

THE TRAP RE-BAITED :

MOURNING DRESS 1860 - 1890

by Anne Buck

The title does not mean that the subject will not be treated seriously. We who live in an age which can give food for works like The Loved One and The American Way of Death are not in such a state of rational superiority that we can ridicule the crape-laden women of the late nineteenth century.

Mourning dress has been worn for centuries all over the world taking many different forms. In England, between 1860 and 1890, it did not show divergence from the general fashion of its time; the mourning element was expressed by the wearing of black materials, by the draping of garments with crape, and by the wearing of one or two accessories peculiar to mourning dress. As far as men's dress was concerned, most of their normal dress was black, so mourning appeared through the third expression, the wearing of mourning accessories, often of the mourning material, crape.

The most extreme form of mourning, unmistakable in its depth and duration was the mourning dress of the widow, "The first degree of mourning is of course that of a widow: the dress is always of paramatta entirely covered with crape to within an inch or two of the waist, the crape being in one piece, not in separate tucks, for the first nine months. If after this period it requires renewing, it may be put on in two deep tucks, with about an inch space between them, but must come up as high on the skirt as before. The sleeves are tight to the arm, the body entirely covered with crape, and deep lawn cuffs and collar are worn. The cap was formerly constructed so as almost entirely to conceal the hair and to fasten under the chin; but this severe style is now considerably mitigated, and many different shapes are worn, the Marie Stuart, so familiar to us in the portraits of her Majesty, being the most general. It must be worn for a year and a day. The outdoor dress has a jacket or mantle of paramatta very heavily trimmed with crape: neither fur nor velvet can be worn. The bonnet is entirely crape, with a widow's cap tacked inside it, and with a crape veil with a deep hem. This constitutes the dress for the first twelve months.



Figure 1. Widow's First mourning. The Queen 6 July 1872

After that time has expired, silk heavily trimmed with crape, may be worn for six months, after which the crape can be considerably lessened, and jet trimmings used to brighten the toilette. After nine months, plain black, with jet ornaments, is permissible; and after two years mourning may be laid aside, though it is in much better taste to wear half-mourning for at least six months more. Many widows never put on colours again. Of course during the first year of mourning a widow can neither accept invitations nor frequent places of public amusement; a widow's cap in such scenes has a most incongruous appearance. After the year has elapsed she may, if so inclined, gradually return to society."¹ (Fig. 1)

1. The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, 1876 (ii) p. 66



Figure 2.
Mourning costumes
The Ladies' Treasury
November 1890

Widow's dress of crepe cloth or real crepe over a back lining.
Dress for second mourning cashmere with a band of crepe and crepe trimmings.

Ordinary mourning costume of corded silk or woollen fabric, no crepe except on the hat.

The mourning worn after the first twelve months, while the crepe was gradually lessened, was called second mourning. Ordinary mourning was the third stage when crepe was completely discarded. (Fig. 2) This was followed by half-mourning, white, grey or lilac trimmed with black. Black and white were deeper mourning than black and grey.²

The cap, of white crepe, was worn for a year and a day, but by many widows, amongst them Queen Victoria, for half a lifetime. This with its long white streamers was the most distinctive feature of the widow's mourning, but the different shapes worn during the period quietly reflect contemporary fashion in hats and capes. Long black veils, long enough to reach the heels of the wearer hung from the crepe-bonnets.³ (Fig. 3)

From the mourning of the widow the depth and duration of mourning is scaled down according to the degree of relationship. A child mourned a parent, a parent a child, in paramatta and crepe for three months, silk and crepe for another three, then three months of black without crepe and three months of half mourning. For a brother or sister the full period was six months, three with crepe and three without.⁴

Wives mourned relatives of their husbands as their own and this spread to further complimentary mourning, by a second wife for the first wife's near relations, and by mothers-in-law for the mothers of their sons and daughters-in-law.

The social convention had now impressed itself rigidly on an increasing number of people. Letters to women's journals reveal that the etiquette of

2. The Ladies' Treasury, 1881, p. 168

3. *ibid*, p. 223

4. The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, 1876 (ii) p. 66-7

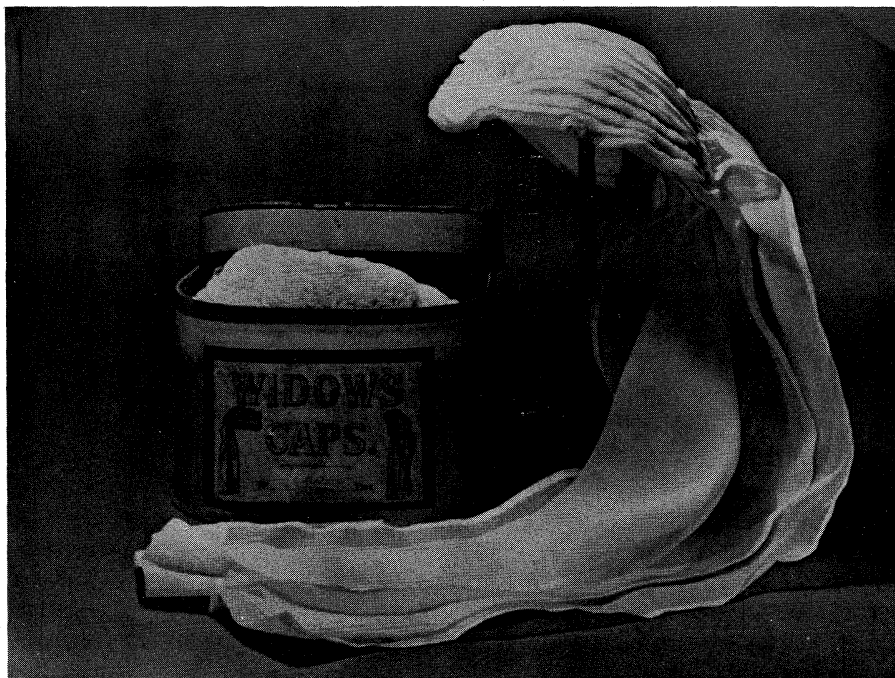


Figure 3. Widows' Caps 1880-1900

Stiffened white muslin and white crape. Gallery of English Costume, Manchester. (Manchester City Art Galleries).

mourning was a matter of concern to many who, not accustomed to its rules and restrictions, were anxious not to transgress them. In a single year, 1879, Sylvia's Home Journal has a question on this subject in almost every issue, "How soon may I wear second mourning for my father who died on second February 1878, and is it wrong to wear a little white now, such as a border, bonnet, collar or white neck scarf?"⁵ There seems almost a competitive element in mourning; this journal gives nine months in crape for a parent, black for six months and six months for half mourning,⁶ a total of a year and nine months, adding nine months to that of the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine 1876.

A delicate situation arose when a wedding broke in on mourning. Fortunately white was also acceptable as a mourning colour. The Ladies' Treasury, in 1881, recommended, "The wreath wholly white, not a tinge of colour, no green leaves. The veil white with a very deep hem. The gloves white sewed down the back with black".⁷ White mourning was also permissible in other circumstances. In Mrs. Gaskell's North and South (1855) Edith Lennox wears white

crape for evening when she is in mourning for her aunt's husband, though Margaret his daughter still wears black. Mrs. Gaskell gives the same advice to her own daughter, Marianne, in 1859 "and pure entire white is mourning for girls in an evening". In very hot weather white dresses with black trimming might be worn as a concession to the heat.⁸

Even young children did not escape. Queen Victoria was indignant to hear that her daughter in Prussia was not putting her young children into mourning for the death of a relative, "I think it is quite wrong that the nursery are not in mourning, at any rate I should make them wear grey or white or drab and baby wear white and lilac, not colours. That I think shocking". and later wrote that "Darling Beatrice looks lovely in her black silk and crape dress". Beatrice was then three years old.⁹ Elizabeth Sellars, nine years old when her grandfather died, "was at once clothed in black cashmere, so lavishly trimmed about with crape that I must have looked like a miniature widow of that period (c. 1878) without the cap".¹⁰ (Fig. 4)

5. Sylvia's Home Journal, 1879, p. 365

6. *ibid.*, p. 289

7. The Ladies' Treasury, 1881, p. 168

8. The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, 1832 - 1865. Ed. J. A. V. Chapple and A. Pollard, 1966 p. 556

9. Dearest Child, Letters between Queen Victoria and the Princess Royal 1858 - 1861. Ed. R. Fulford, 1964, June 1859.

10. Edinburgh's Child. Elizabeth Sellars, 1961

But by 1880 the convention, as far as children were concerned, was being relaxed and, as so often in the history of dress, children were the pioneers of change. "It is desirable that children should be put into mourning dress as seldom as possible; only in fact for the very nearest relatives. The little children do not understand it and it is absurd to invest them with the signs of grief they cannot feel. Absence of a positive colour is quite sufficient mourning for children".¹¹

Mourning was often of very long duration because of a sequence of deaths in the family. The effect this had of retarding fashion for many people, is revealed by other letters in the journals, "Will you kindly advise me how to alter a dress I had five years ago which I have had to put by on account of mourning".¹² This putting aside of dresses may account for some almost unworn examples which are now preserved in museums and also for dresses which have been altered several years after their first making.

Cashmere or paramatta, another twill material, which could be all wool, silk and wool or cotton and wool, were the main fabrics of first mourning. By the 1880's paramatta was "now only used for mourning" and crape cloth, requiring no crape, was another material produced especially for mourning at this time. Black silk and poplin could be worn for second mourning, but alpaca and velvet only when the crape phases of mourning were past.

Crape, a silk fabric of plain weave with a hard-twisted yarn, crimped by heat, was the staple fabric of grief, a distinctive and universally recognised sign of the fairly recent loss of a near relative. It was consumed in such large quantities that it made large fortunes particularly for the firm of Courtauld during this period, "the demand for it in this country by the first mourning establishments is so great that the supply does not always equal the requirement".¹³ By 1888-9 the English demand was beginning to decline but there was still a European market for what was there known as "crêpe Anglaise". There were several qualities of crape, single, double or quadruple, according to the number of threads used. The pattern of the crimping changed a little during the period, mainly by the introduction of a "spot" into the figure in the 1870s.¹⁴ A less expensive variety known as "Albert" crape was introduced in the 1870s,

"the common kind of crape is called The Albert which is an inferior and coarser material mixed with cotton and therefore not suitable for really good mourning".¹⁵ Other journals, however, less upper-class in outlook than The Queen, recommended this less expensive Albert crape.

The demand for mourning led to the establishment of special stores or departments of stores which dealt with nothing else. Jay's General Mourning House had been established in Regent Street in 1841, Peter Robinson opened a mourning department, Court and General Mourning House there, known as black Peter Robinson to distinguish it from the parent house, and Nicholsons also had their Argyll General Mourning and Mantle Warehouse in Regent Street.¹⁶

The working hours and conditions of dressmakers revealed in the Report of the Children's Employment Commission of 1862, mercifully show some alleviation of the appalling conditions revealed in the Report on the Employment of Women of 1843. There the medical evidence recorded case after case of severe damage to eyesight and even loss of sight amongst dressmakers who sewed without respite; and the sewing of black materials often in poor light for hour after hour to complete a mourning order in time aggravated all the normal evils. In 1862 conditions and working hours varied in different establishments, the difference made to working hours by mourning orders also varied. Kendal Milne of Manchester, with working hours of 8 a. m. to 9 p. m. said that overtime for mourning orders was slight. The head of a Liverpool mourning warehouse said the same; his hands were stated to work from 9 a. m. to 8 p. m., the shortest working day given for dressmakers in the Report. Workers in a shop with a special mourning department usually worked less overtime than those in general dressmaking establishments. At Jay's "the ordinary excess of work never carries on longer than from 8.30 p. m. to 10 p. m." But Miss Bramwell, who was in charge of a hostel in Great Marlborough Street, said that "in a large establishment where a great deal of mourning is made they work from 8 or 9 till 11 p. m. all the year round". The reporter, Mr. Lord, summarised, "Mourning orders seem to be in every way especially trying; they are usually in excess of the ordinary week's work and the time allowed for their completion is too frequently very short so that an es-

11. *How to Dress Well on a Shilling a Day* by Sylvia, c. 1875, p. 125

12. *Sylvia's Home Journal*, 1879, p. 109

13. *The Queen*, 6 July 1872

14. *A History of Courtauld's* by C. H. Ward Jackson, 1941

15. *The Queen*, 6 July 1872

16. *Shops and Shopping* by Allison Adburgham, 1964 p. 67



Figure 4. Child in crape trimmed dress and hat, c. 1870

pecial source of fatigue is added to work essentially dreary and depressing in itself".

Although society did not hesitate to exploit the widow in employment, she often appears as a romantic and idealised figure in the novels of the time, woman at her most helpless and dependent. The widow's cap was a symbol of this, giving a halo of pathos to the wearer, "Poor Eleanor Bold", says Trollope in *Barchester Towers*, "How well does that widow's cap become her". In *Middlemarch* Dorothea Casaubon's maid, Tantripp, may speak with forthright commonsense about her mistress's devotion to

her crape-laden dress, but succumbs to the joint appeal of Dorothea and a widow's bonnet, "Most thankful I shall be to see you with a couple o' pounds worth less of crape... there's a reason in mourning as I've always said and three folds at the bottom of your skirt and a good plain quilling in your bonnet - and if anybody looked like an angel it's you in a net quilling - is what is consistent for a second year". Tantripp would not go against the usage of society, but was against encouraging male vanity, even when it was dead, "and if anybody was to marry me flattering himself I should wear those hijeous weepers

two years for him, he'd be deceived by his own vanity, that's all". But Tantripp is not a romantic heroine. In wearing her weeds, cherishing them as a link with the husband she had lost, the widow was showing herself a wife par excellence, if only she could be persuaded to relinquish them. Both Eleanor Bold and Dorothea Casaubon are no longer widows at the end of the story. Amabel, a widow of twenty one, in Charlotte Yonge's Heir of Redclyffe saw her second mourning as the dress she would wear for life as she reluctantly left off her first mourning of widow's cap, veil and crape, "with a suppressed sigh Amabel dressed for the first time without her weeds, which she had promised to leave off on Laura's wedding day... so she put on such a dress as would be hers for life, black silk and lace cap over her still plain hair".

This excessive mourning, its conventionalising and its extravagance was by the 1870's beginning to arouse critical opposition. In 1875 a society, The National Funeral and Mourning Reform Association was founded and a second, similar society, sponsored by the Church of England, followed.

The reformers opposed conventional mourning in the first place on economic grounds. The convention was powerful among the poorer classes and the individual family risked social ostracism if they appeared to show insufficient respect to the dead, but its expense came at a time when they could least afford it. There was also a feminist element in the opposition. Women bore the main weight of mourning. A bereaved husband wore a seven-inch crape band on his hat, the deepest degree of male mourning, but the widow was swathed in crape, "In all cases the nearer the relative the more cumbrous becomes the dress of the female mourner; but the widow's dress positively amounts to a mild form of suttee... It is in fact a survival of the outward expression of the inferiority of women for... the inferior always expresses grief for the superior".¹⁷ During the first

period of mourning a woman did not go into society, so a wife in the crape period of mourning for her husband's father could not attend a party although her husband himself could do so without censure.¹⁸ The implications of inferiority had perhaps been strengthened by the custom of putting servants in mourning. The answer to a correspondent in Sylvia's Home Journal in 1879 was that "All servants should have black dresses, black shawls and black bonnets. It is customary to give servants mourning when an important member of the family dies".¹⁹ The reformers attacked this as ostentatious, "the innate vulgarity of mind which leads to people putting their servants into mourning" and laid the blame for the excesses of conventional mourning firmly on the higher ranks of society, "It is regrettable that the Court sets such a bad example to people in this matter".²⁰

Soon after this court and society led the way in reform. The Princess of Wales gave crape "the coup de grâce by dispensing with it during her mourning for the Duke of Clarence".²¹ The sale of crape in England, to the upper classes, began to decline in the 1890s.²² The hope expressed in another article "There is said to be a scheme on foot not only to reduce the cost of funerals by much display being voted as vulgar, but also of abolishing in some degree the expenses of mourning habilaments, which the tyranny of custom compels almost penniless widows and orphans to adopt. The sooner this is done the better for those whose grief is greater and more lasting than their means"²³ was, by 1890, barely beginning to be realised; it was the next generation, the generation which suffered the losses of the war of 1914-18, which finally abandoned the outward signs of grief.

19. Sylvia's Home Journal, 1879, p. 141

20. The Woman's World, 1889, p. 421

21. Englishwomen's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century by C. W. Cunnington, 1937, p. 381

22. A History of Courttauld's, p. 71

23. The Ladies' Treasury, 1890, p. 113

17. The Woman's World, 1889, p. 418

18. *ibid*