

Margaret Thatcher, Dress and the Politics of Fashion

Abstract

This article explores and conceptualises the roles of dress in Margaret Thatcher's political life and the intersections between the micro and macro politics of dress and identity. Feminist literature on women and politics considers media focus on dress to marginalise and destabilise women's agency. The analysis of Margaret Thatcher and dress refines, develops and makes problematic this contention. Dress was both constraining and enabling for Thatcher and she demonstrated varying levels of agency. Thatcher drew from cultural and socio-economic resources from her upbringing and performed class, gender and embodied tropes of Britishness for multiple audiences. Thatcher moved beyond the classed and gendered constraints of her background, learned and adapted her dress to suit the political occasion and sought to include dress as a legitimate political concern. Nevertheless, Thatcher's dressed performances were perpetually contingent on how these performances were received by various audiences and also upon broader political dynamics.

Key Words: Women in Politics, Dress; Gender; Margaret Thatcher; Performativity.

'Who do I dress for? I really dress for the occasion and for the job and it is very important' (Margaret Thatcher, *The Englishwoman's Wardrobe*, BBC TV, 1986).

The micro-politics of dress translated into the macro-politics of power in Margaret Thatcher's private and public performances of dress.¹ Analysis of Margaret Thatcher's dress leading up to and during her Premiership reveals her aspirations and her increasing power. Dress and fashion were political in multiple ways and on different levels. At macro-political level, fashion symbolised Thatcherism's valorisation of individual enterprise, consumption and material display and for Thatcher personally, dress was a means by which to consciously project tropes of British identity and political messages. Furthermore, dress *is* political and intersects with identities such as class, gender and race. Modes of dress have been both symbolic and enabling for nationalist, political and protest movements across

context and history. The micro-politics of dress involved Thatcher negotiating a shifting and difficult political trajectory where focus on appearance and dress could be both empowering and threatening to Thatcher's political status and appeal. Focus on Thatcher's dress refines the understanding of the relationship between structure and agency enacted by political actors in the public realm. Dress became a potentially destabilising focus for her critics and symbolic of her "outsider" status. Yet in the face of these challenges she recognised and learned from the expectations of others, adapting and changing her dress. However, this was not an instantaneous, complete or permanent transformation. What Thatcher achieved, as she crafted her dressed performances, was agency over a further aspect of her life and her politics. Indeed, there was also an alignment of her dress with her political ideology and domestic and international roles over time. Thatcher performed *structures* such as class using dress and drew from cultural and socio-economic lessons engendered during her upbringing, but she also broke free from such constraints and her dressed performances demonstrate fluidity, multiplicity and fabrication.. Thatcher's identities were incongruent with her unprecedented political status and she faced many challenges in attempting to reconcile this. This article, through a detailed exploration of Thatcher's changing uses of dress, explores the relationship between dress, identities and agency in the public realm and thus contributes to wider feminist debates about women politicians, the political sociology of dress and gender politics. It aims to refine and develop our understanding of dress and its roles in political life and makes problematic the feminist claim that once women's appearance and dress is made visible, women's agency is automatically restricted and demeaned.

Margaret Thatcher, like many individuals, had an emotional and sensuous connection with dress which developed in her adolescence. Margaret King, an executive at *Aquascutum*, who advised the Prime Minister on clothes, recalled, 'She was a delight to dress. She loved trying on clothes and would twirl around like a little girl. She loved material and buttons and told me about her mother, Beatrice who was a dressmaker. She was very proud of the fact that her mother knew how to make clothes' (cited in Maddox, 2003: 188). Dress was a facet of Margaret Thatcher's interests and

personal background and became a consciously deployed element of her political persona. Thatcher's vivid self-dramatisation as the 'Iron Lady' in 1976 used her dress to invoke the most abiding metaphor of her as a leader: 'I stand before you tonight in my Red Star chiffon evening gown, my face softly made up and my fair hair gently waved, the "Iron Lady" of the Western world' (31/1/1976). By invoking this imagery at the Finchley constituency dinner Thatcher, in Campbell's words, 'became the lady and a warrior' (1987: 243), but this was not the first or last time that Thatcher performatively constituted her personal and political identity through dress. Thatcher seldom combined verbal and visual metaphors as she did in her 'red star chiffon evening gown' speech, but she repeatedly styled herself to suit the political occasion, sending diplomatic and political signals by her dress (most obviously on the frequent occasions when she was resplendent in the Conservative Party's colour of blue). Such was the power of her dress, one element became a universal metaphor for political and diplomatic behaviour: 'to handbag' or to receive a 'handbagging' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1993).

The personal, sensuous attachment to dress was connected to the exercise of political power for Thatcher. This was not a spontaneous or chance occurrence. Thatcher was influenced by and drew from cultural influences from her upbringing in Grantham in the 1930s. Thatcher was initially resistant and occasionally ambivalent about focusing on dress in her public life, but learned to adapt and master dress to suit certain political ends and help craft a dominant and secure political status. Thatcher was thus extending and reinforcing the role of dress in performing power that was engendered in her childhood. Woodward writes that for women 'it is through the tactility and sensuality of fabrics that clothing is able to carry memories and former selves' (2007: 13). The personal, evocative role of dress, tied to the performance of power in Thatcher's political career was underlined by the fact that outfits were named according to where they were worn, such as 'Washington Pink' and 'Kremlin Silver' (Thatcher, 1993: 576). Thatcher avoided wearing favourite or new outfits to meetings she thought could be difficult or unsuccessful, particularly meetings of the European Council for fear they would be sullied by bad memories (Thatcher, 1993: 80). Dress was a

tool of the job for Thatcher, but also, as for many women; an emotional and psychological means for her to negotiate and cope with the demands presented by her many roles (see Woodward, 2007). Thatcher's "power dressing" reflected her pre-eminent political status, but also located her in a wider collective of women who dressed to signify and perform their material, social and cultural power. This article begins by exploring the roles of dress in commemorating Thatcher's period of office, before moving onto conceptualising Thatcherism's politics of fashion and then locating the micro and macro politics of dress in Margaret Thatcher's life and career.

Margaret Thatcher's Biography of Dress and the Politics of Fashion

Dress forms a key element by which Thatcher and her period of office are commemorated. Reflecting upon and recuperating Margaret Thatcher and her period of office is an ongoing popular cultural phenomenon (Forde, 2010; Fowler, 2010). In July 2008, *UK Vogue* featured a fashion shoot with Margaret Thatcher as part of its focus on 'ageless style'. The journalist writing the article explained that although a child during the 1980s, her impressions of Thatcher were informed by a powerful image of 'that hair; those blue suits, the flamboyant bows at her neck' (Sheffield, 2008: 124). Thatcher's dress resonates across the decades and symbolises aspects of her power, politics and legacy. Indeed, the opening scene of the BBC4 television drama *Margaret*, broadcast in 2009, depicted Margaret Thatcher being dressed in an elaborate evening gown and posing regally in the mirror (Cottan and Kent 2009). Thatcher's political career can be assessed using a "biography of dress", just as it can be assessed by other, more traditional, means. The popular press and popular biographies of Margaret Thatcher often commented on Thatcher's changing mode of dress and also discussed her interest in fashion and appearance. Hugo Young's magisterial biography of Thatcher does not devote much written attention to Thatcher's engagement with dress beyond the comment, 'She was disarmingly candid on the vital importance of wearing clothes that suited the political moment no less than the social occasions' (1991: 601). However, Young's biography does provide a

form of “picture essay” entitled ‘The Evolution of a Public Person’ (1991: 416-417) visually depicting Thatcher’s changing dress and appearance as she moved up the ranks from being a new MP in 1959, to Junior Minister in 1961, Leader of the Opposition 1975 (her appearance made newly fashionable and elegant and duly labelled ‘the Clothes Horse’) and her difficult and somewhat tumultuous beginning as Prime Minister in 1979, where Thatcher is shown wearing an unflattering outfit and labelled ‘the dowd’. Young entitles the height of Thatcher’s power as Prime Minister, from the post-Falklands-era until 1988, as ‘*Gloriana Imperatrix*’ and Thatcher is pictured wearing a variety of glamorous and regal outfits . These pictures of Thatcher’s changing dress reveal the embodiment of the various roles in her career and the images vividly evoke her changing political fortunes, becoming increasingly powerful, but also increasingly regal, detached and grand. This fits wider common narratives of her time in office (Howe 1994; Lawson 1992; Blakeway 1993) and the ‘biography’ of Margaret Thatcher’s clothing dovetails and directly contributes to key moments in Thatcher’s career and remains a significant media by which her career and legacy are memorialised in popular culture.

In 1989, the tenth anniversary of Margaret Thatcher’s Premiership, British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood appeared on the front cover of *Tatler* magazine dressed and styled as Margaret Thatcher accompanied by the caption ‘This Woman was Once a Punk’ (April 1989). In the accompanying article, Westwood was critical of Thatcher both as a person and politician. Westwood’s complement to Thatcher’s style, yet criticism of Thatcherism’s politics reflected wider tensions in the “politics of fashion” in the 1980s. Thatcherism did indeed have a “politics” that embraced “fashion”. Angela McRobbie argues that many young fashion designers in the 1980s and 1990s were ‘Thatcher’s children’ (1998: 1-2). The Enterprise Allowance Scheme caused an inadvertent boom in British small cultural industries and Thatcher herself on a number of occasions advocated the fashion industry as a paragon of the enterprising, individualistic, internationalist industry she wished to encourage

(McRobbie, 1999: 4-5). Thatcher also recognised the fashion industry as a means to promote British nationalism. When asked about Vivienne Westwood's international success Thatcher replied 'Isn't it nice that she's British!' (cited in Maddox, 2003: 189). Thatcher's frequent patronage of fashion houses such as *Aquascutum* and Jean Muir and the revelation on BBC TV in 1986 that she bought her underwear from her favourite shop, Marks and Spencer, further extended Thatcher's vision of British nationalism resurgent in the international community into the realms of fashion and dress (Thatcher and Ruth 18/7/1986). In 1984, Thatcher invited British fashion designers to a reception at Downing Street to celebrate British Fashion Week. In a special interview about fashion on TVAM, Thatcher explained that the British government had not done enough to support and promote the British fashion industry and this was in contrast to the French government (Diamond, 2/10/1984). The reception held at the end of Fashion Week also revealed the wider tensions and contradictions in Thatcherism's "politics of fashion". Designer Katherine Hamnett arrived at Number 10 sporting a T-Shirt emblazoned with '58% Don't Want Pershing' opposing Thatcher's intention to locate Pershing Nuclear Cruise Missiles at Greenham Common and expressing support for the Women's Peace Camp at the Common (Browning, 28/19/2005). Thatcherism benefited the fashion industry by encouraging a culture of consumption, valorising the material display of success on the body and endorsing fashion designers as being both nationalistic and enterprising, yet there remained a tense and double edged relationship between Thatcher and fashion designers.

Dress, Women and Politics

Feminist analysis of dress and contemporary British politics argues that media focus on women's dress is damaging and marginalising. However, the analysis of women's agency in relation to dress and the roles of dress in defining and representing politicians' identities (both male and female) requires development. Childs writes 'representations which focus on women politicians appearance, clothing and familial relationships...represent and reinforce, rather than challenge, widely accepted assumptions about the suitability of women and politics' (2008: 141-142). Such representations

perpetuate the “norm” of the male politician and the “pretender” status of women. Puwar defines women politicians as ‘space invaders’ who occupy ‘male’ and masculine public/political spaces (2004: 65). This gendered de-legitimisation resulted in the first women MPs experiencing considerable hostility and isolation from their peers in parliament (Lovenduski, 2005: 49; Nunn, 2002: 39). Margaret Thatcher also experienced sexist attitudes from some Conservative activists when first applying for selection as a parliamentary candidate, misogynist comment from the British media when a Cabinet minister and in her words, was subject to ‘male chauvinist hilarity’ from Labour MPs when she first became leader of the Conservative Party (Thatcher, 1995: 96-97, 182, 284). Contemporary women MPs remain ‘highly visible’ in relation to their male peers and thus are subject to media comment about their dress on an unequal basis (Puwar, 2004; Childs, 2008: 140-165). Much feminist analysis of politics concludes focus on dress is sexist and damaging to women’s political agency.

For women politicians, ‘not being the “natural” occupants of the position means there is a burden of doubt associated with the co-existence of women in these spaces. They are not automatically expected to embody the relevant competencies. Thus their every gesture, movement and utterance is observed since they are viewed rather suspiciously’ (Puwar, 2004: 72). Dress has been a key means by which women have been both made visible and judged as “unsuitable”. For example, Shirley Williams, a Cabinet Minister in the 1970s, was often portrayed as a ‘bag lady’ by the British press because her hair and clothing were deemed to be unkempt (Ross and Sreberny, 2000: 87). In the 1995 Labour Party leadership elections, contender Margaret Beckett’s fashion sense and appearance was derided by the tabloid press (Childs, 2008: 144). Ross and Sreberny noted from their interviews with British women MPs that many resented the media’s focus on their appearance and dress and believed men as politicians were not subject to such comment (2000: 86-87). Lawler’s (2004: 115) study of women’s protest argues that the press’s comment on women protestors dress was a means of making their ‘feminine’ and class identities both visible and ‘pathological’ in order to ‘disgust and dismiss’ their protest. This makes analysis of Margaret Thatcher’s negotiation of and attitudes

towards dress significant. As the discussion below will elucidate, focus on dress was potentially, but not inevitably damaging or marginalising to Thatcher and Thatcher demonstrated varying levels of agency over dress and its role in representing her as a politician. We therefore need to refine and develop our understanding of dress and constructions of dress in political life.

Dress and its relationship with political culture remains an underdeveloped aspect of political sociology. The failure to take dress and its relationship with identity, the body and power is a consequence of dress's 'feminised' and therefore demeaned cultural status (Entwistle, 2000: 9-10). Dress is an ideal and important means to analyse the constructions of identity and locate an actor's agency in relation to structures and context. As Entwistle argues, 'human bodies are *dressed* bodies. The social world is a world of "dressed bodies"' (2000: 6). Elias's (1994) analysis of the figurational development of "civilised" manners and habits demonstrates how concern for bodily appearance, "respectable" and "shameful" forms of dress, redefined power relations and the individual's role in society. Forms of dress traverse personal (micro) and public (macro) boundaries of power, framing power as a performative (Butler, 1999) and symbolic act embodied and performed at an individual level yet interweaving with macro-political processes. Butler develops Foucault's concepts of identity by arguing gender is achieved as the result of repeated *performances* (1999). This 'performative' construction of identity can shift, change and be contradictory and these shifts and changes can be expressed through changes in dress. The transgressive potential of these shifting and multiple performances is visible when someone 'cross-dresses' and challenges accepted gender norms (Butler, 1999: xxiv). Dress informs all gendered performances, but women undoubtedly have a particular, conscious and intimate relationship with dress. The bodily and sensuous act of "getting dressed" is the moment when women 'have to negotiate their bodies, respectability, style, status, and their self perception' before entering the social world (Woodward, 2007: 2). Dress therefore plays a multifaceted role in defining and deploying individual identities, but also locates the subject in relation to and part of the wider collective: 'we can use dress to articulate our sense of "uniqueness", to express our difference from others, although as members of particular classes and

cultures, we are equally likely to find styles of dress that connect us to others as well' (Entwistle, 2000: 158). Dress is therefore a profound expression of other forms of identity, such as class, age and race and situates the individual in relation to and part of wider political and social processes and structures.

"Fashion" and the ability to choose, adapt and define ones dress was a result and a symbol of social mobility, the growth of the bourgeoisie and the related decline of the aristocracy (who had hitherto had an exclusive ability to adapt dress and define "fashion") (Entwistle, 2000: 44). Dress can also symbolise, generate and engender collective identities, such as political, social and nationalist identities. As Parkins argues, forms of dress 'can become sites of political struggle', contesting or legitimating the state and modes of citizenship (2002a: 2). In the French Revolution, 'dress was a powerful and multifarious index of revolutionary ideas' and the cut, colour and type of dress simultaneously symbolised and allowed individuals to perform political radicalism (Wrigley, 2002 19). The suffragettes also used dress to symbolise commitment to the suffragette political cause, to define aspects of political activism and to vividly reconfigure and politically radicalise certain types of fashion and the femininities associated with it (Parkins, 2002b). Indeed, fashion became a form of women's agency for the suffragettes: 'it enabled and abetted their protest' (Parkins, 2002b: 106). The dressed performances of protest enacted by the suffragettes also challenged the cultural intelligibility of a woman's body and the docile and ornamental ways it had hitherto be constructed, creating a 'theatricalised public space' where dress was part of the women's performance of political radicalism (Parkins, 2002b: 3). Dress is therefore a means by which identity is performed and affirmed and creates a symbiotic relationship where it both enacts and reflects aspects of micro and macro socio-political change.

Margaret Thatcher in the Public Gaze

Margaret Thatcher had a complex relationship with and shifting attitudes towards public and political focus on and comment about her dress. She alternately resisted and encouraged such attention and exercised changing levels and modes of agency over her dress. Loach, in reviewing the otherwise hostile responses of feminists to Thatcher noted that for many women in the 1980s, the Prime Minister was 'a woman who can sustain the conflicting qualities of drive and femininity and still be part of the world – not loved or liked as women feel they need to be, but successful, assured and admired' (1987: 26). Campbell concurred,

Margaret Thatcher is one of the most seen women in the world. We all look at her, but in the power of our gaze we have no control over her - she does not protest at this mass observation, because she is not an object. We have seen how there is in her both a flight from femininity and from the world of women, and yet an absolute adherence to its appearances. Perhaps it has been through her consciousness of being watched that she has rearranged her 'feminine persona', putting both her femininity as well as her power on display (1987: 242).

Thatcher was certainly "conscious of being watched" and did indeed "rearrange" her appearance because of it. However, the adaptation of Thatcher's performances of dress belie her deeper unease about being objectified and occasional resistance to the public gaze in which she was intensely held. Speaking on television in 1984 about a forthcoming Downing Street reception for fashion designers, Thatcher confided 'I'm a little bit nervous about it because they're all going to look so glamorous'. 'Why should you be nervous?' asked the interviewer, 'But of course', replied Thatcher, 'they're going to be looking at me and I'm going to be looking at them!' (Diamond, 2/10/1984). Thatcher was concerned by the prospect of being held in this mutual gaze at the reception and the possibilities it produced for her status and self-esteem to be made contingent upon it. For Thatcher to be considered by contemporary feminist writers as 'not an object' subject to the male gaze is a considerable cultural achievement, yet this was not a permanent achievement. There was continual tension, occasional anxiety and resistance by Thatcher to her potential objectification.

Thatcher initially resisted conflating her personal performances of dress with her public performance of power. Thatcher alternately rejected yet later embraced the objectification implied by focus on her appearance. In 1975, Thatcher challenged a male TV interviewer asking 'Why is it that all the young men ask me about what I look like?', he replied, 'Well, it may seem to people who work in a factory or a mill that you don't share or even understand their daily concerns'. Thatcher responded 'Yes, all you young men ask me what I look like. I'm forty eight so I suppose it's flattering that you concentrate on my appearance'. The Interviewer replied 'No, we are not asking what you look like as such, but we are asking about your political image'. Margaret Thatcher concluded, 'Yes, why do you always ask what I look like?' (cited in Cockerell, 1988: 216). In this exchange, Thatcher expressed the resentments of many contemporary women politicians and challenged the focus and comment on her dress by men. Shortly after becoming Prime Minister, Thatcher's office issued guidance on 'Mrs Thatcher's clothes, hair, eating habits etc.' which stated 'The Prime Minister regards personal matters of this sort as trivial and unconnected with her position as Prime Minister. She is insistent that we should never volunteer such details to the media' (Press Office, 4/7/1979). Thatcher's reluctance to 'adapt' her dress was initially premised on her unease about being held in the public gaze, the potential for her objectification and her initial questioning of the link between politics and appearance. However, Thatcher rapidly accepted the need for adaptation of dress and the opportunities this afforded her to play multiple roles and to appeal to various constituencies by using dress to its full extent. Indeed, openly discussing dress became a conscious strategy of Thatcher's during the 1970s and was designed to appeal to women voters (Cockerell, 1988: 235). By the mid-1980s, Thatcher occasionally revelled in and encouraged the media's fascination with her dress and would, on occasion, insist that appearances mattered and were a vital consideration in politics, admonishing male colleagues for their lack of attention to appearance.

Margaret Thatcher engaged in multiple performances of dress. These performances sometimes implied Thatcher was disciplined by a male gaze, yet on other occasions, Thatcher asserted her agency, reworked tropes of gender and sought to include men as an object of judgement about

dress. In office, Thatcher learned the Bourdieusian 'rules of the game' (Lawler, 2004: 56) by adapting her dress to suit the political context. Thatcher wrote in her autobiography 'I took a close interest in clothes, as most women do: but it was also extremely important that the impression I gave was right for the political occasion' (1993: 575). Thatcher also contends that refusing to change one's image and dress if you are a politician 'betrays a lack of seriousness about winning power' (Thatcher, 1995,295). Thatcher's self-narrative in her memoirs accepts readily, responds quickly and is willing to change her appearance in response to critique - responses she seldom demonstrated regarding criticisms of her domestic and foreign policies (Thatcher, 1993: 516-524). In 1989, after parliament was televised, Margaret Thatcher, whilst making a statement, wore a suit with stripes and checks. A male MP, who had been watching the debate on the television outside the chamber approached her afterwards and remarked 'what you said was all right but you looked awful!'. Thatcher writes simply 'I learned my lesson' (1993: 576). The Prime Minister also received letters if she wore outfits on successive occasions, something she also notes in her memoirs (1993: 576). Cynthia Crawford (her personal assistant and dresser) kept detailed files on outfits worn, the occasion it was worn and comments about its suitability for future use. Thatcher could be considered to be subject to the discriminatory gaze of the 'space invader' and thus quick to respond to criticism because she was eager to conform to stereotypes about women politicians. In the 1970s, Thatcher had voice coaching lessons to lower the pitch of her voice, continued to rinse her hair blonde (whereas she had naturally brown hair) and followed a strict diet in the weeks before the 1979 election to reduce her weight (Mayo Clinic, 1/1/1979). However, Thatcher frequently sought to extend this gaze to male politicians in both public and private. Asked during a television interview if she minded comment on her dress when people did not notice how male politicians looked, Thatcher replied that 'They [the press] do look at them a little...if they're not reasonably well tailored or they shamle around. Oh yes they do!' (Diamond, 15/3/1984). Nigel Lawson recalls being appointed by Thatcher as Chancellor of the Exchequer that, 'she gave only one piece of advice. This was to get my hair cut' (1992: 249). Thatcher's adaptation of dress for the public's gaze was more complex than conforming to feminine

stereotypes and she used dress with growing self-confidence to performatively engender broader political messages. Above all, rather than rejecting focus on dress as illegitimate or unrepresentative; she sought to make dress a universal and constitutive element of the public realm and political life.

Dress, Hollywood and Glamour

The micro-politics of dress during the inter-war years reflected and provoked broader socio-economic changes in British society. The adaptation of dress and the ability of women to exercise agency over dress and appearance became considerably democratised in British society during the 1930s. This became part of a broader cultural process in the twentieth century that incorporated women into a “fashion industry” and cultural gaze that valorised certain femininities, demeaned others and could constrain and discipline women. The popularity of women’s magazines brought fashion to a provincial, middle and working class audience (Buckley and Fawcett, 2002: 83). Changes in production and consumption, namely the opening of new department stores selling ready-made and reasonably priced fashionable clothes removed fashion and the ability of women to pick and choose their outfits from the confines of the aristocracy. This new ability extended and reinforced dress’s power to symbolise and provoke social mobility and challenge existing social hierarchies: ‘fashion provided women with an accessible cultural language to contest oppressive representations and to begin to construct new versions of their identity’ (Buckley and Fawcett, 2002: 85). Even cosmetic makeup became an acceptable means for women to present different “masks” to the world, whereas it had hitherto been considered only appropriate for actresses and prostitutes (Woodhead, 2005: 8). Above all, the cinema and especially Hollywood films profoundly affected provincial British women’s social lives, aspirational goals and understandings of the multiple performances offered by changes in dress (Gundle, 2008: 149). ‘The physicality of the cinema, the visual style of the films, and the star images, although on the one hand reaffirming stereotypical aspects of femininity, provided in a context in which women could “imagine” themselves as female

in ways which ultimately challenged patriarchy' (Buckley and Fawcett, 2002: 99). Hollywood stars presented a range of gendered, glamorous and transgressive images (Gundle, 2008: 188).

The cinema was one of the few pleasures the young Margaret Thatcher was allowed as an adolescent. 'It was', recalls Thatcher, 'the coming of the cinema to Grantham which really brightened my life', and she became 'entranced with the romantic world of Hollywood' (1995: 14). Thatcher reflected how 'on my visits to the cinema I roamed to the most fabulous realms of the imagination' and recalled her favourite Hollywood stars (1995: 15). Thatcher, like many British women in the 1930s and 1940s, experienced socio-economic changes that emphasised the power of the adaptation of dress and appearance and the performative ability of women to do so. At the same time, these changes subjected wider groups of women to a disciplinary "gaze" that constituted "fashionable" dress, judged appropriate appearance and bodily forms. Indeed, exacting attention to appearance, comportment and accent was an important element of lower-middle class Englishness in the 1930s and incorporated a 'the fear and anxiety of being watched and uncovered' if one's dress was imperfect (Nunn, 2002: 68). The agency to choose and change dress according to the latest fashion, the Hollywood star one admired, or the social occasion or mood one felt, formed a potentially transformative process for women. The agency women had to "choose" dress was mediated, however, by class and attendant assumptions about femininity.

Margaret Thatcher's social rise from the provincial lower middle-classes to the metropolitan upper middle-classes is evident by her aspirations and dress. Lawler writes that such 'getting out and getting away' (1999: 14) across class divides for English women is expressed and enabled by acquiring 'cultural capital' through education, marriage and changing modes of dress. Women who have been socially mobile can often recall their conscious 'desire' for fine clothes, glamour and money and also sometimes their 'envy' for other women who had more than them (Lawler, 1999: 11). This sense of social differentiation embodied by dress and other cultural artefacts was evident in Thatcher's narrative of her upbringing. In 1985, Thatcher recalled her frustration at how her mother

would reply, 'Well we're not situated like that!' when the young Margaret would ask why some of her peers in Grantham had more luxurious furnishings and goods and of how her mother would insist that all new fabrics had to be 'serviceable' (Stoppard, 2/10/1985). 'One kicked against it' remarked Thatcher, 'how I longed for the time when I could buy things that were not serviceable!' (Stoppard, 2/10/1985). In her autobiography, Thatcher writes 'I used to envy the young Catholic girls, making their first communion, dressed in white party dresses with bright ribbons', Methodists were, 'much plainer...if you wore a ribboned dress, an older chapel goer would shake his head and warn against "the first step to Rome"' (Thatcher, 1995: 8). Thatcher was clearly aware how dress and other cultural artefacts denoted socio-economic status and her lifelong celebration of and enjoyment in dress and design formed a key element of her "getting out and getting away" from the assumed status that her class, gender and provincial location would allow her.

Thatcher performed class and gender using dress. Thatcher's background also made her aware of the disciplinary gaze women could be held and judged by *within* class and local community and therefore more so if they rise above and across classes. Lawler writes women who have risen 'above their station' can never fully occupy or effortlessly embody their new social status (1999: 13). Constant attention to dress was therefore an important social act. There could be few more bold performances of Thatcher's changing *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990) and her successful social mobility from a provincial town, via Oxford to a solidly upper middle class and metropolitan life than her choice of wedding dress upon her marriage to an upper middle class businessman, Denis Thatcher. The "off the peg" dress, of blue velvet and an ostrich feather hat, was based on a Gainsborough painting of the fashionable 18th century political hostess Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (Maddox, 2003: 55). Margaret Thatcher's sartorial style continued to exhibit fashionable panache in the 1950s. The upward social mobility across class and geographic location was not without effort or risk for Thatcher, nor was it a permanent achievement. Challenges to Margaret Thatcher's status and political aspirations came to the fore as her political career developed and representations of her dress was used in an attempt to destabilise her hold on power.

Dress and Performances of Power

Margaret Thatcher's dressed performances allowed her to present multiple 'masks' (Woodward, 2007: 15), performing 'a masquerade' of changing identities (Rose, 1993: 66). Thatcher was initially unaware of the politically damaging but also propitious opportunities exercising agency of the "masks" she presented by dress could give her. Thatcher's "fashion sense" came under scrutiny and was contested as her career progressed in the 1970s. Many of the early political challenges she faced were represented, refracted through and reinforced by her dress. Thatcher gradually learned, adapted and asserted agency to use dress for her political benefit. The wearing of hats befitted Thatcher's class, generational and social aspirations. However, such hats also symbolised Thatcher's "pretender" and "outsider" status as Party Leader, because they invoked the narrow, petty-bourgeois prejudices her critics accused her of embodying and appealing to. At the 1970 Conservative Conference, Thatcher wore a much ridiculed "beehive" hat. Asked in 1985 about the hat, Thatcher recalled 'I wore a rather smart hat. It suited...The fact was it would have done for an actress, but it was not quite right for a politician. I learned that lesson ever since' (Stoppard, 21/10/1985). Thatcher's penchant for hats became a political problem when she became Party leader. Thatcher was an 'accidental leader' of the Conservatives and her victory had shocked supporters of the previous incumbent, Edward Heath (King, 2002: 452). Ian Gilmour spoke for many in the Conservative establishment when he claimed her leadership would result in a 'retreat behind the privet hedge into a world of narrow class interests and selfish concerns' (cited in Evans, 2003: 14). Webster writes that hats can symbolise both respectability but also class (1990: 28). The frequent cartoon of images of Thatcher wearing hats signified 'the Tory Lady in a hat' (Webster, 1990: 23). Thatcher was reported to be furious about criticisms of her fondness for wearing pearl necklaces and earrings, which was also considered to symbolise her status as a suburban, middle-class "Tory Lady" (Junor, 1983: 90). Yet her advisers successfully persuaded her to cease wearing such hats for domestic political purposes. Adapting her dress by not wearing hats was a visual means

by which Thatcher could reach out to new constituencies for support and counter her Conservative critics. Dress also signified the tense class politics of the Conservative Party in the 1970s and revealed wider unease at having a class, gender and ideological 'outsider' (King, 2002) as party leader.

As Margaret Thatcher consolidated her position as Leader of the Opposition, she styled herself as a housewife and was pictured wearing aprons, washing up gloves and performing the roles of a housewife: brewing tea, shopping, cooking and washing up. This performance also reflected and emphasised a key Conservative macro-economic policy: that of responsible management of the nation's "household budget" and the negative impact of inflation on the amount of goods each family could buy (Blakeway, 1993). Thatcher was thus combining a gendered dressed performance to shore up her leadership as well as emphasising her ability to manage the national economy as a "responsible housewife". Webster argues this was an extraordinary and regressive set of performances and in contradiction to the reality of Thatcher's post-war life as an Oxford trained, lawyer and career woman (1990: 49-51). The "housewife" style could be considered as a typical example of how women politicians become 'domesticated' by the media (Ross and Sreberny, 2000, 95) and did allow Thatcher to 'dramatise her authority in accessible terms' (Nunn, 2002: 47). However, it also enabled her to visually counter the "Tory lady in a hat" image: emphasising Thatcher's "ordinariness" and present a traditional image of femininity making the reality of a woman leader less threatening to men (Nunn, 2002: 40). This domesticated version of femininity which Thatcher adorned and performed to suit was not a passive or subordinated gender construct. Indeed, Warner argues it embodied the 'right of prohibition' akin to that of a strict mother, nanny or governess (2000: 53). Thatcher would often remark that women were more suited to assume responsibility and were more decisive than men because it fell to them to manage the home and it was women alone who would be left 'carrying the can' (cited in Blakeway, 1993; Campbell, 1987: 234-237; Webster, 1990: 49-70). Dressing as the housewife enabled Thatcher to dominate, force and

bully while drawing on wider cultural norms of “acceptable” femininities. Indeed, this particular trope of feminine dress connected Thatcher to other women and invoked British cultural sensibilities about the hidden but wryly acknowledged power of the wife and mother: ‘part of many women’s pleasure in Thatcher’s power is everything to do with her gender. Thatcher is more powerful than the men around her, she bosses them around’ (Campbell, 1987: 233). Thatcher dressed as “housewife” made her power intelligible and less threatening in gendered (and class) terms, but also enabled her to project her power in dominating and starkly different terms to her Conservative predecessors and colleagues. By performing the housewife, Thatcher personalised the Conservative economic and political critique of the Labour government’s policies in her image as leader and emboldened her claim to be the only individual capable of addressing and solving Britain’s economic problems.

At the height of her Premiership, Thatcher performatively accentuated her power as a national politician and as a statesperson using dress. Thatcher had set aside previous concerns about focus on dress and revelled in such attention. In 1986, she invited BBC cameras into Downing Street to discuss and film her favourite clothes (Ruth, 18/7/1986). Cabinet colleague Nigel Lawson wrote ‘she was convinced that her authority....would be diminished if she were not impeccably turned out at all times. She was probably right’ (1992: 127). Furthermore, Thatcher insisted that dress was a legitimate aspect of the exercise of political power and sought to incorporate her male colleagues. Dress and politics were intertwined in Thatcher’s daily life. For Thatcher, clothes were integral to her job and successive and rapid outfit changes were a normal routine in the Prime Ministerial day. Even Thatcher’s handbags became important in performing the various tasks she faced as Prime Minister: quotations, statistics and thoughts were stored in them and a constant supply of handbags, ready packed with cosmetics and mirror, were permanently stationed at Thatcher’s Downing Street apartment (Parris, 27/4/2009). Writing about the preparations for the 1987 election campaign, Thatcher recalled: ‘preparation for the election involved more than politics. I also had to be dressed for the occasion’, and Thatcher’s hounds-tooth *Aquascutum* suit was named ‘election 87’ (1993:

575). Thatcher's transformation from 'a middle class mimsy' (Polen in Campbell, 2003: 475) in the 1970s to a power-dressing, international stateswoman was complete by the mid-1980s (Webster, 1990: 91).

Embodying Domestic and International Power

Margaret Thatcher's dress reflected and embodied her growing power in both domestic and international terms. Dress moved beyond performing party political power, to embodying the nation and tropes of Britishness. Thatcher told *Vogue* in 1985 'The essence of the well-dressed woman should never be exaggerated. Appearance is the first impression people get of you. And it does matter. It matters tremendously when you represent your country abroad' (Bleichroeder, October 1985: 274). In a television interview, the Prime Minister said: 'if anyone represents Britain, with our reputation for tailoring...they ought to turn out looking quite good' (Frost, 7/6/1985). This "representing" Britain blurred with embodying Britain as Thatcher combined gendered and political performances on the world stage: 'As the Queen grew older and less glamorous...Margaret Thatcher became more powerful and wreathed in myth, the very embodiment of Britannia' (Campbell, 2003: 466). This monarchical tendency became a source of public fascination, particularly after victory in the Falklands War. Marina Warner noted that in Thatcher 'Britannia has been brought to life. But she has achieved this singular hypostasis not because she is a battle-axe like Boadicea, but because she is so womanly, combining Britannia's resoluteness, Boadicea's courage with a proper housewifely demeanour' (Warner, 2000: 51). Thatcher was compared to Elizabeth I 'the very personification and embodiment of Britishness' (Campbell, 2003: 155). This regal image gave Thatcher an easily identified femininity bestowing her with a 'dignity, an aura of benevolence, even perhaps, for some, magic and mystery' (Webster, 1990: 110). As the 1980s progressed Thatcher undertook what appeared to be "State Visits" of her own and took almost as much care in the diplomatic design of her wardrobe as Queen Elizabeth II (Author A, 2009). Thatcher wrote in her autobiography that she

liked to include the colour of the national flag of the country she was visiting in her outfit and was very aware of the implications of dress and representing Britain to foreign publics (1993: 575).

Margaret Thatcher chose and wore outfits for political purposes for two of her most famous foreign visits. In 1987, weeks before the election campaign, Thatcher visited the Soviet Union. In 1988, Thatcher visited Poland and publicly met with the leaders of the Solidarity movement. The outfits served domestic and international purposes and dramatically invoked regal imagery. Margaret Thatcher wrote choosing the clothes for the visit to Moscow was her 'biggest challenge' (Thatcher, 1993: 575). Upon the advice of Cynthia Crawford and Margaret King, Thatcher chose an entire range of outfits from *Aquascutum*. Thatcher dressed specifically to make a dramatic impact on Soviet political leaders and the public both in the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. Maddox writes the pictures of Thatcher in her clothes in Moscow turned her into 'a superstar' (2003: 191). Thatcher's dress dominated UK and Russian media reports of the Prime Minister's visit. Yet far from belittling her status or power by focus on her appearance, press reports emphasised Thatcher's international status and political acumen (Cockerell, 1988: 319-320). Thatcher's aides credited the Moscow visit and the imagery generated by Thatcher's dress as significant in increasing popular support for the Conservatives in the subsequent general election (Blakeway, 1993; Cockerell, 1988: 320). Thatcher specifically wore green *Aquascutum* outfits when meeting the leaders of Solidarity during her visit to Poland as this colour symbolised hope in Polish culture (Thatcher, 1993: 779). Thatcher performatively magnified her status and political impact on these occasions using dress. Thatcher's use of fashion, glamour and specific fabrics and colours which resonated with cultural and political reference points was not unlike the Hollywood stars of her youth and it generated exceptional focus and fascination with her personality and abilities as leader.

Thatcher's agency over dress was not limitless and was contingent on how her performances were received by audiences and in relation to other political factors. Thatcher's use of dress revealed a

politician who adapted and changed her performances of dress to appeal to multiple audiences, but also reflected a leader who was increasingly autocratic, hubristic and inappropriately monarchical. Thatcher's "embodiment" of Britain and her seemingly unassailable position in office was reflected by her increasingly regal behaviour (even announcing, in 1989, 'we have become a grandmother'). Indeed, Thatcher's increasing isolation, indifference to criticism and paranoia about threats to her leadership were likened to that of a 'medieval monarch' by one of her colleagues (Tebbit cited in Blakeway, 1993). In 1990, the style of her dress goaded her critics, symbolised her imperious and detached style of leadership and heralded her imminent political demise. Margaret Thatcher wrote that she reserved her 'most exciting outfits' for the annual Lord Mayor's banquet in the City of London (1993: 575). The banquet in 1990 took place the day after the resignation of her long serving Cabinet colleague, Geoffrey Howe and the evening before he was due to deliver his resignation speech in Parliament. According to Campbell 'she turned up dressed like Queen Elizabeth I at Tilbury in a black velvet gown with a high collar, cloak and pearls. Never in all her years of power dressing had she worn anything so ostentatiously regal: at the very moment when she needed to show some humility her dress positively screamed hubris' (2003: 718). The images of the outfit and the Thatcher's televised grand entrance was a dressed performance that reflected and engendered the perception that she had lost touch and become politically careless. Thatcher's carefully crafted performances of dress at the outset of her leadership were now perceived to be reckless and politically damaging.

Conclusion

Analysing Thatcher's social and political mobility using dress raises important questions of agency and constraint for women in public life as well as develops our understanding of dress as a central aspect of performed identity. Warner believed Thatcher had successfully 'isolated the virus' of threatening and demeaned femininity that afflicts other women politicians (2000: 53). It has also been argued that Thatcher's dress was 'ultra feminine' and stylised in ways that unthreatening and

reassuring to men (Puwar, 2004: 75; Webster, 1990: 73-76). This “unthreatening” demeanour was not automatically nor consistently conferred, neither does it acknowledge the complex and shifting performances by Thatcher. Thatcher’s agency as a woman and a politician, was both enabled and constrained by dress and constructions of dress. Thatcher faced a political struggle to “get out and get away” from her lower middle class, provincial background and even more so when she became the ultimate “space invader” in the British political elite. In this struggle, Thatcher’s dress threatened to become a destabilising classed and gendered symbol of her outsider status and of her inappropriateness for office. Thatcher’s initial responses to these threats were to ignore and dismiss dress as a public political concern. However, she self consciously learned from “mistakes”, asserted agency and adapted her dressed political performances to consolidate her power, craft her identity and project images to multiple audiences at home and abroad. This adaptation drew from the socio-economic milieu she grew up in, but it was noteworthy that it crossed from a private enjoyment and interest in dress to a very public and self-confident one. Indeed, Thatcher became insistent that dress was a legitimate and important political concern for all actors in political life. Thatcher was not totally constrained by her class or gender and her performances of class and femininity (such as that of the housewife) were themselves shifting fabrications to suit political ends. Dress, as Buckley and Fawcett argue, ‘is highly effective in endlessly constituting but never fixing identities, and it is performative, in that it ceaseless rehearses and exacts the “lines” of femininity’ (1999: 9). Thatcher’s crafting of dressed performances can also be situated alongside other transgressive and transformational uses of dress such as those invoked by the suffragettes. Thatcher’s use of dress and its roles in defining, enabling and constraining her political career is of interest, not least, because contemporary women in British public life have yet to match her high office or to seemingly resolve the tensions around agency and the destabilising representation of women politicians when dress is invoked.

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Endnotes

¹ Dress is defined as 'all the modifications made to the human body and supplements to the body. Dress includes a long list of changes to the body which can be either permanent or temporary' (Johnson and Lennon, 1999, p. 11).

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