Fragments from an Adamant Life

The Iron Lady
Do you wonder if films based on real-life characters have any moral obligation towards the subject of their narratives? At the recent Oscar presentations, two of the nominees for Best Actress were for performances aimed at dramatising episodes in the lives of famous women: Michelle Williams as Marilyn Monroe in *My Week with Marilyn* (Simon Curtis, 2011) and – the winner as it not too surprisingly turned out – Meryl Streep as Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2011). Monroe has been dead for fifty years now, so she is past being hurt by anything filmmakers can do with her image, but Thatcher, depleted by age and illness though her awareness may be, is still alive, and one wonders what she makes of *The Iron Lady*, if she’s found herself up to viewing it. This is only one of the ways in which we might approach this film, but I think it is one worth considering in detail.

**Thatcher in life and on screen**

A good many people, myself included, may find themselves in the strange position of coming to admire a film character based on an actual person whose policies and attitudes they had much disliked in life. It was easy to find Margaret Thatcher unsympathetic in her response to many of the key issues (such as the miners strike and the Falklands War) that surfaced during her incumbency as British prime minister from 1979 to 1990. She so often seemed utterly blinkered in relation to the distress of ordinary people, aggressive in foreign policy, hectoring in her dealings with parliament and so on. Indeed, few prime ministers have ever been so divisive in the way their country responded to them. And yet – viewing *The Iron Lady* may lead one to think again about her.
This doesn’t necessarily changing one’s mind about her as a politician or about the government she led. It’s still likely that those who equate ‘Thatcherism’ with a particular brand of meritocratic conservatism will adhere to such views, but even so, the film may lead to second thoughts about the woman behind the strident politician. By this I mean that Phyllida Lloyd’s excellent film may lead you to wonder, as it did me, if you’d been too severe in your judgements. Essentially, it is for me about the importance of aspiration – of accepting this reality for the young Margaret Roberts and the reality of the obstacles she had to surmount in the realising of her aspirations. However dislikeable she may seem as a politician, she had to overcome some daunting prejudices in matters of class and gender as she made her ambitious way to the top.

The film doesn’t make it easy for us either. It doesn’t follow a linear narrative. Instead, its habit is that of dipping from elderly present into various pasts: working in her father’s grocer shop in Grantham; deciding to run as a candidate; taking on the suits of Westminster; marrying Denis and having the twins; dealing with the miners strike of 1984; settling in to a sort of retirement with Denis. But these scenes from the past do not occur in the chronological order in which they happened in Margaret Roberts’ life. They enact the confusion in the mind of the old Margaret, slipping into Alzheimer’s. And this leads me to another context in which this film might be viewed.

**Thatcher losing it**

*The Iron Lady* has some elements of the long-established biopic genre – that is, up to a point it belongs in a venerable history of films which purport to relate the life of a famous figure, whether it’s a pianist like David Hellgott in *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996), a poet such as Sylvia Plath in *Sylvia* (Christine Jeffs, 2003) or the Facebook pioneer Mark Zuckerberg in *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010). A common paradigm – which *The Iron Lady* mostly embraces – is the presence of a burning ambition, the encountering and overcoming of obstacles, and some sort of public triumph. But Lloyd and writer Abi Morgan,
Though they incorporate some of these elements, do not choose to follow the pattern in a straightforward way.

When we first meet their Thatcher (Meryl Streep), she is already far gone into age and Alzheimer’s. She potters about the flat, in which various ‘carers’ try to keep her in order, when a memory strikes her. The film dramatises this memory, which both tells us about her past and her current state of mind. I don’t want to suggest that this is in any way confusing, only that it is the means of giving access to a mind that is losing its grip on reality but is still intermittently full of vibrant recollection. Biopics are not usually impelled by showing the protagonist in a state of decline, both physical and mental as it is in this case.

The opening image is of the old Thatcher going out to buy milk. It is worth looking briefly at this opening sequence for the ways in which it sets up expectations for the rest of the film. In the 1970s, in the days before she became prime minister, ‘Margaret Thatcher, Milk Snatcher’ was common graffiti on school and other walls, rebuking her for cutting off the free milk supplies to state schools. The spectacle of this old lady complaining in a supermarket about the escalating price of milk will therefore resonate with older audience members who remember this unsympathetic aspect of her career. She takes up the topic of milk price with husband Denis (Jim Broadbent) when she returns home – but Denis seems to be sitting at the breakfast table one minute, and not the next. In other words, this is the film’s way of representing Margaret’s muddled mental state, and this ambiguity about his presence will recur throughout the film.

From one point of view this is a moving study in old age, which is not a theme that is often explored in film, perhaps because ‘Cinemagoing has more usually been a young person’s pastime’, as one commentator on the subject wrote. Although several film studies of old people have been undertaken, Leo McCarey’s Make Way for Tomorrow (1937) and Yasujirō Ozu’s Tokyo Story (1953) being two of the most affective examples, old age itself, and its concomitant problems of failing powers, is not often at the centre of a film’s concerns. (It may be worth considering why this might be so.) In the case of The Iron Lady, the film’s structure is determined by Margaret’s loosening grip on reality; this is where the film starts and for the rest of its length it moves in and out of present and past, and between reality and delusion. Part of the film’s triumph is that its narrative flow is not jeopardised by this approach to structure. We must accept from the first sequence involving the supermarket and the breakfast table that we are in the presence of a mind for which the past is no less real than the present.

This structure is reinforced by the way the muted colours (mainly greys and soft blues) and muffled sounds of the present contrast with the splashes of remembered vivid hues [not just in the trademark bright blue costumes but in the places depicted as well] and the noise of political outrage, both in parliament and on the streets when the crowds marshal their forces to protest against the Thatcher regime. The flat in which the elderly Thatchers live out their days seems attuned to the limits that age has imposed on them, and in Margaret’s case especially the diminished sense of the present is further underlined by the film’s brilliant make-up [Mark Coulier and J Roy Helland won an Oscar for this] and costume design. These ‘technical’ aspects are important signifiers of meaning in relation to character, and in this case to contrasting the enfeebled present with the dominant past.
Thatcher ascendant

If one does feel that sympathy with the film’s Thatcher is at odds with the real-life persona, this may be due to the way the filmmakers have chosen to focus on the formative influences in her life. She was the daughter of a grocer, Alfred Roberts (Iain Glen), who has been the prime inspiration of her early life. He has strong principles about aspiring to make a difference through individual effort and when the young Margaret (Alexandra Roach), whom we see working in the shop, gets a telegram announcing her place at Oxford University, he exhorts her, ‘Don’t let me down.’ She has come from a modest lower-middle-class background and she makes her own way in a world dominated by chiefly upper-class men.

She has been mocked by other local girls for her aspirations, and at a dinner party early in her entry to the political scene she is patronised for her modest background, relying on the youthful Denis (Harry Lloyd) for guidance in matters of profuse cutlery. She has talked to the Dartford constituency of the need for ‘good housekeeping’ in her bid for preselection, but it hasn’t equipped her for instant ease in the posher social situation in which she now finds herself. Nor is she equipped for the masculinist superiority when she is enjoined: ‘Miss Roberts, will you join the ladies?’, the implication being that the chaps want to get on with serious discussion, unimpeded by the need for deferring to the presence of women. We recall this moment a little later when Margaret, in response to Denis’ proposal, tells him firmly: ‘I will never be one of those women who stand silent on the arm of her husband.’ There is an honesty in this that compels admiration, just as dealing with the prejudices of class and gender compel sympathy for this difficult woman. The youthful romance between Denis and Margaret, conducted to the strains of ‘Shall We Dance?’ from The King and I (Walter Lang, 1956), offers a touching insight into a woman who, for all her firmness of purpose, is capable of a tenderness that will always be an element in this partnership. He can decades later jokingly read Kipling’s line about how ‘the female of the species is more deadly than the male’, but Denis possesses underlying affection that is clear in Broadbent’s performance. Though he may be married to a ‘woman who changed the face of history’, as the conservative Daily Telegraph calls her in ‘a lovely little article’, she is also a devoted wife and mother, if not conforming to the stereotypes of either.
She is no doubt an awkward symbol for feminism. She has no special feeling for the roles of women at large, and she is more or less exclusively focused on her own ambitions and advancement, but nevertheless the film makes us feel some sort of empathy for this woman who takes on the male preserve of parliament. We see her commanding the attention of all those high-flying men – Michael Heseltine (Richard E Grant), Geoffrey Howe (Anthony Head), Francis Pym (Julian Wadham) and others – and in her careful coiffure and couture Streep makes her stand out physically from the dark-suited brigade, which is not used to taking its lead from a woman.

In the end, *The Iron Lady* is not really a ‘political film’, as, say, George Clooney’s *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) was, but because its subject is an old woman called Margaret Thatcher whose mind is drifting between her shadowy present and her tumultuous past, it has to show us something of what that public life has been. As suggested above, there is notable contrast between the visually and aurally subdued tones of the elderly Thatcher’s confined life and the loud, often kinetic quality of the inserts from the contentious past.

I have heard complaints that the film doesn’t do justice to the significance of her political life – that it doesn’t tell us anything about this that isn’t already well known. My reply to these objections is twofold. First, such episodes as those representing the miners strike and the Falklands War are dealt with in vivid summary form as the memory of them stakes its claim in the wandering mind of the old woman. They have something of the immediacy of television coverage. Second, the film aims to show something more than a combative politician in a bright blue suit, with pearls and an aureole of fair hair: Morgan’s screenplay wants us to accept the idea that there is more than politics at work in the life of a politician. There was, in Thatcher’s case, a husband and children. *The Iron Lady* is as much the study of a marriage as of a political career, and these two crucial elements are held in a kind of narrative balance, which is secured by the storytelling structure that moves between the domestic and the public, the present and the past, bound by an old woman’s slackening and intermittent grasp of the facts of her life.
Streep and others

It is rarely possible to come to a film with a completely open mind. In the present instance, we not only bring our recollections of the Thatcher years (for those of us who lived through them) and the Thatcher persona to bear on how we receive the film, but we now also have expectations of a Meryl Streep film. In her sixty-odd films, she has established an extraordinary record of inhabiting the lives of such diverse characters as the whistleblowing nuclear-plant worker in *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1983), the wartime resistance heroine in *Plenty* (Fred Schepisi, 1985), Lindy Chamberlain in *Evil Angels* (Fred Schepisi, 1988) and so on, all the way up to *Julie & Julia* (Nora Ephron, 2009). Even in inane films like *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) and the unspeakable *Mamma Mia!* (like *The Iron Lady* directed by Phyllida Lloyd, 2008) her complete immersion in each role compels attention. When she is playing characters based on real-life figures as she does in *The Iron Lady*, she may impress with the exactness of the surface detail, as in capturing Thatcher’s vocal intonations and ways of standing and sitting, but it is never a matter of mere mimicry.

In regard to this latter point, Jim Schembri, writing in *The Age*, insisted that Meryl Streep ‘should not – nay, must not – win the Oscar’, asserting that

*Her portrait is composed almost entirely of high-definition mimicry expertly gleaned from endless hours of TV news footage. It is an effective and accurate impersonation, no doubt, but … There are no revelations in the character, no surprises, no journey we didn’t know about already.*

He goes on to suggest that she fails to ‘leap over the obvious to get under the skin and into the soul of a character’, as, say, Colin Firth did when playing George VI in *The King’s Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010). Whether or not one goes along with this criticism of Streep’s performance as being no more than skilful impersonation, there seems to me no denying that our images of her from all those preceding films influence how we receive her performance as Thatcher. At the very least, our interest may be divided between Thatcher and Streep-as-Thatcher.

The real greatness of the performance goes beyond the physical accuracies: it’s as though she’s worked through these to suggest the inner life (a life of aspiration, of ferocious ambition, of determination to have her way – and her genuine love of Denis). Or perhaps it works the other way round; that is, she has so fully understood the inner life that the external details naturally fall into place. The ageing is marvellous too – not just a matter of brilliant make-up and stance (increasingly stooped)
but the way Streep registers Thatcher’s growing anxiety of being no longer sure who is listening to her or where she is.

The acting is in any case one of the great strengths of the film. Jim Broadbent brings warmth and humour to his take on the supportive, tippling Denis, also recalling a previous role as a long-suffering husband to an Alzheimer’s victim in Richard Eyre’s 2001 film about Iris Murdoch, *Iris*. The rest of the cast is stuffed with reliable British characters who stamp their roles as politicians, admirals, doctors and ‘carers’ with an easy authority and conviction that provide the context for the film’s protagonist; there is a notably touching study in friendship from Nicholas Farrell as the supportive Airey Neave, who is a victim of IRA terrorism.

And remember too that a film is also an industrial product. *The Iron Lady* is a UK/French co-production, and the major companies involved include the British-based Goldcrest Pictures, since the 1980s one of the UK’s most prestigious film production companies, and the prolific French company Canal+. The point to be made is that the film’s credentials suggest that *The Iron Lady* is conceived as a major international film and that this will have bearing on its production values, and consequently on how we respond to the film.

**Conclusion**

It has not been my aim to offer a definitive reading of the film so much as to suggest what may prove some useful approaches to it. What I would claim is that under Lloyd’s direction of Morgan’s screenplay, and with the incalculable advantage of Streep’s magisterial performance, I found myself forced to rethink Margaret Thatcher as a human being and ended by being much moved. I think it’s a very interesting situation: to be hugely impressed against our prejudices, and to start to wonder exactly what is impressing us.

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**Endnotes**