will attempt to appraise Edwards and Sanford’s texts over a period of time to assess the “cumulative impact” of their discourse.

Genre

Genre criticism analyzes “multiple speeches or other forms of discourse in order to draw conclusions about categories of rhetoric” (Burghardt, 399). Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford are both political wives, and *prior* to their husbands’ extramarital affairs, their rhetoric could fit neatly into the traditional genre of supportive, noncontroversial, political spouse discourse. However, *after* news of their husbands’ scandals broke, Edwards and Sanford faced quite the dilemma: “stand by your man,” or defend your own character and judgment. This thesis will focus on precisely that rhetorical dilemma—one that forms the foundation for an emerging genre of personal/political discourse: the “scorned political wife.” By thinking of this discourse

as a “genre,” I hope to contribute to a greater understanding of the creation and development of rhetorical categories, more specifically, the genre of apologia.

B. L. Ware and Wil. A. Linkugel paved the way for such analysis in their article “They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia.” They defined and illustrated the major traits of apologia that can be applied to the discourse of Edwards and Sanford (Ware and Linkugel, 417-427). As I will demonstrate, Edwards’ and Sanford’s public discourse fits the definition of apologetic discourse. Halford Ross Ryan defines “apologia” as “an apology, a speech in defense” (Ryan, 307). On the surface it seems as if Edwards and Sanford did nothing wrong and would not need to “defend” themselves against anything, but, in this situation, they actually must defend their personal choices, their honor as women and wives, and their overall credibility. In his book, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, William Benoit discusses how “attacks on one’s image can be very serious concerns, and most people recognize the importance of these threats to reputation” (Benoit, 2). After public mortification in the tabloids, Edwards’ and Sanford’s strategic remarks are a special kind of apologia that functions to restore their place of honor in society and dampen unseemly media speculation. Benoit also discusses how speeches of self-defense, as in the case of Edwards and Sanford, assume “reputation is important,” and, “when such attacks occur, verbal means of redress exists” (Benoit, 28).

Outline of Chapters

This study is comprised of four chapters. Chapter one will provide an introduction to political, extramarital affairs and will illustrate the situation faced by Edwards and Sanford. The second and third chapters produce a rhetorical criticism of

each wife's public discourse surrounding her husband's extramarital affair. These two chapters mirror each other in format: chapter two will focus on Edwards, and chapter three will focus on Sanford. This analysis will demonstrate a clear contrast between Edwards' and Sanford's rhetorical strategies. Both women were successful and their strategies conducive, at least in the short term, at addressing their rhetorical situations. As I will make clear, Edwards and Sanford had different rhetorical goals: Edwards wanted to preserve her marriage, but Sanford wanted to sever her marital bonds. The fourth and final chapter will synthesize the findings of the previous chapters in order to assess what constitutes a "fitting response" for a scorned political wife, based on the question, "should I stay or should I go?" In addition, the concluding chapter will analyze the characteristics or "topoi" of this emerging genre and will provide future scorned political wives with two clear choices, each with specific strategies, for when they are faced with the question: "should I stay or should I go?"

Notes

1. *The Good Wife* airs on CBS on Tuesdays at 10 PM. The series premiered on September 22, 2009 and was picked up for twenty two episodes. The show stars Julianna Margulies and Chris Noth as Alicia and Peter Florrick, the State Attorney of Cook County who has recently been jailed due to his involvement in a prostitution scandal. Early in 2010, CBS renewed the legal drama for a second season. The scene mentioned at the beginning of this thesis is a paraphrase of the first scene in the pilot episode of *The Good Wife*.

2. For additional reading on Onassis and Clinton during their years as First Lady please see: Beasley; Gould; Parry-Giles; Truman.

3. Benoit; Burghardt 399-450; Ware and Linkugel 417-427.

CHAPTER TWO

Elizabeth Edwards: The Wronged Political Wife America Has Come to Know

This is my story, and my story is filled with pain and anger, with great erasures of my history and new outlines for my future, but it is not filled with the clutter you seek. The story from my side is quite a different story from the one of grocery store papers, a story played out too many times but rarely as publicly as my own.

-- Elizabeth Edwards (*Resilience*,
171)

Cancer. For some this could signify the end of a life. An indiscretion. For some this could signify the end of a marriage. For Elizabeth Edwards these two things have become a part of everyday life. America was introduced to Elizabeth Edwards in late 2003, when her husband, North Carolina Senator John Edwards, announced his candidacy for the 2004 Democratic Presidential nomination. At the end of the 2004 presidential race, Edwards revealed she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Her disease was treated and then later returned in 2007 as Stage IV and incurable. Aside from her illness making headlines, Edwards would find herself thrust further into the spotlight as her husband, John, announced he had been unfaithful. In the following months, Elizabeth Edwards would work to preserve her marriage, while fighting to stay alive. In *Resilience*, her memoir, Edwards discusses the heartache she faced when learning of her husband's infidelity on top of battling her illness: "It was not clear whether I could forgive his transgressions or whether I would continue to stand beside him, but that did not matter" (*Resilience*, 136). She further speaks to her struggles,

remarking, “I am sad because my life has not worked out as I had hoped. It is no secret that my husband of thirty years told me that he had not been faithful to me” (*Resilience*, 169).

Elizabeth Edwards chose to stand by her husband, and, though there was no official press conference announcement, Edwards remained by her husband’s side amidst allegations that the affair was more than just the admitted “one time” and the rumor he fathered a child with his mistress, Rielle Hunter. Edwards’s statement, interviews, and various media requests define her as a woman who chose to preserve her “perfect” marriage, no matter what. In the spotlight alongside John Edwards and Rielle Hunter, Edwards was extremely vocal and apparently was not ashamed to still be “with” her husband. To track and analyze the main rhetorical elements of Edwards’s public discourse after the August 8, 2008, announcement of the affair, I will examine the following documents: Edwards’s initial statement; her first interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*; the corresponding *O: The Oprah Magazine* interview; and, lastly, her memoir, *Resilience*. I will argue the dominant themes of “The Perfect Marriage,” “Recovery Mode,” and “The Woman and the Victim” place Edwards’s discourse in the genre of apologia. I will explain how, together, these themes work to improve Edwards’s overall credibility. Moreover, they act to illustrate how she defends and protects her marriage to John Edwards. I will further maintain that Edwards’s response meets the expectations set forth by the rhetorical situation and should be considered fitting in the short term. By examining the specific rhetorical and argumentative strategies used in Edwards’s discourse, I will identify topoi that could be employed in the new genre of scorned political wives.

Context and Exigence

On December 28, 2006, John Edwards announced his candidacy for the 2008 Democratic Presidential nomination from New Orleans, Louisiana. Two days later, he traveled home to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he told his wife, Elizabeth Edwards, that he had been unfaithful to her. Distraught, Edwards asked her husband details of the affair, and John Edwards told her that it only happened once. In her May 2009 interview, Oprah directly asked Edwards, “So on December 30, he came home and told you that he had. . . .” Edwards interjected: “Had this relation or indiscretion or however you want to do it, and that he was—that she was out of his life and he had regretted what he had done” (*Oprah*, 4). Choosing to salvage their almost thirty-year marriage, Edwards vowed to rebuild the couple’s bond and asked her husband to leave the race he had just entered two days prior. When talking to Oprah Winfrey, she remarked:

And my first thing to do was say, “You need to get out of the campaign.” You know, I knew there would be people who would be following him around, who would be trying to uncover things. So I thought for my family, for my children, for John, for me, it’d be best if he got out of the campaign. He said--and truthfully, he was right. It was hard to argue with this--that if you wanted to raise a lot of questions, what you do is get out of a campaign you got into two days before. You know, we’d just set up offices and gotten people onboard. And it would have been a very--it would have raised a lot of questions in people’s minds. (*Oprah*, 5)

In order to prevent the media from becoming suspicious, John Edwards stayed in the race and began to campaign, as Elizabeth Edwards reworked the language she would use to describe her husband while campaigning on his behalf. Sometime later, in October of 2007, the *National Enquirer* began running a series of stories alleging John Edwards’s affair with campaign staffer, Rielle Hunter (*National Enquirer*). John Edwards denied the allegations until the summer of 2008. After dropping out of the nomination race (that

current president Barack Obama would win) and in the midst of preparation for the 2008 Democratic National Convention, John Edwards took the media spotlight. On August 8, 2008, he released a statement and sat down for an interview with *ABC News*' Bob Woodruff (Schwartz et al.). It was during this interview he confessed to having had a sexual relationship with campaign staffer Rielle Hunter. John Edwards also admitted to lying to the public as a presidential candidate, but he adamantly denied fathering Hunter's child or paying her to stay quiet. Later that day, Elizabeth Edwards released her statement in support of her husband, their family, and their marriage.

After the official announcement, Edwards was shocked to learn from her husband that it was not just "one time," and he had withheld information and specific details about the affair from her. It was almost a year before she made any media appearances to discuss the scandal. In that year, the media focused their attention on the couple and the affair. Edwards was in the middle of writing her second book, *Resilience*, which was published in May of 2009. Many speculated that the book would talk about why her husband left the campaign, and the public was surprised when she tackled the affair on the pages of *Resilience*. On May 7, 2009, Edwards appeared for the entire hour on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and the very next month, *O: The Oprah magazine* ran a correlating interview with Edwards.

Press Release: "Elizabeth Edwards Statement on Affair"

First, I will analyze Elizabeth Edwards's personal statement, which was released on August 8, 2008, at 9:20 p.m. EST, after her husband's interview on *ABC News*' "Nightline." She posted the three-paragraph statement to her blog on *Daily Kos*, which is a web site that promotes the Democratic Party through various messages written by

leading politicians and activists (*Daily Kos*). Elizabeth Edwards's personal blog is one featured on their website. Edwards opens her statement by talking about the turmoil her family has been through with the recent announcement of her husband's affair. She bluntly states that, while her husband is willing to stand alone and take the blame for his actions, he will be supported by his family, no matter what. Edwards then discusses how her husband told her of the affair and how, together, they have been working to save their marriage since 2006. But with the media's recent allegations surrounding the paternity of Hunter's child, Elizabeth Edwards discusses how their struggles as a couple are no longer private and are once again made more difficult by the constant scrutiny. She then applauds her husband for admitting his mistake in his sit-down interview and states she is "proud of the courage John showed by his honesty in the face of shame" (Edwards Statement). Later, she announces that both she and her husband will continue the "work" they started in 2006. Edwards closes her statement by asking for privacy and understanding.

The Oprah Show: "Elizabeth Edwards' First Interview"

On May 7, 2009, Elizabeth Edwards made her first media interview appearance since the affair broke in August of 2008. Edwards sat down with Oprah Winfrey for an exclusive, hour-long interview to discuss her marriage, family, and illness. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, or more commonly known as just *Oprah*, airs on most ABC stations and some CBS affiliates. It is the highest-rated talk show in American television history and airs in the weekday afternoons (Oprah.com). Edwards talks to Oprah in her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and John Edwards is previewed in the hour-long show, but is not directly interviewed. Edwards first talks about the understanding she and John had

going into the marriage. Edwards told Oprah, “I wanted him to be faithful to me. It was enormously important to me” (*Oprah*, 1). Oprah then asks Edwards to tell the viewers the story of how she found out about the affair and her initial reaction. The two women discuss the topics of love, life in the media’s glare, and what to think of John Edwards’s mistress, who Edwards requested not be mentioned by name. The interview then shifts to a more spiritual tone and features Edwards talking about the future and reflecting on how her husband’s affair will not define her life. Oprah questions Edwards regarding how much her children know about the affair and how Edwards’s life is forever altered by her cancer diagnosis. The interview concludes by focusing on the Edwards’s home and the love that John and Elizabeth have provided to their family.

***O*: “Oprah Talks to Elizabeth Edwards”**

The next month, after the exclusive *Oprah* interview aired, Winfrey featured more of Elizabeth Edwards’s interview and story in the June issue of *O: The Oprah Magazine*. More commonly known as *O*, the magazine was first published in 2000 by Winfrey and partner, the Hearst Corporation. *O* is published monthly, and its estimated circulation is 2.5 million (Oprah.com). Oprah opens the interview by providing background on the Edwards couple and their “dream home,” built in 2006. The interview then turns to a discussion of Edwards’s cancer and how her illness plays a part in her motherly and wifely duties. Edwards states, “I am deeply in love with my family,” as she talks about her children’s reactions to learning about her terminal cancer (*O Magazine*, 155). The two women also discuss John Edwards’s affair, and much of this conversation is an overlap from the *Oprah* interview. The interview finishes by talking about the future, as

discussed in Edwards's new book, *Resilience*, and how Edwards's prognosis will not determine how she continues to live her life.

Autobiography: *Resilience*

Resilience is Elizabeth Edwards's second book and her personal story of how she overcame a number of obstacles in her own life by learning and leaning on others she has met along the way. In the opening pages of *Resilience*, Edwards talks about life in the eye of a media storm and how, if you are lucky, the media will eventually leave you alone and move onto the next poor chump. She lays out her goal in writing *Resilience* as telling her "side" of the story, which she argues is quite different from the media's scandal-monger headlines. She first talks about all that she learned growing up as the daughter of a Naval pilot and how she adjusted to daily life without her father at home. She speaks to growing up abroad and the ways her experiences have shaped her into the woman she is today. She then writes several candid and deeply moving chapters on the loss of her first born son, Wade. Edwards questions God, her faith, and how a mother's life could ever continue after the death of a child. Edwards's frank discussion about her anger and misunderstanding led her to write about her own personal health crisis. Edwards then discusses her diagnosis and battle with cancer that will eventually end her life prematurely. She concludes her book by talking about her husband's extramarital affair and how all of her life's struggles and obstacles have helped ease her pain and provide her with understanding. The book ends on a positive note, looking toward the future, while Elizabeth Edwards is still hounded by the media and continues to work on her marriage. In the last lines of *Resilience*, referring back to a previous statement about "weathering" the media's storm, Edwards speaks to her children about the future: "I do

know that when they are older and telling their children about their grandmother, they will be able to say that she stood in the storm, and when the wind did not blow her way—and surely it has not—she adjusted her sails” (*Resilience*, 213).

Audience

Through the end of 2009, Edwards stood by her husband and was courageously working to repair her marriage as the media looked on. After being in the public spotlight since early 2003 and touring the country with her husband’s campaign both in 2004 and 2008, Elizabeth Edwards became a household name and a prominent face of the healthcare crisis in America, garnering support wherever she visited. Commenting on Edwards’s involvement, *Ms. Magazine* called her a “strategist” and a “full partner in both her marriage and the campaign” (*Ms. Magazine*). Edwards’s public fell in love with her “smart, likable and down-to-earth” personality and style (Random House). However, the marriage that Edwards herself had worked so hard to keep perfect collapsed in front of the entire nation once John Edwards acknowledged he was the father of his mistress’s child in January of 2010. After that, Elizabeth Edwards abandoned her strategy to preserve the marriage and protect John’s reputation. Thus, her primary purposes and potential audiences shifted over time.

Prior to the final collapse in early 2010, Edwards addressed the political followers of her husband’s presidential campaigns, those in support of Edwards’s platform, and healthcare reform. In addition to Democratic partisans, presumably, white, middle-to-upper-middle-class women could relate to Edwards on a number of levels. Although Elizabeth Edwards was set apart by being a presidential candidate’s wife and possible first lady, she had many “sisters” in the fight against breast cancer and connected with

other mothers who had lost a child. Overall, Edwards seemed fairly normal and thus probably appealed to ordinary women of her social class and age. She had experienced many of the same things other wives and mothers had: raising children, working full time and running a home. After John Edwards confessed to infidelity, she had a potential sympathetic audience of divorced or sexually betrayed women, as well. Wanting to reach out to Edwards, who seemed to be carrying a lot of loss and pain, women across the country took up for her cause, offering support by reading and commenting on her blog and making her a best-selling author. Women were able to follow Edwards's story by reading celebrity gossip magazines and internet websites that framed Edwards as a woman who had been dealt blow after blow. Her female followers were able to watch magazine news shows and various other "controlled" media appearances Edwards made in popular women's media outlets to check up on her and see how she was holding up in the midst of the media's storm.¹

Rhetorical Implications Overview

Upon examining Elizabeth Edwards's public discourse, three themes were revealed as she desperately clung to her failing marriage. In the first theme, "The Perfect Marriage," Edwards focused on the foundation she and John Edwards had built and illustrated why her marriage was worth saving. The second theme, "Recovery Mode," highlighted the techniques Edwards used to soften the crushing blow of her husband's affair in the eyes of the media. It was here that Edwards attempted to take the "heat" off of her husband by protecting and defending him, and placing the blame on Rielle Hunter. The third theme is the two-step process of "The Woman and The Victim," which framed

her struggles as a victim and explains how, as a strong, confident woman, she chose to accept her new reality and move forward.

Themes

The Perfect Marriage

It comes as no surprise that Elizabeth Edwards argued that she and John Edwards had the perfect marriage. Dying of cancer and seeking stability and comfort, Edwards held tightly to her marriage, as her world began to collapse in the eyes of the media. Boasting almost thirty years of marital bliss at the time the scandal broke, Edwards argued the two were deeply in love and had the proof to show. In her discourse, Edwards never looked down on their marriage; rather, she chose to frame it as positive and loving, with a small amount of difficulty: her husband's extramarital affair. In her memoir, Edwards wrote:

We live not far from the country church in which John and I were married. I promised to love him for richer or poorer. We had nothing then. Really nothing, except debt from college loans. It is more than thirty-one years later, and we have more than we will need. I promised to love him in sickness; he has held me and fed me and taken care of me. I promised to love him for better or for worse. It has been, I have to admit, mostly for better. But there has been worse, and that worse has been tough on me. I turn sixty this year, and since I was fifty-seven, I have lived with that worse. (*Resilience*, 210)

Choosing to focus on the good from her marriage, while accepting (yet belittling) the affair, Edwards illustrates her theme of "The Perfect Marriage": "We had, what I believed, a great love story, bound as we were by triumph and defeat, by exhilarating achievement and shattering grief. We had walked side by side for three decades and in my foolish dreams would walk side by side, hand in hand, for three more." (*Resilience*, 37). Worried about their public appearance as individuals and a married couple, Edwards

talks about the “characters” they played in their perfect marriage: “We were lovers, life companions, crusaders, side by side, for a vision of what the country could be, we were an old married couple” (*Resilience*, 137). Edwards used their thirty-year marriage and beautiful family as evidence that John Edwards was a good family man. She made sure to uphold his reputation and discuss how his indiscretion was a simple mistake any person could have made. By focusing mostly on the positive attributions of their marriage and less on the actual indiscretion, Edwards was able to defend her choice to stay, sustain her husband, and further work to keep her “perfect” marriage.

Defending her husband’s actions, Edwards argues that part of what makes her marriage so strong and worth fighting for is the fact that John Edwards has remained by her side as she struggled mentally with the death of their son and physically with her cancer diagnosis. Edwards condemns those who think she just stayed with him because she was sick and too weak to move on. Rather, she contrasts this allegation by choosing to talk about how her illness has actually brought her and her husband closer and strengthened their marital bond, all the while, speaking to John Edwards’s character. She writes in *Resilience*, “I lie in bed, circles under my eyes, my sparse hair sticking in too many directions, and he looks at me as if I am the most beautiful woman he has ever seen” (*Resilience*, 200). Edwards frames herself as indebted to her husband for his unwavering support. She tells Oprah that her husband has fed her in the moments when she was weakest, and it is those moments that make forgiveness an option:

So what do I say? He’s done this terrible thing, a thing that he thinks is terrible too, and I say, ‘I’m sorry, all of those things don’t count. Only this one thing counts.’ And for me to say that after living with him, and loving him for so long, I mean, he was my life, and assuming that we can work on everything in the way that we hope we are able to, you know, that will continue to be true. But if it is, it’s because we cared

whether the other was in pain, and I'd be lying if I didn't say there was no single moment in all of this where I didn't wish his pain could end, too." (*Oprah*, 15)

Edwards also tells Oprah that it is through her illness that she is reminded of just how great of a husband John Edwards has been, sustaining her throughout some of the toughest times in her life (*Oprah*, 14).

Not wanting to damage her husband's reputation or the reputation of their marriage, Edwards belittles John's cheating as a mistake anyone could have made. Edwards is willing to forgive her husband because she knows he is a good man with strong morals. Having already painted him as her caretaker and reason for survival, Edwards continues to speak to the character of her husband: "I've stayed with him because this is a really good man who had done a very, very bad thing—but who really cares about things a lot of people just ignore. Though this may seem like an odd word, he's a very moral person, with an idea of right and wrong" (*O Magazine*, 154). Edwards describes her husband as someone who cares about her and others, willing to stand up for those who don't have a voice and are often ignored. This strategy works against the idea that John Edwards is just another cheating husband and politician. Rather, Edwards claims, he is a strong, loving man who has exceptional morals and values.

Recovery Mode

After building a marriage deeply rooted in love and tradition, Elizabeth Edwards watched as its foundation crumbled beneath the weight of her husband's indiscretion. When she wasn't using their marriage as her foundation, Edwards was in "Recovery Mode." Edwards developed several key ways to rationalize or "soften the blow" of her husband's affair in the eyes of the media. First, she focused on the regret her husband

felt and the reasons why he was worthy of forgiveness. Next, she tried to protect her husband from the public thinking he was a “cheater.” Finally, she framed Rielle Hunter as the person to blame for her and her husband’s troubles. She cleared her husband of any wrongdoing by personally attacking Hunter’s lack of morals.

Shaken after the news of her husband’s affair, Edwards began to cling to any glimmer of hope she could find in her marriage to John Edwards. Upon telling his wife of his indiscretion in December of 2006, John Edwards immediately expressed his regret and shame. Edwards saw this confession as a way to be honest with their curious public, fix what needed to be fixed, and then hopefully return to the way things were prior. By “coming clean” to his wife, Elizabeth Edwards saw her husband’s truthfulness and openness as reasons to forgive him and continue working on their bond. In her memoir, Edwards talks about the anguish her husband felt during his confession, saying, “He was so clearly full of pain that what he had done had come to light. He was so full of pain and guilt and shame, it was hard not to want to reach out” (*Resilience*, 188). Edwards supported her husband, taking up from him by presenting his honesty as something worth praise. Edwards commended her husband for telling her he had “been with the woman” because she so desperately wanted to salvage their marriage and for things to return to normal.

By focusing on his honesty and then likening the indiscretion to a simple, impulsive mistake any person could have made, Edwards stood by her husband and attempted to soften criticism of the affair, so to speak. She went on to write, “it’s hard for John, I can see that, because it is something about which he is ashamed” (*Resilience*, 201). Elizabeth Edwards noted the immense guilt and shame John felt in order to

accentuate his personal guilt and shame. By doing so, she was able to spin her husband's recent confession from something negative into something positive. The confession then became a sign of John Edwards's openness and honesty and allowed Edwards to still save her marriage.

Edwards chose to protect her husband from the harsh criticism of his affair and resulting confession in hopes that things would eventually return to normal. In her interview in *O*, Oprah questioned why Edwards chose to stay with her husband when allegation after allegation continued to be proven true. Edwards responded by saying, "I wanted to protect him. I wanted all of us to come out of it like we had been, so we could keep our story" (*O Magazine*, 154). After being married for close to thirty years, no one doubted Edwards's love for her husband and their family. Distraught and ill, Edwards should have been the one being shielded from the media's gaze by her husband, not the other way around. Edwards put aside her own pain and suffering while in this "recovery mode" and instead focused on her husband's pain and how she hoped to alleviate it by not punishing him any further than the media already had. She stated, "I saw him go through an enormous amount of pain. And after living with him and loving him for so long, I'd be lying if I said I didn't wish his pain could end too" (*O Magazine*, 154).

Oprah was astounded at how beautifully Edwards handled herself, to which Edwards agreed: "My first reaction was the reaction I think anybody would have about someone they've loved for that long. I wanted to protect him. I wanted, you know, I wanted him, I wanted me, I wanted all of us to come out of it, you know like we had been." By choosing to protect her husband, Edwards attempted to shift the media's attention and scrutiny off of her husband. If the media stopped talking about John, then

Elizabeth Edwards's life would start to stabilize and move towards normalcy. Once the public saw her forgive John, she hoped, then their questions would be answered and the scandal would subside. Edwards didn't care how her life returned to normalcy; she just knew that she wanted to desperately. She was able to put aside her hurt feelings and really reach out to her husband and shield him from the harshness of the media. Oprah asked how Edwards could find the room in her heart to forgive her husband, let alone want to protect him. Edwards claimed, "I think we try to turn those feelings off, because we're so full of anger, you know" (*Oprah*, 15). By forsaking her own feelings of hurt and anger, Edwards further illustrated just how far she was willing to go to preserve her marriage.

Finally, Edwards, grasping for stability and comfort, shifted the affair's blame from her husband to his immoral mistress, Rielle Hunter. Edwards tries to make Rielle Hunter the scapegoat and provides the public with someone to blame other than her philandering husband. It allows Elizabeth Edwards to emerge from the scandal as a victim and someone to pity, while Rielle Hunter is framed as a seductress with weak character. It clears Elizabeth Edwards of any wrongdoing, while citing Hunter as the reason for the affair and resulting scandal.

When asked how much Edwards knew about Hunter, she responded:

Just what I read, same things everybody reads. I didn't meet her, really. I mean, one time we were in the same place, and that was the night of the rally here in Chapel Hill at the end of December. And, literally, I was with my family, and my children and my brother and sister and family, and she walked by into another area, and that's the extent of my—that's it. (*Oprah*, 14)

In order to prevent the ordeal from looking like a "cat fight" or just two women bickering back and forth, Edwards creates distance between the two and acknowledges that she

doesn't know much about Hunter nor has she spent any time alone with her. In both of her interviews with Oprah, Edwards requested that Hunter not be mentioned by name, and she makes almost no mention of the mistress in her book, *Resilience*. Edwards argued she did not want to give Hunter any more notoriety that she had already earned: "If somebody wants to work at destroying my family and my home in order to get into the light, I'm not really interested" (*O Magazine*, 154). Edwards specifically states in her book that, while she does place some of the blame on her husband, she mainly sees Hunter as the instigator. This label shifts responsibility away from John Edwards. By making Hunter the instigator, Edwards is able to show how John Edwards made a simple mistake and was "lured" by Hunter. Elizabeth Edwards is able to make it seem as if Hunter preyed on John Edwards and made him do something that he normally would not have done.

In order to minimize her husband's recent indiscretion, Edwards chooses to attack Hunter's character:

I think women have to have more respect for other women. I've created this life. It takes a lot of work to put together a marriage, to put together a family and a home. You can't just knock on the door and say, 'You're out, I'm in.' You have to have enough respect for other human beings to leave their lives alone. If you admire that life, build it for yourself. (*O Magazine*, 154)

Edwards worked hard to build a strong marriage deeply rooted in family values. By attacking Hunter and pointing out her lack of dedication to building her own family, Edwards places herself above the lowly Hunter. She further stirs up the idea of disgust and Hunter's lack of respect for other women by framing her as a "hussy." Even though her marriage was crumbling from under her, Edwards never gave up and was determined

to save the face of her marriage. In Edwards's eyes, if she failed, Hunter would win, and that was something that Elizabeth Edwards fiercely tried to prevent.

The Woman and the Victim

The final theme in Elizabeth Edwards's discourse is her rhetorical metamorphosis from the victim of infidelity to a strong and confident woman. Initially, Edwards evoked sympathy from her public by exploiting her victimhood. She focused on the idea that, as a cheating politician's wife, her life was made more difficult by his indiscretion and the resulting media fallout. After her audience empathizes with her, Edwards switches gears and focuses on how strong and focused she has become due to the scandal and her attempts to overcome the media's personal attacks on her character and credibility.

Elizabeth Edwards situated herself as a victim of her husband's wrongdoing. She discussed how she already felt vulnerable long before the affair by just being a politician's wife. In *Resilience*, she writes, "And even before I learned of a single night, I felt vulnerable to humiliation. Because of the fish-eye lens through which we all see someone in the news--the lens that makes some traits seem bigger and some seem smaller--people had too high an opinion of me, and I knew I had no chance of meeting their expectations" (*Resilience*, 192). On top of the daily struggles political wives face, Edwards had the added pressure of being married to a scandalous politician. After hearing her husband's confession, she stated, "The fact that it is a mistake that many others have made before him did not make it any easier for me to hear when he told me what he had done" (Edwards Statement, 1). Dedicated to her family and marriage, Edwards desperately clung to the notion of "happily ever after." Her skewed view of the

affair and her complete loss of control was one more thing that added to her victimage, as explained in her memoir:

And the misery of having your past and your future taken away by something so unpleasant as a woman with nothing, but idle time to spend hanging around outside fancy hotels would be avoided. But we cannot, they cannot turn back. This is the life we have now and the only way to find peace, the only way to be resilient when these landmines explode beneath your foundation, is to first accept there is a new reality.
(*Resilience*, 30)

Here, Edwards is forced to concede control of the situation and accept how her life has changed. She is forced to move on, to leave behind her great love story and look to the future as an independent woman. As she explained to Oprah, “What’s the best I can make of what I have right now?” I think we grow up with this idea that our life story, we’re going to start on some path and it’s just going to be, you know, rosy vines” (*Oprah*, 16). Even though Edwards’s life most assuredly was not rosy vines, but rather a mess of deceit, cover-ups, humiliations, and illness, Edwards is determined to focus on the future and embrace her new identity. By gaining her audience’s sympathy first, Edwards symbolically attempts to pull away from the scandal with a new identity and an audience rooting for her independent success.

Rhetorical Implications

Elizabeth Edwards expressed clear-cut goals in her public discourse. There was no doubt she would do whatever it took to preserve her marriage to husband, John Edwards. By focusing on three themes: “The Perfect Marriage,” “Recovery Mode,” and “The Woman and the Victim,” Elizabeth Edwards attempted to boost her credibility, re-establish her place in society, and reinvent her personal identity after the scandal. Though Edwards only succeeded in saving her marriage for a short while, I argue that

future scorned political wives can follow her persuasive strategies in their attempts at “preserving” their own marriages.

Edwards’s use of the first theme, “The Perfect Marriage,” signifies her role as both a wife and a mother, two jobs she built her life around. Edwards’s main objective in centering her argument around the thirty-year marriage that she and John Edwards shared, as well as the family they created, is to make her public aware of just how strong their bond had once been. By focusing on their bond, Edwards was able to provide her audience with numerous examples of their happy marriage and explain exactly why her marriage was worth preserving. Frantic after learning of her husband’s affair and still battling cancer, Edwards wanted to maintain any sense of stability she could. Not wanting to look pathetic or desperate, Edwards did what any woman in love would do: she focused on the positive aspects of her marriage. Constantly reminding the public of her old-fashioned marriage, one in which she and John were “lovers” and “life companions,” created the impression that the marriage was worth saving, that the indiscretion could be overlooked or tolerated. After all, when you’ve been married that long and share such a tight bond and such a beautiful family life, who in their right mind would walk away?

Edwards knew from the very beginning of the scandal that her life would be cut short and made the decision that she didn’t want to spend her precious time fighting with her husband, but rather working to rebuild her marriage so she could leave this world in peace. Having no control over her health or when she would die, Edwards perhaps turned to the one thing she could control: her decision to stay. After losing a child, dealing with a terminal cancer diagnosis, and her husband’s confession, the only thing

that Edwards had left to fall back on was the thirty-year commitment she chose to maintain.

In the “Recovery Mode” theme, Edwards cast herself aside in order to protect her husband. Her main objective was to shield John Edwards from the media scrutiny that was destroying his credibility and reputation as each allegation was later proven true. Edwards argued her husband was not bad, but a man of morals and values who simply made a mistake. She then likened that mistake to a mistake that any human being could have made, but, because of her husband’s life playing out in the media, the mistake was made larger than it really was. Edwards made it clear that her husband regretted his actions, and she made sure to focus on how she was able to forgive him. She was adamant in making sure the public knew that it was her husband’s openness and honesty that earned him her forgiveness.

As part of her strategy to excuse the actions of her husband, Edwards portrayed Rielle Hunter, the mistress, as a conscienceless predator. While Edwards made it clear in her interviews with Oprah that Hunter was not to be mentioned by name, Edwards herself had no problem identifying Hunter as the person to blame for her husband’s actions. Attacking Hunter on a personal level, Edwards framed the mistress as a woman with little to no morals who was simply trying to “move in” on her family and steal them from under her. Edwards did not claim to know why Hunter was scheming, standing outside a hotel waiting for her husband with the pickup line, “You are so hot” and then pursuing a married man (*Oprah*, 4). Edwards effectively cleared her husband of any major responsibility in the affair, arguing John Edwards fell captive to Hunter’s ways: “It was an opportunity and it didn’t seem like there were any consequences” (*Oprah*, 10).

Edwards basically said that her husband's cheating had no real implications, but rather it was Hunter's decision which should be critiqued.

"The Woman and the Victim" theme moves back to focusing on Elizabeth Edwards. When she lost her son Wade in 1996, it seemed as though her life could not have gotten any worse. But Edwards's life did get worse, and the media was there for every gut-wrenching blow. Her husband's run at the White House failed; she was diagnosed with terminal cancer; and then her husband cheated on her and tried to hide it. The accumulation of these events inexorably turned Edwards into a victim, deserving of sympathy. The public undoubtedly wondered what else could happen to Edwards? This apparently sweet, innocent, mother and wife was not only going to die prematurely, but also her husband made a mockery of her marriage.

According to Edwards's narrative, she had spent her life working, raising her children, supporting her husband's political platform, and running her home. She did everything a good wife and mother should do. Even after husband's confession, Edwards still continued to fight for her family and her marriage. Her victimage is seen in her innocence; she did nothing wrong and cannot be blamed for John Edwards's affair. Edwards was never "active" within the scandal. She had no responsibility for the media fallout, rather she was dragged into the headlines by the news coverage of John Edwards and Hunter. In a way, she was just an innocent bystander, a victim of circumstance.

Edwards's status as a victim worked to her advantage rhetorically because her public probably felt she deserved more than this life had given her. Moreover, the public might not have been able to relate to her husband, but they could relate to Edwards's numerous identities: the grieving mother, the discarded wife, and the breast cancer

warrior. Her sympathetic followers were likely able to empathize with her as she faced some of the same struggles they did. *Jezebel*, an online news source for women, argued that Edwards's realness and "relatability" appealed to the public and assisted in her own canonization.

Upon soliciting the empathy of her public and potentially reestablishing her place in society, Edwards turned her rhetoric into a discussion surrounding her inner strength and determination that would see her through life after the scandal. In her memoir, *Resilience*, Edwards discussed that it was only through each of her struggles and losses that she was able to find true understanding. Edwards reasons that it has been her own victimage that has allowed her new identity to emerge and a new chapter of her life to begin. She argues the reason she survived each setback was because she accepted that "Nothing ever stays the same" (*O Magazine*, 155). And by understanding that life is always evolving, changing, and moving forward, Edwards was able to find some consolation. Her victimage gave way to her own personal growth and independence.

Conclusion

Overall, Elizabeth Edwards employed several persuasive strategies to preserve her marriage to John Edwards. Successful for several years, Edwards attempted to bolster her credibility that had been questioned by the media, restore her place in society, and recreate her new, personal sense of identity. She illustrated forcefully that she had no part in her husband's affair and simply worked diligently to save her marriage and family. Edwards highlighted her own life struggles in order to evoke empathy from her public and situate herself as the strong, confident woman who would come to understand that nothing ever stays the same. After the scandal, her public would come to know

Elizabeth Edwards as the loving wife who desperately loved a cheating man. They would know of her battle with cancer and the grieving she faced for both her deceased son and her broken marriage

After learning of the Edwards's great "love story" and Elizabeth's protective nature over her husband, it is no surprise that Edwards would come out of the scandal a changed woman with a new identity. A warrior in her own right, Edwards answered the question "Should I stay or should I go" with "I should stay." And she fought hard. Though she never had to answer for personal immorality or character defects, Edwards was placed into a rhetorical situation that called for a response. Because her husband cheated, she was forced into defending her choice to stay. Her themes and strategies can serve as possible new *topoi* for future scorned political wives to use as a model for how to preserve a marriage. When scorned wives want to work things out and forgive their husbands, they can look at Elizabeth Edwards and her persuasive strategies and see a potential path to follow.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Edwards appeared on numerous television news and talk shows. For additional information, media clips and transcripts of Edwards's media appearances please see the websites for *The Today Show* and *Larry King Live*.

CHAPTER THREE

Jenny Sanford: The New Model for the Wronged Political Wife

Before Jenny Sanford came along, the options for wronged political wives were pretty poor. You could suffer silently (see Silda Wall Spitzer), deny everything (hello, Hillary), or make catty asides about the harlot who caused your husband to stray (Elizabeth Edwards). Then came Jenny Sanford.

--Rebecca Johnson (*Vogue*,
583)

Heiress. Georgetown graduate. Investment banker. Campaign manager. Mother of four. Former wife of Governor Mark Sanford. Though Jenny Sanford's resume seems to speak for itself, it has been her courage and tenacity from June of 2009 until March of 2010 that have thrust her from rock bottom to public admiration. In the six months prior to her husband's June 24, 2009, press conference, Sanford worked to save her marriage. Early in 2009, Sanford accidentally came across e-mail correspondence between her husband and his Argentinean lover, Maria Belen Chapur. When confronted about the e-mails, Mark Sanford took full responsibility and promised to end the affair. In her memoir, *Staying True*, Sanford discussed her initial reaction to the affair:

I suppose it's cliché to say that I felt as if I had been punched in the gut. But that's the best description I can muster for what this surprise felt like. I was short of breath. I began to shake. Stunned, I wasn't sure of what to do next. I had so many questions. How could I not have known? Had I really known, on some level? When and where had he been seeing her? How had he found time for an affair? Did he really love her? How could he do this to me and to the boys? (*Staying True*, 168-169)

Sadly, Mark Sanford did not end his relationship with Chapur, and, in June of 2009, after disappearing from the state of South Carolina for almost a week, the governor was forced to hold a press conference. In a bold and decisive move, Sanford chose not to be present at the press conference. In fact, she wasn't even in the capitol city; rather, she watched the course of her life change from the bedroom of her Sullivan's Island home. She remarked, "I had never considered myself a traditional spouse, though, and this wasn't the moment to start being one" (*Staying True*, xviii).

By choosing not to stand by her husband, Jenny Sanford morphed into the new model for wronged political spouses and forever changed the stereotypical image of the "tearful wife, hiding behind big sunglasses, next to her husband while he unloaded his sins to the world" (Zakaria, 4). Within hours of her husband's press conference, state representatives were calling for the governor's resignation, and Sanford was being hailed. *Newsweek* called her a "media genius" (*Vogue*, 538). Diane Sawyer called her "classy," praising her "grace in the glare" of her husband's affair (*Vogue*, 538). But what came next for Jenny Sanford, the endless interviews and media request, would probably shape the available options for future political wives.

In this chapter, I will use four examples of Jenny Sanford's public discourse after the announcement of her husband's extramarital affair to track and analyze emerging themes and motifs: Sanford's initial press statement, her *Vogue* magazine interview, the *20/20* interview, and, lastly, her memoirs, *Staying True*. I argue the emerging themes of "The Sanford Legacy," "Trouble in Paradise," and "Looking Inward and Onward" frame Sanford's discourse as apologetic, working to improve her overall credibility and defend her personal choices as a wife and mother. I maintain the specific rhetorical and

argumentative strategies used in Sanford's discourse function to create potential new topoi for the genre of scorned political wives.

Context and Exigence

In January of 2009, South Carolina's First Lady, Jenny Sanford, was digging through her husband's desk in search of some family files, when she learned of his affair with Chapur. In her memoirs Sanford wrote:

I walked into the tall office with long windows overlooking the mansion driveway and went to Mark's desk. Ignoring the scattered papers on top and the stacks of books on the floor that Mark planned to read, I went straight for the drawer on the left side, where I knew Mark kept files about current issues. In random order, one labeled simply "B" caught my eye. I opened it and saw quickly that this was not a file dedicated, as I thought, to correspondence with Mark's brother Bill—often called just B by his siblings. Instead, a letter, an article clipped from a magazine and a printed email exchange inside told me that B stood for Belen, a woman, I learned sitting there, Mark had slept with and whom he believed to be his eternal love. (*Staying True*, 168)

Sanford hoped to save her marriage by working towards forgiveness, seeking counseling, and eventually moving toward reconciliation, if and when her husband ended the affair. Jenny Sanford chose to keep her husband's indiscretions private in order to protect her four young boys and her husband's career. She hoped to prevent a media backlash by handling the situation at home, between her and her husband.

Over the next six months, Jenny and Mark Sanford sought counseling and had numerous conversations about their marriage and what was best for their family. Mark Sanford chose to focus on work, as his conservative political career began to take off. His name was mentioned on the "short-list" for the office of Vice President on the Republican ticket in 2008, an honor and possibility that frightened Sanford. Instead of ending the relationship he had with Maria Belen Chapur, Mark Sanford continuously

begged his wife to let him see his lover in person in order to end things properly. Sanford began to see her husband had real feelings for this woman, whom she later learned had been seeing her husband for seven years. Sanford allowed her husband to travel to New York, with a family friend as a companion, to end the relationship and to discontinue communication. Unbeknownst to Sanford, Mark Sanford did not end the relationship while in New York.

Completely worn down and disheartened with Mark Sanford's lack of effort in fixing their marriage, Sanford chose to move her boys to the family beach home as soon as school was over that May. The move, Sanford reasoned, wouldn't raise any media speculation, since it was summer, and, in South Carolina, summers are spent near the water. Sanford refused to give her husband permission to visit his lover again and drew up a contract that vowed she would remain silent about the affair for the sake of his political career, if he would agree not to see Chapur ever again. Mark Sanford refused to sign the contract and continued to grow more restless and distant. A family friend and political advisor stepped in, warning the governor of his disastrous choices. Mark Sanford chose to ignore the advice. On June 10, 2009, at the request of his wife, Mark Sanford told his children that he would have no contact with them for thirty days in order to "sort things out" (*Staying True*, 190). Sanford begged her husband not to see Chapur again. He promised he wouldn't see her, but just a few short hours later, he had already bought a ticket to Argentina.

Sanford knew that her husband had interest in visiting his lover. She then chose to tell her boys, Marshall, Landon, Bolton, and Blake of their father's affair. On June 17, 2009, Governor Mark Sanford left Columbia, South Carolina, and told a few members of

his staff he would be hiking the Appalachian Trail. He failed to answer any phone calls and was considered “missing” from June 18 until June 24, 2009, when he was discovered arriving in an airport in a different state on a flight from Argentina. Sanford was questioned about her husband’s whereabouts during his brief “vacation,” but, due to the thirty day separation period, she did not know his exact whereabouts.

Governor Mark Sanford held a press conference beneath the South Carolina State Capitol rotunda in the afternoon of June 24, 2009. It was there he announced his marital infidelities and recent trip to visit his lover in Argentina. In his press conference Mark Sanford identified Chapur as his “soulmate” and addressed the fact the media had in their possession intimate email correspondence shared between the two. Jenny Sanford was not present at the press conference and watched it air live from her Sullivan’s Island beach home surrounded by her friends and family. Prior to the press conference, Sanford wrote a statement she would later release on her own. On Wednesday night, June 24, 2009 at 5:19 pm, she walked down her driveway to the press corps staked out at her home and handed out copies of her statement, personally written by her with the help of her father. The First Lady’s office released her statement to the public the next morning.

Press Release: “Statement From First Lady Jenny Sanford”

The initial critical object I will examine is Jenny Sanford’s personal statement. She begins by speaking to the legacy she will leave behind: her four young boys, whom she hopes will grow into men of character. She then moves to a discussion of the sacredness of marriage: “I believe wholeheartedly in the sanctity, dignity and importance of the institution of marriage” (Sanford Statement, 1). Due to her strong belief in the

establishment of marriage, she hopes to move towards forgiveness and, eventually, reconciliation. Jenny Sanford then addresses the recent media attention her husband brought to light with his disappearance. She makes clear to the public that, because of their trial separation, she did not know his whereabouts for the last week and chose to keep their marriage troubles quiet in order to protect her young children. Sanford closes her statement by opening herself “spiritually” to the notion of forgiveness and invites her husband back into their marriage and family. She makes it clear that Mark Sanford has earned the “a chance to resurrect” their marriage, but that her focus will be on raising her boys into men (Sanford Statement, 2). She closes her two-page statement by discussing her struggles to find strength, patience and healing for her and her family and a request for privacy.

After the press conference, Mark Sanford returned to the family’s Sullivan’s Island home, where he and Sanford attempted to recover from the announcement of the affair and the resulting media fallout. Things did not improve, and Sanford realized that her husband had a number of problems he needed to tend to before he could even begin to tackle their crumbling marriage. Later that summer, on August 7, 2009, Jenny Sanford moved her and her four boys out of the Governor’s Mansion in Columbia, South Carolina. Mark Sanford had shown no improvement in his actions, and Sanford announced she and her children would be moving into their home on Sullivan’s Island full time for the near future (*Staying True*, 206).

***Vogue*: “Notes on a Scandal”**

In September, a mere two and a half months after the news of her husband’s extramarital affair was made public, and a month after leaving the Governor’s Mansion,

Jenny Sanford was featured in a six-page interview spread in the fall fashion issue of *Vogue* magazine. Sanford's interview is a notable feat because, in the fashion industry, the September issue is twice as large as a normal month, due to the introduction of fall fashion lines. Written by Rebecca Johnson, the interview takes place at Sanford's Sullivan's Island beach home. The interview opens with Johnson remarking on Sanford's physical appearance and notoriety: "petite, clear-eyed, strong willed, pious without being smug, smart without being caustic, Jenny Sanford became an unlikely heroine by telling the simple truth. Her children were the most important thing in the world to her" (*Vogue*, 538). After providing Sanford's background, touching on family, friendships, and faith, Johnson shares Jenny Sanford's marital history and comments on her husband's betrayal. The *Vogue* interview focuses purely on Sanford and the notion "life in the fishbowl that is the governor's mansion has not always been easy for her or her children" (*Vogue*, 540). The interview is paired with photographs of the former first lady around her southern home and with her young boys.

20/20: "Jenny Sanford Breaks Her Silence"

After the *Vogue* interview, on December 11, 2009, Sanford announced she would be filing for divorce. Remaining quiet into the new year, Sanford focused on her boys and writing her memoir. On February 5, 2010, Jenny Sanford broke her silence by sitting down with Barbara Walters for a *20/20*, hour-long interview. *20/20*, is a primetime news magazine program airing on Friday nights, at 10 PM, on ABC. Walters asks Sanford a number of direct and personal questions about "sex and the political wife" (*20/20*, 2). The interview begins with a background on political wives and why they stay with their cheating spouses. Walters cites Bill Clinton, John Edwards, Larry Craig, and Eliot

Spitzer's extramarital affairs as evidence to the growing trend of weepy-eyed political wives. Then Walters introduces Jenny Sanford as the first woman to break that trend and not stand by her man. Her first on-screen question is, "You did not stand next to your husband. Did you think of doing that?" (20/20, 6) Sanford's response is simply put, "No, I didn't really" (20/20, 6). From there, Walters highlights Sanford's life as South Carolina's First Lady, her role as a mother and wife, and then turns the conversation to Mark Sanford and their tumultuous marriage. The majority of the interview is concerned with the affair. Walters questions how the affair happened, how Sanford found out, how she felt, and what her future plans were. The interview ends with Sanford taking a firm stance about her actions: "I would say that I have acted honorably in our marriage. And I've been the best wife I can be. But now I'm looking forward to whatever comes next" (20/20, 26). The interview concludes with Barbara Walters commenting on Sanford's new book and the closure it has brought to Sanford amidst her husband's continual betrayal.

Autobiography: *Staying True*

Jenny Sanford released her memoir, *Staying True*, in February 2010. Focused on faith, family, and love, Sanford tells her life story chronologically, with the exception of the prologue, which speaks to her husband's extramarital affair and frames her new perspective on life. In the opening pages she writes, "I see now that June 24, 2009, was a day that changed forever the trajectory of my life, but it did not change me" (*Staying True*). She begins her story by discussing her childhood, growing up in Illinois as the heiress to the Skil Corporation, the world's first producer of the portable circular saw. She then tells of how she met her husband, Mark Sanford, their decision to marry and

then move from New York, where she was working as an investment banker, to Charleston, South Carolina. Once she began her life in South Carolina, she tells of Mark Sanford's entry into politics and their personal growth as a family with the birth of their four sons. From there Sanford shares her struggles balancing motherhood, wifely duties, and her job as Mark Sanford's campaign manager. The last few chapters deal specifically with Mark and Jenny Sanford's life as the Governor and First Lady of South Carolina and Mark Sanford's affair with Argentinean citizen Maria Belen Chapur. Throughout her book, Sanford touches on her spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ and how her faith plays a part in her everyday life. She shares personal reflections, family stories, and her own motherly mantra, stating, "in the end, I really only wanted to be remembered as a good mother and grandmother; a life well-lived by me would leave behind generations of well-adjusted and happy children, each productive in their own way" (*Staying True*, 25-26).

Audience

Thanks to the hounding media, the world was able to watch as Jenny Sanford worked to save her marriage and ultimately failed. The world did, however, get to see Sanford take a bold stand against the stereotypical wronged political spouse and in turn be hailed as "a new role model for wronged spouses," by *The Washington Post* (*Vogue*, 538). The press corps was camped outside Sanford's Sullivan's Island home within hours of her husband's press conference. They were so close she was able to actually walk down her driveway and hand out personal copies of her statement. Living in the capitol city of Columbia and being the first family of South Carolina, the media were relentless in the portrayal of Sanford, the strong, independent mother and Governor Mark

Sanford, the conservative governor who spent a week getting “Argentine tail” (*Staying True*, xiv). Aside from *The State*, Columbia’s largest newspaper, having Mark Sanford and Chapur’s emails, the majority of the media backlash came from scandal mongers feeding on yet another political affair. Governor Sanford’s remark about Chapur being his “soul mate” and their racy emails landed him as fodder for nightly talk shows.

Comedian Jay Leno actually read the emails aloud on his primetime show, *The Jay Leno Show* (Leo).

Jenny Sanford felt the embarrassment of the affair alongside her husband. While Sanford’s exact audience will never be known, one can make assumptions about whom Sanford’s audience was and how they came to support her. Using Edwin Black’s concept of the “second persona,” Sanford’s “implied auditor” or audience was female, middle aged, upper class mothers, or women who resembled Sanford herself (Black, 89). Sanford had a number of supporters in her “corner” that followed her in the media. Over seven million viewers tuned in to watch Sanford’s interview on *20/20*, beating *The Jay Leno Show* and *Numb3rs* (Seidman). Housewives, mothers, and middle aged women agreed with Sanford’s stand and felt the need to support her. Sanford was smart in choosing key media outlets that would garner her support. By choosing to appear in *Vogue*, Sanford was able to appeal directly to a female audience and tap into a wealthier demographic. The cost of a single issue of *Vogue* is close to five dollars. Women were able to relate to Sanford because she, too, was a mother and wife, who witnessed her husband cheat on her. An article in the *New York Times* said “for thousands of women, responding on the internet and Twitter, Mrs. Sanford’s decision to hold her husband accountable provided a

catharsis, a kind of public exorcism of the ghosts of political wives past” (*New York Times*, 1).

Rhetorical Implications Overview

After an examination of the discourse set forth by Jenny Sanford, three major themes emerged. The first theme, “The Sanford Legacy,” focused on Sanford’s goals as a mother. The second theme, “Trouble in Paradise,” illustrated Sanford’s goal to restore her credibility by highlighting her husband’s weaknesses. And the third and final theme, “Looking Inward and Onward,” revealed Sanford’s goal to defend her choices and reaffirm her position as a woman of God. Lloyd Bitzer argues that rhetoric is situational and has the ability to change “reality through the mediation of thought and action” (Bitzer, 60). I argue that Sanford’s discourse illustrates a “fitting response” and furthers her overall goals of defending her actions after her husband’s extramarital affair and heightening her credibility to the public. By using these themes (and correlating categories), Sanford was able to guide her public into the direction she chose.

Themes

The Sanford Legacy

Within the first few lines of Sanford’s 2009 *Vogue* article, author Rebecca Johnson notes, “Jenny Sanford has been adamant from the beginning that her four boys, ranging in age from ten to seventeen, are the center of her life” (*Vogue*, 540). Throughout her public discourse, Sanford makes it clear her one goal in life is to be the best mother possible. The theme of “The Sanford Legacy” appears in a number of ways throughout her rhetoric. The notion of legacy is exemplified in Sanford’s mothering

response after her boys learned of their father's scandal. Within the first few lines of her personal statement, Sanford sets the tone for her family's future. She states:

I personally believe that the greatest legacy I will leave behind in this world is not the job I held on Wall Street, or the campaigns I managed for Mark, or the work I have done as First Lady or even the philanthropic activities in which I have been routinely engaged. Instead, the greatest legacy I will leave in this world is the character of the children I, or we, leave behind. It is for that reason that I deeply regret the recent actions of my husband Mark, and their potential damage to our children. (Sanford Statement, 1).

Sanford's boys are the most important thing in her life, and she strives to illustrate the ways in which her children can grow into men of character. She uses her own actions as an example for her young sons. After learning of her husband's affair and working hard and failing to fix her ailing marriage, Sanford finally asks her husband to leave the family home. She defends her choice by setting a personal example for her boys: "We reached a point where I felt it was important to look my sons in the eyes and maintain my dignity, self-respect and my basic sense of right and wrong" (Sanford Statement, 1).

"The Sanford Legacy" consists of three categories surrounding Sanford's mothering nature. The first category revolves around the notion that God blessed Sanford with four young boys, and, by honoring them, she is honoring Him. In the second category, Sanford portrays herself as an "old fashioned mother," whose one job in life is to protect her children from harm. And the third category deals specifically with the damaging effects Mark Sanford's extramarital affair caused Marshall, Landon, Bolton, and Blake Sanford.

By placing motherhood front and center, "The Sanford Legacy" worked to influence her audience and persuade them of her traditional gender role. This theme is the most noticeable in all of her discourse and could be considered her number one goal,

long term. She does not skirt around the idea of family and her understanding of what it means to be a good mother. She places her children before herself and argues that she will do whatever it takes to prevent them from feeling the effects of Mark Sanford's affair.

Reeling from her husband's extramarital affair, Jenny Sanford turned to her faith and spirituality to guide her decisions as both a wife and a mother. When interviewing Sanford, Rebecca Johnson commented on Sanford's deep and resounding faith growing up, noting "Religion played an important role in the family. As a girl, she saw her father kneel next to the bed in daily prayer. Faith also helped the Sullivan children cope with their mother's longtime battle with skin cancer and the debilitating treatments she underwent to fight it" (*Vogue*, 540-541). Based on the priorities in Sanford's life, it was no surprise to her friends and family when she turned to God and her children in the closing remarks of her public statement: "Psalm 127 states that sons are a gift from the Lord and children a reward from Him. I will continue to pour my energy into raising our sons to be honorable young men" (Sanford Statement, 2). Barbara Walters doted upon Sanford's dedication to her family in their *20/20* interview by asking Sanford about her sense of responsibility to her boys. Sanford responded, "The majority of us cannot hear anything but ourselves, and we cannot hear anything God says. But to be brought to the place where we can hear the call of God is to be profoundly changed. It's a good thought of the day. Listen that you hear what God has to say" (*20/20*, 7). By strategically rooting herself in motherhood, Sanford reaffirms her role as the mother of Marshall, Landon, Bolton, and Blake Sanford. Building her role as mother on a foundation deeply rooted in

religion, Sanford reprioritizes her life, placing motherhood at the helm. She argues that her role as a mother is a way of answering God's calling.

The second category frames Jenny Sanford as an "old fashioned mother," dedicated to taking care of her children and keeping them out of harm's way. Sanford made her role clear to her public when she placed her boys' well being as a priority over her own: "And I was thinking of the boys, who didn't deserve this in the least" (*Staying True*, 186).

When discussing her relationship with Mark Sanford and the juggling act she faced with her career and motherhood, Sanford candidly spoke to Rebecca Johnson: "At heart, I am an old-fashioned woman. If the Lord blessed me with children and family, I knew that would be my calling" (*Vogue*, 541). Even though Sanford left her job as an investment banker in New York City to move to South Carolina with her husband, she wrote in *Staying True* "For a very long time, my marriage to Mark and our commitment to our family has allowed me to work toward my goals daily, even as true balance often eludes us. A woman's life is a juggling act, to be sure, and I'm not the only mother who feels that whatever you devote your time to this moment cheats someone else" (*Staying True*, 153). By anchoring herself in the role of "mother," Sanford once again connects with her implied audience of women and mothers. She portrays herself to be just like any other mother whose main concern is the betterment of her children.

Sanford furthers the notion of an "old fashion mother" by highlighting how she reprioritized her life after giving birth to the couple's four sons. Much of Sanford's anguish regarding her husband's affair correlated to the effect it had on her boys. She frames herself as an "old fashioned mother," who's one job in life is to protect her young

from danger. Within this category she redesigns her mothering style, arguing that no longer is she an investment banker, a politician's wife, a campaign manager or a first lady, rather she is a mother who is dedicated to staying home and raising her boys into men of character. Staying true to her "old fashioned" reaction to shield her children from harm, she chose not to immediately tell her sons of their father's infidelity, but was forced to tell them before the media broke the story. In her memoir she argued, "No child should have to learn such things, but I wanted them to be well prepared in case the story got out; I didn't want them to learn about Mark's affair from the television or the public" (*Staying True*, 196). Like any mother, Sanford wanted to cover her children and protect them from the cruelties of the media. She chose to deliver the devastating blow to her boys in their home. When discussing that conversation, Sanford noted, "I was crushed by the hurt they must have felt at learning of his betrayal, and also by their thinking he might abandon them. Then with such clairvoyance Bolton exclaimed, 'Oh my gosh. This is going to be worse than Eliot Spitzer'" (*Staying True*, 196). And Bolton Sanford was correct, the Sanford affair hit the airwaves, and, before long, the family was making headlines.

Unbeknownst to Sanford and her boys, Mark Sanford chose to see his lover once more, which ultimately led to his press conference that June. It was announced during the press conference that *The State* newspaper had e-mails between the two lovers, e-mails that both Sanford and her boys were forced to face. Sanford was saddened that her young children would learn of these e-mails and their provocative nature. Barbara Walters asked Sanford, "What did those e-mails say?" Sanford responded, "Nothing that you ever want your children to read." But the young Sanford men did read those e-mails,

to which Sanford responded, “Nobody wants their children to read something like about their father, from their father. Their world’s been turned upside-down as well. It just ripped me up to see them reading these emails and to see them have to grow up so fast” (20/20, 23). Though Sanford had no control over how quickly her boys were forced to grow up in the media’s glare, she did have control over the type of men they would become.

As mentioned in the opening lines of Sanford’s statement, she regrets her husband’s recent actions and their “potential damage to [her] children” (Sanford Statement, 1). Sanford’s motherly instinct strives to give her children the best life possible, ensuring their father’s affair has no lasting impact on their young lives. From the moment Sanford told her sons about their father’s affair, she noticed an immediate effect. In her *20/20* article, Sanford noted:

You know, children sense what’s going on around them. And I think they sensed that things weren’t right between us and they didn’t know why they weren’t right. And I felt at some point that I just needed to be honest with them and tell them why exactly they couldn’t speak with him and why exactly we were separated and we wouldn’t see him for a month. And one of them said, ‘I guessed it. I thought he was having an affair.’ And the other one said, ‘Well, why didn’t you tell us earlier? We could have, we could have woken him up,’ which just breaks your heart. No child should, should feel like they could be the ones to wake him up from his delusion or his dream or his searching for another woman. And I said boys, he looked me in the eye and he said, ‘I will not see her.’ And they said, well, we just have to hope he sticks to that. (20/20, 18-19)

Mark Sanford chose not to end his relationship with Chapur and made no effort to save the marriage. Sanford eventually asked her husband to leave, citing the damaging effects their crumbling marriage was having on their boys. In her memoir, she wrote: “The questions that dogged me were the ones that would ultimately break the commitment from my side as well: At what point are children ill-served by the example

set by their parents and their marriage? And what of my personal dignity and self respect if Mark continued to see his lover” (*Staying True*, 177). Mark Sanford did leave the family residence and Sanford worked diligently to make sure her boys still knew their father was a good man and deserving of their respect. She put her feelings aside and put on the best face possible for her boys, stating, “Of course I would be kind to the boys and respectful of their love for their father. I had to find a way to explain things to them that would allow them to continue to love their dad and not force them to hate him out of loyalty to me or a desire to protect me” (*Staying True*, 195). Sanford knew the pending separation would be difficult for her boys to handle, with the media focusing on the family. Sanford acknowledged the difficult time they were having. She asked for privacy for her and her boys. She explained, “What a mix of feelings we had. We had the shame of betrayal and the coming public humiliation, but we also had our faith, our love of Mark and our family. I could see the gray of the confusion of conflicting emotions as clearly as I could see some part of it as black and white” (*Staying True*, 197). As bad as things seemed for her children, Sanford was determined to make the best out of the situation and move her boys in a positive, new direction.

Trouble in Paradise

When Barbara Walters directly asked Jenny Sanford about her marriage to Mark Sanford, Sanford responded, “I would have described our marriage as not a fiery romantic marriage, necessarily, but, but a very good, steady, supportive marriage” (20/20, 13). With an uninspiring foundation like that, it was no surprise when the Sanfords watched their marriage fall to pieces courtesy of the governor’s extramarital affair. The idea of “Trouble in Paradise,” or Sanford’s ailing marriage, is the second of three major

themes found throughout her discourse. Alongside the theme of “The Sanford Legacy,” the second theme, “Trouble in Paradise,” works in tandem with the previous topics. Sanford’s rhetorical and argumentative strategies are illustrated through three particular categories that fall under this second theme. The first category illustrates how Jenny Sanford framed Mark Sanford’s affair as an “addiction,” or out of his control. The second category looks at Sanford’s negative portrayal of Mark Sanford, as a person, and the third category revolves around both Jenny and Mark Sanford’s participation in the marriage.

The theme of “Trouble in Paradise” clearly worked to shift media attention from Sanford herself, to her besieged husband. I argue Sanford’s main goal in using the theme “Trouble in Paradise” revolved around padding her own public image and heightening her credibility, while attempting to uphold her husband’s public image yet weaken his credibility.

Jenny Sanford worked to shift the media attention from her marriage to Mark, specifically in the first two categories of the theme “Trouble in Paradise.” In the first category, Jenny Sanford frames Mark’s actions as an “addiction,” and felt that due to his struggles he had earned the chance to salvage their marriage. In her personal statement, she wanted to give her husband the opportunity to come back home and to be reunited with his family. It was her hope that he would leave his scandalous behavior in the past, and, together, they could move forward as a family. From day one, Sanford stood up for her husband, coming to his defense in her very first public remarks. When interviewed later that summer by Rebecca Johnson, Sanford said, “Mark is not a bad person. What the world saw in the press conference is someone who is struggling. None of us are

perfect. We are all trying to do the best we can” (*Vogue*, 581). Sanford had faith that through counseling Mark Sanford would see the error of his ways, strive to make amends for his wrongful behavior, and come to grips with his sexual desires. She came to his defense again during the *Vogue* interview, telling Johnson, “I have learned these affairs are almost like an addiction to alcohol or pornography. They just can’t break away from them” (*Vogue*, 540). Sanford felt her husband’s involvement in politics was responsible for his disconnection from their marriage and his resulting sexual desires. Speaking to his inflated confidence, she reasoned:

Politicians become disconnected from the way everyone else lives in the world. I saw that from the very beginning. They’ll say they need something, and ten people want to give it to them. It’s an ego boost, and it’s easy to drink your own Kool-Aid. As a wife, you do your best to keep them grounded, but it’s a real challenge. (*Vogue*, 580)

Due to Mark Sanford’s egotistical lifestyle, Sanford fought to win back his attention and begged him not to see his lover. But the governor could not help himself. Eventually, Sanford realized that reconciliation was never going to happen. In her memoir she wrote, “It became clear to me this romantic relationship he had was a way of doing something for himself—it felt good and he didn’t really want to give it up” (*Staying True*, 175).

Sanford chose to frame her husband’s sexual appetite as an issue he needed to face alone: “My husband has got some issues that he needs to work on, about happiness and what happiness means. You wish it wouldn’t come to a crisis like this” (*Vogue*, 540).

Sanford works to set up the idea that Mark Sanford’s raging sexual desires and affair are the results of an “addiction” from which he is suffering from. She begs the audience to cut her husband slack, arguing that people make mistakes and everyone’s human. While she doesn’t strive to “bury” Mark Sanford in his mistakes, she does work

to weaken his credibility as a politician. After all, who wants a politician who is suffering from a sex addiction that is likened to alcohol or drug abuse?

The second category that revolves around the theme “Trouble in Paradise” is Mark Sanford’s drastic change in character. Sanford does an excellent job of framing her current husband in stark contrast to the man she married. She discusses how his current downfalls were not representative of the man he once was or the man with whom she fell in love. When Sanford discussed first meeting her soon-to-be-husband, she told Johnson, “I didn’t think, Wow, this is the man for me, but I thought he was a breath of fresh air. Compared with the typical Wall Street guy, he seemed like an honest, sincere gentleman” (*Vogue*, 541). She went on to talk about how shocked she was when she learned of her husband’s affair saying, “It never occurred to me that he would do something like that. The person I married was centered on a core of morals. The person who did this is not centered on those morals” (*Vogue*, 540). Mark Sanford proved distasteful when he practically begged at his wife’s feet to be allowed to visit with his lover. While morals were the last thing on the governor’s mind, the repercussions of his actions weighed heavily on Sanford’s mind. She told Barbara Walters:

I could have never imagined this. I mean, I could never even made this up. Never occurred to me that this person I knew, who was actually a fairly grounded person, would- be asking me something so morally offensive. And he said, “Why can’t you just give me permission?” I said, “Well, why would I give you permission?” I mean who, who gives their spouse permission to go see their lover? And he said to me at one point, why don’t you just love me? And I said, well, that’s not love. I mean, love has a responsibility. (20/20, 16)

But Mark Sanford chose to continue to see his lover and was eventually forced to face his public. During the conference the governor spoke highly of his mistress and mentioned

little of his family. He spoke of his own heartache and agony which would later lead to the demise of his very promising career. Sanford's comment on her husband's remarks spoke to his lack of recognition of both her and their boys and his helpless love struck rhetoric. She responded, "It was awful for me to watch my husband pine about his soul mate and days spent crying in Argentina. It was awful to watch the implosion of his career that really began right there at that press conference" (20/20, 20).

Mark Sanford's clear addiction to his mistress and his weak moral character bothered Sanford and she made no excuses for her feelings. As she explained to Walters:

It's fair to say that from the time I discovered the infidelity in January, that each stage, each time he asks me for permission to see his lover and then finally when he went to see her, and then on top of that, comments like the soul mate, each one of those remarks makes reconciliation a little bit more difficult, if you will. (20/20, 18)

Sanford's marriage was unable to be salvaged, and the man she married and loved was almost unrecognizable to her in the media. In *Staying True* she wrote, "Mark had become so self-absorbed that he was lost. He had become so focused on his will and his desire that he was blinded to his actions and their consequences in a connected world" (200).

To illustrate just how much Mark Sanford had changed since their marriage began, Sanford turns to the Mark Sanford of the past, "a man centered on a core of morals" (*Vogue*, 540). Sanford speaks in defense of her husband, citing the strong moral man that he once was; the man whom the public elected. But she turns the argument against him by attacking his career and its constraints, arguing that his political involvement turned him into a weak, philandering politician.

In the third concept that is categorized under the theme ‘Trouble in Paradise,’ Sanford examines her relationship with her husband and highlights that both parties had faults of their own that contributed to the demise of their marriage. Even though Sanford was deceived by her husband and emotionally distraught, she does accept partial blame in the collapse of her marriage, but her sincerity is questionable. These mistakes, paired with Mark Sanford’s addiction to his mistress and his deceptive behavior, worked together to destroy their marriage. Sanford was a firm believer in the institution of marriage and was saddened to see her impending divorce play out in the media. She argued that she and her husband “weren’t madly in love, but we were compatible and good friends” (*Vogue*, 541). Sanford would go on to say that she thought they “balanced each other out,” even though Mark Sanford was “always searching for something else, something bigger” (*Vogue*, 541). Sanford never doubted that her husband loved her, she told Barbara Walters, “I thought he loved me in his own way, which is not a warm, bubbly way. But I—I thought he loved me, yes” (*20/20*, 13). Even after learning about the affair in early January, it wasn’t until the June press conference that Sanford realized how bad things had really become. In her memoir she wrote, “I had been deceived through the entire marriage, and for the first time in all that painful year I felt duped” (*Staying True*, 203). After hearing her husband brood about his mistress continually to both her and the media, Sanford became reflexive on her role in the marriage:

It’s hard to be the loving sexy wife in the evening after you’ve been managing things during the day. But the flip side is you end up with an understanding of one another that’s incredibly deep. Your triumphs and your tribulations are, are shared. Instead of living very separate lives, you’re, you’re, you actually have a, have some very strong bonding. I mean, I mean, I, I could go through for the rest of my life, you know, what went wrong or where did it go wrong. And I don’t know if I’ll ever come up with the answer. (*20/20*, 23)

But Sanford doesn't let herself off the hook so easily. In the third category of the theme, she puts herself into the marital equation and cites herself as part of the reason her marriage failed. While she makes it clear she does not blame herself for her husband's affair, she does attribute their "strictly business" marriage as a reason Mark Sanford might have lost interest. Sanford made the decision to leave her troubled marriage in the past and focus on the future. Armed with her faith and spirituality, Sanford was able to ease her discomfort and say goodbye to her one time paradise.

Looking Inward and Onward

The third and final theme found in Sanford's discourse is that of spirituality. Whether it be faith, hope or love, Jenny Sanford sought to forgive her husband's wrongdoings and move forward in two particular ways. In order not to appear heedless in her choice to leave, the theme "Looking Inward and Onward" provided Sanford with the opportunity to defend the reasons behind her choice before fellow religious believers and other wives. This theme produced two categories surrounding faith and spirituality: (1) Sanford's personal faith in Jesus Christ; and (2) her inner feminine spirituality. I argue Sanford's goal in referencing spirituality allowed her the opportunity to provide her audience with understanding that would not come from this world, but rather a spiritual place deeply rooted in faith and forgiveness.

Upon finding her husband's correspondence with his mistress, Sanford remarked on her initial reaction, forgiveness:

Still, I knew that I could and would forgive him. It might have been my survival instinct kicking in, a willingness to forgive and move on, perhaps the hope that in forgiving quickly I could eradicate the ugly knowledge I'd gained that day. But my immediate impulse to forgive Mark has not

proven to be only that. I can see now that forgiving him was an essential part in healing for myself as well. (*Staying True*, 171)

By positively focusing on reconciliation through forgiveness, Sanford hoped to move forward and become a stronger person. Rebecca Johnson commented on the religious tone of Sanford's two-page statement: "It came from her heart and from her head. It mentioned God without making you squirm" (*Vogue*, 538). With faith and family being the cornerstones of Sanford's world, it came as no surprise that she would fall back onto her faith throughout her media ordeal. After the scandal broke and Sanford's world came crashing down, she again turned to her undying faith, saying, "Faith is waking up every day with an attitude of gratitude, knowing that, as I once wrote in my journal, 'This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it'" (*Staying True*, 209). She further discussed how her relationship with Jesus Christ deepened during the months after the scandal broke as her family strived to make sense of things. Turning to prayer, Sanford wrote, "I prayed for His will to be done and for me to bear the future with grace and peace. I asked for calm for my boys and acceptance of the future. I sought understanding of Mark's actions and prayed that the Lord would wake him to the error of his ways. I praised more and asked less" (*Staying True*, 179).

Later in the summer when Sanford was asked about the role forgiveness played in her everyday life Sanford commented, "If you don't forgive," she says, "you become angry and bitter. I don't want to become that. I am not in charge of revenge. That's not up to me. That's for the Lord to decide, and it's important for me to teach that to my boys. All I can do is forgive" (*Vogue*, 581). Five months later, in February of 2010, Sanford was asked directly if she had forgiven her husband, something she had strived for, she replied:

Yes, I have. And many people find that hard to believe in some respects. But I have an incredible appreciation because I loved the busy life alongside him. You know, I watch the challenges in the political world. And people in his own part working at odds against everything he did. So, I have a great appreciation for what can, perhaps, get a person to just want to escape and I think that makes it easier for me to forgive him in some respects. (20/20, 25)

Sanford ends her memoir, the last piece of discourse examined, on a positive note, looking toward the future with forgiveness in her heart. Commenting on the public's initial reaction to hearing Sanford adamantly declare her hope for forgiveness and reconciliation, Rebecca Johnson wrote "her willingness to forgive and move forward is what has most impressed the world about Jenny Sanford" (*Vogue*, 581). But clearly there is more to like about Sanford than just that.

As a woman of God and a woman committed to sanctity of marriage, Sanford created a stir when she chose to stop working toward reconciliation and move toward divorce. She moved out of the Governor's Mansion, moved into the family beach home permanently and by the end of the same year had filed for divorce. Many religious followers don't support the reason Sanford left or the fact she filed for divorce. Sanford wanted to defend her choice in leaving, arguing that she made an honest attempt at fixing the marriage. In her 20/20 interview she discussed the process of finally leaving Mark Sanford saying, "when the summertime came, as soon as school was out, I moved to the beach with the kids. And then he came to be with us at the beach. And it was just awful. He was just, he was in a tizzy. And I finally said, this just doesn't work. You have to leave. And I kicked him out" (20/20, 18). Sanford gave him every opportunity to work towards becoming a better husband and man, and Mark Sanford chose to do neither. By illustrating the number of opportunities she gave her husband, Sanford shows reason

behind what some religious followers would call her “rash” decision. Jenny Sanford also falls back onto the notion of “forgiveness” through faith. In religious circles forgiveness is a part of reconciliation. Sanford wanted to reconcile with her husband but sadly, the couple chose to go their separate ways. By turning to her faith and looking toward the future, Sanford was still to make sense of her impending divorce and forgive her husband.

The second category that is illustrated well by Sanford is her own feminine spirituality or the idea that she needs to be the strongest woman, mother and friend possible. Sanford never blamed herself--in fact, she accepted some part in her marriage’s demise. However, she was her own harshest critic. Sanford wanted to move on; she wanted to remain strong for herself and for her family, saying “what I truly felt at this time of personal crisis would begin a new chapter in my life” (*Staying True*, xix). The new chapter in Jenny Sanford’s life focused on the future of her and her young boys, after she admittedly had forgiven her husband. She told Barbara Walters “I have acted honorably in our marriage. And I’ve been the best wife I can be. But now I am looking forward to whatever comes next” (20/20, 26). Earlier in the same interview she defended her choice to leave her husband and discussed how after giving her husband numerous chances she couldn’t really blame herself any longer. Sanford reflected on her own personal struggle throughout the scandal as she grappled with when to walk away. In her memoir she wrote, “Allowing my husband to see his lover for whatever reason goes against who I am and my entire sense of right and wrong” (*Staying True*, 186). But Sanford chose to listen to her heart and her mind and finally left her cheating husband and retreated to her beach house with her children. There, when writing her memoir, she

wrote, “I have loved and will love again. I have lived these married years loyally, as honestly, as lovingly and as committed as I could. I have worked hard and enjoyed our successes. I have give of myself, have been blessed with incredible friendships, and have worked on building character--mine and our children’s” (*Staying True*, 212). With a clear focus on her and her children, Sanford moved out of the Governor’s Mansion, filed for divorce and in March of 2010, her divorce was finalized. Now Sanford spends her days on Sullivan’s Island’s beaches, focusing on her boys, putting her contradictory spouse behind her, all the while looking toward the horizon.

By reaffirming herself as a woman of God who so rightly divorced her husband, Sanford then shifts the conversation to her own inward spirituality. She highlights that by doing what’s right and moving forward, she becomes the best possible version of herself. By looking to the future, Sanford frames herself as automatically becoming strong, focused and determined without a husband by her side.

Rhetorical Implications

Jenny Sanford had several goals she strived to achieve through her public discourse. By using specific themes and strategies, Jenny Sanford was able to restore her place in society, bolster her credibility in the eyes of the public, and recreate her personal identity. Sanford used the three themes highlighted in the Themes section of this chapter to sever her marital bonds and break free of her husband, Mark. If a future scorned political wife chooses to answer the question “should I stay or should I go?” with “I should go,” Sanford’s themes and strategies suggest a number of productive topoi.. Jenny Sanford furthers this new genre by serving as the archetypical “severing wife.”

Sanford was successful in the short term in cleanly breaking away from her marriage by focusing on her young family and how, together, they would move forward.

“The Sanford Legacy” theme is potentially persuasive in a number of specific ways. I argue this theme worked to combat the negative implications of Mark Sanford’s affair on the family, especially the Sanford children, while heightening Jenny Sanford’s role as mother. A curious public might question the Sanford’s ability to parent when they can’t even stay married. Running a state, making appearances and raising a family is a lot of responsibility and Jenny Sanford, wisely, might have chosen to highlight her dedication to her family. She made it clear that after the affair and resulting separation, she would make raising her young boys the top priority. By appearing as motherly and dedicated to family, Sanford was able to mend her tarnished reputation in the eyes of mothers and women who value traditional, southern ideals. She was also able to take a firm stance against her husband Mark, by choosing to look towards the future which she saw as just her and her boys. And finally, “The Sanford Legacy” changed Jenny Sanford’s identity from a first lady and heiress to a single mother, living at the beach, raising her young family. By distancing herself from the politics of both South Carolina and her husband, Sanford was able to come out of the scandal with her head held high and her boys by her side.

“Trouble in Paradise” similarly heightened Sanford’s credibility by shifting the media’s attention from her and her part in the scandal to solely Mark and his actions. In this theme Sanford highlights how her husband’s affair was the direct result of an addiction, and though they did not have a “loving” and “tender” marriage, she was dedicated to their marriage. This theme persuasively places Sanford back in position atop

society. An heiress, Georgetown graduate, and first lady, Sanford was classy, intelligent and wealthy. She focused on pointing out to the public that she had no “real” part in the affair. She discussed how loyal and supportive she was of Mark: running his campaigns, managing the house and serving as a political confidant. For sympathy, she noted how difficult it was to be all of those things and “the loving sexy wife in the evening” (20/20, 23). While some could consider this statement as Sanford noting her faults in the breakup, in my opinion, it is not to be considered genuine or key to the real reason the marriage ended. The public would see Sanford as taking partial blame for the marriage’s demise, yet still blame Mark for the majority of the trouble. After all, who would blame a wife for being supportive and raising the family when her husband was seeing someone else for years and lying about it? Shifting the media’s focus is an extremely persuasive tool and allowed Sanford to come out of the scandal as an innocent victim. It also allowed Sanford to continuously point out Mark’s errors and dually note his errors as the only reasons for the couple’s trouble.

Sanford’s final theme of “Looking Inward and Onward” illustrates just how “strong” Jenny Sanford was. Sanford chose to focus on her personal relationship with God, as well as, her inner feminine spirituality. This theme allowed Sanford to rationalize to other women who align with her religiously, why she was leaving her husband and also allowed her to make peace with her life and remerge as a new woman after her husband’s affair. Persuasively speaking, Sanford both reaffirms her role as a woman of God and recreates her personal identity by turning inward and becoming reflective. To satisfy the public’s hunger for answers surrounding the scandal, Sanford falls back onto various scriptures that direct her daily life as well as noting her reliance on

God for guidance and support that she is missing in her life. She reaffirms her strong, deeply rooted religious convictions regarding marriage by choosing to focus on the idea that originally she had hoped to reconcile and it was her husband's continuous negative actions that kept reconciliation from happening. She explains that the only way she made sense of things was to rely on her faith in God and her young boys. Once again, this theme persuades the public to place the blame on Mark, not Jenny, because she proves that (in the beginning) she wanted to reconcile. Once Mark decided not to reconcile, Sanford commented on how she "turned" things over to the Lord and let him take care of Mark. By placing the situation in God's hands, Sanford clears herself of any religious wrongdoings (leaving/divorcing her husband) and is able to once again shift the conversation and media from the scandal to solely her new identity as a single woman.

Sanford knew that the crisis created by her husband would usher in a new chapter in her life. She left the Governor's Mansion, moved to the beach, took her boys and filed for divorce. I found that in order to end things on a positive note and in order for Sanford to literally come out of the scandal atop the rubble, she had to redefine herself and her identity. No longer was Sanford, Mrs. Mark Sanford. No longer was Sanford the first lady of South Carolina. No longer did Sanford run her husband's house and no longer did Sanford depend on Mark for anything. In the first lines of Sanford's statement she discusses how important it is for her to make sure her boys were cared for and raised properly. When Sanford realized that her boys would become affected by the scandal, Jenny Sanford as the world had known, ceased to exist. Instead, a new, confident, bold and wise, single mother emerged. Jenny Sanford chose not to appear with her husband at his press conference. Instead, she was at her beach house with her family. When the

media asked what happened and where things went wrong, Sanford boldly responded with, “I’ve been the best wife I can be. But now I am looking forward to whatever comes next” (20/20, 26). Unafraid of the future, Sanford openly embraced her new found strength and identity.

As I mentioned earlier, it has been Sanford courage and tenacity in recent months that have propelled her up and above her husband’s scandal. Her new identity as Jenny Sullivan Sanford provided her public with understanding and satisfaction. She no longer continuously makes headlines or gossip columns. Her public understands that she has moved on and that the woman who once existed has forever changed into the Jenny Sullivan Sanford you see today.

Sanford wanted to go and so she chose specific themes and strategies that led her down a path to meeting her goal. While the rhetoric of apologia argues for speeches in defense, Sanford was never really on the defense. Rather, she was forced into a rhetorical situation (her husband’s affair) that required a response (will I stay or will I go) and so she spoke. Now, whether her public was expecting to hear exactly what Jenny Sanford said is questionable; but based on her answer, her choice of themes and strategic persuasiveness, Sanford strived to wash her hands clean of Mark Sanford. Successful Jenny Sanford’s route to severance is one that future scorned political wives should consider and follow if they so choose. Unlike Elizabeth Edwards, Sanford was clear, decisive and bold in each of her rhetorical moves, and her overall goal is apparent throughout her public discourse. Sanford rose to the rhetorical situation and was forced to defend her choice to leave her husband and at the same time heighten her credibility destroyed by the media.

Conclusion

In February of 2010, Barbara Walters directly asked Jenny Sanford why she decided to file for divorce from her husband of more than twenty years. After spending months in the headlines, her response was simple and heartfelt: “I decided that I needed to remain strong and move on with my life and be the best I can be for, for our children and that Mark needs to resolve a lot of his unresolved issues on his own” (20/20, 23). Ironically enough, the three themes prevalent in Sanford’s discourse are presented in one concise quote in one particular piece of discourse. To say Jenny Sanford didn’t know what she was doing would be entirely false. Sanford’s discourse has clear-cut persuasive goals and her positivity and internal strength is something the public has come to know and respect. Psychologist Sally Porter argues “this public show of support signals a power shift within the relationship. ‘From that point on, she’s in charge, she’s got the power. She is absolutely on top’” (Austin, 2). After hearing Sanford’s remarks and watching her media appearances, the public made sense of the scandal. They supported her choices as a scorned political wife. Unlike her husband, Sanford’s credibility was kept intact and she was able to cleanly sever all ties between her and her husband. Sanford has placed the scandal behind her and gracefully moved on into the next chapter of her life. No longer is she fodder for the media, but instead she has become a woman who rose above the gossip columns and nightly talk show banter to take control of her own life. And what scorned political wife wouldn’t want to go out on top?

CHAPTER FOUR

Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford: “Should I Stay or Should I Go?”

Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford may appear similar on the surface. Both women suffered from the actions of their adulterous husbands, and both women weathered the media’s storm. As this thesis progressed and each woman’s strategies were revealed and then studied, Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford turned out to have different rhetorical situations, with different strategies in place, to rise to the occasion. Edwards and Sanford came to represent the different ends of the scorned political wife “spectrum.” While Elizabeth Edwards strived to preserve her marriage to John by highlighting their thirty-year bond, Jenny Sanford viewed her husband’s affair as incomprehensible and chose to sever their marriage and move on alone. As clearly defined opposites, these women used varying ways to heighten their own credibility and defend their choices. There is a clear contrast between Edwards’s overall rhetorical strategy of “defending why she stayed” and Sanford’s overall rhetorical strategy of “defending why she left.” Both of these strategies, in the short term, were successful in different rhetorical situations and with differing goals.

In Defense

Both Edwards and Sanford were forced to defend themselves and their choices before God, their families, and their publics. Their rhetoric can be considered part of an emerging genre that departs from the traditional behavior of wronged political spouses. As noted in the introduction, Edwards’s and Sanford’s rhetoric prior to their husbands’

scandals clearly fit into the traditional genre of supportive, noncontroversial political spouse discourse. However, as I have demonstrated, these two women diverged from the traditional course after the scandals broke, over an extended period of time. Even though Edwards and Sanford were cleared of any wrong doings, they were still required to defend their choices in order to re-establish their place in society and diminish the media's bashing of the women and their families. Edwards defended herself before her husband's political supporters, the people who agreed with their platform and believed in their "great love story." She chose to drag out the scandal by defending her husband for as long as possible. Sanford was less concerned with her husband's followers and more concerned with bolstering her own credibility and defending her choices to southern, white, women who resembled herself.

One of the most notable differences between Edwards and Sanford was Edwards's use of language regarding her husband's infidelity. Throughout her discourse, Edwards avoided the word "affair," replacing it with the terms "mistake," "indiscretion," "one time," "infidelity," and "situation." Whether or not she wanted to admit that her husband had indeed taken part in an extramarital affair, Elizabeth Edwards chose to specifically defend and even minimize her husband's actions. Edwards saw the affair as a tiny mistake, something that could and would be covered up and fixed by her and her husband. She chose to excuse her husband from all consequences and promoted his goodness to the public. In an act of desperation, Edwards framed her husband's indiscretion as something so minor that not even a separation was warranted. Given Edwards's goal of preserving her marriage, this rhetorical strategy was rational, and surprisingly, it kept her marriage intact for quite some time.

Sanford viewed her husband's infidelity as an "affair" and chose to divorce him due to his scandalous choices. Based on her choice to appear in *Vogue* and write her autobiography in an inspirational and devotional manner, Sanford felt the need to defend herself in the eyes of the "southern, white, upper-class women" who might judge her based on her husband's adulterous choices. By tapping into this specific demographic, Sanford was able to speak her mind and re-establish her place of honor in society. At first, Sanford did work toward reconciliation. It was not until after her husband failed to meet her halfway that she switched directions and moved toward divorce. Sanford strived for her own happiness and the wellbeing of her boys. Her choice of divorce could be seen as her way of putting the affair behind her and not letting the scandal be drawn out any further. Given her ultimate decision to sever the marriage bonds, Sanford's rhetorical strategies were well conceived to bring about her persuasive goals.

Although the rhetoric chosen by each woman was "fitting" in the short term, Elizabeth Edwards' rhetorical choices began to fray over time. By staying with John Edwards, Elizabeth dragged herself through the mud, damaging her credibility and forfeiting her own identity. She pushed away the opportunity to be happy on her own by struggling to keep her tainted marriage and cheating husband. Edwards is now filing for divorce, yet she and John remain in the media's gaze because of the way in which the affair and resulting scandal continually play out. Edwards continues to make headlines by granting television interviews and has recently released an additional chapter to *Resilience*, tackling the changes in her life since filing for divorce. Together, the couple has become the subject for former Edwards aide Andrew Young's new "tell all" book. From all accounts, Edwards seems to be saddened by the way things worked out and one

would assume disappointed in the way she handled things. By contrast, Sanford's rhetorical strategy appears to have been the better long-range choice. Currently, Sanford is on her own and seems to be completely past the ordeal. As of today, there is not much mention of her husband's affair in the media. Today, Sanford seems to be happy with herself and her choices. She is no longer connected to the scandal or her husband.

Identity

Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford differed greatly, yet, both chose to discuss their identity as women, wives, and mothers. Aside from the emotional stories Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford shared with their public, no one knows exactly what these women went through when learning of, and dealing with, their cheating husbands. At first glance, Edwards and Sanford seem to be similar, both married to politicians and busy raising their young families, but when faced with an extramarital scandal, each woman viewed things differently and created new personal identities of their own. Elizabeth Edwards chose to ignore what was directly in front of her. Rather than turning and facing the scandal head on, Edwards avoided confrontation, highlighted her personal health struggles, and desperately clung to John Edwards and their intertwined identity. Edwards never strived to stand alone; she wanted to be married and see things return to the way they had been prior to John's affair. Perhaps it was because she was still grieving the loss of her child, or because she knew she was going to die, that Edwards lived with self-denial. Constantly situating herself as a part of "John Edwards," Elizabeth reinforced her traditional gender role as a wife. Edwards grew up the daughter of a Naval pilot, who was often stationed abroad and away from his family. Edwards devoted her life to creating a stable home and raising children who shared the same ideals and vision

for America as her and John. Edwards situated her ideal marriage as a united family entity, meaning children, husband, and wife. She made clear that she hoped to keep all of her family together and longed to return to “how things used to be” (*Oprah*, 15). She carefully placed herself as an inviolable part of John Edwards and their marriage, forfeiting her own independent identity for one of unity and solidarity. She furthered her dependent status by aligning herself politically with her husband and campaigning around the country on his behalf. She felt so connected to John that she even went so far as to defend his moral character by blaming his mistress for the “indiscretion.” Edwards did not want to see her marriage end because, unlike Sanford, she would be unable to stand on her own. So much of her life had been built with John Edwards that it would be difficult for her to determine where his life stops and her life begins. To an audience, the Edwardses were so intertwined that many could not believe John Edwards cheated on Elizabeth without her knowing. The public was accustomed to the couple’s closeness because Edwards defined her marriage in more of a traditional sense: “a great love story.”

Jenny Sanford started down the same path as Edwards. She wanted to save her marriage and made an honest attempt to patch things over, but failed miserably. Throughout her discourse, Sanford created this “I versus We” argument. Unlike Edwards, Sanford accepted her marriage was over and worked diligently to create a distance between her and her counterpart, Mark. She took control of the situation, faced it head on, and argued she would take her boys and raise them like any good mother would be expected to do. Challenging her traditional gender role of the conservative wife, Sanford moved out of the Governor’s Mansion, eventually kicked her cheating husband out of their family home on Sullivan’s Island, and made the ultimate decision to

move forward a mere six months after the scandal broke. Sanford framed herself as a role model for all women who have suffered with their husband's infidelity: take your children, be strong and courageous, and start to rebuild your life. Sanford did just that by severing her relationship and putting the past behind her.

Part of Sanford's confidence and independence might be correlated to her wealthy upbringing. Sanford's family's business, Skil, provided her with numerous career opportunities and life choices that were not available to her counterpart, Elizabeth Edwards. Edwards grew up in a military family and was in immense debt from law school when she married John Edwards. One might argue that, due to their differing upbringings and financial situations, each wife viewed herself differently in relation to her husband. Edwards saw herself as the victim, needing to be taken care of, while Sanford was wealthy enough to be independent and could be viewed as the financial "bread winner," even though she wasn't actively working. This independence can best be seen in Sanford's ability to stand alone, as a single mom raising her children and not relying on her husband for monetary or emotional support. Sanford makes it clear that she plans to "take the boys" and "raise them into men of character," with or without her husband. Consequently, she actively works to reframe her image as a strong, self-sufficient woman (Sanford Statement, 1). Sanford also frames herself as disjointed from her husband, Governor Mark Sanford. She focuses on her children and becomes pointedly self-reflective as a way of separating herself from the business-like partnership she and Mark shared. Throughout her discourse, Sanford contends her marriage was not one of "burning passion," but one of support and dedication (20/20, 13). By choosing to use language starved of emotion, Sanford once again was able to create distance between

her and Mark, and further her independent identity. Sanford chooses not to frame the relationship she had with Mark as part of her family, rather she defines family as her and her boys.

The way Elizabeth Edwards' and Jenny Sanford's new personal identities were revealed through their rhetorical strategies was surprising. Edwards, the Democrat, tended to play more of a traditional gender role as a wife and mother, all the while working to intertwine herself into the identity of her husband. She was so closely related to her husband's identity that she even began to play a key role in his political life, a life that she was not necessarily willing to give up. She strived to preserve her marriage in hopes that she would not be forced to stand alone without her husband's support and title. Sanford, the Republican, ended up lending herself to a more "liberal" view of marriage and cleanly severed the relationship between her and Mark that allowed her to succeed without him. Sanford defended her choices by presenting herself as strong on the inside and fully capable of raising her young boys on her own.

In Summation

Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford have taught us a lot about the rhetoric of scorned political wives. Even though they fall at different ends of the spectrum, there were clear themes and argumentative strategies that both women used to meet their rhetorical situations. Elizabeth Edwards fittingly responded to her rhetorical situation of attempting to preserve her marriage. Her three themes, "The Perfect Marriage," "Recovery Mode," and "The Woman and the Victim," allowed Edwards to focus attention on her and John's "great love story" and their repairable marriage, as well as, shift attention from John's wrongdoing to Edwards' own personal struggles as a mother,

cancer survivor and wife of a politician. She was able to defend her choice to stay by John Edwards's side, all the while working to bolster her credibility in the eyes of her curious public. Concerned with what the political and public supporters thought, Edwards made sure not to damage John's political persona or his character. After all, Edwards enjoyed the success of her and her husband's career so much that she was unable to separate herself from John. Edwards focused on reinforcing their strong marital bond and highlighted her own struggles as a woman, mother, and cancer victim.

Jenny Sanford also rose to issue a fitting response in regard to her husband's extramarital affair. Sanford used the three themes of "Sanford Legacy," "Trouble in Paradise," and "Looking Inward and Onward," to clearly sever her marriage to Mark Sanford and heighten her own credibility, speculatively, in the eyes of women just like her. Sanford strived to completely put Mark out of the picture by focusing on her family's foundation and future as an independent woman and a single mother. The short-term success both Edwards and Sanford were able to achieve can be directly linked to the way in which they viewed their marriage. Edwards wanted to preserve her marriage, Sanford wished to wash her hands of the ordeal and move on.

Initially, I suspected that, from Edwards's and Sanford's discourse, a guidebook of sorts would be created and this new genre of "Scorned Political Wives" would easily be defined. However, this thesis produced two women with completely different strategies, yet both with fitting responses. From this study, I now know that a politician's wife must ask herself an important question prior to issuing any remarks: Should I stay or should I go?

Based on their answer, Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford would be serviceable models to follow. Both women strategically used a morphed sense of apologia in their remarks. Edwards and Sanford were not necessarily defending themselves against any wrong doings, but they did set out to defend their honor as women and their identities as wives and mothers. Finally, they sought to heighten their overall credibility, after being publically humiliated. Edwards and Sanford answered the call mentioned by Benoit: when attacks against reputation occur, an opportunity for response is created, as well as, needed.

I believe that Jenny Sanford did a better job of meeting her objectives and coming out on top. Sanford's rhetoric was clear, concise, and her overall goal of severance was apparent from the release of her personal statement, all the way until the last page of *Resilience*, her memoir. Elizabeth Edwards had a lot more to deal with than Sanford, so I do understand how she might have hoped to save her faltering marriage. Partly due to her illness and daily stress level, Edwards seemed chaotic, overly emotional, and desperate at times. As audience members, we must keep in mind her health; however, we must also ask, how would she have handled the affair had she not been sick? I envision that she still would have attempted to keep her marriage intact, but would have employed different tactics to achieve her goal. Elizabeth Edwards was simply worn down by the media and the drawn-out scandal, and had to draw the line somewhere.

Thoughts

Daily life for Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford will go on. In the coming years, Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford will pack their children's lunches and drive them to school. They will fold laundry and attend soccer games. They will pick up a cup

of coffee and a newspaper, and read headlines about the newest scorned political wife and the struggles she will face. Edwards and Sanford will never be able to avoid the mark of a scorned political wife. Pundits and comedians will laugh at them and poke fun at their husbands, and their names will forever appear on the “list” with which no woman ever wants to be associated.

But Elizabeth Edwards and Jenny Sanford can rest assured: their rhetorical strategies were well conceived (at least in the short term) to obtain each woman’s personal goals. Both women rose to the occasion, issuing fitting remarks at the cusp of their husband’s scandals. Their rhetorical responses serve as possible templates for future scorned political wives. From the themes and strategies found in Edwards, and Sanford’s public discourse, the guidelines for the new, emerging genre of “Scorned Political Wives” may be crystallizing. Future studies can look back at Edwards and Sanford as the models of grace and success, no matter how bittersweet. Future scorned political wives can look to Edwards and Sanford for support and guidance, as they struggle to answer the question: should I say or should I go?

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