



## [The Iron Lady](#) at [Cornerhouse](#)

Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) and [Anne Ryan](#) January

[Simon Belt](#) 's view..

For those involved in politics in the 70's and 80's, and many others besides, Margaret Thatcher had some very distinctive personal characteristics and mannerisms, which Meryl Streep captures delightfully in **The Iron Lady**. Meryl's refined acting twinned with some highly effective make-up artists of the production team, allow us to repeatedly believe, for brief moments anyway, that we are actually watching the Maggie many of us grew to hate.

The Thatcher **brand** has certainly stood the test of time and still commands respect today, with liberals dining out on their hatred of her whenever they can, and even now organising churlish Facebook campaigns to stop her getting a state funeral (don't remember such a fuss about the unelected Princess Diana). As if there aren't enough things in the here and now to campaign about, like opposing the state's interference in almost every aspect of our lives, supposedly to protect us from ourselves. It seems that Hollywood knows how to cash in on a free ride too, and has never been coy about tasteless and tacky rewrites of Politics and History.

*The Iron Lady* is a coming together of the cash cow of a brand that is Lady Thatcher - purposeful and decisive, bungled together with today's increasingly dominant focus on us as powerless victims. This is an awkward bungling of the two themes that simply doesn't work and is tenuously held together by Thatcher representing decline and loss of power associated with old age, as a disorientated individual who is suffering from delusional dementia in her dotage.

There is a relatively promising start to the film as we see a young Margaret Roberts develop her aspiration for a world of politics beyond her family's grocers shop. From scenes where the lively mind of Margaret is excited by ideas and politics, to her battling to become a candidate for the Conservatives and becoming a Member of Parliament, the potential is laid for our insight into how ideas can inspire people to go beyond their personal circumstances. This is very quickly trounced though as the wider world is flipped on its head and viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, representing the supposed degenerate decline of Thatcher's mind.



Trying to represent the machinations of what goes on in the mind of someone with dementia is a complex and difficult task, and this film clearly isn't a serious attempt to do that. And selecting Thatcher as the subject to supposedly fulfil such a task without any access to her, her family or friends in developing the script is bound to fail. And fail it does. To keep our interest though, the supposed recollections of what Thatcher's life was about are regularly interspersed with a prison-like lifestyle in her Belgravia house.

The replays of some key moments from Thatcher's era of politics are powerfully acted, though bereft of context. Understanding the context and trying to understand the importance of what Thatcher was about and why her period of politics was ascendant is not something liberals are

particularly good at, either side of the pond. At the end of replaying scenes from the miners' strike, Brighton bombing or Falklands war we are left thinking Thatcher is just heartlessly vengeful in the way she responds to political situations, driven by a desire to appear strong alongside her male dominated cabinet and party. No politics there then.

In truth, what really wound up most of Thatcher's opponents was that she represented a serious attempt by the establishment to dispense with the beer and sandwiches approach of consensus in politics ever since the 2nd World War. The personalisation of Thatcher having been responsible for the self-satisfied decline of manufacturing at the heart of the economy, and supposed dismantling of the welfare state is a convenient storyline by liberals who were left without their free lunch in their closed door committee rooms. You might wonder why Thatcher came to office if everything was so rosy before her rise. The decline of Thatcher in office alongside the defeat of the institutions of the working class is presented and then ignored as though the authors don't actually notice it, which is probably the case.

In personalising the problems of society as a fault of Thatcher's personality, is an admission of how weak the political opposition to Thatcher was more than anything else. To then re-run such an unsatisfactory story by parading a fictionalised representation of Thatcher as an old lady with advanced dementia is a truly degraded way to deal with either the Thatcher era or problems of dementia, very Channel 4.

In the run up to the film I watched the *House of Cards* TV series, not having seen it first time around. Yes, it was fiction, but a very powerful and intimate fiction exposing the big power politics of the Tory and establishment machines. Great drama and delightful to see the Manchester Town Hall imaginately used in the filming. As something of a carbon copy, we see *The Iron Lady* similarly use Manchester Town Hall for location shots of inside parliament, only without the drama or political imagination of the TV series. Without a compelling story, the acting in

### *The Iron Lady*

, though technically and emotionally superb, just comes across as formulaic - the weak script is to blame here, not Meryl Streep nor Jim Broadbent.

It's definitely worth seeing the film - to see how strong the grip of victimhood is today when discussing politics, as this film only retains any purchase beyond the Thatcher brand because people find it difficult to criticise films with powerless people at the centre of it. See my review of the Radio 4 [Black Roses Debate: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster](#) for more on this. *The Iron Lady* is very well produced for all its faults, and I would like to see it again - to see if it's the emotional response to Thatcher or the way a highly volatile and political period is so easily rubbished that wound me up the most. The contradictory title and content of the film though is clearly as confused as the portrayal of Margaret Thatcher's legacy.

### [Anne Ryan](#) 's view..

When the young Margaret Roberts was growing up, learning the lessons of hard work and thrift from her father, the Alderman, Hollywood was dominated by great actresses. Larger than life personalities who reduced the men around them to ciphers. While Bette Davis and Joan Crawford could embody the role of a woman who 'fights every day' for what she wants, not even in Mildred Pierce's depths of despair would Hollywood have shown a heroine old and alone, but this is Thatcher's fate.

This treatment is the major controversy of 'The Iron Lady', written by Abi Morgan and directed by Phyllida Lloyd. Is it right to show the dementia of a living person? As in 'Iris', when Judi Dench played Iris Murdoch, viewers may feel uneasy at this portrayal of a public figure unmasked in the indignity of a bewildered old age. Some, of course, may feel that Thatcher's ending is not cruel enough. I would argue that this is not a portrayal of dementia, but of loss – her visions of Denis are a dramatic device which serve to humanise the character.

The film is, of course, dominated by Meryl Streep and she is extraordinary, surrounded by a cast of British male actors who fade into the background, only Jim Broadbent, as Denis Thatcher is allowed some equality, as her constant supporter. Olivia Coleman also deserves praise for portraying the dilemma of a daughter who having struggled to make her own life finds herself witnessing her mother's gradual dementia.

Streep's performance is not an impersonation, this is not a thing of prosthetics and accents, but confirms that she is now the greatest screen actor of her age, giving a depth to woman as she has grown older. Even in *Mama Mia*, her first collaboration with Lloyd, she showed the richness of a woman's life and character. And it is in old age that Streep is astonishing. Age is rarely portrayed on film, it is a stage in life our culture prefers to ignore, but here, once again, Streep becomes the everywoman of our time. In *'Kramer versus Kramer'* she was a woman abandoning her family to find a life her career now culminates in the role of Thatcher a woman who follows the path of public life and is left privately alone.



Thatcher herself was never a feminist, but this is a strangely feminist film, despite the protestations of its heroine. The film is probably unique in Hollywood being written, directed and dominated by women. But in addressing her humanity the film almost neglects her politics. This is history as in the many film portraits of Elizabeth I, where the Spanish Armada and the wars of religion are mere backdrops to a character study. Younger viewers will learn little of recent British politics or of how Thatcher created the world in which we live. However they will get a sense of her influence as the most powerful woman of her age.

As a woman, and one from a lower-class, she took on a Tory Establishment and changed the world. The real power of this film is in showing the greatest actress and the most powerful woman of our time as Everywoman. The poor sad, rather lost old lady that we see buying a pint of milk – ignored and alone. Does this make us sympathetic to the woman, even as we decry the politician? This is the question the audience must answer.

This is not a political film, it does not tell the story of the politics of the time and in ignoring the centrality of politics to her life the film is a failure. However it does make a profoundly political argument in its depiction of society's treatment of the old and powerless. The irony is that the society which abuses and ignores the old is the society that Thatcher created.