

The Pains of Rendering The Iron Lady ‘Palatable’



*In this post, LSE MSc Gender, Media, & Culture student Kimberly Killen explores her reaction to the film *The Iron Lady*. She looks at how the film portrays a woman in power and the problems that arise therein.*

Let me get this out of the way: Meryl Streep is great in the film *The Iron Lady*. That’s not what I’m questioning. She was phenomenal in her embodiment of the scripted character – and I use the term “character” to attest to the fictional embodiment of an actual human being – and her portrayal of a woman suffering from dementia was absolutely heartbreaking. However, the film led me to question the pains that must be taken to humanise, silence, or render palatable a woman in power.

I went to see *The Iron Lady* for research (although, I was exceedingly pleased to be doing “homework” at the cinema). My interests lie in the realm of political presentation, representation, citizenship, and their intersections with gender. Additionally, I had heard quite a diverse set of reactions to the film from friends and professors. Some called the movie a “travesty”, some merely raised eyebrows, and others mused on the subjectivity and potential bias of the filmmakers. I won’t lie, though; prior to the movie, I had also read several reviews that led me to expect I would have a less than favourable reaction to the film’s presentation of gender. I mean, how can an article on Slate titled “[Meryl Streep Can’t Save the Surprisingly Sexist *The Iron Lady* From Incoherence](#)” not affect me? Not a glowing start.

I’m sad to say that, once I watched the movie, my expectations were neither shattered nor was I pleasantly surprised. I was mildly disturbed, felt a bit queasy and – I’ll admit it – was close to watering up a few times in the theatre. The movie itself plots the rise and fall of Margaret Thatcher as the first (and so far only) female prime minister of the UK. It does this, though, through a series of flashbacks she has in the present (yes, Ms. Thatcher is still alive and well, despite what the film may leave you believing) that are spurred by interactions with family members, friends, photos, and hallucinations with her long-deceased husband. However, in its exploration of Ms. Thatcher’s psyche and its formation, the film feels perilously close to reifying stereotypes of women in power, including embodying male characteristics to get ahead, being a bad mother and wife, exploiting an appearance of femininity, and demonstrating contradictory characteristics such as shrill, uncontrollable, domineering, emasculating, emotional, etc.

Margaret Thatcher is an undeniably controversial figure who still arouses heightened passions in the UK. However, while present, this element of the film is sporadically addressed through noisy interludes, shouting, and spliced historical footage. Xan Brooks, a film critic for the Guardian, writes in [an early review](#) for the film, “There’s little sense of the outside world, the human cost, or the ripple effect of divisive government policies. It is a movie that gives us Thatcher without Thatcherism.” Accordingly, in many ways, the film seems to enshrine the myth of Ms. Thatcher’s life in masculine terms – how she relates to politics, politicians, and her family. The cultural gender representation of Thatcher refuses to kowtow to simplicity and traditional modes of categorization. Thatcher dresses and grooms herself (but not without help) to be a model of femininity, yet as the filmmakers show the effort was in many cases a political decision and a role she was comfortable with in appearance only. The film further complicates Thatcher’s gender by forcing her to undergo a figurative finishing school prior to the elections that made her PM. During this period, a slew of male colleagues and professionals instruct her on how to lower her voice to speak more like a man and less like a *shrieking* woman. Her hair needed to be changed to give her more character,

and they even attempted to coerce her to give up her pearls (yet that, as she explained, was just not going to happen).

It's more than Thatcher's appearance that seems to benefit from the invisible hand of male influence, though. From the very beginning of the film, we, as the audience, are to understand her conservative policies and “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” philosophy as reflective of her father. Repeatedly, the film flashes back to a young Margaret watching her father address a crowd and using rhetoric mimetic of that for which she will become known. Yet it's Thatcher's husband who comes to play the most prominent role in the film and, according to the filmmaker, her life. His being shapes her consciousness, acting as inspiration and repudiation during her political career. When she decides to run for prime minister, he questions her motives, insinuating that she's been a bad wife and mother. He plays a mocking imaginary companion to her struggles with dementia.

It's this element of the movie that made me profoundly uneasy. The film does show the often contradictory stereotypes women in power must confront: her colleagues call her shrill and the media portrays her as domineering. Even the film joins in, portraying her as neglectful of her children as well as stubborn, often to a fault. However, it is the portrayal of Thatcher's dementia that elicited my strongest feelings and the greatest variance in interpretation. Some friends and fellow students I spoke with felt that the portrayal of Thatcher's mental decline was in effect humanising a woman demonised by the media, party politics, and in many ways herself, which led another friend to ask why we feel compelled to render *her* sympathetic? What parts of Thatcher were mediated by the film, transformed into a more palatable, inspirational woman in power? I, however, felt that it did not elicit sympathy so much as pity. Wandering in her nightgown, hair mussed and eyes glazed, Thatcher came to alternately resemble a harridan and a doddering, incapable old woman.

I felt as if it was only through the mental emasculation of Thatcher that the audience could come to feel for her. The movie did include self-aware lines that spoke to my feminist heart, such as her agreeing to marry her husband only if he realizes she will never relinquish her goals. In some moments, the film felt highly triumphant. However, the ultimate portrayal of her as stubborn, shrill, a “bad” mother, and, near the end of her careere, touched by a slight case of megalomania leave little room for audience identification. So must the film get rid of the domineering and powerful version of Thatcher to finally make her sympathetic or a complex character? Must it show her wistfulness for such soft subjects and memories such as *The King and I*, dancing with her husband, and days with her children? Must it erase the Iron Lady and replace her with a woman who now cannot find her voice? And what does this tell us about society's level of comfort with women or certain types of women in power?

This movie cannot be understood as anything but political, and that's part of the trouble I have in understanding my own feelings towards it. In response to the film, a friend of Thatcher's children, Sir Mark and Carol, told [the Telegraph](#) the pair were “appalled” at what they had heard of the film, and that “it sounds like some Left-wing fantasy.” In some ways the film does portray the struggles of adapting to a life no longer in power – the struggle to be heard and to leave a legacy. Yet it does this in a way that seems almost apologetic on Thatcher's behalf and not necessarily for her policies, but for her personality and mode of politics. By the end of the film, the Iron Lady has disappeared, replaced by the frail, elderly woman who's complaining about the price of milk. For some, the movie may have been a travesty, but for me, it was a tragedy.

While the film has left me conflicted and confused on many points, it's my peers who have helped me sort out my many complex and contradictory feelings. What do you think of the film? Do you feel it added depth to the polarising public image of Thatcher? Or did it just shore up opinions/biases you already held about her? Check out [this trailer](#) based pieces from the book [Game Change](#). What do you think of these films' portrayal of mental illness, especially in relation to powerful women?



Kimberly Killen is an MSc student studying Gender, Media, and Culture. She has a particular interest in constructions of citizenship and nationalism, the construction and application of feminism as a political movement and how all of this operates in the political sphere, especially in the United States. Kimberly has a dual undergraduate degree in Political Science and English from Wellesley College, and is refusing treatment for her addiction to political gossip.

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