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'A Matter of Individual Opinion and Feeling': The changing culture of mourning dress in the First World War

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ABSTRACT

Mourning dress, the typically black costume worn to mark a bereavement was once a well-established part of funeral and mourning culture in Britain. The First World War is generally understood to have caused a major breakdown in mourning practices; the explanations offered for this breakdown include patriotism, practicality, concern for morale, and respect for the war dead. This paper will address the changes that took place within the culture of mourning dress between 1914 and 1918, while simultaneously considering how attitudes towards death and the rituals associated with bereavement were altered by the conflict. This will include an analysis of the developments in fashionable mourning dress during the war, assessing changes both in aesthetics and etiquette, in an attempt to determine the reasons for the breakdown. This paper will also discuss what comfort the ritual of mourning dress offered the war widow, and what constituted 'war appropriate' mourning in wartime.

Introduction

Writing in July 1915, a journalist for society magazine *The Queen* commented that: 'extraordinarily modified as her dress is, there is no mistaking the young widow. She is, alas! a far too prominent personage just now.'¹ It is this 'extraordinary modification' of female mourning attire during the First World War in Britain that comes under question in this paper. The dramatic change in the appearance and role of mourning dress at this time has been commented upon by dress historians such as Lou Taylor, who claimed that 'it was the terrible slaughter of the First World War that undoubtedly caused the major breakdown in funeral and mourning etiquette'.² This paper seeks to establish how mourning dress—the typically black costume worn after the death of a relative—was changed by the war between 1914 and 1918, and why these changes took place. The details of these changes have not been analysed in any great detail elsewhere, so this paper offers a unique insight into the world of fashionable mourning dress during the war. It also attempts to establish the significance of mourning dress as a ritual for women who could not afford the latest fashionable styles.

In the limited literature available on this subject a few suggestions have been made as to *why* mourning dress changed at this time, but with little insight into *how* it changed.

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Within his analysis of mourning culture in twentieth-century Britain, Geoffrey Gorer has proposed that traditional black mourning was not widely worn during the war as it could appear depressing and weaken morale, both for those at home and soldiers returning on leave.³ Dress historians Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye have intimated that the reasons for change were more rooted in practicality: 'the rules of funeral and mourning etiquette were relaxed because many women working for the war effort were unable to adhere to them.'⁴ Finally, in the most comprehensive discussion of this subject, Lou Taylor has suggested that during the war it was felt that a different expression of grief was required to adequately mark the death of a soldier. Traditional mourning dress was not considered to be an appropriate expression of respect for those who had died fighting for their country.⁵

Within these three sources, and the few other works that tackle this subject,⁶ the same conclusion is drawn: that the cultural practice of mourning dress was forever altered by the First World War, and never recovered. This paper does not refute this, but seeks to add some depth to the discussion. The quotes cited above suggest that mourning dress was no longer considered to be a valued ritual, that it lost favour because it was thought to be irrelevant, impractical or disrespectful within the context of war. This paper argues that while there may be some truth in each of these statements, the function of mourning dress was more diverse and dynamic, and the ritual remained significant for many women. Furthermore, it hopes to show that by understanding mourning dress both as a material ritual and as a fashionable practice, it can be used to understand the emotional experiences, social concerns and public role of women who lived through the First World War.

This work is fundamentally a dress history study, and although it engages with broader historical narratives, the methods used are primarily suited to the study of dress objects and dress culture. The study of dress, and the relationship women had with their clothing, offers us an alternative interpretation of wartime life. The colour, form, fabric and ornamentation of a garment might not only signal the wearer's economic status but also her taste, cultural influences, political or religious affiliations and daily routine. Framing women's dress, both surviving garments and their representation in printed media, within this material culture framework helps us to understand the narrative strength of such objects and their power to communicate social and cultural information beyond their intended purpose. In the words of archaeologist Sarah Tarlow, 'If we find an ancient shoe [...] the least interesting thing it tells us is that people in the past had feet.'⁷

When studying fashion and dress there often exists a bias towards the upper classes; those who could afford to shop. Of the available source material for a dress history study, the garments that survive in museum collections are rarely those well-worn and repaired items that belonged to the lower classes, and the styles featured in magazines were aimed at those who could spend for pleasure rather than out of necessity. The wartime women's magazines and 'society' newspapers that were an invaluable source in the writing of this paper are no exception. However, it should be noted that many of the widely unaffordable styles featured in such magazines would have been aspired to by a broader demographic, and would have filtered down through cheap copies or home-made versions. Even for the upper classes, it is not possible to ascertain how closely the advice given in these magazines was followed, yet the content is indicative of the interests and concerns of the war generation, and the magazines offer an insightful commentary on the changes that took place in mourning dress culture at that time.

Mourning culture

To understand how mourning dress culture was changed by the war, it is important first to outline the style and etiquette associated with pre-war mourning, and its role within British culture. Historically, mourning dress was understood to indicate the changed social status of the widow while marking her chastity and piety,⁸ but it also had a long association with fashionable dress. Black had been the accepted colour of British mourning since the eighteenth century,⁹ and fashionable black mourning experienced a boom in popularity during the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ During this period, mourning clothes 'were made up in every nuance of style',¹¹ and were featured 'in the most prominent style publications'.¹²

The mourning wardrobe of the mid nineteenth century onwards was marked by strictly defined periods, each with firm guidelines that depended on the closeness of the relationship to the deceased. As with any trend in fashionable dress, the idealised version of mourning dress as dictated by these guidelines, and depicted in magazines, would only have been affordable for a small elite. But a version, however altered, would have been worn or aspired to by women of every class, the practice of mourning dress having reached even 'the very poorest levels of society' by the early twentieth century.¹³ That very little has been written on the mourning dress worn by widows of previous wars comes as no great surprise after reading Janis Lomas' work on the status and treatment of war widows. She notes that in the Victorian era, the wives of soldiers and sailors 'were thought to be, at worst, "drunken slatterns" and, at best, on a par with servants and therefore in need of "watching"'.¹⁴

While the war made a huge impact on mourning dress, and indeed other aspects of mourning culture, the developments that led to the eventual breakdown started long before 1914. A backlash against ostentatious Victorian mourning practices emerged around 1880 after many decades of extravagant mourning rituals, which had come to be regarded as wasteful and disrespectful. The *National Funeral and Mourning Reform Association* formed in 1875 and campaigned for 'moderation' and 'simplicity' instead of 'unnecessary show'.¹⁵ The primary motivation was to save expense, particularly for the poor, for whom a bereavement and the 'terror of inevitable expense' was a serious cause for concern.¹⁶ Another significant change in the roughly thirty-year period prior to the outbreak of war in 1914 was the decline in death rates in Britain. David Cannadine has suggested that the British of 1914 'were less intimately acquainted with death than any generation since the Industrial Revolution'.¹⁷

The shift in attitudes towards death that coincided with these developments has been written about by Sarah Tarlow, Pat Jalland, and David Cannadine. Tarlow has observed that the 'manner and location of remembering the dead' changed from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. She suggests that the associated practices evolved from 'the flamboyantly individual to the intensely personal', and moved 'from the cemetery to the home'. She adds that this shift 'gathered greater momentum' during the war.¹⁸ These sentiments are echoed in Pat Jalland's work on the subject, who further suggests that the developments were connected to changes in religious belief.¹⁹ The association between mourning dress and religion goes back, as noted by Lou Taylor, to the early years of the Christian Church.²⁰ The potential link between changes in religious belief and changes in mourning dress as impacted by the war have not been expanded upon within this article due to a lack

of evidence, but should relevant source material become available it would be interesting to see how the findings correspond with the conclusions drawn in this paper.

It does not seem surprising, given the death toll of the First World War, that attitudes towards death and bereavement, as well as religious belief, would be shaken at the very least. There were no comparable conflicts in terms of casualties or impact on everyday life in living memory when war broke out in 1914. While many thousands of families received the terrible news that loved ones had been killed, only in some cases were they returned a body to bury. Perhaps even more difficult to cope with was the uncertainty when men were reported as missing, and often never found. The rituals of bereavement and mourning had been established in a period of comparative peace; they relied on the tangible presence of a body, a known date of death, a site of burial to visit. For thousands of First World War soldiers a burial place was never identified.²¹ As Jalland and Cannadine have observed, during the war 'Victorian death practices seemed both inadequate and inappropriate, especially in the absence of bodies to bury'.²²

Jalland has also commented on the gender divide in mourning culture, suggesting that women 'experienced the emotions of loss more acutely and would demonstrate those feelings more openly'.²³ This included the observance of material rituals—mourning dress was worn almost exclusively by women²⁴—and so any changes in mourning culture could be presumed to have had a greater impact on women and the way they experienced bereavement. It is important to note that for a large portion of the female population the material rituals of mourning would have been unaffordable, however their loss was manifested. For those who could not afford to adhere to the rules of mourning dress, it could be assumed that the changes to etiquette wrought by war would have made little impact on their bereavement practices. However, this was not always the case. The subject is discussed further in the final part of this paper.

Fashionable mourning in the First World War

Despite growing dissention towards the traditional rituals of mourning, and the many varied challenges of wartime life, the subject of mourning dress remained present both in women's magazines and national newspapers between 1914 and 1918. In March 1915, *The Queen* magazine noted that the subject of mourning dress was 'absorbing far more than the usual share of attention [...] for very obvious reasons'.²⁵ Most department stores boasted a mourning section, and some businesses specialised solely in producing mourning dress in the latest fashionable styles. For those who wished to keep up with the latest trends in mourning, ample advice was offered in the fashion pages and correspondence columns of society magazines such as *The Queen*, *The Gentlewoman* and *The Lady's Pictorial*. These weekly 'society' magazines were aimed at a readership of middle and upper class women, and discussed such issues as etiquette, fashion, children, women's work and recent news. While some magazines chose to continue as if nothing unusual was going on, these three titles all altered their content and remained reasonably sensitive to the difficult circumstances of life in wartime. This included their discussion of mourning dress.

The magazines regularly advocated particular garments or suggested the best shops and tailors to frequent, yet the manner in which the subject of mourning was addressed suggests that selling the latest styles was not their sole intention. The mere presence of

mourning garments, displayed alongside the season's latest furs and millinery, speaks volumes about women's everyday familiarity with death and grief. The journalists acknowledged the exceptional circumstances of war and tried to help their readers, whether this meant advising on the most charming half-mourning frock for a dinner party, or relaxing the rules of mourning for those who needed distraction more than seclusion. In 1915 *The Queen* advised one reader to wear light mourning, 'under the circumstances' of her 'very sad case'. She was instructed to keep things as 'simple and plain as possible', and to 'drown [her] grief by helping others'.²⁶ Another woman bereaved three times by the conflict wrote to *The Queen* for advice on which mourning periods to follow, based on her relationship to each of the deceased. Not unfeeling, the magazine attempted assistance and added: 'We sympathise greatly with you in your threefold sorrow.'²⁷

The mourning ensembles illustrated in magazines varied in practicality, formality and affordability, but all reflected at least to a small degree the prevailing fashions in everyday dress. This was not a wartime innovation; mourning dress had long borne resemblance to the most popular styles of the day in structure and silhouette, with some obvious alterations. This relationship with popular fashion resulted in wartime mourning dress styles that featured layered skirts, tapered sleeves, asymmetric drapes, and apron style bodices. Buttons and braiding were common forms of ornamentation, as were sashes or other waist detailing. Certain details, such as colour, length, trim and accessories, separated mourning from everyday dress; but the silhouettes could be otherwise indistinguishable.

The Gentlewoman featured a mourning outfit in March 1915 that was decorated with military style braiding, a popular wartime trend that reflected the romanticism and hopeful heroism that surrounded all things military in the early stages of war.²⁸ The outfit was not an anomaly; a Manchester department store advertising their latest mourning collections in 1915 boasted a range that included military style collars, military braiding and smart military double-breasted coats.²⁹ This inclusion of military braiding appears particularly poignant and insensitive if, as was implied, worn by the widow or bereaved family member of a soldier killed at war. These styles were perhaps designed with the proud and patriotic widow in mind; those that wore mourning as a badge of pride. This was in keeping with the idealised behaviour that the state demanded of its war widows. They were expected to uphold the memory of their heroic husbands, to function as 'living symbols of the glorious dead',³⁰ regardless of their own needs or desires. Though the uptake of these styles cannot be known, it does seem unlikely that any less enthusiastic widows would wish to engage with such a romanticised notion of conflict in their bereavement practices.

The colours and fabrics of wartime mourning

The colours and fabrics associated with wartime mourning were well documented in magazines, newspapers and advertisements, and are revealing of the traditions and beliefs embedded in the practice. The fabric synonymous with nineteenth century mourning was crape: a crimped, dull silk with a notably matte finish. Its role and purpose would have been universally known; it was worn to signify a bereavement. This association was still well understood in 1915, when a journalist writing for

weekly journal *The Sketch* observed that the wearing of crape 'is certainly a protection against intrusive curiosity, as it is always significant of the loss of a near relative'.³¹ However, it seems that by the time war broke out it was no longer a prerequisite that widows must wear crape to indicate their status. *The Sketch* noted that it was 'now largely a matter for individual taste'.³² Courtaulds, who dominated the market through the 1800s, experienced a 55% value loss in profit of crape sales on the home market between 1903 and 1912.³³ Crape was generally considered to be ugly, uncomfortable, impractical,³⁴ and even detrimental to the health of the wearer.³⁵ Softer, more practical fabrics such as poplin and alpaca gained popularity over crape. One correspondent of *The Gentlewoman* seeking a fashionable and *patriotic* mourning fabric was advised in September 1914 that English-made crepe-de-chine, a softer and light-weight silk, was 'one of the very nicest mourning materials'.³⁶

It does not appear that there was any great change in attitudes towards the colours of mourning during the war. Black for mourning was introduced by the Christian church as early as the sixth century; as declared by *The Sketch* magazine in August 1915, 'in this country, black has always been associated with grief'.³⁷ Black was worn for full mourning, black armbands were worn by bereaved soldiers at the front, and it was even possible to purchase special black corsets or black crepe de chine underwear specifically for mourning, suggesting that the significance of the colour was taken as seriously as it had ever been. Greys, soft purples and white were worn in the latter stages of mourning. *The Gentlewoman*, advising a correspondent on a half-mourning dinner dress, suggested a 'soft pale grey frock, with silver delicately introduced'.

Black, grey, purple and white were not only worn for mourning. It was stated in *The Gentlewoman* in October 1914 that: 'It seems almost useless to talk about colour, since so much black is worn',³⁸ and a year later, black was still 'more worn than anything today', according to *The Queen*.³⁹ Black was a fashionable and practical colour in which garments were widely available. It was worn across age, class and gender, and journalists observed that the colour was in keeping with the general mood of a country at war. It was commented in *The Lady's Pictorial* that 'unrelieved black [...] in these days of war, proclaims a nation's, as well as a woman's, loss of one of her fighting men'.⁴⁰ It was also advised that the wearing of black was a 'courteous' choice 'for the sake of the feelings of others'.⁴¹

A journalist writing for *The Queen* in April 1915 commented on the practice of buying and wearing mourning as a pre-emptive gesture, not to denote a bereavement, but to avoid the fruitless purchase of colourful clothes that would be rendered redundant should a relative be killed in action. 'The luckiest of us goes through spells of short mourning, if nothing deeper, these days, and greys, purples, black, and white combinations are bought by many for prudence' sake for their spring outfits'.⁴² Her words of warning would only have been of relevance to those who could afford to purchase seasonal wardrobes, but her intention in part was to save expense. The article illustrates the climate of impending bereavement; it seems that for some British women widowhood was not only dreaded, it was expected. Far from being avoided to keep up morale, as has been suggested elsewhere, these examples indicate that black was widely worn and for a variety of reasons, not just by women in mourning. The colour appears synonymous with the home front, as khaki was for the fighting fronts; worn not only for personal bereavement, but for a nation bereaved.

Wartime mourning etiquette

The complex etiquette of mourning dress was discussed with surprising regularity in society magazines during the war. The wealthier readers of these publications would have been very familiar with the rules; the periods of mourning with their associated restrictions on clothing, jewellery and lifestyle were precisely laid out in the decades preceding 1914. It is easy to see how these rules, meticulous and pernickety, would seem ridiculous and outdated to many in the context of war. For many, they would be irrelevant and impossible to follow due to the associated costs. Perhaps in an attempt to balance tradition with the harsh new realities of war, the advice on etiquette printed in magazines became increasingly confused.

An example of relatively straightforward advice was offered in weekly magazine *The Sketch* in August 1915, where it was noted that changes in mourning dress were 'particularly marked in widows' mourning, the period of which has been reduced from two years to eighteen months with half-mourning for a few months more'.⁴³ Less helpful was the advice given by *The Queen*, which differed month-by-month. In January 1915, for example, one correspondent was advised that 'the period of mourning is twelve months, and you can either wear half-mourning after ten months or [...] eight months',⁴⁴ while a year later they advised another that:

the longest period of mourning is two years: black should be worn for a year and nine months and half-mourning for three months [...] Diamonds may be worn before gold, pearls before colour stones, the latter after the first year of mourning.⁴⁵

The most insightful comment from *The Queen* came in April 1915, when another correspondent was informed that:

mourning in its every phase has come to be much more a matter of individual opinion and feeling than was hitherto the case. Rules that were adamant in bygone days are now waived aside.⁴⁶

For those who could afford to follow the rules of mourning it would seem that, like the dress itself, mourning etiquette was slowly adapting to suit the wartime lifestyle. However, the discrepancies between these examples are illustrative of the complex and ever changing attitudes towards mourning dress conventions at this time, fuelled by increasingly diverse opinions as to the purpose and relevance of the practice within the context of war. The idea that mourning had become a matter of 'individual opinion and feeling' was contradicted by the complicated and severe advice of a year later. Despite the social, cultural and emotional upheaval wrought by involvement in a global conflict, the often-confusing Victorian rules of mourning were still evident in the mid-war years.

Wartime developments

The changes in both the appearance and etiquette of mourning dress that occurred between 1914 and 1918 were neither immediate nor drastic, but part of a gradual evolution influenced in part by the natural progression of dress trends, and in part by the very particular circumstances of war. The commentary in wartime magazines would suggest that it was the multitude of *young* war widows that made the most significant impact on

mourning dress culture at this time. Angela Smith has suggested that the treatment of widows and their role in society had been set, understandably, on the assumption that widows were older women. Yet it was 'highly likely' that war widows would be 'much younger'.⁴⁷ Men as young as 18 could enlist, and consequently the equivalent generation of women faced widowhood. These younger widows, regardless of class, would have had expectations of long and active lives ahead of them. As pointed out by Geoffrey Gorer, it was no longer 'socially realistic' to expect that all widows would renounce their interest in having an emotional or sexual life,⁴⁸ or that they would exile themselves from work or social occasions.

The Queen commented in May 1915 that 'young widows are especially adventurous, and have broken a vast deal of ground'.⁴⁹ One journalist claimed to be most 'struck' by the growing trend for individuality in mourning dress, and her comments offer an insight into the gradual fragmentation of mourning traditions:

All the old firm and fast decrees appear to have vanished into thin air [...] The dainty white weeds are still worn but remain correct, according to tradition only, so far as the cuffs are concerned, considerable licence being taken with the collar.⁵⁰

In July of that year it was observed that young widows 'appear to have entirely discarded the conventional weeds'.⁵¹

However, it was not only the comparative youth of war widows that necessitated change in fashionable mourning dress. Many upper-class women found themselves working for the first time as a part of the increased professional and charitable female contribution to the war effort. As a result, magazines needed to advise their readers on mourning dress that was adapted to suit busier and more physically active lives. It was observed by journalists that 'simplicity, unobtrusiveness, excellence of cut' and 'good materials' were now associated with mourning dress, and in August 1915 *The Sketch* commented that mourning wear in recent years had become lighter, and 'more becoming in character'.⁵² A quote from *The Queen* towards end of the war in August 1918 highlights this change in lifestyle that was experienced by some of Britain's widows:

Seclusion is, at the present day, of the briefest, and many young widows resume their usual occupations and engagements in this time of war at a very early date, often six weeks after their bereavement, if the interests of their work demand it.⁵³

An October 1914 cover of French fashion magazine *Le Petit Echo de la Mode* appears to show nurses working while wearing mourning;⁵⁴ however, it should be noted that this author has found no evidence of British women wearing mourning dress, or altering their uniforms to denote a bereavement, in any workplace during the war.

Relaxations of the previously rigid mourning dress regulations included shorter hemlines and lower necklines. It was mentioned in *The Queen* that a 'small V-shaped décolletage is quite permissible',⁵⁵ a stylistic detail seen in the illustration of a c.1917 mourning dress available from Miss Bowers, a Glasgow based mourning specialist (see [Figure 1](#)). The lower 'V' neckline is also evident on a half-mourning dress dated 1916–1920, now in the National Trust collection at Killerton House (see [Figure 2](#)). The lavender half-mourning dress has a sheer black overlay in matte silk, and white bands on the hem, sleeves and neckline. The silhouette is typically fashionable for the era, with a low calf-length hem and an emphasised waist. Both physically and aesthetically, the dress fits the description



Figure 1. "Mourning from Miss Bowers" in *The Gentlewoman*, March 17, 1917. With kind permission of the National Museums of Scotland.

of the simpler, modern mourning garments that were popular with younger widows. It therefore helps to prove the existence of such garments beyond the pages of magazines. The white bands on the dress were quite possibly added at later stages by the wearer, to indicate the progression away from bereavement and towards normal life. Signs of wear, and the rough tacking stitches holding the now damaged ribbons in place, are indicative of the emotion imbued in this object.



Figure 2. Half mourning dress c.1916–1920, Killerton House 1365782 © National Trust Collections.

This dress is the only known preserved item of First World War mourning dress.⁵⁶ It is a great pity that such garments have lost their stories; we do not know who wore it, when, or why, and that so few items of wartime mourning have been saved. It is understandable, however, that the widows and bereaved mothers of the war would not wish to preserve the garments so intrinsically connected with grief and loss. Perhaps the lack of such garments says more than their survival ever could.

War-appropriate mourning

While the prescribed colours and codes of mourning appear to have been well established, it is difficult to assess whether and how these material rituals provided comfort to the bereaved women of the First World War. Furthermore, it could be questioned whether the wearing of mourning dress was an appropriate response to a war death. The plight of war widows, and particularly those of the lower or working classes, has been addressed in the work of Janis Lomas,⁵⁷ and more recently Angela Smith.⁵⁸ While neither author has written specifically about dress, their analysis of the financial hardship and social pressures faced by widows clearly illustrates that for many, what to wear could be presumed to be the least of their worries.

The possibility that mourning dress could hold any comfort or emotional significance for the recently bereaved was rejected by the historian David Cannadine, who addressed the issue in his 1981 article 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain':

It remains undemonstrated exactly how—if at all—the elaborate rituals of mourning actually helped to assuage the grief of survivors [...] At the most trivial level, even the wearing of mourning clothes might be more of a sartorial torture than it was psychologically therapeutic.

He further suggested that the 'ostentatious wearing of black' prevented widows from being 'treated as normal human beings'.⁵⁹ It could be argued that the emotional benefits of ritual are not something that can be tangibly demonstrated, as demanded by Cannadine, and that mourning rituals played a more intangible role. The idea that mourning dress was not a valuable practice suggests a hierarchy of appropriate mourning rituals, in which dress is deemed frivolous within the context of conflict.

Whether mourning dress, or indeed any other ritual of mourning, was an appropriate response to the many deaths brought about by the First World War is debatable. As Jay Winter has observed, 'how healing occurs, and what quietens embitterment and alleviates despair can never fully be known', but it is the 'responsibility' of historians to ask the questions.⁶⁰ Perhaps in this case the more relevant questions to ask would be whether the mourning rituals brought any comfort to the bereaved, whether it was felt to be a fitting tribute to the deceased, and whether it was important that these rituals were specific to a war, as opposed to a civilian, death. That these rituals were changed by the war suggests that the latter was indeed significant, and the question of comfort could only be fully answered by those who experienced a bereavement during the war. Ensuring that a tribute to the dead was 'fitting' may come down to the question of patriotism. For women to have 'given a man' to the fight would most probably have been considered patriotic, and it was felt important that the 'noble endurance' of these women was properly recognised.⁶¹ Mourning dress was one way in which this sacrifice could be visibly manifested. Interestingly, for some German soldiers and their families, mourning dress was considered *unpatriotic*. Claudia Siebrecht has written about soldiers sending letters from the front to their wives and mothers asking them not to wear mourning dress should they be killed, to show that their bereavement was a 'proud' one, and that they shared the same ideals of sacrifice.⁶² A not entirely dissimilar conclusion was reached by a number of British women at the very start of the war.

The subject of a patriotic and war-appropriate mourning was widely discussed in the contemporary press. One particular suggestion, the wearing of black, white or purple mourning armbands, was debated in a series of letters published in *The Times*. On 17 August 1914, Mrs Edward Lyttleton, wife of the headmaster of Eton School, suggested that 'usual' mourning should be dispensed with and people should instead wear a purple armband on their left arm to represent their mourning for a loved one killed at war.⁶³ Days later, the Duchess of Devonshire and a group of her peers proposed that a white armband would 'express the pride we feel in knowing that those who are nearest to us and dearest have given their lives in their country's cause'. The women wrote that they all had 'near relations serving with the colours', and should those relations be killed in service, they would 'not show our sorrow as for those who came to a less glorious end'.

There is unfortunately very little evidence as to whether either suggestion was adopted by the British public. Only one mention has been found, in a Scottish newspaper, of an armband actually being worn as an expression of mourning in January 1915, though in

this case the armband was white with two black stripes at the edges. In this story it was pointed out that mourning armbands were 'not yet very familiar in Dundee', and that 'quite a number of people prefer the old fashioned mourning in heavy black'.⁶⁴ While the suggestion was praised theoretically within some other newspapers, it was commented in February 1915 that 'the white band is never seen',⁶⁵ and a writer for *The Sketch* went so far as to claim that 'the suggestion died of inanition. It scarcely aroused interest.'⁶⁶

It is clear from the scope of this debate that, while the women proposing the armbands had patriotic ideals and sensible concerns about saving expenditure, they had not considered the emotional significance or material role of mourning dress in the grieving process. A printed rebuttal to these letters, which included the voice of Miss Henderson, a Red Cross worker from Sutton Coldfield, showed that some British women did not welcome the suggestion. Her words are a powerful reminder that the purpose of ritual could mean very different things to different people:

Anyone who has worked among the poor knows that to rob them of the right of donning mourning for their dead would be to leave them very poor indeed. The average rich person has not the slightest idea of the enormous importance that working women attach to mourning. They will even starve themselves and their children in order to obtain money for its purchase. To urge them at such a time to dispense with mourning is to add a sting to the terrors of death.⁶⁷

It is unfortunate that the social background of Miss Henderson is not known, but in her letter she gave a voice to working-class women; however correct or misguided her chosen words we will never know. She also divided the genders in her discussion of mourning dress culture, emphasising the emotional significance of mourning dress within women's lives, yet going on to suggest that a simple black band would suffice for men and children. This reinforces the idea that the rituals and expressions of mourning were more significant for women. It is clear that Miss Henderson passionately believed that women would suffer if they could not wear mourning dress, and that its power, however intangible, should not be underestimated by anyone.

It has already been observed in this paper that there would have been many widows who could not afford mourning dress. This does not signify, however, that they would not wish to wear it, or that it would have no meaning for them. More affordable alternatives to the styles in magazines were available, for example to make your own, to dye existing garments black, or to wear black clothes donated by wealthier women through various schemes. The cost did not stop some women, who considered the ritual of mourning more important than financial hardship. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* printed a story in July 1916 in which a Judge reprimanded a parent (presumably a mother) for having spent £14 she did not have on putting herself and a 'large family of girls' into full mourning. The Judge was highly critical of the practice, calling it 'shocking', 'ostentation' and 'mere parade'.⁶⁸

The debate that surrounded war-appropriate mourning dress highlights the challenges that were faced by a culture adapting to the realities of war. The war widow as a 'prominent personage' was a new addition to British society, and the concern expressed by women seeking to wear the correct mourning dress perhaps represents the uncertainty they felt about their new status. It is clear that there was a class divide in the experience of war widows,⁶⁹ but all were pressured to varying extents to appear patriotic, loyal, humble

and good. As an immediate visual symbol of their status, perhaps mourning dress became a tool to help them navigate the complex life of the war widow.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discover how the First World War changed mourning dress in Britain, and what these changes meant for women bereaved by that conflict.

The available evidence has resulted in a documentation of the 'fashionable' mourning dress worn primarily by the upper classes, but it has also been shown that many of these changes impacted on a wider social group of women. These changes included the relaxation of previously strict rules, which never regained authority in the post-war period. Wearing an armband may not have been the norm, but it seems it was an acceptable substitute for traditional mourning within the context of war. When full mourning dress was worn the style became more relaxed, in keeping with the fashions of the day and with the changing expectations women may have had of their clothing. Most significantly, personal choice played a more dominant role in the wartime culture of mourning dress. Even fashion journalists, accustomed to dictating what should and should not be worn, acknowledged that it was important for women to make their own decisions about what they wore to express their grief. The tight rules that had previously controlled mourning had moved from a hierarchical system to something more idiosyncratic; perhaps to the surprise of those titled ladies who had outlined their own vision of war-appropriate mourning for the country in August 1914. Echoing the more general change in attitudes towards death at this time, mourning was no longer primarily associated with power and social status but became 'a matter of individual opinion and feeling'.

This paper has also sought to contextualise these developments within a wider discussion of the 'appropriate response' to war fatalities, and changing attitudes towards death and bereavement. In his denunciation of mourning dress, Cannadine asked 'What point was there in donning widows' weeds when the husband lay mutilated, unidentified and unburied on the fields of Flanders?'⁷⁰ It is understandable that for many the convoluted etiquette of mourning dress seems an entirely inappropriate response to the unspeakable deaths of so many young men. If this were the case, it could be concluded that the culture of mourning dress diminished during the war because it was no longer considered a helpful or functional practice. However, this paper has found that there was comfort in the very ritual and restraint that rendered mourning dress ridiculous in others' eyes. The remnants of Victorian mourning culture, the collected visual symbols of colour, fabric and function, created a code that transcended age and class. Whether fashionable or humble, mourning dress still functioned as a semiotic object: it transmitted a message to the world that the wearer was recently bereaved and in an altered emotional state. For many, the ritual and material traditions of mourning dress were considered an integral part of the grieving process. What right have we to criticise the mourning practices that may have brought comfort to even just a few women.

Mourning dress in this paper has been discussed both as a fashionable activity and as a material ritual. Perhaps it is this duality that renders the relevance and purpose of mourning dress so unclear within the context of war. It is clear that many people wanted to establish war-specific mourning rituals, perhaps to delineate a departure from the fashion system, but cultural practices cannot be altered overnight. For Jay Winter, mourning is

defined as ‘a set of acts and gestures through which survivors express grief and pass through stages of bereavement’.⁷¹ Mourning dress and other visual symbols of mourning continued to play a part in this process throughout the war. Indeed these material rituals were more, and not less, significant at this time when so many women were never returned a body to mourn. Without the usual activities that followed a bereavement, such as dressing the body or attending a funeral, mourning dress could provide an alternative point of focus, a tangible manifestation, an outward expression of grief.⁷² The commemorative war memorials that erupted around the country in the post-war period offered sites of mourning that represented the shared experience of grief. As a more individual response, mourning dress allowed the bereaved to make an immediate and visible reaction to a war death. This small and personal act of commemoration depended on their agency alone.

Notes

1. *The Queen* (July 3 1915), p. 24.
2. Lou Taylor (1983) *Mourning Dress* (London: George Allen & Unwin), p. 266.
3. Geoffrey Gorer (1965) *Death, Grief & Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: The Cresset Press, 1965), p. 6.
4. Valerie Mendes & Amy de la Haye (1999) *20th Century Fashion* (London: Thames & Hudson), p. 52.
5. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, p. 269.
6. The only other works that give noteworthy attention to the subject are an article by Sonia A. Bedikian titled ‘The Death of Mourning’, in which Bedikian pinpoints the First World War as the period in which mourning culture declined, and the chapter titled ‘Widow’s Weeds’ within Lucy Adlington’s 2013 publication *Great War Fashion*, which offers some anecdotal insight into how mourning fashions changed through the war period. Sonia A. Bedikian (2008) The Death of Mourning: from Victorian crepe to the little black dress, *Journal of Death and Dying*, pp. 35–52. Lucy Adlington (2013) *Great War Fashion* (Gloucestershire: The History Press), pp. 167–173.
7. Sarah Tarlow (2010) The Archaeology of Emotion and Affect, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41, pp. 169–185.
8. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, p. 65.
9. *Ibid.* pp. 251–252.
10. The period is well documented in Lou Taylor’s *Mourning Dress*.
11. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, p. 150.
12. Bedikian, The Death of Mourning, p. 37.
13. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, p. 120.
14. Janis Lomas (2000) ‘Delicate Duties’: issues of class and respectability in government policy towards the wives and widows of British soldiers in the era of the great war, *Women’s History Review*, 9(1), p. 137.
15. David Cannadine (1981) War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain, in Joachim Whaley (Ed) *Mirrors of Mortality: studies in the social history of death* (London: Europa), p. 191.
16. *Ibid.* p. 191.
17. *Ibid.* p. 196.
18. Sarah Tarlow (1997) An Archaeology of Remembering: death, bereavement and the First World War, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 7(1), p. 105.
19. Pat Jalland (2010) *Death in War and Peace: loss and grief in England, 1914–1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 1–2.
20. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, p. 66.
21. Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, p. 49.

22. Ibid. p. 8.
23. Ibid. p. 3.
24. Mourning dress for men lessened through the nineteenth century, with only a crape armband worn beyond 1900: Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, pp. 134–136.
25. *The Queen* (13 March 1915), p. 446.
26. *The Queen* (13 February 1915), p. 309.
27. *The Queen* (1 April 1916), p. 524.
28. It should be noted that the romantic military trend did not last far beyond 1916.
29. *The Manchester Guardian*, 26 November 1915, p. 4.
30. Angela Smith (2013) *Discourses Surrounding British Widows of the First World War* (London: Bloomsbury), p. 146.
31. *The Sketch* (18 August 1915), p. 136.
32. Ibid.
33. D. C. Coleman (1969) *Courtaulds, An Economic and Social History: volume ii rayon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 72.
34. Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, p. 204.
35. Cannadine, *War and Death*, p. 190.
36. *The Gentlewoman* (26 September 1914), p. 356.
37. *The Sketch* (18 August 1915), p. 136.
38. *The Gentlewoman* (31 October 1914), p. 504.
39. *The Queen* (28 August 1915), p. 399.
40. *Lady's Pictorial* (7 August 1915), p. 199.
41. *The Manchester Guardian*, 26 October 1914, p. 3.
42. *The Queen* (10 April 1915), p. 610.
43. *The Sketch* (18 August 1915), p. 136.
44. *The Queen* (30 January 1915), p. 187.
45. *The Queen* (1 April 1916), p. 524.
46. *The Queen* (17 April 1915), p. 651.
47. Smith, *Discourses*, p. 5.
48. Gorer, *Death, Grief & Mourning*, p. 6.
49. *The Queen* (29 May 1915), p. 928.
50. Ibid.
51. *The Queen* (3 July 1915), p. 31. The term 'weeds' in these examples refers to the trimmings or finish associated with formal mourning outfits.
52. *The Sketch* (18 August 1915), p. 136.
53. *The Queen* (17 August 1918), p. 137.
54. *Le Petit Echo de la Mode*, 25 October 1914, cover.
55. *The Queen* (29 May 1915), p. 928.
56. There may well be others that are not yet known to this author.
57. Janis Lomas (2000) 'Delicate Duties'; (1994) 'So I Married Again': letters from British widows of the First and Second World Wars, *History Workshop* no. 38, pp. 218–227.
58. Smith, *Discourses*.
59. Cannadine, *War and Death*, p. 190.
60. Jay Winter (1995) *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The great war in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 116.
61. Susan R. Grayzel (1999) *Women's Identities at War: gender, motherhood, and politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press), p. 228.
62. Claudia Siebrecht (2014) The Female Mourner: gender and the moral economy of grief during the First World War, in Christa Hämmerle Birgitta Bader-Zaar & Oswald Überegger (Eds) *Gender and the First World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 144–162.
63. *The Times*, 22 August 1914, p. 3.
64. *Dundee, Perth, Forfar, and Fife's People's Journal* (23 January 1915), p. 8.
65. *The Plymouth Evening News*, 20 February 1915, p. 2.

66. *The Sketch* (18 August 1915), p. 136.
67. *The Times*, 2 September 1914, p. 4.
68. *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 29 July 1916, p. 7.
69. Lomas, 'Delicate Duties', p. 128.
70. Cannadine, *War and Death*, p. 218.
71. Winter, *Sites of Memory*, p. 29.
72. *The Times*, 14 December 1914, p. 11.

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Notes on contributor

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