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A creature not quite of this world: Adaptations of Margaret Thatcher on 1980s British television

ABSTRACT

Because the image conveyed by Margaret Thatcher was a construct and therefore artificial, what she looked and sounded like easily transferred from reality into heightened layers of parody and satire. But the way Thatcher appeared on a number of 1980s television texts is striking in terms of how her leadership and persona were read within gendered terms. Thatcher herself consistently downplayed the importance of gender or her own femininity. For her, politics functioned on the basis of convictions, principles and economic theories and far from thinking of herself in gendered terms, Thatcher sought to locate her leadership within gender-neutral realms. There is ultimately little to distinguish the actual Thatcher from the parodic Thatcher; this is inevitable for a leader whose image was so artificial. But where there is a major divergence between reality and the adaptation of reality is on the question of gender. Parodies of Thatcher on 1980s British television consistently returned Thatcher to gendered realms of conduct, showing her as nanny, ice maiden, warrior queen and often as a type conceptualized by film theorists as the 'monstrous feminine'. This article explores parodies of Thatcher, showing ways in which, in contrast to Thatcher's own insistence on gender neutrality, comedic and parodic works that were supposedly avant-garde or alternative in fact resorted to highly traditional gender types as the only way to make sense of Margaret Thatcher.

KEYWORDS

Thatcher
Margaret
political satire
British politics
Spitting Image
The Comic Strip Presents
The Lenny Henry Show
Doctor Who

1. A 'conviction' politician was one whom Thatcher viewed as in accord with her own vigorous beliefs; a 'wet' by contrast was a member of the Conservative Party who did not live up to her own standards and who would likely let the side down.
2. These include the miniseries *Pinochet in Suburbia* (2002), in which Anna Massey played Thatcher; *Margaret* (2009), in which Lindsay Duncan played Thatcher; *Margaret Thatcher: The Long Walk to Finchley* (2008), with Thatcher played by Andrea Riseborough; Patricia Hodge in *The Falklands Play* (2002); and the song 'The Day Margaret Thatcher Dies', written and performed by Pete Dinklage. More recently, there have been *The Iron Lady*, with Meryl Streep as Thatcher and *Back in Business* (2007), with the role essayed by Caroline Bernstein.

INTRODUCTION

As a 'conviction' politician who despised political 'wets',¹ Margaret Thatcher leaves us in no doubt about ideas she either accepted or rejected (Lawson 1992: 26; Levin 1992: 228–29). She did believe in free trade; a liberal, deregulated economy and individual enterprise. She did not believe in community; the welfare state or unionism. While she made history as the first (and so far only) female prime minister of the United Kingdom, Thatcher also often declared that she was not a feminist and any idea that she regarded herself as governing in gendered terms, or as a female trailblazer, is hard to locate in her thought or in responses to her period in office (Martinson 2012).

Nonetheless it is precisely as a woman, and furthermore as a distinctive-looking woman who at times emphasized her 'femininity', and who found that male colleagues and opponents responded to it in ambiguous and diverse ways, that Thatcher often attracted attention from political commentators and biographers, and from parodists (Lawson 1992: 127; Healey 1990: 488). Certainly Thatcher's image when she was leader was distinctive, as is suggested by the ease with which she could be caricatured or the way her fictional persona is essayed by actresses in films and television productions through highly distinctive clothes, hair styling and accessories. Her hair was immaculately coiffured, her black Aspree handbag was normally in evidence and her attachment to blue suits is well documented, both in printed observations and in the photographic record of her public life. As a package, this combination of clothes and accessories together with her distinctive elocution is most vividly presented in the House of Commons footage from her last Prime Minister's Question Time in 1990, in which Thatcher gave one of her most potent and celebrated performances from the Despatch Box ('Prime Minister's Questions – 27 November 1990'). One commentator on her prime ministership suggests that she governed both the United Kingdom and the Conservative Party 'in glorious technicolour' (London 2003). This observation points to the potency of Thatcher's public image, a potency created by the full ensemble that comprised her appearance.

Assessments of what Margaret Thatcher looked and sounded like are commonplace in popular culture, but these aspects of her public life and prime ministership have rarely received serious scholarly analysis. Images of Thatcher, amplifying and distorting her key visual features, are also commonplace in popular media. It is worthwhile placing side by side the parody and the reality of Thatcher, as the historical context of the real Thatcher and what she said about her appearance as a woman brings to light major characteristics of how she was parodied in 1980s British television.

Adaptation theory suggests that where the transgression from reality is most pronounced, the greatest level of cultural interest is generated. Adaptation theory further indicates that there are medium-specific types of creative adaptation, where original sources are reshaped into medium-specific creations (Hutcheon 2006: 7–8). Adaptations of Thatcher's physicality and appearance on television are clarified by these points. As a long-standing and controversial prime minister (she served from 1979 to 1990), Thatcher has been portrayed by actresses in miniseries and films, and songs (invariably critical) have been written making reference to her.² But these productions are of a particular type, being serious attempts to essay her life and career (such as films and miniseries) or violent mediations on her life and death (music). They are not attempts to extend the historical reality of what she looked like, what she

sounded like or what she did, as television parodies attempt to do. Using television adaptations of Thatcher, this article argues that while Thatcher herself consistently downplayed the significance of her gender, this same dimension of her public life was constantly and almost paradoxically reinforced in television parody. The importance of these being television adaptations is central to this argument. Televisual parodies of Thatcher in the 1980s are not only coterminous with her prime ministership, but furthermore her government experienced what media and television historians assert was a combative relationship with television channels. The parodies examined here were made by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Channel 4. The former was part of the establishment; the latter was a new channel in the 1980s with a brief to particularly appeal to under-represented interest groups ('Channel 4 Overview'). As we shall see, however, despite the differences in their status, history and ownership, both channels incurred Thatcher's displeasure, a point adding extra potency to the programmes these channels made parodying Thatcher.

Parodies of Thatcher reinforced traditional notions of gender by encasing Thatcher in firm gender norms and stereotypes, such as the governess, nanny, headmistress or more extravagantly as an ice queen (Campbell 2003). There is, accordingly, a strong irony in parodic representations of Thatcher in that while they were themselves the fruits of non-traditional, alternative comedy that both the BBC and Channel 4 were encouraging in the 1980s, they ultimately returned the focus to gender – and to sharply traditional and stereotypical visions of gender – which Thatcher herself transcended and ignored. In doing so they are part of a pattern which feminist theorist Lizbeth Goodman suggests is apparent in much western comedy, which tends to trivialize and silence women's voices (Goodman 1992: 286). Four particular examples form the basis of my analysis which suggest the same point about Thatcher in terms of her femininity: the puppetry of Thatcher in the satirical programme *Spitting Image* (examining various episodes from 1984 to 1990); the feminine but lethal alien Thatcher in *The Comic Strip Presents: 'GLC: The Carnage Continues'* (1990), and then two separate items from the world of *Doctor Who* (1963–), one a 1985 sketch from the *Lenny Henry Show* (1984–2004) and the other a more sustained consideration of Thatcher in the 1988 *Doctor Who* story 'The Happiness Patrol'. All four television texts are from Thatcher's period in power. They are accordingly contemporary readings, rather than retrospective reinterpretations, and their value lies in the immediacy of their response to Thatcher as a leader and as a woman. The first section of this article examines the real Thatcher and writings by and about her that outline the significance of her appearance and the insignificance, as Thatcher saw it, of gender. The second part will take these considerations of appearance and gender and apply them to parodic adaptations, arguing the paradoxical point that programmes that were avant-garde and alternative portrayed Thatcher in traditionally feminine forms, further suggesting the significance of their medium as examples of 1980s television programming, in which it seems the alternative was becoming almost mainstream.

IMAGES OF POWER AND WOMANHOOD

While Thatcher's life and career have received extensive historical and biographical coverage, Thatcher's appearance and how that appearance intersected with her execution of power and her style of rule, has attracted

3. Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

surprisingly little attention. It *is* surprisingly little because this appearance was not spontaneous, but planned, negotiated and constructed. Commentary on Thatcher also neglects well-established theoretical insights about dress as a performative and dynamic agent of communication. Her appearance thus presents itself to historians of not only Thatcher herself but of the exercise of power in modern Britain as a subject deliberate in tone and emphasis and capable of interpretation. As the recent film *The Iron Lady* (Lloyd 2011) has only reinforced, Thatcher's mannerisms of dress, appearance and speech were crafted through coaching and a deliberate manipulation of image; for example, the impact of the television producer Sir James Gordon Reece in changing Thatcher's wardrobe is widely known (Maddeaux 2011).

The idea that a politician manipulated her appearance is neither surprising nor especially noteworthy. For example, Richard Nixon consciously lightened his appearance once the unfortunate contrast between him and John F. Kennedy became apparent after televised debates in 1960 (Webley 2010). Moving to a British example, it is also meaningful for a moment to think of Thatcher compared to Queen Elizabeth II. The *Spitting Image* puppet of Elizabeth depicted her as a dotty old lady wearing a CND badge and clothes pulled out of a bin.³ In reality, Elizabeth has, over 60 years in public life, consciously adapted her own image. Now she tends to emphasize a grandmotherly image, not least since the death of her own mother, the Queen Mother, who in her old age was regarded as the 'nation's favourite grandmother' (Bond 2000). Before Elizabeth II herself took on her grandmotherly role, she had essayed a number of other personae, including a stylish Norman Hartnell-dressed figure of the so-called 'New Elizabethan age' of the 1950s, and through attempts manifested in works like the 1969 *Royal Family* documentary to appear as an everyday mother and wife (Singh 2011).

But arguably Thatcher paid more attention to her image and altered it more than many other political leaders, including her close contemporaries Harold Wilson in his Gannex mackintosh and with his pipe or James Callaghan in his carpet slippers. Television is part of the explanation here, for it was during her time as, first, leader of the opposition and then prime minister that British politics became more extensively televised, including leadership debates and ultimately the televising of parliamentary proceedings. From the 1970s onwards Thatcher was a frequent broadcaster on the BBC and ITV ('BBC History: Margaret Thatcher').

Thatcher's appearance came to occupy a complex role in her political life. Far from being a feminist pioneer, Thatcher's written and spoken statements on her leadership derogated any suggestion that her gender was significant, and she subsumed her status as Britain's first female prime minister by her emphasis on the gender-neutral realms of political theories, convictions and principles. Indeed she once declared: 'I owe nothing to women's lib' (Kay 2012). In 1982 she insisted: 'The battle for women's rights has largely been won' (Stone-Lee 2005). Yet this sublimation took place even as her gendered appearance existed in tension with her public statements on the irrelevance of gender.

While Thatcher resolutely rejected ideas of gender significance or normative gendered behaviour, she also quite deliberately drew attention to her appearance and acknowledged that it was culturally coded. While still leader of the opposition, and taking a stance against the *détente* with the Soviet Union which then was coming to define Cold War politics, Thatcher donned a red chiffon evening gown, its colour mimicking but also mocking the semiotic

significance of communism's signature colour, and made it a central feature of one of her most celebrated speeches as opposition leader, one which she delivered before television cameras. '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' (Thatcher 1976). Thatcher in fact invoked several contradictory identities in this speech. The gently waved hair, the facial make-up and, of course, the chiffon are all from female realms of appearance and style. The attributes of iron, however, are traditionally ascribed with male qualities. As her speech continued, Thatcher further complicated gender identity, especially the feminine gender, suggesting that her Soviet opponents viewed her as an 'amazon', thus bringing into her discourse the legendary tribe of female warriors, who sublimated femininity to demands of hunting and who mutilated their breasts, signs of their femininity. Most of all, Thatcher located her identity as an 'iron lady' within a masculine frame of reference, suggesting that the title echoed that of the eighteenth-century military commander the Duke of Wellington, who was the 'iron duke' (Thatcher 1976).

Thatcher's own memoirs, *The Path to Power* (1995a) and *The Downing Street Years* (1995b) also direct attention to how she looked, dressed and sounded. In these, Thatcher comments that from early in her political career she recognized the impact of appearance and the way it contributed to political success. Recalling her canvassing in the 1951 election (in which she stood unsuccessfully as the candidate for Dartford in Kent), Thatcher was informed by Lady Herbert Williams, wife of the Conservative MP for Croydon, that 'we should make a special effort to identify ourselves [as Conservative candidates] by the particular way we dressed when we were campaigning'. Accordingly for her public appearances during this campaign she 'spent [her] days in a tailored black suit and a hat' which carried a Conservative blue ribbon (Thatcher 1995a: 71).

Several points of significance emerge from Thatcher's commentary on not only her earliest political campaigning, but also the significance of appearance and dress to these occasions. One is that as an experienced candidate and then (from 1959) Member of Parliament, Thatcher was initially taking advice on how to look and what to wear. Such advice would not be so readily accepted or followed later in her career, although she was also willing to take advice on elocution from such authorities as the famous actor Laurence Olivier (Dunbar 2011). Secondly, Thatcher's memoirs suggest that she did have some insight as to the importance of her appearance as a female politician, and the significance of femininity to the way she operated as a politician, even if ultimately she was dismissive of the importance of gender. As a new Member of Parliament (as the Conservative member for Finchley) in 1959, Thatcher appreciated that female MPs were still a novelty; she was only one of 25 women in the House of Commons (Thatcher 1995a: 108). Thatcher also realized that politics, especially the political culture of the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, was demarcated along gender lines; she commented: 'Neither taste nor convention suggested my entering the Smoking Room' (Thatcher 1995a: 108). Yet Thatcher also insists that in spite of these points, politics to her seemed a sexless, almost androgyne environment, where 'in the House of Commons we were all equals', regardless of gender (Thatcher 1995a: 109).

Thatcher's recollection of this impression, written more than thirty years after she entered the House of Commons, has its own validity as a presumably direct record of how she felt about the significance of gender in politics in 1959. However, it is difficult to accept it uncritically when a range of sources,

4. For a definitive study of Thatcher's use of this criterion see Hughes, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (Pan Books, 1993).

from the archives of the Conservative Party's processes for the selection of candidates to the memoirs of other female politicians in the 1950s and 1960s, Conservative, Labour and Liberal, all testify to the very real significance of gender as a force and often an impediment in politics and where women in particular attracted adverse comment on the basis of their appearance (Ross and Sreberny 2000). Gender was a force that excluded women from selection as candidates, or if they made it to Parliament, from significant posts on the treasury or opposition benches (Lovenduski 2005: 49). However, where Thatcher's comment is important is that it brings to summation a signature theme of many of Thatcher's public utterances on gender, which she consistently downplayed as an important or even significant aspect of her political life, instead emphasizing convictions and personality and whose chief criterion for making appointments was whether a person was 'one of us', meaning not a 'wet' (Thatcher 1995b: 50–51).⁴

Yet this is a theme enunciated by a politician who consistently drew attention to her gender, through the way she presented herself. Her statements on economics are useful at this point. In public she distilled economics down to not only domestic but the simplest *feminine* domestic levels. According to Thatcher, sound economic policy was what any housewife would recognize, including not spending more than one had and checking the household bills on a regular basis (Blakeway 1993). Much of Thatcher's campaigning reflected these themes, and drew on the thrifty and frugal principles of her Methodist housewife mother. Other members of the Conservative Party drew attention to her gender, even if Thatcher did not. As current Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron recalls, young male policy researchers in the 1980s referred to Thatcher as 'Mother' (Campbell 2011). Thatcher was aware of this epithet and played up to it; after her prime ministership had come to an end Thatcher made a joke to a Conservative meeting, commenting that on her way to the meeting she had seen a movie poster which told her the meeting was anticipating her arrival: the film was *The Mummy Returns* (Thatcher 2001).

Indeed Thatcher's gender – including her much reported ability to juggle raising twins with the demands of her constituency and parliamentary obligations – was a major aspect of her public life early in her career even if it then dropped out of sight. Her biographer John Campbell (2000: 106) characterizes her as a 'feminist pioneer of the New Elizabethan age'. Campbell also points to the complex place of gender within Thatcher's public career, as Thatcher by no means wore the mantle of feminist pioneer with pleasure. He criticizes her for espousing a 'family first' viewpoint as prime minister, and advocating the priority of homemaking and motherhood for women, when she had herself not lived out this ideal (Campbell 2000: 106). For Campbell, this was a form of betrayal of women, although this reading is simplistic. Thatcher arguably had not set out to be a pioneer in any way. Rather she thought in abstract terms; but her appearance, if not what she said, was gendered, and it is now time to consider how parodists picked up on the conflicting ideological and semiotic messages she gave out and how they reasserted the primacy of gender in their conceptions of Thatcher.

THATCHER IN POPULAR PARODY

British television in the 1980s produced a number of parodic depictions of Margaret Thatcher that were as deliberate in style, tone and emphasis as the real thing. As Linda Hutcheon (2006: 13) points out in relation to the

adaptation of texts or ideas from one medium to another, television is both visual and corporeal. Television parodies of Thatcher place emphasis on her corporeality and appearance. These range from the direct – in *Spitting Image* the puppet of Thatcher resembles the real-life person closely – to the more oblique – in *Doctor Who*: ‘The Happiness Patrol’ the character of ‘Helen A’ is a strong but joyless leader of a fascist state, clearly allegorizing Thatcher but not directly recreating her. One of the most sustained parodies of Thatcher, and one coincident with the dying days of her prime ministership, was the 1990 episode ‘GLC: The Carnage Continues’ of the intermittent comedy series *The Comic Strip Presents* (1982–). The parody of Thatcher in this story was indebted to earlier distorted depictions of Thatcher in popular culture. The comic strip ‘Fifth form at St Maggies’, which ran in the satirical *Private Eye* magazine from 1979 onwards, depicted Thatcher in gown and trencher as the strict headmistress of St Maggies School (‘John Kent’). Recalcitrant male students fell victim to her discipline. Similarly *Spitting Image* played on the idea of Thatcher as a schoolmistress in sketches depicting Thatcher conducting lessons in the cabinet room in 10 Downing Street and sharply disciplining the male cabinet members for rowdy behaviour. These popular depictions of a schoolmistress Thatcher fed into more serious scholarly commentary. Simon Jenkins’s text studying the influence of Thatcherism over John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown conceived of the 1990 coup against Thatcher as a case of ‘nanny’ being thrown out of the ‘nursery’ (Jenkins 2006: 3; Warner 2000). According to the memoirs of her former political advisor George R. Urban, Thatcher was a ‘good headmistress’; tellingly, Urban’s accounts of Thatcher as headmistress all involve her with groups of men and it is in her interactions with men that the schoolmistress in *Private Eye* and *Spitting Image* appears (Urban 1996: 122). The Thatcher puppet in *Spitting Image* castigates the ‘boys’ in her cabinet and corrects their homework. In another sketch she behaves as the Queen surrounded by male courtiers (*Spitting Image* – Thatcher as Queen). ‘Don’t dawdle Geoffrey,’ the Thatcher puppet bellows at her minister, Geoffrey Howe, and bullies her husband, Sir Denis (‘Margaret Thatcher as Queen’, ‘Thatcher’s cabinet’, ‘*Spitting Image* Episode [a]’, ‘*Spitting Image* Episode [b]’). By 1990’s season eight of *Spitting Image* the parody portrayed an older Thatcher preoccupied with her greying hair, make-up and wrinkles (*Spitting Image* Series Eight). However a range of semiotic and paralinguistic codes are at work in the *Spitting Image* sketches. Thatcher is the only woman among the men, although in some of the episodes of *Spitting Image* the puppet wears a man’s suit and tie and puffs on a Churchillian cigar. Yet the puppet consistently speaks with Thatcher’s modulated feminine voice, and there is a complex interplay between aspects of political life that are male or female in expression.

Both the *Private Eye* comic and the *Spitting Image* puppetry at least still depicted Thatcher as a human being, albeit a severe and matriarchal one. The same cannot be said of the ‘GLC’ episode of *The Comic Strip Presents*, in which the ‘Iron Lady’ (Jennifer Saunders), dressed in blue and carefully enunciating her words, appears as the prime minister of Britain. She also happens to be an alien creature, ‘not quite of this world’, as the Prince of Wales (Adrian Edmondson) describes her.

The Comic Strip Presents debuted on Channel 4 in 1982. The long-running series assailed a range of British cultural icons; two of the earliest examples offered a highly sexualized vision of Enid Blyton’s Famous Five, building up into ludicrous proportions the sexual ambiguities, as well as the anti-Semitism

5. These episodes were 'Five Go Mad in Dorset' (1982) and 'Five Go Mad on Mescaline' (1983).

and racism, hinted at in the source novels by the famous children's novelist.⁵ *The Comic Strip Presents* made provocative reorientations of cultural types, doing so on a channel that was still new in the 1980s and which had been founded precisely to offer an alternative to the more establishment-oriented output of the BBC and ITV, although during the 1980s the BBC in particular came under consistent attack from Thatcher and her ministers, creating a point of tension that inevitably sharpened their satires of her (Currie 2004: 87). 'The Carnage Continues' was produced after the *Comic Strip* team moved across to BBC2. It offers a highly exaggerated narrative of the abolition of the Greater London Council (GLC). This body was led by the radical Labour member 'Red Ken' Livingstone and the real-life Thatcher disposed of the GLC when it became a victim to her ongoing dispute with Livingstone and her drive for the centralization of power to Westminster (Harrison 1996: 357). Thatcher abolished the GLC in 1986, announcing plans to turn its headquarters, County Hall (a building on the Thames Embankment that featured prominently in 'GLC') into a hotel and to distribute its powers and executive functions to other government agencies. The writers of *The Comic Strip* took Thatcher's political action of abolition to a more extreme extent. In 'GLC' 'Red Ken' (Robbie Coltrane), a Charles Bronson-like action figure, uses County Hall as his headquarters in a gun battle against Thatcher's forces. Thatcher herself rampages through the story, gruesomely ripping off men's faces, hanging others, using hoodlums to beat up political opponents and using drugs and thuggish beefeaters to control the Prince of Wales. She is also equipped with a robotic arm that acts as a lethal weapon.

The portrayal of Thatcher in 'GLC' is instructive for what it reveals of the adaptation of her image and the dissemination of this image through television. The story plays with what were then well-known accounts of Thatcher's tailoring of her image. Thus the monstrous and part-robotic Thatcher is shown making television broadcasts keeping her weapon arm carefully out of shot, and ensuring that any unflattering comments or images are consigned to the floor of the editing room. 'GLC' also shows Thatcher as the manipulator of public image; for example, controlling the dissemination of images via a large bank of monitors and controls. While this Thatcher is an alien and threatening entity, the portrayal is grounded in key aspects of the real Thatcher's image, including the wearing of blue suits and a well-modulated and deep-speaking voice; above all else, this is a vision of Thatcher that controls her television appearance.

This alien Thatcher is also deeply feminine. As with the sketches in *Spitting Image* or *Private Eye's* 'Fifth Form at St Maggies', this Thatcher is surrounded entirely by men. Her own gender is constantly reinforced by the contrast with all those surrounding her. 'GLC' also echoes the *Private Eye* strip in showing Thatcher not only surrounded by men, but behaving in a way that terrifies and bullies them. In the *Private Eye* strip, as with *Spitting Image*, Thatcher administered stern, schoolmistress-style discipline. 'GLC' takes this a step further. Thatcher personally hangs male politicians who displease her. In one especially gruesome scene she rips the face off the character of Sir Horace Cutler (Leslie Phillips) (based on a real-life politician, who lost the leadership of the GLC to Livingstone) in displeasure at his weak electoral performance. 'I'm tired, I need a change,' Sir Horace says to Thatcher, in 'GLC'. 'I'm going to change your face,' replies Thatcher, before literally doing so through her horrendously violent act.

FIGURATIVE THATCHER

In both *Spitting Image* and *The Comic Strip Presents*, Thatcher is not represented allusively or allegorically; she simply represents herself. In other 1980s adaptations of her image and her personality, she appears in looser allegorical form. Two examples of storytelling from the long running BBC series *Doctor Who* engage with types of female leadership that allusively suggest Thatcher's defining characteristics. One briefer example is a parody of both Thatcher and *Doctor Who* itself from the 1985 season of *The Lenny Henry Show*, an eponymously titled sketch comedy. This is, in a few moments, a richly multi-layered parody, as it both mocks *Doctor Who* (such as its extra-diegetic reputation for involving characters who 'run up and down lots of corridors'), and also locates a parody of Thatcher within the broader parody of the science-fiction series. In the sketch, the character of the Doctor confronts two aliens from the race of the Cybermen, a species within the fictional world of *Doctor Who*. These examples of the race are however 'Thatchos' and 'Dennos', and portray Thatcher and her husband, Sir Denis Thatcher. Tellingly, by the time of this sketch's transmission in the mid-1980s, it was possible to use a form of visual shorthand to signify that a character was meant to be Thatcher. In this case, the tall, gleaming metal figure from the Cyber race has coiffured hair, is wearing a string of pearls and carrying an Asprey handbag. The few details effortlessly convey that this is meant to be Thatcher, as does the deeply modulated electronic voice of the cybernetic creature. Yet the monsters from the world of *Doctor Who* that Lenny Henry chose to parody as Thatcher are a male race. Accordingly Thatchos is again a female figure in an entirely male world, as this sketch was parodying the *Doctor Who* monsters the Cybermen. There is no such thing as a Cyberwoman in the diegesis of *Doctor Who*. The parody here once again places Thatcher, or rather an extreme adaptation of Thatcher, in a world of men and masculine identities, but still equips her with the accoutrements of female identity such as her pearls and handbag.

Lenny Henry attracted attention in the 1980s as a so-called 'alternative comedian'. A title self-consciously worn by those who claimed it or accepted it, it indicated a type of comedy that reacted against the situation comedies that had defined much of the BBC's output up to the 1980s. Supposedly mainstream comedy of the time included works such as the popular sitcom *Ever Decreasing Circles* (1984–89), starring the comedy stalwart Richard Briers. Often castigated as 'safe' or unadventurous comedies, these types of programmes or others such as *Father Dear Father* (1968–73) or *Bless this House* (1971–76) from the previous decade were suburban, domestic and family-based. However, by the 1980s this type of comedy was becoming rarer and indeed Briers's *Ever Decreasing Circles* was almost the last of its kind. As the BBC's own history page points out, by a strange irony more comfortable comedy had become scarce by the 1980s, and what was apparently alternative or countercultural was virtually mainstream. Indeed, in terms of television production, Lenny Henry's programme was, as Shanti Kumar points out, a product of the major BBC production department Comedy and Entertainment, and was not 'ghettoized' in the Afro-Caribbean Department (Kumar 2003: 409). In place of sitcoms came non-traditional programmes, including *The Young Ones* (1982–85) and *Alexei Sayle's Stuff* (1988–91) and *Red Dwarf* (1988–) (Cook and Wright 2006: 15), programmes that starred many of the members of the Comic Strip ('Comedy: The Young Ones'; 'Comedy: Alexei Sayle's Stuff'). At this time, other exponents of traditional comedy such as the Two Ronnies and

6. Some more political stories include 1972's 'The Curse of Peladon' and 1974's 'The Monster of Peladon', which both satirized Britain's entry into the Common Market; and the alien creatures the Daleks are frequently thought of as allegories of the dangers of nuclear war and Nazism.

Benny Hill started to vanish from television screens (Lewis 2006), their death knell sounded by programmes such as *The Young Ones* (Abercrombie 1996: 43). Their place was also taken by Henry, whose understanding of gender, nonetheless, came back to nothing more advanced than hair and a handbag.

An actual *Doctor Who* serial, the 1988 story 'The Happiness Patrol' also places a delineation of Thatcher in a world of alien menace. The story is set in a futuristic earth colony where unhappiness is forbidden by law and where an overtly fascist regime is headed by a lethal female ruler, Helen A (Sheila Hancock). Helen is a female ruler but the symbols of power in her realm are appropriations of both male and female symbolism. Seemingly the only source of authority in Helen A's world is the eponymous 'Happiness Patrol', a corp of armed female killers. They are heavily made up, elaborately coiffured and wear high heels, yet also carry large weapons, traditionally signs of more masculine provinces of action. With the guns in the hands of the female Happiness Patrol, there are no obvious symbols of male power counterpoised against the female. Helen A's spouse, Joseph C (Ronald Fraser), is an enfeebled domesticated figure, and other male characters in the serial are social outcasts, effeminate cooks or downtrodden servitors.

Direct political commentary is rare in *Doctor Who*. Some earlier stories had used allegorized alien settings to comment on the European Economic Community (as it then was) or the threat of nuclear war, but such occasions were rare in a programme that usually espoused other-worldly and fantastic types of storytelling.⁶ But key creative personnel who worked on this story recall that Helen A was intended to satirize Thatcher, and the revolt of underground workers at the climax of the story was an allegory of the 1984 miner's strike (Adams 2010). Sheila Hancock, the actress who portrayed Helen A, also asserts that her personal dislike of Thatcher fed into her interpretation of the character, and 1980s British politics sit heavily in this story ('The Happiness Patrol'). The character's dialogue stressed that Helen A was a conviction politician and she observes at one point: 'I like your initiative, your enterprise,' a line emulating characteristic Thatcher statements ('Doctor Who: The Classic Series: The Happiness Patrol'). *Doctor Who's* production team pursued this deliberately anti-Thatcher agenda at a time of particular economic, creative and political pressure on the BBC from the Thatcher administration. One year before this story's broadcast, the director general of the corporation had been removed, and a committee of enquiry recommended the abolition of the licence fee and the commercialization of the BBC (Currie 2004). The corporation faced complaints from the government that its 1980s output was biased against Thatcher (Reeves 1993: 145), but its targets were the plays *Tumbledown* (1988) and *The Falklands Play* (delayed for broadcast until 2002), not *Doctor Who*, whose depiction of Thatcher, while firmly coded as female in contrast to Thatcher's own declarations of gender neutrality, was perhaps less obvious.

THATCHER AND FEMININITY

These four examples of parody are not of course the only examples of Thatcher being satirized in the 1980s. There were Janet Brown's celebrated appearances impersonating Thatcher (including in the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only* (Glen, 1981)), as well as the play *Anyone for Denis* (televised in 1981), based on the 'Dear Bill' letters in *Private Eye*. However *The Comic Strip Presents*, *Spitting Image*, *The Lenny Henry Show* and *Doctor Who* merit attention together for the way they suggest the progressive adaptation of Thatcher's image into more and

more outlandish cultural contexts; but also, these suggest that as the adaptations became more extreme, strikingly conservative conclusions were reached about Thatcher as a leader and a person. Alternative comedy and outlandish science fiction together took Thatcher and returned her to realms of behaviour and cultural patterns that asserted her womanhood and femininity, whereas Thatcher herself constantly derogated this aspect of her career. At this point, the ideas expounded by Caroline Walker Bynum in *Metamorphosis and Identity* are useful. She expresses the idea of a dialogic body or hybridity, whereby different aspects are bound within one body (Bynum 2001: 160). Parodies of Thatcher are certainly the sum of several parts, such as the various elements of alien creature, matriarch and fashionable woman that comprise the 'Iron Lady' in 'GLC'. In the parodies of Thatcher we find a volatile mixture of elements in dialogue with each other. The alien creature lurks beneath the veneer of the 'Iron Lady', and Helen A's suppressed emotions are in conflict with her iron-clad outer layer. But the ultimate implication of these combinations of aspects was to focus attention on her appearance as a woman, and on the carefully modulated and artfully constructed female shell of the inner monstrosity.

Appearance interacts with broader cultural patterns of female conduct at high levels of power. As leader, Thatcher was in fact an immaculately groomed and well-dressed woman. These four televisual accounts of her maintain this dimension of her appearance, but also hint that under the immaculate grooming and the style is something grotesque. In *The Comic Strip Presents* the Iron Lady is well groomed, but this simply sharpens the juxtaposition with the more repulsive elements of her alien physiognomy, such as her robotic arm concealed under the blue suit, or the green substance that emanates from her mouth when she dies, elements kept hidden from television cameras. The Thatcher puppet in *Spitting Image* is again mostly dressed in Thatcher's characteristic clothing, but the rubber puppet features exaggerate and distort Thatcher's own features to a horrifying degree. The two adaptations of Thatcher from the world of *Doctor Who* again emphasize the trademarks of her appearance, but simultaneously subvert them. When placed on a cybernetic figure, the pearls, coiffured hair and handbag are simply ludicrous; Helen A is groomed and made up, but so heavily and so artificially that the appearance conveys the impression of a façade with no humanity beneath it. Indeed, the narrative ultimately reveals that Helen has no meaningful emotional spectrum or empathy with other humans.

Accordingly, Thatcher in these parodies became more and more horrific while at the same time being more and more feminine. Popular culture in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s abounded with depictions of monstrous women. For example David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975), a horror movie about an alien parasite, teems with what film theorist David Sanjek (1996: 57) refers to as women who are 'monsters'. Importantly their monstrosity lies in gendered patterns of behaviour and the way they interact with men. The women in *Shivers* are turned into rapacious predators, patterns of behaviour that prefigure the Iron Lady in 'GLC' ripping off Cutler's face or hanging a row of men from a gallows erected in her office.⁷ Although the real-life Thatcher was a wife and a mother of twins, the 1980s parodies tend to downplay this aspect of female behaviour. Instead the parodies of Thatcher on 1980s British television stand apart from the recognizably maternal characteristics of the monstrous woman (Creed 1990: 137).

The adaptations of Thatcher in the 1980s suggest how her femininity also serves to deride masculinity. Adaptation theory points to and interprets

7. Lynda K. Bundtzen's analysis of the *Alien* series of horror movies reinforces this point. As she points out, the alien creature in these films is an explicitly female form of horror and monstrosity, which lies in the fecundity of the alien creature and its clearly perverse but strong maternal instincts (Bundtzen 1987: 12).

8. She is akin to the figures from horror discussed by Linda Badley, whose bodies became sources of political power, such as the monstrous feminine from the 1985 horror film *The Company of Wolves*, in which a devouring female transcends class barriers, embodies masculine behaviours but whose very female body is a source of monstrous power (Badley 1995: 122–23).

processes of reshaping a source (Stam 2005: 11–17). Adaptation theory also points to the medium-specific modes of representation, and television as a medium presents a coherent vision of an adapted Thatcher. The parodic figures of Thatcher are constantly surrounded by men. In order to outstrip them, to intimidate them and kill them, Thatcher must engage with men.⁸

These parodies adapted Thatcher into a highly specific variant of femininity, one that can only be fully understood having considered the historical reality of her appearance and her own iteration of principle, theory and conviction above gender. The femininity of the adapted Thatcher is thus highly ambiguous and compromised, ambiguity that parodies of Thatcher resolved even while invoking stylistic trappings of contemporary horror (especially ‘GLC’ and ‘The Happiness Patrol’). Rather than laying the monstrous and the attractive side by side, these parodies, especially again ‘GLC’ and *Doctor Who*, place both within the one figure. Thatcher, as a rampaging alien in ‘GLC’, is also a well-groomed, well-spoken and inherently attractive woman, as is the impeccably turned out Helen A.

The adapted televisual Thatcher asserts her femaleness in a number of ways. In ‘GLC’, she is at the apex of power, but all other figures in her regime are men, acting as a counterpoise to her femininity, but also showing how she has outstripped their masculinity through her own intense femininity. The men in her government are enfeebled and tormented. Helen A is likewise at the apex of power. There are women under her, but they suffer from diminishing returns in terms of their distinctiveness and identity. Mindlessly enforcing Helen A’s diktats, the women of the Happiness Patrol also simply impersonate Helen in terms of hair, make-up and appearance. The cybernetic Thatchos is the only female among the Cybermen, and Thatcher in *Spitting Image* is surrounded by recalcitrant men. Together these texts throw into relief her femaleness in a way that Thatcher herself never would. These examples of avant-garde, counter-cultural or alternative edge comedy in fact drew upon traditional ideas about Thatcher, inscribing her actions within a range of female activities and stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

It was inevitable that Margaret Thatcher fell victim to parodists during her prime ministership. Indeed it was mostly only after she left office that television productions and films were made (including *Margaret* (2009) and *The Iron Lady*) that attempted to portray Thatcher within realistic dramatic terms, rather than as an extended parody (Campbell 2011). Parodies contemporary with Thatcher are valuable historical texts; they exist in tension not simply with the historic actuality of Margaret Thatcher, but with the nuances and contours of her own views on gendered leadership and conduct. Whether or not she truly believed it, Thatcher consistently downplayed the significance of the impact of gender. Indeed, given how many of her contemporaries record her regard for ‘dries’, her detestation of ‘wets’ and the criterion she used to judge colleagues – ‘Is he one of us?’ – it does seem likely that Thatcher was transfixed by principle, theory and ideology, not gender. It is therefore striking that parodists of Thatcher fixated on her femininity, not simply emphasizing more female characteristics, but placing the adaptations of Thatcher in settings, such as a *mise-en-scène* populated entirely by men, that constantly drew attention to her gender. Seeing where the actual Thatcher and adaptations of her both intersect and are in tension with each other suggests a great deal about

the conclusions parodists reached about Thatcher. Most of all, comparison between the actual Thatcher and her adaptations makes clear the peculiarity that comedy (such as *The Comic Strip*, *Spitting Image* or Lenny Henry) that self-consciously proclaimed its modernity and avant-garde, alternative character, or a *Doctor Who* story that was determinedly eccentric, drew conservative conclusions about Thatcher. Parody in fact entombed Thatcher within a range of traditional female norms, taking the Thatcher image into places from which the Iron Lady sought to extricate herself.

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TELEVISION PROGRAMMES (ALL UNITED KINGDOM UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED)

Alexei Sayle's Stuff (1988–91, BBC)
Anyone for Denis (1981, ITV)
Bless This House (1971–76, ITV)
Doctor Who (1963–, BBC)
Ever Decreasing Circles (1984–89, BBC)
Father Dear Father (1968–73, ITV)
Maggie: The First Lady (2003, United States/United Kingdom: Brook Lapping Productions)
Margaret (2009, BBC)
Red Dwarf (1988–, BBC)
Royal Family (1969, BBC)
Spitting Image (1984–96, ITV)
The Comic Strip Presents (1982–, Channel 4, BBC, UK Gold)
The Comic Strip Presents: 'GLC: The Carnage Continues' (1990, BBC)
The Falklands Play (2002, BBC)
The Lenny Henry Show (1984–2004, BBC)
The Young Ones (1982–85, BBC)
Tumbledown (1988, BBC)

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