



The Iron Lady

Tony Watkins

Fading Dreams

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Film title: The Iron Lady

Director: Phyllida Lloyd

Screenplay: Abi Morgan

Starring: Meryl Streep, Jim Broadbent, Anthony Head, Richard E. Grant

Distributor: Pathé (UK); The Weinstein Company (USA)

Cinema Release Date: 6 January 2012 (UK); 13 January 2012 (USA)

Certificate: 12A (UK); PG-13 (USA) Contains real images of moderate violence, injury detail and brief nudity

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for *The Iron Lady*.

An old lady in a headscarf is buying a pint of milk in a local shop. She's surprised by the price of the milk, and disturbed by the newspaper headlines and the rudeness of her fellow customers. She shuffles home again. No one in the shop or on the street recognises her, though she was once the most iconic woman in Britain if not the world: Margaret Thatcher (Meryl Streep). Back home she boils two eggs: one for herself and one for her husband Denis (Jim Broadbent), with whom she banters. But Denis has been dead for some years, and we realise that her memory is going and her mind is playing tricks.

Over the next couple of days, Lady Thatcher's staff and daughter Carol (Olivia Colman) care for her, organise her and worry about her. They

encourage her to finally sort out Denis's things to dispose of them. But this brings back many memories, as does everything else in the flat, and she keeps imagining Denis with her. Some of the memories are precious, joyful recollections – of being inspired by her father to achieve her true potential, of falling in love with Denis, making it to the House of Commons, and finally becoming Prime Minister. Others are painful or at best very mixed – the murder of her close friend Airey Neave (Nicholas Farrell), the Falklands War, the Grand Hotel bomb, the introduction of the Poll Tax, and the resignation of Deputy Prime Minister Geoffrey Howe (Anthony Head), which led to her own downfall.

[Image]

Meryl Streep and Jim Broadbent in *The Iron Lady*. © 2011, Pathé Productions Ltd. Used by permission.

These flashbacks of memory present a picture of a woman who, as a teenager, developed a driving passion to make something useful of her life, who yearned to change her country for the better, and who passionately believed in the principles which shaped her decision making. But the prevailing mood of the film comes from the framing device of Mrs Thatcher's frailty and restricted existence: this is a poignant story of loss and decline; the diminution of a once dynamic and powerful life.

The loss in Thatcher's life is not only the fading of health and vigour, which comes to everyone eventually, and the loss of her much-loved husband, but the loss of power. *The Iron Lady* remains fairly neutral politically, but it does suggest that personal power was extremely important to her. She had not expected that a woman could be Prime Minister within her lifetime, and expresses surprise when Airey Neave suggests that she 'can go all the way'. Yet she sets about doing so single-mindedly, changing her appearance and her voice to give herself a tone of authority. She was always ambitious, but she seems to become ambitious for power, in particular. Although events like the Falklands conflict present very tough decisions to make, Thatcher relishes the opportunity to call the shots. The American Secretary of State, Alexander Haig (Matthew Marsh), tries to persuade her not to fight Argentina, but she responds by telling him, "*Many men have underestimated me before. This lot's about to do the same, and they will rue the day.*"

Thatcher dominates her cabinet, to the extent that Geoffrey Howe has to warn her, *"One must be careful not to test one's colleagues' loyalties."* Eventually, she does test even Howe's loyalties too far, prompting him to resign and deliver a quietly deliberate but withering speech in the Commons. In the present day, it seems particularly hard for Margaret to remember that she is no longer Prime Minister, and the fact of that loss of power and influence is painful to her.

Whether or not power went to Thatcher's head, *The Iron Lady* portrays her as a woman of courage and strong principles. *"We will stand on principle, or we will not stand at all"*, she insists to Haig. The flashbacks to her life as a teenager (played by Alexandra Roach) in Grantham show Margaret being inspired by her father's conviction that hard work is the way to change things for the better, whether at a personal level or through politics. We see her wide-eyed with admiration at a political gathering as her father (Iain Glenn) gives an impassioned speech, and her determination to please him by using her brain to make something of her life. When Denis proposes to her, following her first abortive bid to get elected, she tells him that she must be free to pursue her goals: *"One's life must matter, Denis... One's life must count for something."* Years later, as an MP, she insists that, *"We Conservatives believe in allowing people to fulfil their own potential."* Even in the framing scenes of the elderly Lady Thatcher, we see the legacy of her father's values which have shaped her entire life: a strong personal work ethic, with an emphasis on self-improvement and duty to society, and stressing the importance of the intellect rather than the emotions. This is made very clear in a conversation with her doctor (Michael Maloney):

Doctor: *"It must be a bit disorienting. You're bound to be feeling –"*

Thatcher: *"What? What am I bound to be feeling? ... People don't think any more; they feel. ... Do you know, one of the great problems of our age is that we are governed by people who care more about feelings than they do about thoughts and ideas. Now, thoughts and ideas – that interests me. Ask me what I'm thinking."*

Doctor: *"What are you thinking, Margaret?"*

Thatcher: *"Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become*

actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become your character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny. What we think, we become. My father always said that. And I think, I am fine."

Thatcher's discounting of the importance of feeling is, *The Iron Lady* suggests, not only vital to her success, but also a key part of what brought her into conflict with others. People saw her standing for some principle or other while neglecting to allow for how people would respond at an emotional level. This is not only true with the big political battles, but within the cabinet and even at home. There are a couple of painful scenes when her family feel that they are only receiving the dregs of her attention. When she tells Denis of her plans to run for party leader, claiming it as her duty, he retorts, *"It's your ambition! But the rest of us – me, the children – we can all go to hell!"* It is yet another example of the loss which pervades the film.

Public office, particularly at higher levels, demands a high cost, and Thatcher warrants respect for throwing herself into it wholeheartedly and passionately, whether or not one agrees with her policies. But having given herself to the political life, what now remains for an old woman, when even the memories are fading? It is impossible for any of us to fully understand what it means to have had so much power and lost it suddenly, but as we get older we increasingly experience the same mix of memories, both wistful and regretful. Perhaps the key lesson of the film, if there is one, is that it is a hazardous thing to centre our sense of who we are on what we do, and on the impact we have on society as a whole or even on a tiny slice of it. It's ultimately futile because what we do will one day finish, our influence will dwindle, and even those who are most precious to us can be lost to us. Nothing in this world can bear the weight of someone centring their identity on it, and relying on it for satisfaction and meaning. It will all pass, and finally so will we. Unless identity is grounded in the eternal reality of a relationship with God, what meaning does a life have when everything has been lost, even when that life has been as notable as Margaret Thatcher's?

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