ABSTRACT

'Pitied but distrusted': Discourses surrounding British widows of the First World War.

This thesis employs critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) to unpick the discourses surrounding British widows of men who died as a result of the First World War. The war widows' pension scheme, as implemented under the Royal Warrant of 1916, was the first (financially) non-contributory pension, and the first specifically directed towards women in Britain. Implemented against a backdrop of the first mass, industrialised war of the modern era, the discourses and ideologies underpinning it are firmly rooted in those of the previous century.

At a time when the State was intervening in the life of its citizens in more extensive way than at any previous time, it also sought to distance itself from these citizens through the use of an impersonal style of communication. This was used to present war widows' pension legislation that was framed around discourses of morality and nationalism that masks underlying parsimony and patriarchy.

This thesis draws on a wide range of resources such as charitable records, media sources and Hansard reports, concentrating on a selection of 200 individual case files relating to claims for a war widow's pension, held in the National Archive, Kew. Two case files are analysed in detail using discourse-historical analysis (Wodak, 2001) as a framework for a linguistic analysis. The two case files chosen represent widows whose experiences are typical of those found in the corpus. One widow is representative of the sizeable group of women who had their pensions stopped because of 'improper' behaviour, the correspondence in her file revealing how discourses of morality, social welfare and national identity are employed interdiscursively to deny her State funds. The second case study is more diachronic, showing how one widow, in common with thousands of others, was denied a pension on grounds on ineligibility. She employs discourses of social welfare and nationalism to support her claim over a period of nearly 40 years. Over the course of the 20th century, the relationship between the State and the public altered, and this case file offers an opportunity to explore this in some detail.

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Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude and thanks go to my supervisors, Dr Mary Talbot and Professor Peter Wilson. In particular, as this thesis has taken shape over the course of the last five summers, Mary has tolerated the seasonal intrusion every year with equanimity and no little sense of humour. Without her patience and guidance, this thesis would have been abandoned long ago.

Many thanks and no few apologies are due to my family and friends. In particular, my parents have been most tolerant of a daughter who has vanished for weeks on end and, even when present, seems to be on a different planet. Philippa Greenwood has been of greater help than she probably knows. It was she who first alerted me to the existence of the Public Record Office, later the National Archives, and who went on to help me 'translate' the scribbles and crabbed writings of the widows' letters I found there. Loraine Richardson has gone way beyond the usual boundaries of friendship by volunteering to proof-read the final draft of this thesis, offering some very useful comments in the process. All typographical errors that remain are entirely my fault.

Thanks also to Professor Valerie Sanders and Dr Myra Macdonald, whose support and encouragement helped me embark on this PhD in the first place and see it emerge from my MA dissertation. The on-going interest shown by Dr Sarah Gamble has proved unfailingly heartening, serving to remind me that my interest in war widowhood, and widowhood in general, is not quite as weird as I have sometimes been led to believe. Professor Terry Threadgold's supportive comments have also proved extremely valuable.

There are three other people without whom I could not have reached this stage. The longest standing is my brother, Anthony, whose timely move to London coincided with my earliest trips to the archives there. As he has moved around North London, he's never been far from a tube station that will get me to the various archives dotted around the capital without too much trouble. His flatmates over the years, and more recently Kerry and Kyle, have put up with my rather strange visits, where I leave the house with notebook and pencils every morning and return every evening in a puzzled and perplexed state of mind. Without quite knowing what it is

I've been doing in my mysterious research and seemingly never-ending 'writing up', Anth has managed to cheer me up over the years in countless ways. From introducing me to Harry Potter (and a whole new line of research interests in the process), to taking me out for a drink, even when he's had a 'challenging' day at work, he's always shown the greatest tolerance and good humour. Truly the best brother anyone could hope for – even if he never ceases to remind me that he went to a 'proper' university!

Vicky Ball has been with me through thick and thicker, from studying for our Masters degrees together around our respective dining tables to keeping one another sane by regular emails and less frequent (but invaluable!) get-togethers during the time it has taken us to complete our doctorates, despite the miles that now separate us. That we both developed an obsession with cooking at this time is no coincidence as we have sought order and comfort in recipes!

Finally, Dr Michael Higgins has proved to be the best of friends and colleagues. No amount of muffin-baking and pizza-making can ever repay him for all of the help and support he has given me in the short time I've known him. Whilst he may continue to roll his eyes at my pronunciation of 'Wittgenstein' and has adopted a very Paddington-like long, hard stare when it comes to my discussion of Foucault (but helping me see that my pronouncement that Foucault was indecisive was largely owing to my own reading of his work out of the sequence, thus missing the development of his arguments!), his input has been unparalleled in this final year.

Title note

> He pitied widows but he distrusted them. They knew too much. As free as unmarried women, they were fully armed; this was an unfair advantage, and when it was combined with beauty, an air of well-being, a gaiety which, in a woman over forty had an unsuitable hint of mischief in it, he felt that in this easy conquest over, or incapacity for grief, all manhood was insulted, while all manhood, including his own, was probably viewed by that woman as a likely prey.
>
> E.H. Young (1947: 11) *Chatterton Square*. London: Jonathan Cape

The object of this description of a Rosamund Fraser, 'war widow' from the First World War, as perceived in the consciousness of a middle-class, middle-aged, male neighbour. Emily Young was herself a war widow, her husband having been killed at Ypres in 1917. She did not remarry but went on to live with a married man in the inter-war years. We can assume that the description of the middle-class Rosamund is taken from her own experiences and observations of war widowhood. As we will see, this pity and distrust for a middle class widow such as Rosamund in Young's novel extends to society's attitudes and the consequent legislation under which working class war widows in this thesis were framed and confined.