

The lens of dementia

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The movie *The Iron Lady*--about Margaret Thatcher, prime minister of Britain from 1979 to 1990--is worth watching for a number of reasons. One is the opportunity to refresh our minds about a major figure of recent history and her influence upon those times. Another is to watch Meryl Streep's performance in the role. She loses herself behind a helmet of hair, false teeth, and piles of makeup to become--brilliantly--Mrs. Thatcher.

Yet another reason — and for me the most compelling one, though it is quite controversial — is the decision to tell the story from the perspective of Mrs. Thatcher's current dementia.

The movie opens with a frail, old woman tottering away from a grocery store. In the next scenes, we see Mrs. Thatcher breakfasting with her husband Denis, then telling him what he'll wear for the day. Soon we realize that Denis Thatcher, in fact, is dead, and that his frequent "presence" is a function of his wife's current confusion.

Some of her memories are still quite vivid, however, and so we see her life through a series of flashbacks: her rise to power, her challenges and successes, her opinions. The Falklands War and subsequent economic upturn grant her an interval of acclaim, but for the most part, she is an unpopular prime minister. She retains the leadership for about 11 years, then is ousted by her own party.

The Margaret Thatcher we see in these flashbacks is unbending, driven, and difficult to like, though admirable for the strength of her convictions, her tenacity, and the barriers she broke. She seems to be constantly directing, lecturing, or hectoring those around her, who are usually men.

But all this through the lens of dementia – what effect does that have on the life of the woman, on how we perceive her story? Does her condition in old age become what this movie is about, and if so, what story is *it* telling us? Is it a story of comeuppance – *ah, how the mighty are fallen!* – that she who was so powerful, so seemingly uncaring at times, is now reduced? Or, is it a story of profound humanity that arouses our compassion?

The point about dementia is that capacity for self-reflection, which might yet alter or heal aspects of the past, is drastically reduced. In many ways, Mrs. Thatcher still acts as she did in her earlier life, seeking to order and control. Those around a person with dementia are left to react, to “put up.” Well, such was the case in her earlier life as well. This makes me wonder whether the dementia, as a narrative device here, acts as a kind of tragic mirror to all the ways in which she was always “unaware.”

At the same time, the elderly Mrs. Thatcher in the movie returns repeatedly to memories of her husband Denis, and their interactions, also of happy family times at the beach. She asks the Denis Thatcher she imagines being present, “Were you happy, Denis? Tell me the truth.” Is there, in the weight of these memories, a sort of reflection, after all, that either re-orders priorities, or perhaps reveals them more clearly than the public persona did?

Michael White, at *The Guardian*, who “knew” Margaret Thatcher, [calls](#) Streep’s interpretation “remarkable and sensitive” but dislikes its “cruel portrait of old age, loneliness and decay.” Max Pemberton at *The Telegraph* was “sickened,” he [says](#), by the “cruel, thoughtless voyeurism,” and is incensed that the film was made before Mrs. Thatcher’s death. Although he has “direct experience of the reality of dementia for the sufferer and their family,” and considers the movie “faultless in its depiction of dementia,” he believes it “chillingly insensitive.”

I too have direct experience of the reality of dementia. Unlike Mr. Pemberton, I don’t think respect of Mrs. Thatcher requires us to turn away from the face of her dementia, while freely viewing her face as she

gives orders about miners on strike or the Falklands War. Since the movie, I'm mulling the life of this woman, wondering about the parts and how they add up, what they mean. I find resonance here with experiences of dementia in my family. I came away from the story feeling newly attentive, newly full of questions, both discouraged and encouraged by what remains in the lives of dementia sufferers and how that illumines, contradicts, undoes, or re-forms the rest of their history.

Have you seen The Iron Lady? What did you think of it?

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