

Meryl Streep: Career Renaissance

Karen Hollinger



Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006).

At the end of my chapter on Meryl Streep in *The Actress: Hollywood Acting and the Female Star* (2006), I wrote that Streep's career had stalled with her assumption of maternal roles. She was seemingly typecast as the queen of the contemporary woman's melodrama, a film category often pejoratively labeled the tearjerker or woman's weepie. Movies like *Marvin's Room* (1996), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998), *One True Thing* (1998), and *The Hours* (2002) led critics to characterize her films in the late 1990's and early 2000's as one "Meryl Streep weepfest" after another.¹ It was disillusioning to trace the evolution of Streep's choices in roles up to this point. Her career began progressively, as she reshaped underwritten female roles to transform negative female portrayals into more positive ones and built her star image on her acting ability rather than glamor. In her middle years, she expanded her reputation for acting prowess with a string of Academy Award nominations and socially conscious portrayals in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *Silkwood* (1983), *Plenty* (1985), *Out of Africa* (1985), *Ironweed* (1987), and *Cry in the Dark* (1988). Sadly, her career seemed rather disappointing at the turn of the twenty-first century, with a succession of melodramatic maternal roles of the sort conventionally allotted to older female stars. I did note, however, that her decisions to take supporting roles in *Adaptation* (2002) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) represented notable exceptions. They indicated that she was turning to comedy, as she had earlier in her career, in order to take her screen persona in a new direction, and that she was expanding her role choice beyond repeated representations of melodramatic mother figures, if only into the realms of the bizarre author and monstrous mother.

Streep took off in this anti-melodramatic, often comedic direction with gusto. She turned her career around with award-nominated star turns in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Doubt* (2008), *Mama Mia* (2008), *Julia and Julia* (2009), *It's Complicated* (2009), *The Iron Lady* (2011), and most recently *August, Osage County* (2013). She effectively reestablished herself as the premier actress of her generation. But is this new Meryl Streep really that different from the old one? In order to answer that question, it might be useful to consider the similarities and differences between the star image and acting style of the pre-twenty-first century Meryl Streep and her current incarnation.

Although Streep has claimed that she had no control over the progression of her career, that it is really impossible to do so in Hollywood, and that progression to stardom is an entirely random process,² a definite pattern emerges if one looks at her entire body of work. First of all, Streep is unique as a Hollywood actress in that her stardom is almost entirely based on her reputation as a great actress rather than glamour and sexuality. Over the course of her career, Streep has avoided overly sexual roles and ones that required nudity. This is not to say that her beauty has been entirely ignored. Especially early in her career she was praised for her long blonde hair and alabaster skin, but her remarkable string of eighteen Academy Award nominations, the most accrued by any actor or actress, has established her unquestionably as the most accomplished actress of her generation. This reputation for acting prowess is really based on the extensive range of her roles and the fact that her acting style is what acting theorists have called impersonation. Rather than playing some variation on her star image, what reviewers often refer to as just playing oneself, Streep creates a uniquely different character in each role. She never seems to be playing herself, but rather inhabiting a character very different from her. It is this reputation for great acting based on impersonation that buoyed up her career when it experienced a definite decline in the 1990s.

Rather than being attracted to glamorous or sexually explicit roles, Streep has gravitated toward roles that are character-driven, complex, and enigmatic. She has said she is attracted to characters with problems and “disagreeable women,” whom she then works to make sympathetic or at least understandable.³ She has also been drawn to quality projects or prestige pictures, especially literary adaptations and biopics. She has said, “I don’t do junk,” although some of her comedy choices, like *She-Devil*, *Death Becomes Her*, and more recently *Mama Mia*, *It's Complicated*, and *Hope Springs* have been seen as questionable career decisions.⁴ Streep is also attracted to playing characters who offer a real-life or literary model as a basis for her characterization. She has done this with great success throughout her career from early films like *Sophie's Choice*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *Silkwood* to the recent *Julia and Julia*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and *The Iron Lady*. Part of this modeling of her characters on real or literary figures involves her extraordinary proficiency with accents, dialects, and mannerisms, which allows her to seem to have transformed herself into very different characters in each role. This proficiency has also led to some criticism that Streep’s performances are too mannered and that one can see her acting rather than completely losing herself in the character she plays. But since her success is largely based on her acting ability, perhaps it is actually an attraction for Streep’s fans to feel they can see a great actress at work. Her fans may react quite positively to seeing her exhibit a certain amount of ostensiveness on screen.

Streep's role choice has also had a definite feminist dimension even though she has played a number of conservative female figures, such as the traditional mother in *One True Thing*, Sister Aloysius in *Doubt*, and Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*. It is not so much the conservatism of these characters that seems to attract her by their strength of character. She is attracted to women of power regardless of their political or cultural affiliation. She has said she likes to play women whom she needs to defend⁵ or "marginalized... misjudged" female characters.⁶ Streep's preference for these kinds of roles has characterized her work from the very beginning, in the rather unsympathetic role of the mother who leaves her small son with his father so that she can find herself in *Kramer vs. Kramer* to her recent roles as the conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady* and the poison-tongued alcoholic mother in *August: Osage County*. She not only plays powerful women but powerful women who could be presented in very negative ways, and she seems determined to humanize them and make them understandable if not entirely sympathetic. A considerable number of her recent films seem to fall into this category. *The Devil Wears Prada* presents a dominating female fashion magazine executive who could easily be played as a monstrous harridan, but Streep makes her a tough-love mentor to her young assistant. *Doubt* portrays a traditionalist Catholic nun who feels she is heroically engaging in battle against a possible pedophile priest. Similarly, by downplaying her extremely right wing policies and concentrating on the aging Thatcher's struggle with dementia, *The Iron Lady* manages to offer a sympathetic portrait of a controversial and conservative female political figure. These portrayals continue in the tradition of Streep's earlier roles that present female characters who are strong, but strong in a way that is not always entirely progressive.

If all of this is true, how then does one explain the downturn in Streep's career in the 1990s and her resurgence in the 2000s? There are a number of possible reasons. Streep's career decline may have been the result of putting her family over her career and only choosing films that would not require her to be away from her husband and children for any length of time. Some commentators have suggested that once her youngest child reached adolescence, Streep was able to throw herself wholeheartedly into her career.⁷ Others have proposed that she has brought more "warmth" and "joy" to her recent performances or that she has come to represent a safe comforting mother figure to Gen X audiences.⁸ One might also attribute this sense of joy that some reviewers have found in her recent work to Streep's current status as a great actress, which has allowed her to relax, enjoy herself, and not have to worry about constructing a technically perfect performance in each role. She has nothing to prove anymore. Streep herself has attributed her career revival to the fact that by not relying on an overly glamorous, one-dimensional screen image she has been able to play a wide variety of roles.⁹ She also proposes that having more female production executives in Hollywood has led to a prioritizing of films with female central characters.¹⁰ What really seems to have happened, however, is that in the 1990s her career got bogged down in melodramatic tearjerkers. Streep has always been attracted to tragic unconventional heroines, but in the 1990s her characters swerved from tragic and unconventional to maudlin and conventional. Films like *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Marvin's Room*, *Dancing in Lughnasa*, *One True Thing*, and *The Hours* made it seem that she was actually trying to substantiate the views of Pauline Kael, her staunchest critic. Her performances were indeed beginning to look like "one Meryl Streep weepfest" after another. It is because she stopped weeping and began

playing female characters who displayed considerable strength and power that her career turned around. Her portrayals began to fit well with her reputation for great acting and for being a woman of power in Hollywood who has the clout to get films that she wants to make green-lighted. She has given up turning herself into “the red-eyed special,” as Kael sarcastically dubbed her, and has turned to portraying women of considerable strength.¹¹ It is a good thing, too. I would argue it saved her career.

*

I would like to thank my research assistant Angela Edwards for her invaluable help in locating interviews with Streep and reviews of her recent films.

Karen Hollinger is Professor of film and literature at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia. She is the author of *Feminist Film Studies* (2012), *The Actress: Hollywood Acting and the Female Star* (2006) and *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (1998).

-
- ¹ Susan Waszczyna, “Dueling Stars Step Maternal Tale Up in Class,” *USA Today*, December 21, 1998, 40.
- ² Graham Fuller, “Steep’s Ahead: An Adult Conversation with Meryl Streep,” *Interview*, December 1998, accessed at *Simply Streep: The Meryl Streep Archives*, <http://www.simplystreep.com/content/magazines/199812interview.html>
- ³ Liz Smith, “The Meryl Streep Nobody Knows,” *Good Housekeeping* 227, no. 3, 1998, 94.
- ⁴ Eugene E. Pfaff, Jr. and Mark Emerson, *Meryl Streep: A Critical Biography*, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co, 1987).
- ⁵ Emma Brockes, “The Devil in Ms. Streep,” *The Guardian*, September 22, 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/sep/23/awardsandprizes>.
- ⁶ Rachel Abramowitz, “No ‘Doubt’: Meryl Streep is a Contender,” in *The Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jan/28/news/en-meryl28>.
- ⁷ Christine Spines, “She’s The One,” in *Entertainment Weekly* 1024 (2008), 30-34.
- ⁸ Rachel Abramowitz, “Meryl Streep’s Got Legs,” in *The Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/sep/12/entertainment/et-streep12>.
- ⁹ Jesse Green, “What, Meryl Worry?” in *The New York Times*, July 25, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/25/movies/what-meryl-worry.html>.
- ¹⁰ Mark Feeney, “Meryl Streep Stands Without Rival in Hollywood,” *The Boston Globe*, August 1, 2004, <http://www.chron.com/entertainment/movies/article/Meryl-Streep-stands->

without-rival-in-Hollywood-1960358.php.

¹¹ Quoted in Pfaff and Emerson, *Meryl Streep: A Critical Biography*, 83.