

The Angel in the Home? Rachel Thomas, Siân Phillips and the On-Screen Embodiment of the Welsh Mam¹

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Deirdre Beddoe, doyenne of women's history in Wales, argued during the 1980s that Welsh women have been, and continue to be, culturally invisible.² Over the years, Wales has, in general, projected a masculine image to the world via its patriarchal interpretation of history, literature, drama and films. However, as a result of her own research Beddoe argued that five images of the Welshwoman have captured the imagination of the nation over the decades: the Welsh woman in traditional national costume, the pious Welshwoman, the sexy Welshwoman, the funny Welshwoman, and, the most enigmatic, romantic and enduring image of them all, the loving Welsh Mam. One could argue today that there is no function for the Welsh Mam in twenty-first-century Welsh life and that she is a part of an era and a way of life that has long since disappeared. For others, she has always been a fictional figure, a romanticized character created for the benefit of some campaign or another, or for the Welsh abroad plagued by *hiraeth*, of whom Richard Llewellyn and Emlyn Williams are two obvious examples.³ Nevertheless, there is no escaping the fact that the Welsh Mam, an angel in the home, has been a prominent figure in our literature, stage plays and films. The aim of this article is to discuss the means by which the literary portrayal of the Welsh Mam has been translated to the screen during the twentieth century. It examines in particular the contribution of two specific Swansea Valley actors, Siân Phillips and Rachel Thomas, to this on-screen image. However we cannot fully appreciate the image of the Welsh Mam within film without first understanding the roots of this image, grounded in our literary heritage and history.

It is generally believed that the modern ideology of a virtuous and considerate mother was first promoted by the Swiss philosopher and author, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his pioneering essay on education, *Émile* (1762). With the rise of capitalism, Rousseau witnessed the birth of a new social class in France, namely the bourgeoisie, a development which generated significant changes in the social

- 1 This is the text of a lecture presented to The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion at the British Academy, London in October 2008.
- 2 Deirdre Beddoe, 'Images of Welsh Women', in *Wales: The Imagined Nation*, ed. by Tony Curtis (Bridgend, 1986), pp. 227–8; see also Beddoe, 'Towards a Welsh Woman's History', *Llafur*, 3: 2 (Spring, 1981), 32–8; Beddoe, 'Munionettes, Maids and Mams: Women in Wales, 1914–1939', in *Our Mothers' Land*, ed. by Angela V. John (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 189–209; Beddoe, 'What about the Women?', *Planet*, 117 (1996), 56.
- 3 See for further discussion, Gwyn A. Williams, 'Women Workers in Wales, 1968–82', *Welsh History Review*, 11.4 (December 1983), 530. See also Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal: Women's Lives in the Rhondda, 1881–1911' in John (ed.), p. 205, where she notes: 'The nineteenth century was the heyday of the "Mam": in the 1920s and 1930s, when an entrenched domestic ideology and a lack of job opportunities for women kept her at home, her resilience and self-service added to her sanctity. Now, she is a figure of the past.'

relationship between men and women. In his essay, Rousseau presented the idea that it is the mother who has the most enduring influence on her child, and that she therefore fulfils a key function in forming the structures and values of society. A predecessor of the Romantic movement, Rousseau believed that every man, by his very nature, is inherently good and that the sources of his corruption stem from familial and societal influences. As a result, he claimed, the nature of the upbringing and the care and nurture a man receives as a child from his mother is crucial and will heavily influence the type of citizen he will become. Thus, believed Rousseau, the future of the human race is shaped:

On the good constitution of mothers depends, in the first place, that of children; on the care of women depends the early education of men; and on women, again, depends their manners, their passions, their tastes, their pleasures, and even their happiness. Thus the whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life agreeable and sweet to them – these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught them from their infancy.⁴

Rousseau's work introduces the ideology of separate spheres whereby the wife is subservient to her husband. Her dominion is the home and her role is modestly and serenely to raise and nurture good citizens.⁵

This concept was further developed in America where the figure of the mother became a political device to ensure societal control during the formative years following the War of Independence (1775–83). This mother-figure, whose role was to uphold the values of republicanism, provide unwavering support for her husband and act as a steadfast influence on her sons, was later referred to by historians as the Republican Mother. She was given a political function by combining her domestic role with political values.⁶ Women were called upon again to consolidate the morals, values and identity of this new republic during later periods of turmoil such as the Civil War and the coming of industrialization. As a result, America experienced the growth of the 'Cult of True Womanhood and Domesticity'. In an attempt to abide by the dogma of this movement, women would be self-critical, and criticized by others, on the basis of four virtues – piety, purity of heart, mind, and body, humility and domesticity. Opponents of the ideal of True Womanhood were

4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile – Or Treatise on Education*, trans. by William H. Payne (New York, 2003), p. 263.

5 Rousseau claimed, for example, 'The first and most important quality of a woman is gentleness.' Ibid., p. 270.

6 See, for example, Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect & Ideology in Revolutionary America* (London, 1980); Rosemarie Zagari, 'Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother', *American Quarterly*, 44.2 (June 1992), 192–215.

condemned as enemies of God, of civilization, and of the Republic.⁷ Thus, the Mother was deemed the guardian of America's morals; she had the responsibility of instilling the principles and values of the new republic into future generations. As Ann Kaplan has claimed: 'In a rapidly changing world – one that the male order was not sure was all to the good – the Mother was to uphold, continue and represent the old values in danger of being swept away by the tide of changes that seemed beyond control.'⁸ Nevertheless, the status and role of this mother figure was restricted: she was imprisoned in her kitchen and existed only on the fringes of society.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution in Britain, and in Wales in particular, a clear division in domestic and salaried work was barely discernible. Men and women were seen toiling shoulder to shoulder in agricultural communities. However, with the coming of industrialization, fundamental changes occurred and, as the competition between the genders for work increased and the campaign to secure equal political and legal rights for women gathered momentum, traditional feminine characteristics were increasingly emphasized within society and the ideal of the 'Angel in the Home' was promoted. It was thought that, by emphasizing the role of the woman within the family, the foundations of patriarchal order would become more secure. Thus the ideal of a mother as the Angel of Hearth and Home is a product of Victorian patriarchal society, an era when the working class was encouraged to adopt a model of the family with the male as head of the household and sole bread-winner and the woman as the diligent, caring, pure wife and mother.⁹

It could be argued that the main catalyst for the acceptance by the Welsh of this ideal of a dutiful wife and a caring mother was the Report of the Education Commissioners in 1847.¹⁰ The study was commissioned in order to report on the state of education in Wales and the opportunities offered to the working class to learn the English language. However, the prejudices of the commissioners – Johnson, Lingen and Symons¹¹ – and the falsehoods promoted by several prominent members of Welsh society, notably within the established church, led to the publication of a damning report on Wales and her people which was

7 See, for example, Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (London, 1996); Barbara Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860', *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), 151–74.

8 E. Ann Kaplan, 'Mothering, Feminism and Representation', in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London, 1994), p. 116.

9 For further discussion on this, see, for example, Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover, *A Hidden Workforce: Homeworkers in England, 1850–1985* (London, 1989).

10 This Report was compiled in response to a request made by William Williams, a native of Llanpumsaint, but Member of Parliament for Coventry since 1835. *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (London, 1847).

11 R. R. W. Lingen was given the task of collecting information on the counties of Carmarthen-shire, Glamorgan and Pembrokeshire, Jelinger C. Symons dealt with Breconshire, Cardigan, Radnor and Monmouthshire, whilst Henry Vaughan Johnson studied Anglesey and the counties of Caernarfon, Denbigh, Flint, Merioneth and Montgomery.

subsequently publicly condemned as the 'Treachery of the Blue Books'.¹² Those who suffered worst at the hands of the commissioners were the women of Wales. The report claimed that their unchastity lay at the root of the nation's immorality; the report noted: 'Each generation will derive its moral tone in a great degree from the influences imparted by the mothers who reared them. Where these influences are corrupted at their very source, it is vain to expect virtues in the off-spring.'¹³

The Welsh intelligentsia, outraged by such a sweeping condemnation of the morals of the Welsh, launched a campaign to restore the good name of Wales and her people. A crusade, in John Ceiriog Hughes's words, '*i godi'r hen wlad yn ei hôl*' – to raise up the old country – was attempted through literature, poetry, letters to the press and sermons from the pulpit.¹⁴ As a perhaps highly cynical, but extremely effective, public relations ploy, the much-maligned women of Wales were placed in the front line of the battle to restore the nation's honour. Those who were elevated to a higher degree than most were the mothers of Wales.¹⁵ Through the work of sympathizers such as Ieuan Gwynedd (Evan Jones), Ceiriog, Cranogwen (Sarah Jane Rees) and Lady Llanover (Gwenynen Gwent), an image, in the words of Ieuan Gwynedd, of 'dutiful maidens, virtuous girls, frugal wives and intelligent mothers' was vigorously promoted.¹⁶

Ieuan Gwynedd was especially incensed by the libellous comments of the commissioners and he called on Welshmen to defend the good name of the fairer sex:

Os goddef meibion Cymru y sarhad hwn ar ferched ein gwlad,
nid gormod cosp arnynt fyddai eu halltudio ar unwaith i ryw ynys
anial, lle na siriolid hwy byth gan wenau siriol a gofal tyner y rhyw
fenywaidd.¹⁷

If the sons of Wales tolerate this affront to the daughters of our country, it would not be too great a punishment for them to be banished immediately to some desert island, where they would never be cheered by the joyful smiles and tender care of the fairer sex.

Ieuan Gwynedd idolized his mother, Catherine Jones (as did Sir Hugh Owen his mother, Mary Owen, and Ceiriog his mother, Phoebe Hughes) and it was in her image that he set about elevating the image of Welsh mothers through a new

12 The report was first referred to as the 'Treachery of the Blue Books' ('Brad y Llyfrau Gleision') in Robert Jones Derfel's play, published in 1854. See Prys Morgan (ed.), *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* (Llandysul, 1991), p. 1.

13 Symons, *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales*, Part II, p. 57.

14 For further discussion on Ceiriog's contribution to this struggle, see Hywel Teifi Edwards, *Ceiriog* (Caernarfon, 1987).

15 For further discussion on this, see Jane Aaron, *Pur fel y Dur: Y Gymraes yn Llên Menywod y 19eg Ganrif* (Caerdydd, 1998), p. 100.

16 Ieuan Gwynedd, 'Anerchiad', *Y Gymraes* (January 1850), 6–7.

17 Ieuan Gwynedd, 'Merched Cymru', *Yr Amserau*, 23 Mawrth 1848, p. 7, my translation.

magazine, launched in January 1850.¹⁸ The aim of *Y Gymraes* was to champion the morality of Welsh women before the world and to encourage Welsh women to expose the mendacity of the commissioners' report by conducting their lives in a virtuous and dutiful manner. Whilst Ieuan Gwynedd's aims in editing this short-lived monthly magazine between 1850 and 1851 were commendable, in the event it proved a backward step in terms of female emancipation. The Welsh woman, and the Welsh Mam in particular, was raised on to a pedestal and canonized. Through this process of idealization and romanticization, the Welsh wife or mother became enslaved to her apron and her kitchen and entrusted with the burden of rearing a clean family in all senses of the word. As R. Tudur Jones so eloquently described the era:

Gwawriodd Oes Aur y Fam yng Nghymru. A chyda chymorth beirdd, llenorion a phregethwyr, hwylodd y Fam trwy fywyd y genedl tros foroedd o ramantiaeth a sentimentaliti. Ac aeth y foeseg ddomestig a oedd yn ffrwyth ei theyrnasiad yn ddwfn i gydwybod ein pobl.¹⁹

The Golden Age of the Mother in Wales dawned. And with the assistance of poets, writers and preachers, she sailed through the nation's life across seas of romanticism and sentimentality. And the domestic ethic which was the fruition of her reign went deep into the conscience of our people.

This idealized image was not challenged, and the Welsh woman released from her captivity, until the disintegration of society in the years after the First World War. Ironically, however, and in its own inimitable way, the concept of the woman as an 'Angel in the Home' was reinforced by the medium of cinema throughout the twentieth century.

Images of mothers have been produced on screen since the early days of the medium of film. D. W. Griffith, a pioneer of film and cinema in Hollywood, and a man who claimed to be a descendant of the Welsh princes, directed some of the earliest film screen portrayals of mothers, films such as *Mothering Heart* (1913) and *Way Down East* (1920), both of which starred Lillian Gish. The first sound film, *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland), made in 1927, also includes a depiction of a loving mother. In this case, the main character, played by Al Jolson, adores his Jewish mother and she, in turn, is supportive and loyal to her son even though his choice of career as a jazz singer is a disappointment to his orthodox cantor father. Another legendary filmmaker who directed countless screen depictions of the mother was John Ford, the Irishman who idolized his own mother to the point of virtually dedicating his life to recreating her on screen in any film that required a maternal figure. His films are full of genial, caring and self-sacrificing mothers. There is, for example, the wonderful screen adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) which depicts the Joad family, with Henry Fonda in the lead role and Jane

18 For further discussion on these much idolized and idealized mothers, see Hywel Teifi Edwards, *Codi'r Hen Wlad yn ei Hôl* (Llandysul, 1989), pp. 21–3.

19 R. Tudur Jones, 'Daearu'r Angylion', in *Ysgrifau Beirniadol*, vol. 11, ed. by J. E. Caerwyn Williams (Dinbych, 1979), p. 191, my translation.

Darwell playing his spirited mother, or the ever-present influence and memory of Sean 'Trooper' Thornton's mother in *The Quiet Man* (1952), or the sublime western *The Searchers* (1956), in which the idea of a close-knit family closely guarded by a loving mother is a central theme.²⁰

Ford's most famous and perhaps most enduring depiction of family life and the mother figure is found in the film *How Green Was My Valley* (1941). This Oscar-winning film, based on Richard Llewellyn's celebrated novel, is often described as Ford's masterpiece, but for many critics and viewers it is an overly-sentimental confection. Set in the south Wales coalfield, the film depicts the trials and tribulations of a mining family during a period of great social and economic change. This 'feel-good' film, released during a period of great adversity when the Second World War dominated and destroyed lives, offered pure escapism to international audiences. Another film which sought to sustain public morale in times of great hardship was William Wyler's *Mrs. Miniver* (1942). In this film, Greer Garson takes on the title role and portrays a middle-class 'English rose' who, through her affectionate personality and selfless nature, not only sustains her husband and children through the war years but also upholds the morale of the whole community. As a mark of the community's love and respect towards her, a new breed of rose – the emblem of England – is named after her. Mrs Miniver is undoubtedly a screen embodiment of the English 'Angel in the Home'.

Apart from Richard Llewellyn's image of the Welsh Mam, several other screen portrayals exist of this pious, dutiful and hardworking woman. The first Welsh-language film *Y Chwarelwr* ('The Quarryman'), made in 1935 by Sir Ifan ab Owen Edwards and John Ellis Williams, depicts a caring, devoted and devout wife and mother of a family in Blaenau Ffestiniog. A similar portrayal appears in *Noson Lawen* (1949), starring the popular trio, 'Triawd y Coleg' ('the College Three') – Meredydd Evans, Cledwyn Jones and Robin Williams – where Nell Hodgkins is in the role of wife and mother to an agricultural family. Dame Edith Evans gave a beautiful portrayal of Merri, the chapel caretaker and mother of two orphaned boys, in Emlyn Williams's directorial debut, *The Last Days of Dolwyn* (1949), while Betsan Llwyd's performance in Endaf Emlyn's striking adaptation of Caradog Prichard's dark novel, *Un Nos Ola Leuad* ('One Moonlit Night', 1991) is a moving addition to the repertoire.²¹ However, it could be argued that none of these north Wales-based characters has been accepted by the public as an authentic portrayal of a Welsh Mam. Rather, more often than not, it would be characters such as Mrs Parry in *The Proud Valley* (1940) or Mrs Beth Morgan in *How Green Was My Valley* (1941, 1960, 1975), two characters who illustrate the extent to which the on-screen Welsh Mam is associated with the industrial community of the south Wales

20 For further discussion on the familial themes within Ford's films, see Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley, 1986).

21 For further discussion of these films, see Gwenno Ffroncon, *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion: Delweddu Cymru a'i Phobl ar Ffilm 1935–51* (Caerdydd, 2003).

valleys.²² More recently, two actors, Rachel Thomas and Siân Phillips, have been associated more than any other with this screen portrayal of the Welsh Mother.

Rachel Thomas was the daughter of a miner and smallholder from Alltwen in the Swansea Valley. As a young girl, she performed in amateur dramatic society productions and, following a chance radio broadcast from the pulpit of Minny Street chapel in Cardiff in 1933, she came to the attention of Sam Jones, a producer with the BBC in Cardiff, who offered her regular roles in radio plays and school broadcasts. Seven years later, she appeared in her first film, the Ealing Studios production *The Proud Valley*, directed in 1940 by Pen Tennyson, great-grandson of the poet laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson, in the character role that was soon to make her name, that of the Welsh Mam. Rachel Thomas's appearance came, for many, to epitomize that of the 'angel on the hearth', and throughout her sixty-year career she created dozens of genial mothers on screen, on radio and on stage.

Rachel Thomas appeared in *The Proud Valley*, alongside Paul Robeson and Edward Chapman, as Mrs Parry, a miner's wife and mother to five children, who experiences several adversities. She strives to keep one step ahead of the bailiffs on the small wages of her husband and eldest son before she faces the tragedy and challenge of raising a family as a widow. Although Mrs Parry is extremely protective of her family, is devout and hardworking in the tradition of her literary cousins, she also possesses a fiery and defiant nature. Some of the film's most entertaining scenes are of her interaction with her neighbour Mrs Owen, the postmistress (played by Dilys Davies), a domineering, interfering and insensitive gossip. Thomas ensured that her portrayal of Mrs Parry was rooted in reality. She created a multi-layered character who has no qualms about voicing her frustrations with life or giving others a piece of her mind and defending her family's good name when it is called for. For the first time, it could be argued, the people of Wales identified with and warmed to a portrayal of one of its people on screen. Mrs Parry might be a descendant of the Angel on the Hearth found in Victorian literature, but she is also a much more progressive and positive figure.

Mrs Parry is a tragic figure in some respects. Having lost a much-loved husband, she faces dire poverty with five children to feed but exhibits great strength and resilience, as is revealed in one scene towards the end of the film. In this scene, located at the local coal mine, not only is Mrs Parry's inner strength depicted but also her trust in God. She stands alongside her fellow villagers at the pit head awaiting news of a group of colliers, including her son, Emlyn, who are fighting fires underground in order to save the mine. In her hour of need, she turns to religion and music for solace and leads the singing of the moving Welsh hymn, '*Yn y dyfroedd mawr a'r tonnau*' ('In the waves and mighty waters') to the tune 'Ebenezer'. This scene not only depicts how music brought the community together but also illustrates the central role of this woman in her community. It should also

22 See Gwenno Ffroncon, "'Y Graith Las ar Gynfas Arian': Delweddu'r Glöwr Cymreig ar Ffilm, 1935–1951' in *Cof Cenedl: Ysgrifau ar Hanes Cymru XIX*, ed. by Geraint H. Jenkins (Llandysul, 2004), pp. 164–92; Ffroncon, *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion*, pp. 79–111.

be remembered that, since the film was released within months of the outbreak of the Second World War, Rachel Thomas's performance provided a source of great comfort to hard-pressed working people in Britain and America during those terrible years. Audiences were offered a chance to escape to a mother's embrace for strength and comfort in the face of oppression and adversity. There was no better balm than a *cwtsh* ('cuddle') from a Welsh Mam.

Rachel Thomas's dignified performance as the Welsh Mam in *The Proud Valley* attracted a great deal of attention in the trade press, and Ealing Studios boasted loudly of their most recent discovery. Her demeanour and performance attracted unstinting praise from film critics, among them the highly respected C. A. Lejeune: 'Mrs Thomas is a beautiful asset to the picture. What a pleasure it is to look at a real woman's face on the screen – a good face without any doodahs, with a heart shining through it.'²³ The actress herself was obviously deemed to befit and enhance the image of the Welsh Mam and a great deal of satisfaction was garnered from the fact that a realistic portrayal of the working class had been depicted on screen.²⁴ Michael Balcon, the head of Ealing Studios, claimed: 'She brings to the field of drama what Gracie Fields has brought to the field of comedy – a warmth of personality and understanding that goes straight to the heart of the audience.'²⁵ For once, the working class had been portrayed with dignity and Rachel Thomas's performance in *The Proud Valley* is generally acknowledged to be far superior to that offered by the Irish actress, Sara Allgood, in John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley*.²⁶

As a result of her success in *The Proud Valley*, Rachel Thomas was offered the opportunity to build on her portrait of the Welsh Mam in later films, in particular *Blue Scar*, directed in 1949 by Jill Craigie, the late wife of Michael Foot MP, and again in *David* (Paul Dickinson, 1951), *The Valley of Song* (Gilbert Gunn,

23 C. A. Lejeune, 'The Films', *The Observer*, 10 March 1940; *Sunday Pictorial*, 3 December 1939; *Western Mail*, 28 September 1939; *The Daily Worker*, 11 March 1940, p. 3; *The New Statesman and Nation*, 9 March 1940, p. 306; *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 7.73, January 1940, p. 2; 'New Films in London', *The Times*, 11 March 1940, p. 6; Lionel Collier, 'Welsh Miners come into their own', *Picturegoer and Film Weekly*, vol. 9, no. 461, 23 March 1940, p. 24.

24 Until then, the working class had been largely portrayed in comic terms or as rather gormless individuals. See, for example, the characters played by George Formby, Will Hay and Jessie Matthews.

25 'Discovery of thirty-five', *Picturegoer*, 14 October 1939; 'Welsh Film Star', *Western Mail*, 28 September 1939.

26 Interestingly, Rachel Thomas was offered a screen test for the role of Mrs Morgan in Ford's film, but since Atlantic crossings had been curtailed following the outbreak of war she was unable to visit America to take up that opportunity. For further discussion of Allgood's performance in Ford's *How Green Was My Valley*, see, for example, Ffroncon, *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion*, pp. 95–110; Peter Stead, 'How Green is My Valley Now?', *New Welsh Review*, 4.3 (1991–2), 4–9, and David Berry, *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years* (Cardiff, 1996), pp. 161–2.

1953),²⁷ and a BBC television adaptation of *How Green Was My Valley* (1960).²⁸ Regrettably, some of these roles are rather clichéd and far less innovative than the part she undertook in *The Proud Valley*. In the films *Blue Scar* and *David*, she depicts dutiful wives and mothers living in the shadow of their husbands. Thomas clearly did not receive the same freedom to develop these roles as she had been granted by Pen Tennyson and, in the case of Jill Craigie, it is extraordinary that a director who was deeply sympathetic towards oppressed women did not see fit to provide the character with a more prominent and perhaps feisty voice in the film. The film is a prime example of Laura Mulvey's assessment of the status of women on screen:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly [. . .]. Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.²⁹

As was the case in the literature of Wales, the films in which Rachel Thomas appeared propagated the conventional image of the Welsh Mam within a patriarchal context. Either wittingly or unwittingly, Thomas embodied this image.

Rachel Thomas's appearances in *Blue Scar* and *David* were fleeting, but in 1953 she was given the opportunity to star in *The Valley of Song* (Gilbert Gunn), a wonderful drama-comedy starring several of Wales's best, but often unknown, actors, including Mervyn Johns, Clifford Evans, Madoline Thomas, Pryor Williams, Kenneth Evans and Rachel Roberts in her first film role. The film derives its humour from the people's apparent love of music and centres on the activities of a fictional village choir. Rachel Thomas portrays Mrs Mair Lloyd, the wife of the village undertaker, a role which gave her the opportunity to depart from her traditional characterization of the Welsh Mam. The film tells the story of how the fictional village of Cwm-pant is divided by the decision of the new choir conductor, played by Clifford Evans, to choose the grocer's wife, Marged Davies, as the choir's main contralto, rather than the undertaker's wife, Mrs Lloyd, who had been enjoying that privilege for over a decade. Mrs Lloyd expresses her outrage and resentment at losing the solo part to her neighbour and the community disintegrates

27 For more on these films, see Berry, *Wales and Cinema*; Ffranccon, *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion*; Carl Rollyson, *To be a Woman: The Life of Jill Craigie* (London, 2005), pp. 93–100; Gwenno Ffranccon, "'The same old firm dressed up in a new suit': *Blue Scar* (Craigie, 1949) and the portrayal of the nationalisation of the coal industry', *Media History*, 13.2/3 (2007), 169–180.

28 Since this was a live broadcast, no copy of the production, directed by Dafydd Gruffydd, with Eynon Evans and Rachel Thomas in the roles of Mr and Mrs Morgan, exists. We can therefore only speculate on the nature of Rachel Thomas's performance in this iconic role.

29 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London, 1989), pp. 19, 15.

into open warfare as those associated with the Lloyd family and those who are part of the Davies clan resort to dredging up old quarrels and trading petty but comical insults in the street. As her envy deepens, Mrs Lloyd renounces her duties as a mother and wife and puts her own needs first by indulging in mischief-making to prolong the quarrel. This is hardly the behaviour expected of the traditional Welsh Mam.

The division reaches its climax as the villagers realize that their behaviour is destroying the community and the lives of their children. Mrs Lloyd's son and Mrs Davies's daughter are in love and are bent on marriage, but are unable to proceed with their plan while the villagers are at each other's throats. Mrs Lloyd comes to realize the damage the conflict is inflicting on the young couple and, in a very poignant scene towards the end of the film, she voices her regret and shame over her actions. She reveals her heartbreak at losing the solo contralto part and explains to the other villagers how she found a new lease of life in the role and a means of escaping from the everyday chores of a wife and mother. The solo part is an opportunity for Mrs Lloyd to shine as Madame Mair Lloyd, an independent, talented contralto. The film ends as Mrs Lloyd accepts the blame for the rumpus, is reconciled with Mrs Davies and agrees to share the solo part with her. She is then able to return to her duties as a dutiful wife and mother. Whilst the film depicts Mrs Lloyd in a negative light – she is seen as a stubborn, selfish woman – the character offers a rare on-screen insight into the feelings of a woman who dreams of being more than simply a wife and a mother. Furthermore, this character paves the way for greater changes to the on-screen image of the Welsh Mam displayed in films made during the second half of the twentieth century.

Over time, Rachel Thomas's name became synonymous with the Welsh Mam and she delighted in this association: 'I hope that I've shown some of the strength, the gentleness and generosity of the Welshwoman – I certainly tried to give as much dignity as I could to those parts [...] I'm very proud of the fact that I've helped to put the Welsh Mam on the map.'³⁰ Until her death in 1995, Rachel Thomas was, for many, a mother-figure to the nation and there is no doubt that there has never been an actress so committed to this image of the Welshwoman as this great actress from Alltwen.

In contrast to the vast majority of characters played on screen by Rachel Thomas, the characters portrayed by Siân Phillips do not always convey the image of a loyal, caring angel. In fact, the converse is true and at least one of her characters succeeds in turning the literary portrayal of the ideal Welshwoman completely on its head. Siân Phillips, a native of Gwauncaegurwen, played the most celebrated of all Welsh Mams, Beth Morgan, in the BBC's 1975 production of

How Green Was My Valley which starred Stanley Baker as Gwilym Morgan.³¹ In this popular production, Beth Morgan is not only the heart of this likeable mining family created by Richard Llewellyn, but is also the prime focus of this television adaptation. Unlike the novel and John Ford's film, the core of the screen adaptation by Elaine Morgan is not the memories of Huw, the youngest son, but the exploration of the family's life from the point of view of the mother. By avoiding the structural conceit of the novel and the sentimentality of Ford's film, Elaine Morgan ensured that discussions of politics and industrial tensions were not circumvented by the need to maintain childhood innocence. The focus of this drama is thus strikingly different from that of the patriarchal and romantic perspective offered in the Ford film. In this understated and naturalistic BBC adaptation, the feminine sphere and its preoccupations, with strong performances given by Nerys Hughes as Bronwen, Sue Jones Davies as Angharad and Victoria Plucknett as Marged, are highlighted. Another element which enhances the originality of the production is Siân Phillips's appearance as a Welsh Mam. This extremely slender and elegant figure succeeds in lending immense dignity and poise to the character of Beth Morgan, and, in so doing, she distances herself completely from the stereotype of the Welsh Mam as a genial, short, plump matriarch.

There is no doubt that Beth Morgan is the mistress of the hearth. However, while she remains in charge of hearth and home she is also allowed to be a part of the men's discussions over working conditions and work at the coal mine. There is some likeness in her character to authentic women in the south Wales valleys, and to the strong women in the novels and short stories of Kate Roberts and the films of Karl Francis.³² Beth Morgan is a highly capable woman who is central to her family and community. She is not afraid to voice her opinions and is steadfast in her principles. However, even though she appears to be an authoritative and feisty figure, in her depiction of the character Siân Phillips also succeeds in upholding the image of the dedicated wife, loving mother and pious Welshwoman. Even in this purportedly progressive production, the traditional depiction of the Welsh Mam would not be cast aside so easily.

However, one film representation by Siân Phillips completely undermines the stereotype of the virtuous and forbearing Welsh Mam. This occurs in Mark Evans's film adaptation of the stage play by Ed Thomas, *House of America* (1997). The film does not aim to offer a palatable image of modern Wales. Far from it. In *House*

31 For more on the career of Siân Phillips, see Siân Phillips, *Private Faces: The Autobiography* (London, 1999) and *Public Places: The Autobiography* (London, 2002). See also Peter Stead, *Acting Wales: Stars of Stage and Screen* (Cardiff, 2002), pp. 121–30. The role of Mr Morgan was Stanley Baker's final appearance on screen before his untimely death at the age of forty-nine in June 1976. See Robert Shail, *Stanley Baker: A Life in Film* (Cardiff, 2008).

32 Consider, for example, Jane Gruffydd in *Traed Mewn Cyffion* (1936) or Elin Gruffydd in *Te yn y Grug* (1959). For more on the world of women in the work of Kate Roberts, see Norah Jones, 'The Comforts and Discomforts of Home: Modern Feminism and Kate Roberts' Domestic Themes', *Planet*, 107 (October/November 1994), 75–82; Branwen Jarvis, 'Kate Roberts and a Woman's World', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1991), 233–48. See also the drama-documentary *Ms Rhyimey Valley* (Karl Francis, 1985).

of America, Siân Phillips portrays Mrs Lewis, a mother to three children in their early twenties who lives with her brood in the deprived and neglected community of Banwen above the Dulais valley at the end of the twentieth century. The family live in the shadow of an opencast mine that slowly expands towards their home and threatens to engulf their lives. This mine is an illustration of the wretched remains of a once prosperous Welsh coalfield. The family also live in the shadow of madness as the children, Sid, Gwenny and Boyo, dream of escaping to America from their unfulfilling and dismal lives in Banwen. The three are unemployed, frustrated, addicted to a cocktail of drink and drugs, and are slowly retreating into a fantasy world.

Their mother is incapable of offering support and leadership to them, while their father, according to their mother, has packed up and escaped to America in search of a better life.³³ Mam in this film has only a very weak grasp on reality. Prior to the release of *House of America*, the on-screen Welsh Mam was seen as a strong woman, dependable and devout, always at the heart of her family. However, in this film life's trials, including the after-effects of industrial decline, overwhelm Mrs Lewis and she suffers a mental breakdown. It is she who is now weak, dependent on her children and, in fact, at the heart of the family's troubles. Mam in *House of America* is not one to be admired; instead, she is depicted as a tragic-comic figure oscillating between expressing intense affection and insanity. The film opens in a surreal manner, with Mam inviting Roger, the soft-drinks seller, in for tea and regaling him with how her husband departed for America, leaving her as sole carer for the children, after he realized that she had accidentally drowned the cat, Brando, in the washing machine. During this absurd conversation, one of the main elements associated with the conventional image of the Welsh Mam – her ability to make the best of any situation – is distorted: 'I buried the cat on the mountain behind the house, next to the budgie, Billy . . . well . . . you have to make do, don't you?'³⁴

Ed Thomas and Marc Evans proceed to undermine another facet of the traditional Mam's character by denying Mrs Lewis the opportunity even to find reassurance and sanctuary in her faith. In *House of America*, Mam's faith is revealed through her psychosis as she explains to Boyo, her youngest son, that Jesus is an exceptionally busy man who does not always have the time to offer guidance and strength to those in need:

Like I got through to him the other night, asking forgiveness but I wasn't at my best, but you know what he said, he said there was so much going on down there it's hard to keep track, and if it carried on like this he'd just have to put his head in the sand, Jesus himself . .

33 The absent father is a constant theme in Ed Thomas's work. See "'Not much of a dream then is it?'," Edward Thomas interviewed by Hazel Walford Davies in Gallipolis, Ohio, July 1997', in *State of Play: Four Playwrights of Wales*, ed. by Hazel Walford Davies (Llandysul, 1998), pp. 115–30; Katie Gramich, 'Edward Thomas: Geography, Intertextuality, and the Lost Mother', in Davies (ed.), pp. 159–73.

34 Ed Thomas, 'House of America', in *Selected Work*, '95–'98 (Cardigan, 2002), p. 135.

. he'll have to watch out, we can't have him drunk in charge of the world can we?³⁵

A further cornerstone of the traditional image of the Welsh Mam is destabilized in the film, namely her demeanour and attire. Confined to a mental asylum by the end of the film, rather than to her usual prison of the kitchen and the hearth, she is seen dressed in the traditional Welsh costume. Unlike her children, she seeks to hold on to her Welshness but her efforts are restricted to old stereotypes and symbolism such as wearing the costume, sporting a daffodil and listening to other patients singing 'Myfanwy'. The old conventional symbols of Welshness have been consigned to the realm of the insane. There is no dignity left to the Welsh Mam; her suffering and tragedy are now complete. In this, Mrs Lewis is a symptom of the destruction of many families in post-industrial Wales.

In the context of the model of the ideal Welsh Mam, Mrs Lewis is a failure. She has failed as a wife to her husband and has failed to sustain the family and resolve their problems. She has not introduced her children to the finest aspects of Welsh culture and has not ensured that they respect morality, religion or even their fellow beings. Indeed, she has completely neglected her duty as a mother. Her punishment for not providing a reassuring home and ensuring that the children are raised to love the language, culture and the traditions of Wales is to descend into madness and bear witness to her children's destruction. *House of America* thus subverts the image of the iconic traditional Welsh Mam beyond recognition.

In this portrait the Welsh Mam at the end of the twentieth century is not an Angel of the Hearth. She is a shadow of her revered literary cousin, and although she is still a longsuffering woman she is no longer a strong, virtuous and selfless character. We can no longer depend on her to nurture a new generation of admirable Welsh people. Therefore, through this portrayal, an important milestone in the representation of the Welsh Mam, the ideal of the nineteenth century, is shattered and a new chapter opens in the history of the Welshwoman. Ed Thomas and Marc Evans's film offers a new mythology for contemporary Wales, and casts aside the apparently irrelevant values of the past. As Evans observed, 'I thought we were making something very modern, if not post-modern, whereas in fact we were having an argument with the past.'³⁶ Ed Thomas stated soon after the film's release, 'I find that our culture is sometimes very servile to stereotypes, and my argument is that we have to have the confidence to construct our own sense of who we are [. . .] To be Welsh at the end of the twentieth century you need to have imagination.'³⁷ Thus, with the filming of *House of America*, a new chapter opens in the history of the Welshwoman on screen.

35 Ibid., p. 139.

36 Marc Evans, 'Looking Forward, Looking Back' in Thomas, *Selected Work*, '95-'98, pp. 291-2.

37 "'Not much of a dream then is it?'" in Davies (ed.), pp. 117, 118.