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The Oratory of Edward Kennedy

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Edward Kennedy was a politician who faced a unique set of circumstances which have been covered in great detail in numerous biographies (Honan, 1972; Lester, 1993; Hersh, 1997, 2010; Klein, 2009; Clymer, 2009; Canellos et al., 2009). As the youngest brother of the Kennedy dynasty there was an expectation that he could sustain the mystique of Camelot and the unfulfilled promise of John and Robert Kennedy (Wills, 2002). That he never secured the presidency would suggest that he failed. However, the longevity of his Senate career (1962–2009) and the breadth of his legislative imprint would ensure that he became recognised as the leader of the liberal wing of the party and one of the most effective Senators in history (Calabresi and Bacon, 2006).

This chapter will argue that his status as heir to the Kennedy flame would infuse his rhetoric and oratory for nearly five decades but that it was to be characterised by two conundrums. The first conundrum was that he sought to justify his policy positions – from Vietnam to Iraq, from civil rights to health care – in deeply moral tones. He sought through pathos to establish a connection that was underpinned by dignitas or bonum (for example what is worthy or good). It was assumed that this could be reinforced by his ethos. But his character flaws limited his ethos. His reputation as a womaniser and his supposed drinking, and the recurring legacy of the Chappaquiddick incident, all badly damaged his credibility (on Chappaquiddick see Tedrow, 1979; Willis, 1980; Damore, 1989; Kappel, 1989). The second conundrum was his inconsistency (Devlin, 1982: 405–6). He was capable of soaring oratory in the Senate and at Conventions, but he could be inarticulate and unconvincing in set-piece interviews, with his incoherent response to the question ‘Why do you want to be President?’ (in 1979) being the most embarrassing illustration of this (Mudd, 2008: 348–50).
Overall, this chapter seeks to identify his unique status, and the conundrum surrounding his political morality and personal immorality, and his strengths and weaknesses across different forums. It does so by exploring his most significant interventions in the Senate (from civil rights in 1964 to the minimum wage in 2007 and the controversial confirmation hearings of Robert Bork in 1987 and Clarence Thomas in 1991); by examining his numerous Convention speeches, notably in 1980 (‘the dream will never die’) and 2008 (‘the dream lives on’); and by selecting various debates and interviews (notably against Eddie McCormack in 1962 and Mitt Romney in 1994 and also during his presidential campaign of 1979–80). In doing so the chapter seeks to embrace both Kennedy the politician, but also Kennedy the cultural figure and patriarch of a dynasty defined by charisma and tragedy. Throughout this analysis the chapter identifies how he exploited the memory of his slain brothers to justify his policy preferences, and how although a user of *logos*, much of his appeal stemmed from the emotional reaction that he could engender through his name and the loss that was associated with him. In addition to identifying his reliance on *pathos* and the difficulties for him in utilising *ethos*, the chapter identifies how Kennedy relied on *epideitic* speech based on political theatre and drama to magnify its impact.

**Kennedy: A Politician in Unique Circumstances**

Any appraisal of Kennedy the political orator is bound up in his status (after 1968) as the patriarch of the Kennedy dynasty (Collier and Horowitz, 2002). That he was defined by his family was always apparent, most notably during his audacious attempt to win the Democratic nomination for the Massachusetts Senate seat in 1962 (previously held by his elder brother John Kennedy between 1953 and 1960). His opponent, Eddie McCormack noted that, ‘if your name was Edward Moore, with your qualifications your candidacy would be a joke, but nobody is laughing because your name is not Edward Moore. It’s Edward Moore Kennedy’ (Levin, 1966: 210).

However, as the decades rolled on he became well known for his ‘aching eulogies’ in the aftermath of another Kennedy death (Canellos et al., 2009: 3). Such was the status of his family these eulogies generated considerable media attention. In 1994, he said of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, ‘she made a rare and noble contribution to the American spirit. But most of all she was a wonderful wife, mother, grandmother, sister, aunt and friend. She graced our history. And for those of us who knew