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## Rebeccaism and Gender: A study in-to the significance of females and the feminine in the Rebecca riots 1839-1844

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# Rebeccaism and Gender: A study into the significance of females and the feminine in the Rebecca riots 1839-1844

EMA A329: THE MAKING OF WELSH HISTORY

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The period of 1839-1844 saw around two hundred and fifty incidents through south, west and mid Wales that were linked to Rebeccaism.<sup>1</sup> Although initially targeting tollgates – the later stages of the movement saw workhouses, landlords and figures of authority falling victim to the wrath of the Rebellaites. This shows that the movement was far more than a spasmodic, knee-jerk reaction to the burden of the tollgates, but part of a wider frustration at a system which many felt disadvantaged them. The role of females and the significance of the feminine during the unrest has fallen victim to a double-edged sword of historiography. Firstly, the Rebecca riots did not fall into the category of a political struggle in an urban-industrial context, neither did they conform to the ‘revolutionary intellectuals and organisations’ that many left-wing historians were looking for.<sup>2</sup> Sharon Howard therefore argues that the ‘reactionary radicals’ of this rural Welsh movement have been lost in a historiographical blind-spot.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, and as outlined by Wilma Thomas, the study of women in rural Wales has been given little attention.<sup>4</sup> There are few historians of the Rebecca movement who go into detailed analysis or even consideration of female representation in the Rebecca riots. Rhian E. Jones’ work endeavours to close this gap.<sup>5</sup> She brings a fresh perspective to the Rebecca riots and, for the first time, truly analyses the significance of the costume, the aliases and the ritual within a discussion of gender. *Petticoat Heroes* considers gender as a category of the Rebecca riots – something that many academics had failed to do previously. That is not to say previous works had not been thorough and revealing – but some had essentially neglected half of the population. Despite Rhian E. Jones study of gender within the movement, there is still very little revealed about women participants and instead the focus is the female character of Rebecca. This

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca: An Account of the Welsh Toll-Gate Riots 1839-1844*, (Llandysul, 1983)

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Howard, “Riotous Community: Crowds, Politics and Society in Wales, c.1700-1840” in *The Welsh History Review*, 20:4 (2000), p.679

<sup>3</sup> Howard, “Riotous Community”, p.679

<sup>4</sup> Wilma R. Thomas, *Women in the rural society of south-west Wales, c.1780-1870*, thesis; Swansea University (Swansea, 2003)

<sup>5</sup> Rhian E. Jones, *Petticoat Heroes*, (Cardiff, 2015)

essay will close that gap by considering what role women played and why they were represented in the way that they were.

This dissertation will consider gender in the Rebecca movement through two approaches – the female and the feminine, and it is important to establish the difference. When talking about females it is female participation that will be the focus, and this will be discussed in the first chapter. It is often the narrative that the rioters consisted of men dressed as women. However, there is evidence to show that many women also took part – not only in the riots themselves but also in the moral regulation within the community when it came to punishing those who gave information about the movement to the authorities.<sup>6</sup> As well as the women that were seen and documented – there were those within ‘the mob’.<sup>7</sup> The sexually indeterminate nature of this collective noun, means that until an individual is arrested or significantly harmed their gender is unlikely to be revealed.<sup>8</sup> Women were disproportionately affected during times of scarcity and direct action such as food riots and setting the price was often carried out by women. It was primarily women who were responsible for purchasing provisions, so the knock-on effects of the tollgates were impacting the market and they were then left to navigate the problem.<sup>9</sup>

The second part of the question, the ‘feminine’, will then be considered and it will not look at the literal women, but instead the figurative. The third chapter deals with the female signifiers of the outfit (and the contradictory male signifiers such as fake beards and axes), as they are hugely significant and often undervalued. The choice of outfit was dismissed by many as nothing more than a disguise. David Williams’ *The Rebecca Riots: A Study in Agrarian Discontent* was the first in-depth

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<sup>6</sup> *Swansea Journal*, 1 March 1843, cited in Thomas, *Women in the rural society of south-west Wales* (The *Swansea Journal* was not digitally accessible at the time this was written, neither was the *Carmarthen Journal* for the period in question)

<sup>7</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, (London, 1991) p.309

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p.309

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Customs in Common*. (Thompson looks closely at women in the marketplace and then in relation to the food riots, he also challenges John Bohstedt’s *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790-1800* (1983) for questioning whether women played as much of a significant role in food riots as many believed)

analysis of the movement, but it does not specifically comment on the attire of the protesters and the connotations of it.<sup>10</sup> Williams instead places the subject of clothing within conversations about the holistic activities of the movement. Similarly, David Jones who also produced one of the definitive studies on the movement, *Rebecca's Children*, goes as far as acknowledging the symbolism of the attire but within the restraints of ritual and religion.<sup>11</sup> However, considering the active role that women took in riots elsewhere during this period and the types of these riots, this essay will argue that the attire of the rioters had a far greater purpose than disguise. The mix of male and female signifiers meant that this was not just a woman – but a character and this is supported by the different aliases and accompanying voices used.<sup>12</sup> Although this argument is commonly attributed to Rhian E. Jones' *Petticoat Heroes*, it was also brought to light much earlier by Malcolm I. Thomis and Jennifer Grimmett in 1982 who provide an insightful postscript of 'Rebecca and her sisters'.<sup>13</sup> The fourth chapter will then focus how the press reacted to Rebeccaism and the importance of female signifiers and how they were treated and received.

Where the historiography of Rebeccaism falls short is in its research into the women who took part. It is not the intention of this dissertation to go into a detailed analysis of the cause or outcome of the Rebecca riots. Neither will it seek to provide a detailed blow-by-blow account of the riots and unrest in question. Instead, it will use newspapers, personal letters and diaries to prove the significant and active role played by women in the Rebecca riots, some of which have been misinterpreted by previous historians. It will look at the types of unrest that women were consistently involved in, and what relevance that had in terms of women's place in society. Rhian E. Jones' theory of the costume being a complex blend of feminine and masculine signifiers will be

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<sup>10</sup> David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots: A Study in Agrarian Discontent* (Cardiff, 1955)

<sup>11</sup> David J. V. Jones, *Rebecca's Children: A Study of Rural Society, Crime, and Protest* (Oxford, 1989)

<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, "Fresh Disturbances in South Wales" (7 February 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/CS85226567/TTDA?u=tou&sid=TTDA&xid=0558331f> Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> March 2021 and *The Times*, "The State of South Wales" (5 August 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/CS85226757/TTDA?u=tou&sid=TTDA&xid=f4c9aaa0> Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2021

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm I. Thomis and Jennifer Grimmett, *Women in Protest 1800-1850* (London, 1982) p.146

applied, alongside the importance of tradition and ritual to determine the significance of females and representations of the feminine seen in the Rebecca riots.

## 2: The Women of Rebecca

Studies into the unrest seen primarily in south west Wales often fall short of addressing the women who took part. This ‘strange transvestite outbreak’ was branded by popular history as a riot in which men dressed as women.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently many studies overlooked the role that women played in the unrest of the period in question. David Williams’ authoritative book argues that the Rebecca riots were an extension of the practice of *ceffyl pren* (‘wooden horse’).<sup>15</sup> *Ceffyl pren*, often referred to as the Welsh version of the *charivari* was used as a means of shaming and punishing those who had offended the communities’ moral values, it was essentially a ritual of justice.<sup>16</sup> This was acknowledged at the time, as *The Welshman* reported on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1843 that Rebecca had in fact “superseded” and “stepped into the place of the old-fashioned ceffil-prens”.<sup>17</sup> Evidently, many people in Wales respected the tradition and ritual of the *ceffyl pren* and the moral integrity that it demanded. This is central to understanding the Rebecca riots as *ceffyl pren* enforced adherence to this strict moral code, so to a certain extent the attacks on tollgates, workhouses and landlords were part of a defence of the morals of the community rather than a backlash to the tolls alone. When *ceffyl pren* was used in the Rebecca riots or by those claiming allegiance to Rebecca, it was often dealing with private and domestic issues which were often regulated by women. These actions saw children being delivered to the doors of their supposed father and marital infidelities punished.<sup>18</sup> These wrongdoings were ones that had far more of a detrimental effect on women’s standing in the community than that of men’s. However, that is not to say that such moral regulation was carried out in the name of women’s rights. Jones states that punishment from a “hard fist” was given to

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<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Elton, *Modern Historians on British History 1485-1945: A Critical Bibliography 1945-1969* (London, 1970) p.107

<sup>15</sup> David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.56

<sup>16</sup> Geraint H. Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007) p.194 and David Howell, “The Rebecca Riots” p.6 in T. Herbert and G.E. Jones (eds) *People and Protest: Wales 1815-1880* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1988) pp.113-38

<sup>17</sup> *The Welshman*, “Rebecca – Dangerous State of the Country” (5<sup>th</sup> May 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345814/4345817/33/> Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2021

<sup>18</sup> Edward Crompton Lloyd Hall, letter to Sir James Graham (24 August 1843), Public Record Office, HO 45/454 and Kate Chadbourne. “Rough Music and Folkloric Elements in the Whiteboy Movements” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 16/17 (1996) p.186



those who beat their wives “without cause”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore it would be inaccurate to argue that Rebecca was taking a stand against violence towards women. It seems that if the women were deemed to have committed an offence, be it in the public or private sphere, then violence against them was acceptable. Coventry Patmore’s *Angel in the House* outlines the position of many women during this period in which marriage and dutiful domesticity were the ultimate goal.<sup>20</sup>

Part of this desired epitome of domesticity was of course, motherhood. In November 1843, the *Morning Post* published an article on the Rebecca riots which stated that those questioned under suspicion of being involved in the movement “claimed ‘Rebecca’ as their ‘Mam’ and have received her hearty and maternal welcome in return”.<sup>21</sup> This brings to attention the maternal way in which Rebecca’s character was potentially created and subsequently viewed, further supporting the argument that her aims were fuelled by a demand to uphold the moral integrity of the community. In a secret meeting of Rebeccaites, the chairman proclaimed that “an army of principles will penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot”.<sup>22</sup> It seems that the protesters and those who organised the riots, or wrote the letters firmly believed that they were protecting and conserving morals and principles. On 15<sup>th</sup> September 1843, the self-appointed leader of the Liberal cause – *The Welshman*, reported an incident in which an informer of a suspected Rebeccaite who had allegedly set alight wheat in Llandilo was being questioned.<sup>23</sup> From the outset the report brings into question the moral and intellectual integrity of the informer. Following the release and assumed innocence of the accused individual, the informer was violently attacked by a crowd made up primarily of women.

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<sup>19</sup> David J. V. Jones, *Rebecca’s Children*, p.268

<sup>20</sup> Coventry Patmore, *Angel in the House*, 1858

<sup>21</sup> G. R. Wythen Baxter, “The Secret History of the Rebecca Movement”, *Morning Post* (18 November 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/R3209999704/BNCN?u=tou&sid=BNCN&xid=db6cb699> Accessed 28 April 2021

<sup>22</sup> *The Welshman*, “Carmarthenshire – Tollgates broken down” (31<sup>st</sup> July 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345874/4345876/15/> Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2021

<sup>23</sup> David J. V. Jones, *Rebecca’s Children*, p.255 and *The Welshman*, “Llandilo – The burnt Dynevor Wheat” (15<sup>th</sup> September 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345909/4345912/19/> Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

This was not the only reported incident of women punishing those who revealed the identities or whereabouts of Rebeccaites – whether the informers were speaking the truth or not. On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1843, the *Swansea Journal* revealed that after receiving his reward of £100 for identifying and informing on two men he claimed to have seen destroying a tollgate and house as part of a mob, David Griffiths was set upon by women and children who threw stones and hissed at his open carriage.<sup>24</sup> Again here, it is the morals of being an informant (or lack of) that is the punishable offence being policed by women.

Pound keepers, bailiffs and gamekeepers were held in high contempt by many as they were seen as accomplices of the people's enemies and they would often reside at the home of the debtors until the debt had been settled.<sup>25</sup> Threats and subsequent attacks on the bailiffs became common practice for Rebeccaites. September 1843 saw Sophia Evans and Frances Howells 'badgering' and subsequently negotiating with the bailiffs who had taken up residence nearby whilst settling the debt owed by the local mayor. However, the negotiated payment was still not met, and the seized goods were to go to auction. Before this could begin, the Rebeccaites arrived and sent the bailiffs away. Following this, the borough of Kidwelly (over which the mayor resided), was referred to as 'one of the most independent in the kingdom'. This, along with the references to how important and 'ancient' Kidwelly was show again, that the anger goes deeper than the recipient – in this case the bailiff.<sup>26</sup> The discussion is brought back again to the traditional moral order and expectations which many believed to have been instilled in their ancient communities and were now under threat. Even those in positions such as the mayor, were granted protection if morals were

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<sup>24</sup> *Swansea Journal*, 1 March 1843, cited in Thomas, *Women in the rural society of south-west Wales*, p.200

<sup>25</sup> Jones, *Rebecca's Children*, p.283

<sup>26</sup> *The Welshman*, "Rebecca Relieving the Mayor of Kidwelly" (15 September 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345909/4345911/10/> Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2021 and *The Welshman*, "Meeting on Allt-Cyn-Adda" (29 September 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345919/4345921/8/bailiff> Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2021 and *Aberglasney Manuscript Collections* cited in Jones, *Rebecca's Children*, p.283

being undermined. In their role as guardians of public morality, women played a prominent role in this element of the Rebecca riots.

Jones argues that the Rebecca riots were a “channel for the moral force of females as well as the physical force of males”.<sup>27</sup> This is certainly true, but it does not acknowledge the part played by women in the physical protests like the tearing down of tollgates or attacks on workhouses. There are few studies of Rebecca who fail to acknowledge Frances Evans in some way. She was a prominent figure of the attack on the Carmarthen workhouse in June 1843, which was a real turning point in the Rebecca riots as it gained attention from national newspapers such as *The Times* who subsequently sent the journalist Thomas Campbell Foster to south and west Wales to report on the unrest. During this attack on the workhouse there were over one hundred arrests and Frances Evans was one of them.<sup>28</sup> She was reported to have led the mob up the stairs and was “dancing with violent gestures on the table in the hall”.<sup>29</sup> She was later charged with having incited the mob to commit a breach of the peace.<sup>30</sup> Frances Evans was not just part of the riot, but she seemingly led it – and the participating men followed. Although primarily being confined to the south and west, the unrest did spread to other parts of Wales and occasionally spilt over the border. The market town of Rhayader in mid Wales had six roads into the town - each with a tollgate, and the town proceeded to witness some of the most violent acts of the Rebecca riots.<sup>31</sup> Special constables were sworn in and were then joined by the Metropolitan Police and a detachment of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dragoons.<sup>32</sup> At the height of the unrest whilst searching for the rioters, the constables who were patrolling the West gate were informed by two women that the Rebeccaites were at the New gate. Upon leaving their station, the

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<sup>27</sup> Jones, *Rebecca's Children*, p.243

<sup>28</sup> Malcolm I. Thomis and Jennifer Grimmet, *Women in Protest 1800-1850*, p.60

<sup>29</sup> *The Times*, “The State of South Wales” (7 July 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/CS100824295/TTDA?u=tou&sid=TTDA&xid=3f56106a> Accessed 9 May 2021

<sup>30</sup> *The Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, “Rebecca in Peril”, (8 July 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3632845/3632848/10/> Accessed 1 May 2021

<sup>31</sup> David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.178 and p.79

<sup>32</sup> W. H. Howse, *Old-Time Rhayader* (Llandrindod Wells, 1951) p.12

mob arrived and destroyed the west gate.<sup>33</sup> Here women were instrumental in this orchestrated ruse which essentially enabled the Rebeccaites to take down four gates in such a short period of time. Even when women weren't involved in the destruction of the gates they were clearly part of the movement and played a part in the secrecy and deception of it.

There is evidence of named women taking part in the Rebecca movement. However, it is important to also consider the women who were somewhat invisible in historiography – that is those in the mob. When printed in the paper, or court proceedings and other documentation 'the mob' of the nineteenth century was understood by those at the time as being made up of men, women and even children. Thompson argues that there was no sexist bias from the reporter or those who documented the events, but instead such bias in the twentieth century historian and reader.<sup>34</sup> This explains the lack of attention given to the women who took part in the riots by those who researched them. 'The mob' is not the only sexually indeterminate collective noun used in the nineteenth century that has since been treated as male – 'rioters', 'crowd' and 'rabble' are just a few that have also fallen victim to being considered a male entity. It is not until these women are shot, injured or arrested that they are documented as women. Swansea industrialist and politician Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, whose journals have been transcribed, documents clear examples of this. Repeatedly, when talking of the unrest the journal entries use 'mob' and 'Rebeccaites' and 'assailants'.<sup>35</sup> However, the entry on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> July describes an incident in which Dillwyn, alongside a number of constables and soldiers went 'to take as many [Rebeccaites] as we could lay hands upon'. In doing so, they arrested two women and a man who were identified as being part of the group who destroyed Rhyd Y Pandy turnpike gate.<sup>36</sup> Many twentieth century historians would

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<sup>33</sup> *The Hereford Journal*, "The Rebeccaites at Rhayader: The Destruction of Four Gates" (15 November 1843) Available at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000398/18431115/026/0004> Accessed 8 May 2021

<sup>34</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p.309

<sup>35</sup> Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, 1843. "The Journals of Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, transcribed by Richard Morris", *The Dillwyn Collection*. Swansea University (Swansea) Available at <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/1843-D8.pdf> Accessed 25 April 2021

<sup>36</sup> Dillwyn, July 23 1843. "The Journals of Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn", p.23

have potentially treated this 'mob' as male, and as E.P. Thompson argues – it is not until these women are arrested, that their gender is revealed. If it were not for this arrest, they would have been invisible in the historiography and this seems to be an emerging pattern in the studies of the Rebecca Riots. The widely reported attack on Carmarthen workhouse also gives an insight into who took part. The *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian* in their article used 'rioters', 'processions', 'Rebeccaite' and of course 'mob' whilst describing the series of events. It was later revealed that this 'formidable mob' consisted of men, women and children.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, *The Times* when covering the same incident reported a large number of women to be in the crowd.<sup>38</sup> The number of people reported to have taken part in this riot does vary widely from paper to paper – anywhere between 2,000 and 12,000 alleged participants but it seems that political affiliations, regional and national loyalties aside – the press at the time were acknowledging the presence of women in the 'mob'.

Thomis and Grimmett do however argue that the movement actually excluded women participants.<sup>39</sup> Thomas Foster, the correspondent for *The Times* stated that in a secret meeting he gained access to, the chairman declared that "neither woman nor any of the female sex shall be introduced into this selected assembly, except Rebecca and Miss Cromwell".<sup>40</sup> Exclusion from this selected assembly was certainly not exclusion from the movement itself – and this has been wholly misinterpreted by Thomis and Grimmett. It is important to remember where women stood and were expected to stand during this time. Even if their exclusion from meetings with leaders of the movement was widespread across the affected counties – women still played an active and

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<sup>37</sup> *The Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, "Rebecca at Carmarthen" (24 June 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3632835/3632838/11/> Accessed 15 April 2021

<sup>38</sup> *The Times*, "Rebecca Riots" (22 June 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/CS84702422/TTDA?u=tou&sid=TTDA&xid=308c840f> Accessed 20 April 2021

<sup>39</sup> Thomis and Grimmett, *Women in Protest 1800-1850*, pp.141-142

<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, "The State of South Wales" (24 July 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/CS85882104/TTDA?u=tou&sid=TTDA&xid=5a6ec1ad> Accessed 12 May 2021

prominent role in the movement that has been largely overlooked. It is clear that they were allocated roles but also created roles for themselves.

### 3. Rebecca, Nell and Susan: The costume, aliases and ritual

This chapter aims to discuss the figurative women – Rebecca and her daughters. The decision to wear women’s clothing was not confined to Rebeccaiter protest. The Swing riots, Luddism, Scotch Cattle and the Scottish Clearance riots all had elements of transvestism.<sup>41</sup> The Swing Riots which are often likened to the Rebecca riots, swept from Kent through the south of England and east Anglia in the summer of 1830. They did not experience transvestism as a consistently recurring theme, however there are incidents of it.<sup>42</sup> Closer to home, was the opposition to enclosure seen in south west Wales. An incident in 1820, saw an attempt to build on a recently purchased allotment, which was then attacked and burned down by “a mob disguised as women and wearing handkerchiefs over their faces”.<sup>43</sup> All of these social protests that have incidents of male protesters dressing in women’s clothing, behaved in accordance with long standing traditions and community rituals. The common theme between these social protests is that these rituals provided the protesters with their format, tools and the perfect script.<sup>44</sup> More importantly than this however, was the validation that re-creating these rituals gave the protesters.

The choice of the name Rebecca is worth a brief consideration. Most historians of Rebeccanism are in one of two camps regarding where the name came from. The first being that Rebecca was derived from Genesis; “And they blessed Rebekah and said unto her, thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gates of those which hate them”.<sup>45</sup> The second argument that is strongly supported in the local communities where Rebecca waged her war is that due to the size of Twm Carnabwth (also known as Thomas Rees – who is allegedly the first Rebecca leader), the only petticoat he could find big enough to fit him was that of a lady from Llangolman whose name was Rebecca.<sup>46</sup> The former argument was supported by

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<sup>41</sup> Thomis and Grimmett, *Women in Protest*, p.138

<sup>42</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, (4 December 1830) cited in Thomis and Grimmett, *Women in Protest*, p.139

<sup>43</sup> David J.V. Jones, *Before Rebecca: Popular Protest in Wales, 1793-1835*, (London, 1973) p.49

<sup>44</sup> Carl J. Griffin, "The Violent Captain Swing?" in *Past & Present*, 209:1 (2010), p.158

<sup>45</sup> Genesis, Chapter 24: Verse 60, Revised standard version of the Bible

<sup>46</sup> Bro Beca Project, *Roads, Riot and Rebecca: The History of the Rebecca Riots in Pembrokeshire* (n.d)

Thomas Campbell Foster at the time and more recently David Howell and Pat Molloy, who argues that the symbolism of the name Rebecca gave the movement a sense of scriptural authority.<sup>47</sup>

However, Jones and Williams give both the arguments equal weight and research into the origins of the name has never provided a decisive answer.

Rebeccaism is often likened to food riots and price setting in that it was concerned with settling injustice and restoring lost rights.<sup>48</sup> This comparison is helpful in gaining an understanding of why the protesters chose female attire. The presence of female rioters in the Rebecca movement has already been established. However, it appears that this was commonplace in eighteenth and nineteenth century pre-industrial unrest. The food riots seen particularly at the turn of the nineteenth century suggest that “women appear to have been both more numerous and particularly active”.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, both Olwen Hufton and E.P. Thompson argue that women were disproportionately affected in times of scarcity.<sup>50</sup> Women were frequently the predominant sex in the marketplace and the responsibility of purchasing provisions and making them last fell to them. When the price of goods were inflated women often had to bear the brunt of this hike, and subsequently took part in or instigated food riots and they were also regularly seen in incidents of setting the price in markets.<sup>51</sup> If this theory was then to be placed within Rebeccaism and the tollgates, then frequent and high toll charges would subsequently increase the price of goods that primarily women were purchasing. If social and economic protest (under which Rebeccaism falls),

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<sup>47</sup> *The Times*, “The Riots in South Wales” (30 June 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/CS100824286/TTDA?u=tou&sid=TTDA&id=c2ce280c> Accessed 4 May 2021, Howell, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.7 and Howse, W.H. “Knighton and Rebecca” in *Radnorshire Society Transactions*, Volume 13 (1943), p.54 and Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca*, p.29 and p.342 for support of the Genesis theory.

<sup>48</sup> Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, p.193 and Howell, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.4

<sup>49</sup> Alan Booth, “Food Riots in the North-West of England 1790-1801” in *Past and Present*, Volume 77 (1977) p.98

<sup>50</sup> Olwen Hufton, *Women in Revolution 1789-1796* (1976) cited in Jones, *Petticoat Heroes*, p.61 and Thompson, *Customs in Common*

<sup>51</sup> *Manchester Mercury*, (26 April 1757) Available at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000200/17570426/015/0004?browse=true> Accessed 13 May 2021 and Thompson, *Customs in Common*, and Adrian Randall. *Riotous Assemblies : Popular Protest in Hanoverian England*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)



was the arena of women then it can be argued that men dressed in women's clothes in order to validate their trespassing into a woman's sphere of protecting and preserving morality within the community. Although not incorrect, this theory falls short of a full acknowledgement of what the protesters were actually wearing and carrying. Moreover, if women were as present and active in the Rebecca riots as the evidence suggests then it brings into question why male protesters still wore women's clothes if the movement had been validated by their presence.

Popular history has branded the Rebecca riots as being as clear cut as men protesting in women's clothing. However, one only needs to scratch the surface on what the rioters were wearing in order to establish that it is far more complex than that. There are undoubtedly consistencies in terms of clothing commonly attributed to the female sex. White bedgowns, frocks and petticoats were almost always seen in incidents of unrest – both on Rebecca and her daughters.<sup>52</sup> A pseudonymous poem featured in *The Welshman* in 1843 describes Rebecca "athwart her prancing milk white steed" thus likening her to the Holy One in Revelation.<sup>53</sup> Although having the potential to be interpreted as evidence of Rebecca deriving from the scriptures, the symbolism of the colour white and its links to spirituality contributed to the further validation of the movement and its religiosity. Despite their seemingly feminine appearance there are numerous reports of Rebeccas and her followers wearing beards made of horsehair.<sup>54</sup> Symbolically, beards are bound up in an overtly masculine image of strength and virility so the choice to add them to the image of Rebecca is significant. The more that is revealed about what the protesters who were dressed up were wearing, the character becomes increasingly multifaceted. In terms of what the protesters in costume were carrying there was a real mix. Some carried items such as parasols and wore bonnets with ringlets – which are all synonymous with the female sex, and wealthier females at that. Arguably this further

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<sup>52</sup> *The Times*, (22 June 1843, 30 June 1843 and t August 1843) and Jones, *Rebecca's Children*, p.248

<sup>53</sup> *The Welshman*, "Rebecca Regina!" (15 September 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345909/4345913> Accessed 15th April 2021, and Revelation: revised standard version of the Bible.

<sup>54</sup> *Cambrian*, (6 January and 16 March), cited in Jones, *Petticoat Heroes*, p.67 (Due to COVID restrictions at the time of research, these sources were not accessible)

exaggerated the topsy-turvy paradox of men rioting in women's clothing, as the women who typically wore these items were not the same women who would be involved in these riots. Additionally, a large proportion of the rioters were carrying weapons, such as guns, swords and axes. One account from the Carmarthen Journal stated that;

*He was so frightened of the appearance of the old lady, who was at least six feet high, with her face blackened and brandishing a large hay knife in her hand, that he protests he will never have anything more to do with turnpike gates.<sup>55</sup>*

This excerpt refers to an incident in which a special constable, who had been placed on Llandeilo Rwnws gate to take the names of those who refused to pay the toll, was approached by Rebecca and was allegedly so frightened that he ran back to Carmarthen. It is important to bear in mind that this is a newspaper article and has more than likely been edited, sensationalised and not come directly from the source. Whilst this essay is largely informed by newspapers, the bias and purpose of each paper has been considered. However, it is because of this bias that the press surrounding Rebeccaism is so useful as it offers indicators of public debate and view. Regardless of the accuracy of the account, at the very least the above article highlights how the *Carmarthen Journal* wanted Rebecca to be depicted. Here she is a complex blend of contradictory male and female signifiers – Rebecca is a character that fits in with no norms.

Having established the significance of Rebecca's appearance in terms of its femininity, it is also important to consider the actions. Other than Rebecca herself, one of the most identifiable and integral parts of the riots was the performative nature of it. The evidence of ritual and theatrics contribute to the discussion of how and why Rebecca is portrayed in the way that she is. At the beginning of the unrest, Rebecca was the sole named protagonist. However, as the movement expanded the riots were frequented by other characters. It must be emphasised that in the same way neither Captain Swing nor General Ludd were one person – the role of Rebecca would have

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<sup>55</sup> *Carmarthen Journal* (14 July 1843) cited in Molloy, *And She Blessed Rebecca*, p.135

been played by numerous different men from their respective communities. Henry Tobit Evans who wrote about Rebeccism very early in terms of historiography surrounding the unrest, stated that the other character names were those of the women from whom the clothes were borrowed, thus reinforcing the 'Big Becca of Llangolman theory'.<sup>56</sup> February 1843 saw *The Times* publish an article (prior to Thomas Campbell Foster's close involvement) describing the threatening letters sent to Narberth workhouse demanding better food. In this letter "Nell" and "Susan" are referred to as Rebecca's "officers".<sup>57</sup> This military semantic field is a common theme running throughout both the letters and the reports surrounding Rebeccism. This provides another contradiction with a military commander and her officers being feminine. Furthermore, this article also likens the unrest to Captain Rock in Ireland in which the mythical leader avenges agrarian wrongs.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, it was common for those taking part in this unrest in Ireland to dress in women's clothes and be referred to as 'Lady Rock' among other aliases. They wore white dresses, bonnets and veils whilst also carrying and wearing the same kind of masculine signifiers seen with the Rebeccaites.<sup>59</sup> As the unrest intensified in Wales throughout the summer of 1843, more of these aliases of Rebecca are revealed. A report on the procession to the destruction of the infamous Rhydypany tollgate describes how the culprits put on women's voices "as near as they could" and shouted each other's names – "Lucy", "Mary" and "Nanny" being among them.<sup>60</sup> These aliases highlight the performative nature of the unrest – like *ceffyl pren*, there was a structure and a role for each person to play. Interestingly, a report in *The Hereford Journal* refers to a Rebeccait incident in which Rebecca was not actually

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<sup>56</sup> Henry Tobit Evans, *Rebecca and her Daughters: Being a History of the Agrarian Disturbances in Wales Known as the 'Rebecca Riots'* (Cardiff, 1910) pp.9-10

<sup>57</sup> *The Times*, "Fresh Disturbances in South Wales" (7 February 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/CS85226567/TTDA?u=tou&sid=TTDA&xid=0558331f> Accessed 28 March 2021. Also covered in *The Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, "Apprehended Riots in South Wales" (11 February 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3632745> Accessed 15 May 2021

<sup>58</sup> James S. Donnelly. *Captain Rock : The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821-1824*. History of Ireland and the Irish Diaspora. (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009) p.4

<sup>59</sup> Donnelly, *Captain Rock*, p.112

<sup>60</sup> *The Times*, "The State of South Wales" (5 August 1843) Available at <https://link-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/apps/doc/CS85226757/TTDA?u=tou&sid=TTDA&xid=f4c9aaa0> Accessed 10 April 2021

present, but instead “Rebecca’s sister *Charlotte*, and about 250 followers, presented themselves at the Turnpike gate in Cwmdwr”.<sup>61</sup> By taking on these characters, those taking part were validating their actions but also giving themselves the ability to step away from these characters without affecting their own identity – be it masculine or feminine.

At the very core of Rebeccism and seemingly the majority of eighteenth and nineteenth century social protest where cross-dressing played a part, was ritual. The subject of ritual is integral to the choices made in the presentation of Rebecca, and therefore the presentation of women and the feminine. One of the key elements of these ritualistic actions that mirror the likes of *ceffyl pren* are the dichotomies of black and white (see white clothing and blackened faces), male and female, harmony and cacophony, and justice and injustice.<sup>62</sup> Almost all of the incidents covered in this essay were preceded by processions, but mock trials and pantomime style performances should also be considered as part of this cacophonous performance. This directly imitated the practice of *ceffyl pren*, which further highlights the dichotomy of justice and injustice whilst simultaneously reinforcing role reversal in terms of both gender and class norms. Williams argues that the acts of pantomime and trial were unusual in the later stages of Rebecca as secrecy and haste were the priority, especially once the army and special constables had been brought in.<sup>63</sup> However there are multiple examples of these rituals still being carried out as late as the autumn of 1843. In a series of letters written by John Davies of Gwardolau to Thomas Lewis Lloyd the Squire of Nantgwyllt (both on the outskirts of Rhayader in mid Wales), who had taken his family to Boulogne, there are a number of these performances revealed.<sup>64</sup> Thomas Lewis Lloyd had chosen John Davies to act as an ‘agent’ for him whilst he was away, and the letters included several updates regarding Rebecca’s

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<sup>61</sup> *The Hereford Journal*, “Rebecca and her sister” (11 October 1843) Available at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000398/18431011/014/0003?browse=False> Accessed 6 May 2021

<sup>62</sup> Alun Howkins and Linda Merricks, “‘Wee be black as Hell’: Ritual, Disguise and Rebellion” in *Rural History*, Volume 4 (1993) p.42

<sup>63</sup> Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.191

<sup>64</sup> *Gwardole Letters of 1843*, Transcript of letters from John Davies, Gwardole to Thomas Lewis Lloyd, Nantgwyllt, Powys Archives (with permission from The National Library of Wales)

movements and actions.<sup>65</sup> He cites the mock trials as one of the main fascinations with Rebeccaism. When the Cwmdauddwr gates were levelled, again on the outskirts of Rhayader, the pantomime was performed in ‘a sort of jargon, neither Welch nor English’.<sup>66</sup> As well as being performative, this ‘jargon’ could have been used to mock the way in which real trials were carried out and to further undermine authority. During the same series of attacks, the keeper of the North gate “was awakened about 2am by a voice at the window saying, ‘lie still or death will be your doom’. The keeper could hear the rioters at work, and some saying, ‘work away little wenchess’”.<sup>67</sup> A report on the riot at Pwlltrap gate describes one of these performances; “The leader of the mob addressing the others in Welsh says, ‘my children, this gate has no business here, has it?’ To which her children reply that it has not”.<sup>68</sup> Even in the performative element as seen here, Rebecca takes on the role of the maternal Welsh ‘mam’. These threats and often acts of violence were performed in the “controlled arena of the drama”, thus keeping the actions of the Rebeccaites within the moral expectations and framework of the traditional communities. This framework provided the protesters with the vehicle for pre-political agrarian protest.<sup>69</sup>

Not only were these characters choosing elements of feminine attire, but they also played the women’s role as the guardian of public morality and guided their ‘daughters’ to do the same. By creating a character or a role that was performative and theatrical, as evidently the protests were, men could step away from the female role after a protest without undermining their masculinity as the character was far more complex than a woman. This blend of identities also gave the men who were rioting validity when they were stepping into the female sphere. Part of this ritual was also

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<sup>65</sup> Colin Hughes, “A Very Creditable Portion of Welsh History? The Rebeccas Riots in Radnorshire”, in *Radnorshire Society Transactions*, 67 (1997) p.113

<sup>66</sup> *Gwardole Letters of 1843*, Powys Archives

<sup>67</sup> T.P. Davies, ‘A famous night in Rhayader’ (November 1843) *Radnorshire Society Library* cited in Hughes, “A Very Creditable Portion of Welsh History?”, p.110

<sup>68</sup> *The Welshman*, “Lawless and Extraordinary Proceedings – Rebecca and Her Daughters” (6 January 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345729/4345731/20/rebecca> Accessed 10 May 2021

<sup>69</sup> Graham Seal, “Traditional and Agricultural Protest in Nineteenth Century England and Wales” in *Folklore*, 99:2 (1988) p.161

public humiliation and shaming. The much detested bailiffs were frequently the subject of this. In the attack on the bailiffs at Pound farm in January 1844 at which women were present saw the Rebeccaites mock and strip them of their authority. They were made to kneel and swear a 'mock oath' on the Bible that they would not return.<sup>70</sup> Even as Rebeccaism moved away from putting all their efforts and frustrations into tollgates, they still utilised the rituals as framework and legitimation for their protest. An article published by the radical *Welshman* attests to the historical importance of ritual to Rebecca's country. As a response to the panic caused by the attack on Carmarthen workhouse, an article was published describing how "We odd fellows must have our procession. We dress ourselves...in coats made for any body".<sup>71</sup> By placing the Rebecca riots within the legitimising notion of traditional ceremony, with the validation from the guardians of public morality, Rebeccaism encompassed the morals and traditions of the community and therefore their support.

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<sup>70</sup> *Cambrian*, (6 January 1844) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3333929> Accessed 10 April 2021 and Jones, *Petticoat Heroes*, p.46

<sup>71</sup> *The Welshman*, "About Becca!" (30 June 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345854/4345856/2/> Accessed 1 May 2021

## 5. "Rebecca Regina": Rebecca in the press

The press surrounding the Rebecca movement can be vivid, genuine, downplayed, sensationalised or informed by rumours. Regardless of this, it is all useful. No different from the modern-day forms of press, the press of nineteenth century Wales did not reflect how the general population felt about something. Instead, each newspaper gave an indication of how a portion of society may feel, but more importantly how the paper in question wanted them to feel. Rural Wales especially was still very much community based and some people, certainly in the more isolated villages were born, then worked, married and died within that community. Therefore, newspapers were a vital tool in distributing news, but they were also hugely influential as they could entirely form and shape an opinion for people. This chapter will review the language and imagery used in a number of articles to consider how the character of Rebecca was presented. Admittedly, this discussion only provides a snapshot of the wealth of articles that cover Rebeccanism. However, a wide range of newspapers with differing bias and affiliation have been selected.

*The Welshman* has been used frequently throughout this dissertation and its radical and self-proclaimed liberal stance has been acknowledged. However, on 15 September 1843, *The Welshman* published an article in which they essentially admitted their own bias regarding what they stood for, that being; "The unwearied and unflinching advocacy of the rights of the people and a bold assertion of their claims to a full enjoyment of the fruits of their labour".<sup>72</sup> The article goes on to state that the "scandalous jobbery of the better dressed but worse conducted men [who] have lived too long on the infamous toll system". It therefore comes as no surprise that when covering incidents of Rebeccanism, *The Welshman*, although cannot encourage any riots for fear of being prosecuted for inciting violence, it certainly sympathises with and respects the movement. One of the most insightful articles from *The Welshman* regarding Rebecca and the female aspects of her

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<sup>72</sup> *The Welshman*, (15 September 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345909/4345911/13> Accessed 15 April 2021

persona depicts her as a queen; “our lady the Queen hides her diminished head, before our lady *Becca* – the former is only *Victoria Regina*; the latter is *Regina Rebecca*, the most puissante of Sovereigns”.<sup>73</sup> In terms of the representation of women, this article places Rebecca in an extremely elite group of women who sit above even some of the most influential and powerful of men. Rebecca is royalty and even Queen Victoria is intimidated by her presence. As with many articles in *The Welshman*, this is tongue in cheek and dismisses its claims as a ‘joke’. However, it may also be mocking the hierarchy and monarchy by potentially placing a Welsh farmer, wearing a white petticoat and bonnet, a fake beard made of horsehair and carrying an axe, in the midst of such regal power. This regal-like status is also mirrored elsewhere in the press. *The Hereford Times* both on 4 November and 23 December 1843, describes the reactions of communities when Rebecca ‘arrives’.<sup>74</sup> This excitement and bustle is like the hysteria that precedes royals or celebrities, however Rebecca was presented as a figure of the people.

In the true style of Rebecca, these depictions of her as a ‘lady’ are wholly contradicted by the threats and on occasion, acts of violence. *The Cambrian*, at the end of 1843 reported an act of Rebeccaism which saw bailiffs dragged out of bed by protesters carrying bludgeons and guns, and subsequently “pinched and pushed and even ridden by the wanton daughters of Rebecca”.<sup>75</sup> This idea of a wanton and unruly woman is discussed by Natalie Davis. She argues that “males draw upon the sexual power and energy of the unruly woman” in order to sanction resistance in the same way a female persona would.<sup>76</sup> There are occasions however, where the press used female stereotypes to

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<sup>73</sup> *The Welshman*, (16 June 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4345844/4345846/12> Accessed 3 April 2021

<sup>74</sup> *Hereford Times*, “Radnorshire” (4 November 1843) Available at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000396/18431104/010/0003> Accessed 20 April 2021 and *Hereford Times*, “Rebecca on the borders of Herefordshire” (23 December 1843) Available at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000396/18431223/018/0003> Accessed 20 April 2021

<sup>75</sup> *Cambrian*, “Alleged Rebeccaism in Anglesey” (30 December 1843) Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3330750/3330753> Accessed 4 April 2021

<sup>76</sup> Natalie Z. Davies, ‘Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe,’ in B.A. Babcock (ed.), *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, Cornell University Press, 1978



detract from the validity of the movement. This wild and “veritable body of Amazons”, “The Witch of Witches” and similar references were seemingly being used against Rebecca by publications that were more sceptical and critical than the *Welshman*.<sup>77</sup> Articles using language like this, depicted the feminine persona of Rebecca as passionate, unruly and irrational with rage and unchecked sexuality, and then her placed within established authority and rationality in order to undermine her validity.

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<sup>77</sup> *Carmarthen Journal*, (23 June 1843) cited in Jones, *Petticoat Heroes*, p.112

## 5. Conclusion

“Rural grievances were expressed in much more sophisticated and clandestine ways by large numbers of men who blackened their faces, wore women’s clothes and swore allegiance to a redresser of wrongs known as ‘Rebecca’”.<sup>78</sup> This common definition of the Rebecca riots is somewhat both inaccurate and neglectful. Throughout the period 1839-1843, the incidents of unrest attributed to Rebecca and her daughters undoubtedly show that the protesters were made up of a cross-section of the whole community. Of these incidents – there are also examples in which women took the lead, particularly when the unrest was bound up in protecting the moral code of the community. The narrative of men being the sole active gender that were protesting has been accepted for so long due to the attire of the protesters been consistently misunderstood as ‘women’s clothing’. There is an overwhelmingly large gap in the knowledge of Rebeccaism. All too many historians have accepted the narrative of men dressing as women, and instead their research has been bound up in discussing the causes, incidents and outcome of the Rebecca riots. Consequently, television programmes, documentaries and plays that have been fascinated with the eccentricity and drama of Rebecca have too carried this mantle. It was never in the remit of this dissertation to oppose the ‘greats’ of Rebeccaism such as David J.V. Jones and David Williams as their work is extensive and unearthed an overwhelming amount of information about the movement. However, this dissertation has considered what many have overlooked. It has proven that Rebecca and her daughters were carefully and purposefully constructed performative and somewhat paradoxical characters who consisted of a blend of male and female signifiers that respected traditional rituals. The female signifiers and presence of women granted the movement the moral supremacy and validity of women in social protest, which was often seen as a female preserve. Moreover, the male signifiers as well as the men themselves provided the power,

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<sup>78</sup> Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, p.193

authority and physicality of men (as nineteenth century Britain perceived it). The practice of *ceffyl pren*, the ritual and ceremony were integral to the movement, and granted them legitimacy as it mirrored the traditional values that had existed for generations. The combination of these elements of Rebeccaism resulted in an authoritative movement which demanded the restoration of morality and lost rights within the community. As moral guardians of their communities and active partakers in the protests, females and representations of femininity are at the very core of Rebeccaism.

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