

Victims of Gender Politics: A Comparison of Jane Shore in *The Second Part of King Edward IV*  
and Margaret Thatcher

When thinking of powerful women during the Tudor or Elizabethan eras, one normally does not think of the literary character Jane Shore. Jane Shore, who did not even have a speaking role in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, is most well known as King Edward's mistress. However, *The Second Part of King Edward IV* by Thomas Heywood shows her in a different light. In Heywood's play, Jane Shore is written as more than a reason for Richard to execute Hastings, unlike Shakespeare's play where Richard orders for Hastings' execution for simply giving Jane the benefit of the doubt (Shakespeare 3.4.74-76). Heywood wrote her as more than a powerful man's concubine. He wrote her as an active participant in the political game. For example, in scene 10 of *The Second Part of King Edward IV*, the queen asks Edward for the pardon, and he denies her (Heywood 10.155-60). However, after Jane asks him, albeit on the queen's behalf (Heywood 10.164-65), he complies, and Jane brings the "gracious pardon [that] frees the gentleman" (Heywood 10.124). Heywood had Jane Shore use her influence over King Edward to obtain the pardon for Strangwidge, which was something even the queen could not do in the play. This move alone is enough to make her a minor political figure in the play, at the very least, because it shows her ability to sway King Edward. It is also enough to make the powerful male characters want her out of the picture for the same reason. On the other end of the political spectrum is Margaret Thatcher: the first female leader of a political party in Britain and the first female Prime Minister of the UK (Ribberink paragraph 10; Stepney 136). Margaret Thatcher left behind an intensive legacy, and while she certainly made and executed some unfavorable decisions and policies, such as her method of financial reform (Stepney 137), it is undeniable

that one of the reasons people disliked her was because she was a powerful woman. Heywood's character Jane Shore and Margaret Thatcher are used as comparisons to show that gender politics in Britain have not changed much, despite the fact that they are centuries apart. While Heywood's Jane Shore and Margaret Thatcher are from completely different times, had different roles in society, and held different positions of power, one thing they have in common is they were both victims of gender politics. Both women went against gendered expectations by demanding autonomy, making their own decisions, and joining the world of politics, and they suffered the consequences for it.

“Gender politics” are defined as “the assumptions underlying expectations regarding gender difference in a society; (also with *singular* agreement) an ideology based on such assumptions” (“Gender politics”). In other words, society as a whole has expectations for people based on gender, and expects the people to abide by them. If they choose not to, the society's entire idea of how to function would crumble because people will no longer fit in the boxes made for them. In regards to Jane Shore and Margaret Thatcher, this means that there were societal expectations in place for them that they went against, or at least attempted to go against. In *The Second Part of King Edward IV*, Jane Shore was not content with staying home or acting as an extension to her husband. She chose to go off on her own and create her own path. Heywood's play is a fictionalized play, but it is still very much based in reality for its time period, so one can assume that the circumstances of the play reflect the reality of the time period it is set in.

Margaret Thatcher wanted to make her own moves and stand independently. She was a married woman, and the common belief was that her job was to take care of her husband and children and to not have a job outside of the home (Ribberink paragraph 5). Not only did she have a paid

job, but Thatcher had a paid, powerful job that required her to travel away from home often. This was rare for a woman of her time. A male historian even claimed “Margaret Thatcher [was] not a woman” (Ribberink paragraph 1). It was not just men that were upset about Thatcher’s dismissal of gender roles. Other women claimed that she was “unfeminine” because she was too “dominant” and “more like a man every day” (Ribberink paragraph 1). The gender politics of her time were so extreme, that even other female citizens in the UK were against Thatcher.

Due to the way Jane Shore is written, notably by Thomas More and William Shakespeare, most people do not see her as a political figure. They see her as King Edward’s mistress, or the other woman, because she is commonly portrayed as such. However, if a mistress was all she was, why did Thomas Heywood write her differently? Why did her story in *The Second Part of King Edward IV* end the way it did? When she was arrested, she was told to shed her clothes, wear a white sheet, and cut her hair, which were all indicators for public shame for being a whore (Heywood 18.193-96; Heywood 289 n.0.2). Rufford was placed in charge of her, and declared that no man could help her, and if they tried they would be sentenced to death (Heywood 20.249-53). Why did she receive such a harsh sentence? Heywood possibly chose to portray Jane as a more complex character because it added more controversy. It is possible that Jane received her sentence for being an adultress, and Heywood may have intended to maintain her classic representation, but considering how Heywood included that Jane’s own husband forgave her, the queen allegedly forgave her, and the king committed the same crime, yet died with his reputation seemingly intact, that does not seem likely. Jane’s relationship with the king seemed consensual on both sides. Jane says, “My tongue, that gave consent, enjoined to beg” (Heywood 20.27). The verb “gave” indicates that Jane was the one giving consent, therefore she

was the one persued by the king. She did not coerce the king, or force him to do anything he did not want to do. The affair was known while the king was still alive, yet it was only after his death that Jane was punished. This means that it is possible that there was another reason Jane was arrested, and that reason could be that other men in the play saw her as a problem. They saw her as someone who had power and influence when Edward was still alive, and therefore stood in their way when they were seizing power and control after Edward died.

Jane Shore was a functional, active character in the play. There is a chance that she would have retained her power after Edward's death, because she was well-liked and people would have followed her or stood by her. Brackenbury refers to her as a "comforting, minist'ring, kind physician" after Jockie informed him of how Jane helped people (Heywood 9.25). The apparitors who arrested her showed her "all the favour poor men could" (Heywood 20.17). When Brackenbury sees her arrested later, he acknowledges that she was wrongfully imprisoned (Heywood 20.64-5). After she was arrested, those working for Richard isolated her and ensured no one could or would help her. Rufford declared it "present death" if anyone gave her food or water (Heywood 20.252). This was done to shame her, humiliate her, and make sure she lost any power or influence she had left. No one wanted to put themselves at risk for someone so publicly hated, and the few who did, such as Aire, were executed (Heywood 22.46).

While this violence occurred in a fictional play, it is not uncommon for women in politics to receive acts of violence, which adds to the play's accurate depiction. "Efforts to impede women's political participation are not new. Many societies around the world have long associated men with the 'public sphere' of politics and the economy and women with the 'private sphere' of home and family" (Krook 74). Men try to keep their hold on political power by doing

what they find necessary to keep women away, even if it is violence or fear, and “dynamics of intimidation and harassment are often intertwined with threats and acts of physical violence up to and including murder” (Krook 75). It is not outrageous to read the treatment of Jane Shore as a result of her gaining some political power or influence over the public. She was closest with the lower class and middle class, which outnumbered the upper class that Richard and his men were part of. It is likely that, in Heywood’s play, Richard feared Jane because she easily outnumbered him, and could then lead a revolt when he wrongfully came to power. Jane Shore was only a minor political figure in the play, but she still had some power, and a little influence over people, and that was enough to scare men desperate to hold on to power.

Margaret Thatcher differs from Jane Shore not only because she was a real person, but also because she was elected into her positions of power. However, the reasons behind her being elected did not start as beneficial for her, seeing how there is a history of women being elected during times they are destined to fail:

In short, a female party leader leads a team who not only share power, but can remove her from power as well. Under gendered assumptions of women as political outsiders (even among political elites) and of male political elites’ hostility or resistance to women’s political power, the power-sharing and power-removal components of prime ministerial parliamentary government may facilitate women’s rise to party leader and prime minister. Removal mechanisms permit male political elites, with ambitions of their own, to support a woman as leader and potentially as prime minister, because they know they retain the power to remove her in the future and to create thereby opportunities for themselves. (Beckwith 723)

This means, as far as prime ministers or party leaders are concerned, men feel comfortable electing women for the position during hard times because they will be easy to remove in the future. The women are set up for failure, which in turn will make men look more capable than women to lead a government. It is believable that Thatcher fell victim to this practice because “after the free school milk fiasco the Conservatives duly lost the 1974 general election to Labour. Later in 1975 Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative party, now in opposition. She then won the 1979 general election and became Britain’s first and only female Prime Minister” (Stepney 136). Thatcher’s party made an error that angered the public, lost an election, and then elected her as leader when they did not have much to lose, but a lot to gain. If they won, she could potentially be removed. If they lost, she would look bad, and in turn so would women in politics. Beyond the milk blunder, the Conservative party was already weakened by the incumbent party leader, Edward Heath, who “led his party into two election defeats in the course of a single calendar year” (Beckwith 731), which also aided to Margaret Thatcher’s election. Thatcher’s “ability and experience intersected with the political opportunity of the 1974 electoral defeats of the Conservative party” (Beckwith 733), and she campaigned against someone with a bad reputation. She did not have tough competition considering how she was a qualified politician, having served sixteen years in parliament, and was “relatively untouched by the fallout of the government’s defeat” (Beckwith 731). Thatcher was clearly a strong candidate.

The timing and circumstances could not have been better for Thatcher, but political crises open up opportunities for women to protect the men, and if the Conservative party were not in shambles, elite men would have ran for office and kept Thatcher out (Beckwith 734). The Conservative party used her to repair their reputation, instead of risking a male member.

Thatcher was passable because of her experience, and she had reason to challenge the incumbent party leader for leadership, which was allowed under Conservative Party rules (Beckwith 731-32). Her party could get away with electing her, but they were not planning on keeping her. Removal mechanisms would provide men with power to remove her from office and create opportunities for themselves (Beckwith 723). It is reasonable to believe that male members of the Conservative party were satisfied with electing Margaret Thatcher because they knew that once their reputation was repaired, they could come up with an excuse to remove her from office and elect someone else in her place, and the general public would be okay with that considering several believed she was out of place to begin with. The Conservative party could trust her with repairing their reputation, but they could not trust her with holding power for a long period of time. Thatcher held her position for as long as she did because junior men kept postponing their candidacy too long due to her dominating both national and international politics (Beckwith 742). She was too strong of a figure for the party to quietly replace, and after her time as Prime Minister there were changes made to the election process to ensure that no one could “come to power under the rules that favored Thatcher’s selection” (Beckwith 743). The Conservative party made a mistake with electing Thatcher, and they were not going to make it again.

Heywood’s Jane Shore and Margaret Thatcher are extremely different, but their uniting characteristic is that men wanted to tear them down due to them being powerful. In the play, Jane had influence over the King of England that she had the potential of using to her advantage, and while Thatcher cared deeply about her image, she did not care what people truly thought about her. She was far from modest, but she tried to make herself invisible by crafting the perfect image (Ribberink paragraph 6). She knew that the public would rip her apart in any way they

could, and she gave them as little ammo as possible to make her career easier. “A perfected political image was her answer to the problem of being a woman in a man’s world and the vulnerability this implied” (Ribberink paragraph 6). Margaret Thatcher was self aware. She used the Iron Lady “insult” to her advantage (Stepney 136), despite it going against the stereotype for women, and otherwise let the insults and criticisms from the public role off her back. Both Heywood’s Jane and Thatcher held a unique power that led to men, as well as other women in Thatcher’s case, hating them. Richard could have hated Jane Shore because she was close with King Edward, or because the public favored her. Men hated Thatcher because she did not fit into the role they believed married women or mothers should have. Women hated Thatcher because they saw her as a masculine woman. Both positions of unique power led to unfortunate endings. Thatcher’s legacy is viewed as controversial, and not just because of her rulings. Jane Shore died after being wrongfully arrested, publicly shamed, humiliated, “And by a king again she was destroyed” (Heywood 22.112). It is true that both women had moments where they were in the wrong; neither woman was fully innocent. Margaret Thatcher made some questionable political decisions, and Jane Shore consensually cheated on her husband with a married man, but they were not bad people, or at least not intentionally.

Heywood’s Jane Shore and Margaret Thatcher were both victims of gender politics. By going against the gendered expectations set in place for them, they suffered consequences. Specifically, they passed away with their names tarnished. The question needing answered is if they were men, would their names have been as tarnished, if tarnished at all. King Edward passed away seemingly with his reputation intact in *The Second Part of King Edward IV*, yet Jane was horrifically shamed, and politicians are not known for making the entire public happy,

yet Margaret Thatcher is partly known for being a controversial figure. Is it fully because of her political moves, or because she is a woman? Both Heywood's Jane Shore and Margaret Thatcher made choices despite knowing society was set up against them, and they did the best they could. Jane did what she could to help others. Thatcher made a name for herself by changing politics and setting up a precedent, not to mention reviving the Conservative party. Jane Shore may have died for what she did, and there has only been one female Prime Minister since Margaret Thatcher, but their reputations and impact have lived past them, and that should speak for itself.

Works Cited

Beckwith, Karen. "Before Prime Minister: Margaret Thatcher, Angela Merkel, and Gendered Party Leadership Contests." *Politics & Gender*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2015, pp. 718-45.

*ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1749295392?accountid=28833>,

doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000409>. Accessed 29 Oct. 2019.

"Gender politics." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*,

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77468?redirectedFrom=gender+politics#eid23699494>

Accessed 11 Nov. 2019.

Heywood, Thomas. *The Second Part of King Edward IV. The First and Second Parts of King Edward IV*, edited by Richard Rowland, Manchester UP, 2005, pp. 205-311. The Revels Plays.

Krook, Mona Lena. "Violence Against Women in Politics." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no.

1, 2017, pp. 74-88. *ProQuest*,

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1862036451?accountid=28833>,

doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0007>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2019.

Ribberink, Anneke. "Gender Politics with Margaret Thatcher: Vulnerability and Toughness."

*Gender Forum*, no. 30, 2010, pp. 1-12. *ProQuest*,

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/818683572?accountid=28833>. Accessed 29 Oct.

2019.

Shakespeare, William. *Richard III. The Wadsworth Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans,

2nd ed., Wadsworth, 1997, pp. 748-804.

Stepney, Paul. "The Legacy of Margaret Thatcher—A Critical Assessment." *Open Journal of*

*Social Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, pp. 134–43. doi: 10.4236/jss.2014.21013. Accessed  
29 Oct. 2019.