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# The Haunted Wardrobe: Reflections on Clothing and Loss

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## 1.1 A personal introduction

In the beginning I lived in a land without death and I was happy: I lived there for 38 years and then my sister died. I came home from my sister's funeral wearing her necklace and her green wool coat; her boots didn't fit me so I bought replicas that did. Her husband visited me and brought more clothes; the thickest of cardigans and a rather wonderful dress from Monsoon. For the next two years these clothes were an important part of my wardrobe; and then they weren't. I had grieved through clothing it seemed, and now my grief was "resolved". The whole experience troubled me. I had felt obliged to wear my sister's clothes: it was not so much that I had done things with these garments as that they had done things with me.

Unexpectedly I was offered funding for a PhD and I seized the opportunity to turn my puzzlement into a research project; unfortunately I had very little clue about where to begin. Blessedly unaware of the sheer breadth of the topic I set off in several directions at once. I sent out some surveys, I conducted a Q-method statement ranking exercise (Brown, 1980: 59f, van Exel and da Graaf, 2005) and I started to collect all the bits and pieces I could about the use of clothing in death-response. The surveys and the Q-sorting proved to be poor methodological choices, but they demonstrated one point extremely clearly: feeling "compelled to act" or placed under some kind of obligation by the clothing of the dead was a relatively common experience, as was the inability to explain the potency of such clothing. None of my participants added a great deal to my understanding, but they were touchingly convinced that I was going to add to theirs: several contacted me repeatedly to ask if I'd found out "what it meant" yet.

The process of gathering scraps of information about clothing and death proved more productive, particularly as it introduced me to bereavement narratives, which were to prove a very rich source of information. Bereavement narratives are biographical accounts of the experience of loss, often written as therapy by the bereaved, but finding a ready market in other mourners (Prodromou, 2012). For me these offered "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the role played by clothing in death response; not just accounts of what mourners did with clothing, but also why they *thought* they were doing it. It was through gathering and classifying the statements that bereaved people made about clothing that I started to develop a theory about what was going on.

It was at this point that my father died after losing a long, and pretty degrading, battle with Alzheimer's. The words that best describe my behaviour with his clothing are also those that connote a battle. I launched a quick and savage onslaught on his wardrobe. Everything associated with his decline was summarily destroyed, as if in liquidating the garments that linked him with suffering and death I could liberate the heroic father I recalled. When my destructive frenzy was over I was left with a small collection of good clothes, associated with an earlier, happier period of his life. From these I selected an outfit for my father to wear in the coffin. I chose with care: I wanted fabrics that were pleasant to the touch, smelled good and were perfectly co-ordinated. It struck me at the time as being slightly mad – he wasn't going to know, and I suspected that no-one was going to want to view the body – but it seemed very important. In this way I ended up with two bags of clothes, one contained the final outfit, the other things that "might do for someone".

The final outfit was never used: it turned out that my father had donated his body to Leeds University and they needed to freeze it straight away. The bags of clothing stood in my hall for weeks. I couldn't bring myself to make any decisions about them at all. Finally the clothes that "might do for someone" went to a charity shop, but the final outfit remained in

limbo. That outfit, with the soft cord trousers, the flannel gardening shirt, the co-ordinated socks and the jumper he had worn every Christmas, slowly moved from the hall to the landing to the loft, because, as my daughter pointed out, "you can't just get rid of the jumper that he carved a dozen Christmas turkeys in".

Before I read any bereavement narratives I thought that what I had done was both unique to me and relatively insignificant: I was just one woman who wore her sister's clothes and didn't know what to do with her father's. After I had read half a dozen accounts of bereavement, I realised that what I had done was part of a consistent pattern, a trope almost, enacted in countless households but rarely discussed. The new research-oriented me decided to map this pattern.

## 1.2 What do people do with the clothes the dead leave behind?

The task of dealing with the clothes of the dead goes to close kin and, very often, to women; the task is widely agreed to be arduous, even frightening (Jones, 1998: 32, Thompson, 2007: 140) and is often either done in a rush "to get it over with" or postponed until the psychological resources to deal with it have been mustered. Popular wisdom and bereavement narratives both warn that it is possible to make terrible, irredeemable mistakes in sorting; to dispose, in anger or haste, of things one will later crave, perhaps to destroy, unseeing, an item that could give access to an unanticipated truth or provide a connection to one's ancestors (Kent, 1994: 37, Scoble, 1995: 165, Hunniford, 2008: 118).

Dealing with the clothes of the dead has several elements or stages: sorting, keeping, cleaning, using, displaying, controlling and disposing. All of these might be seen as elements in a project, on the part of the bereaved, to make the best out of a bad situation, by:

- perfecting and protecting the memory of the deceased
- consoling the bereaved

- sustaining relations between the living and the dead
- ensuring that "something good" comes out of the death.

The fact that people do not fully understand what they are doing does not reduce the vigour they invest in this project. However, their chances of success are threatened at every point by their own vulnerability, by disagreements between mourners over what should be kept and what should be remembered, and also by the uncanny power of the abandoned clothing itself.

## 1.3 Sorting the clothes of the dead

Logically, sorting might be assumed to have four distinct outputs; dumping, selling, gifting or keeping; but sorting the clothes of the dead is both simpler, and more complex, than might be assumed. In the first place, "selling" can be removed from the list: it almost never happens. In the sixty bereavement narratives I read one person sold one item – her dead husband's ski outfit - and it made her feel awful (Lindsay, 2009). Disposal, in the sense that something is determined to be rubbish and is burnt or binned, is also rare and is usually confined to an initial purge of items which are not consistent with positive memories of the deceased. Once these disturbing things have been removed from the dead person's wardrobe there is a real aversion to the destruction of their possessions; this is experienced as the eviction (Truman, 1988: 18), or even the destruction (Jackson, 1987: 97) of the person who has died;

*"as I threw out garment after garment…. I experienced a mounting sense of horror and a need (which I suppressed) to howl and scream. It was as if it was my mother I was throwing away." (Mcleod, 1994: 166f)*

Although the task of sorting the clothes of the dead may be deferred for a considerable time, and may also be an activity that takes place over years (Golden, 1995: 19, Scoble, 1995: 170, Wait, 1995: 87), once it has begun it follows a fairly consistent process. Items with negative connotations are disposed of quickly. Questions about whether anyone

but the deceased can take ownership of items are then considered. When this is settled, distribution begins. Some items are kept and some distributed as "gifts" from the dead, the rest are then distributed ensuring that every item goes to an "appropriate place" determined by the kind of value it embodies: monetary value is rarely important, surfacing only when items have to be distributed fairly, but mnemonic value and use value are critical.

### 1.3.1 Disposing of items with negative connotations

Reading bereavement narratives confirmed that my own attempts to rid my father's wardrobe of painful reminders were by no means unique. Simone de Beauvoir found her memories of her mother's decline focussed on a single garment;

*"They found Maman lying on the floor in her red corduroy dressing gown…… 'I never want to see that dressing gown again'" (de Beauvoir, 1965: 9 & 48);*

but where the decline has taken place over months or years much of the wardrobe may appear contaminated;

*"some of his things were now not only shabby beyond belief, but to me had the aura of illness about them. These I could not wait to part with" (Sheepshanks, 1997: 150f)*

In most cases underclothing is also disposed of promptly (Gibson, 2008: 110); this is private, discomfiting and not transferable. The disposal of these items ensures that the wardrobe represents the deceased as their "best self"; a public self, captured at the point in their life when they most closely resembled the cultural ideal. Thus, with the filtering of the clothing of the deceased, begins the process of rendering them ancestral, of replacing the actual with the ideal (Miller and Parrot, 2009: 506) so that when we remember the familial dead we also re-engage with cultural values (Hertz, 1960, Taylor, 1989).

### 1.3.2 Determining whether ownership can be transferred

Once the unappealing items have gone, attention shifts to the other possessions of the deceased and questions about the possibility and desirability of passing these to others must be considered. Two significant barriers to disposition are frequently encountered; the first is the sense that the items are *part* of the deceased, the second is the notion that the deceased has not finished with them.

Items which have been worn over many years, which the deceased was rarely seen without, which have been moulded and individualised by their body, (Lupton, 1998, Hauser, 2005) may be experienced as an extension of their body, or at least of their social self (Parkin, 1999). When items cannot easily be disentangled from the imagined self of the deceased they may be left with the body; perhaps becoming part of the outfit worn in the coffin. Wedding rings are often left with the body for this reason (Stott, 1994: 84, Scott, 1994: 146);

*'and what about her wedding-ring?' asked Poupette, taking it out of the table drawer. We put it on to her finger. Why? No doubt because that little round of gold belonged nowhere else on earth." (de Beauvoir, 1965: 86f)*

Items felt to be the inalienable possessions of the dead but which cannot be left on the body often end up in limbo, hard to dispose of and often disturbing. This is also the case for garments which are felt to be of ongoing importance to the dead. As funeral-director turned academic Philip Gore (2005: 15) points out, mourners do not experience the deceased as being "completely dead all at once": thus they are sometimes imagined to have a future need for their possessions. Joan Didion (2005: 41) avoided giving away her husband's shoes in case this prevented him from coming back.

*"I was thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome….I could not give*

*away the rest of his shoes. …he would need shoes if he was to return." (Didion, 2005: 35f)*

Didion is unusual in recognising that a strong element of magical thinking determined her behaviour, but she is not alone in thinking that the dead will be affected or offended by the disposal of their clothes (Truman, 1988: 18). I had a terrible dream, writes Lynn Lindsay (2009: 83f)

*"I dreamt that Jeremy had come home and…I had to tell him that I had given all his things away"*

### 1.3.3 Distributing "gifts" from the dead

There are, however, some items which are easy, even pleasurable to distribute; either the deceased has indicated that they would like a particular individual to inherit an object (Aldiss, 2000: 59f), or one person stands out as the natural recipient (Hunniford, 2008: 271) because of their close association with the memories the object evokes or their ability to put it to good use. These items might be considered "gifts" from the dead and are often seen by all parties as tokens of the affection or approval of the deceased.

While British wills normally distribute goods on the basis of kinship and fail to differentiate financially between the loyal and the distant, the loved and the tolerated, the gift of sentimental tokens acknowledges these differences (Miller, 2007). Gifts from the dead give material form to the bonds of affection between donor and recipient and carry an obligation to remember. Such remembrance frequently has a public dimension; the item might be used to cue family story-telling or may be prominently included in the heir's own life-story:

*"William wore to his own wedding the morning coat that had been made for Charlie for ours." (Sheepshanks, 1997: 151).*

Where an item is passed onto an individual who has a specific need for it the family takes comfort in the idea that the deceased individual would have been happy to help them. Lynn Lindsay (2009: 23) was convinced that her dead husband directed her to pass his walking boots to a friend who was about to depart on a field-trip to India. His need for boots of a particular size and her possession of the perfect pair appeared to her to have a neatness, a symmetry that implied supernatural planning.

### 1.3.4 Distributing according to sentimental or mnemonic value

The distribution of gifts from the dead segues into the next phase of disposal, a phase shaped by the desire to ensure that the deceased is remembered as positively as possible by as many people as possible. Items are distributed as keepsakes in the hope that they will be cherished, displayed or used; they are offered first to those close to the deceased who are believed to require them as a consolation in their grief, and then to a wider circle of acquaintances who will make commemoration visible.

Families gain great comfort from reassurance that the deceased will not be forgotten (Boston, 1994: 174, Binchy, 1994: 185, Layne, 2000), and the display and re-use of their clothing is viewed as reducing both the finality of death and the absence of the dead

*"I have…. seen Karen wearing one of Caron's suede coats and I like it. It gives it dignity. It gives it life. Karen says it makes her feel so close to my Caron (Hunniford, 2008: 271).*

Such re-use prevents the social presence of the deceased from being immediately eclipsed, particularly by facilitating those conversations about the deceased that etiquette would normally constrain (Monckton, 1994: 54, 86f, Knatchbull, 1995: 3, Madill, 1995: 185, Moyes, 1995: 27).

For Hallam and Hockey (2000: 108) and for Gibson (2008: 36) the sorting, disposition and (re)use of the possessions of the dead stimulates the inner story-telling and collective reminiscence through which

individuals and groups determine *how* the deceased will be remembered. In this way disposition contributes to the "construction of a durable biography that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives" (Walter, 1996: 7).

### 1.3.5 Distributing according to use-value

Items which are not required as mementos will be redistributed on the basis of their use-value. This enables the bereaved to ensure that something good comes out of the death. Bob Jackson (1987: 189) travelled to India to donate his son's clothes to a missionary school. He was moved to see the garments being used and appreciated by children "who had no others" (ibid: 174 check) and referred to those boys as "a living memorial to Matthew" (ibid: 162).

Donation to charity is perhaps the most common way for families to dispose of the clothing that is left after the requirement for mementos has been satisfied (Madill, 1995: 185, Wait, 1995: 87, Jones, 1998: 32). Frequently a charity of interest to the deceased is chosen (Jackson, 1987, Harper, 1996). Charity donation affords several benefits. It avoids the implication that anything associated with the deceased was without value, it enhances the reputation of the deceased and it accords with the increasingly popular idea that life is a gift or loan (Parsons et al., 1972) and that assets should be re-invested for the communal good when life is done. Charity donation may also help to make a "bad death" which challenges communal assumptions about the value and purpose of life into a "good death" which reaffirms such values (Bloch and Parry, 1982, Bradbury, 1999). Finally, donating clothes to charity removes the power of garments to connote absence by overwriting the absence of one body with the presence of another.

## 1.4 Keeping and Using the Clothes of the Dead

Although the bulk of the clothing that the dead leave behind is "slowly filtered away" (Golden, 1995: 19) according to the principles outlined

above, some items are kept by the close kin of the bereaved. These fall into two categories, "relic items" which are purposely kept and "limbo items" kept by default because the filtering process has simply failed to find a place for them;

*"I kept some of Caron's socks – I mean what was I going to do with her socks? – because I just couldn't throw them all away." (Hunniford, 2008: 119f).*

Clothes in both categories may be experienced as powerful and the experience of bereaved people is often characterised by a battle to control this power. While they may use the clothes of the dead strategically, in order to perfect and sustain memories, to evoke the presence of the dead and to support the processes of grief and adjustment, they also find that the clothing itself exerts uncanny power. It pulls at their consciousness in a way that Avery Gordon (2008) describes as a haunting; perhaps (re)introducing memories they had tried to suppress, perhaps urging them to act in unexpected or irrational ways.

### 1.4.1 Relic Items and the Memory of the Dead

As relic items, clothes are able to create and mediate an idealised and imaginary identity for the deceased: they are also able to grant moments of temporary access to that imagined persona. Bereaved individuals may exploit these capacities in order to adjust to loss.

As already noted, the clothes which are kept are those associated with positive memories; children will keep items that represent (good) parenting, lovers will cherish items associated with romance, friends and siblings the items that evoke shared memories. In this way each mourner recreates an image of the deceased at the point where their own relationship with them came closest to the ideal (Humphreys, 2013, Miller and Parrot, 2009: 514). Traditional and gendered ideas about roles and relationships determine which garments will be kept. The clothing kept when a woman dies often recalls either domestic skills (Moyes, 1995: 33), or glamourous femininity (Gibson, 2008: 26), while men are more often

remembered through clothing associated with a work role or the clothing worn to pursue a sport or hobby (ibid, Ash, 1996, Miller, 2010: 151).

The whittling away of possessions tends to reduce the complexity and ambivalence of a whole life to an agreed storyline which accords with communal mythology. In this way the memory of the deceased is edited and aligned with communal values until family reminiscences can function as ancestor myths. It is tempting to characterise the disposition of the clothing of the dead as the material corollary of the creation, through conversation, of a "durable biography" for the deceased (Walter, 1996: 7), but this is to over-simplify its role. As well as stimulating conversations in which family mythology is negotiated (Gibson, 2008: 36) and providing the evidence that these stories are "true", clothing also generates immersive memory experiences that bring the dead suddenly into close proximity.

The close physical and symbolic associations between garment and wearer, the materiality of clothing and, in particular, its capacity to capture smell, means that clothing has the (intermittent) power to conjure the presence of the dead. Proust (1981) used the Celtic belief that the souls of the dead are captured in inanimate objects as a metaphor for the way in which objects trigger memory. The dead may be forgotten, he argues, until the object which holds them is encountered, then its smell, taste or texture gives access to "the vast structure of recollection"; the dead

*"call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised their voice the spell is broken. We have delivered them: they have overcome death and return to share our life."*

Many writers of bereavement narratives describe such encounters with the dead. They are terrifying but rapturous, facilitating contact with the dead in an imagined space and beyond time

"*I close my eyes, my face already wet as I find her red sweater to pull it to my face as though I am hugging her tight …I smile. I am with her in Bordeaux and we have all the time in the world" (Daste, 2011: 249).*

Typically such experiences are triggered by handling, wearing or smelling the clothing the dead frequently wore. They may be induced deliberately and used as a source of comfort when life seems particularly bleak. However, such episodes are frequently rationed, out of fear that the impression the dead have left on their clothes will be erased over time, the smell evaporating, taking with it the possibility of contact (ibid, 2011: 249, Aldiss, 2000: 191, Gillilan, 1992).

### 1.4.2 Clothes and the grieving process

Writers of bereavement narratives commonly explain their use of the clothing of the dead in terms of the models of "grief-work" that they are familiar with. However, analysing their statements does not point towards any particular adaptation strategy, but rather suggests that people create their own strategies using the full range of cultural resources available to them (Miller and Parrot, 2009: 509). The clothing of the dead and a wide range of ideas about grief and recovery both feature among these resources.

#### 1.4.2.1 Clothes as Connecting Objects

The parallel drawn between the mourner and the abandoned child by Bowlby (1961) and Parkes (1970) is no longer particularly fashionable, yet this model, which suggests that mourners "pine" and "search" for the deceased just as the infant pines and searches for the absent carer, and that they cling to the possessions of the dead as transitional objects (Winnicott, 2005), still appears vibrant and useful to mourners. Many writers of bereavement narratives write vividly of "searching" behaviours: they search for both the lost individual and for scraps of information about their life and death (Wolterstorff, 1987: 17, Truman, 1988: 12, Bawden, 2005). The clothing of the dead is interrogated for information

(Hamilton, 1987, Mara, 1998): any new information gained is seized upon as a source of hope. If the cause of death can be understood perhaps the death can be undone (Didion, 2005: 184), if the deceased can still produce surprises then perhaps they are not really dead (O'Rourke, 2011).

The idea that garments may function as transitional objects, offering the reassurance while they learn to manage without their loved one, is also noted by mourners (Baldock, 1995: 58, Wheeler, 1999, Stallybrass, 1999)

"*People try to find comfort in….. memories, a beloved scarf or a brooch, something that was special to the one they loved. Mummy wears your school blazer and I sleep sometimes with your sweater bound around my neck or I use your school clothes for a pillow" (Thompson, 2007: 125)*

Margaret Gibson (2008: 34) notes that the clothes used as transitional objects are often warm and heavy – jumpers, coats – so that wearing them gives the impression of a hug from the deceased. While some mourners believe that they are driven or compelled (by instinct or emotion) to cling to the clothing of the dead it is worth noting that hugging and smelling the clothing of the dead are both modelled in fiction (French, 2008: 7, Higgins-Clark, 2009: 223, Slaughter, 2010: 45f) and recommended by grief memoirs and may thus be elements of a mediated model of "how to grieve".

The use of clothing as transitional objects is by definition time-limited; they are no longer required when transition to the bereaved state is complete. This may account for the disposition of many items a couple of years after the death. Some items, however, are kept much longer and function as material evidence of "continuing bonds" (Klass et al., 1996) with the deceased. This "very special clothing" (Morris, 1995: 117) sustains the social presence of the deceased and ensures that they continue to be part of the family. As Reg Thompson (2007: 264) wrote to his daughter when they moved house after her death:

*'"we [will]… fill the cupboards with your clothes and leave your shoes in random places all over the house. We will take you with us wherever we go. You are part of this family. You will always be part of this family."*

#### 1.4.2.2 Wearing the clothing of the dead and incorporation

As well as providing a way to feel close to the dead (Sheepshanks, 1997: 151, Thompson, 2007:41f, 125), clothing also makes identification with the dead possible, enabling mourners to preserve elements of the appearance or personality of the deceased through imitation and incorporation (Kent, 1994: 39f, Grove, 1994: 122, Rose, 1994: 68, Ainley, 1994: 199). Putting on someone else's clothing (or, metaphorically walking in their shoes) offers an opportunity to see the world as they saw it and temporarily dissolves the boundaries between separate selves and between the living and the dead. Peter Stallybrass wore the jacket of his dead colleague and noted

*"Allon was dead….[but] if I wore [Allon's] jacket, Allon wore me" (Stallybrass, 1999: 28).*

I put on my sister's coat and I walked like she did, experiencing the power of the confident older woman that I believed her to be; I looked in the mirror and wondered if we were becoming more alike; I found in her pocket the stubs of concert tickets and I wondered if I might enjoy classical music too.

#### 1.4.2.3 Disposition

Disposing of clothing belonging to the dead also plays a role in adjustment to bereavement; perhaps several roles. The writers of bereavement narratives mention disposing of memories (Sheepshanks, 1997) "divestment" (Mara, 1998: 60), "moving on with their grief" (Scoble, 1995: 170) and "cleansing" (Hunniford, 2008: 119). Some of these instances are rooted in the Freudian idea of decathexis (Freud, 1917); the idea that in order to recover from grief one must give up one's connection to the dead. Even when this idea ceased to be part of clinical orthodoxy, the idea that disposing of the clothes of the dead was

something you were "supposed to" do (Didion, 2005: 35), as evidence that you were recovering, persisted (Gibson, 2008: 16).

The pattern of keeping clothes for a year or two and then disposing of them was extremely common. Several writers mentioned that their value as memory items had been eroded over time; that the deceased was no longer *there*:

*"He was printed into his shoes. I did not burn or throw or give them away. Time has denatured them now. Nothing left" (Gillilan, 1992).*

In some cases the denaturing or deterioration of the object coincided with a reduction of need for that object. Mary Sheepshanks (1997) wore her husband's Puffa jacket until it was destroyed in a laundry mishap a year after his death

*"I minded very much at the time; it seemed one more severed link, but perhaps it was a good thing really: it had served its purpose." (Sheepshanks, 1997: 152)*

So the power of mementos and the need for mementos reduces in parallel and, after a couple of years, the idea that the dead retain an interest in their possessions fades too. All of these things make disposition possible (Gibson, 2008: 15). Disposal is however usually preceded by "rituals of dispossession" (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005: 814); clothing is laundered to remove any residual traces of the deceased and tends to be moved gradually from the centre to the periphery of family life (from the hall to the loft or the garage) before finally being disposed of. Miller and Parrot (2009: 509) interpret this pattern of disposition after retention as a ritual re-enactment of separation: bereavement always comes before we are ready leaving us shocked at our inability to control events; giving away the possessions of the deceased when we *are* ready returns a little of that imaginal sense of control.

## 1.5 Haunted by the clothing of the dead

While bereaved people often use the clothes of the dead in an attempt to increase their control over events and relationships, such clothing has a dual nature, it comforts and reassures, but it also distresses and terrifies (Stallybrass, 1999: 28). As an unexpected reminder of what has been lost it can be devastating, often precipitating emotional crisis (Truman, 1988: 54, Carol Chase cited in Hunniford, 2008: 271f). Indeed the overwhelming power of such reminders was one of the reasons behind the foundation of Compassionate Friends:

*"if that day… an odd school stocking had surfaced in the wash – the collapsing world around you was not about to be put right by some philosophical prose. What you needed was someone at the end of a phone who would listen to your incomprehensible outpourings and then tell you they'd be right over." (Lawley and Lawley, 1995: 197)*

Bereaved people frequently try to protect themselves from such traumas by knowing the location of evocative items at all times. They will be either stored away in a single box (Haycraft, 1992, Williamson, 1995, Payne and Gekoski, 2004) or kept in plain sight where they can never surprise (Greene, 2001); but even with precautions in place, the clothing of the dead can be associated with the fear, the compulsions and hallucinations usually associated with madness (Jones, 1998: 57, Hunniford, 2008: 119). Reg Thompson's family slept downstairs after his daughter died, none of them could cope with going upstairs and seeing Charlie's room, her wardrobe, her discarded clothes (Thompson, 2007: 26, 273). When Nicholas (Wolterstorff, 1987: 55) finally forced himself to move the boxes containing his son's clothes into the garage he heard his son's voice, "loud and clear, calling from the entry, 'Hey Dad, I'm back."

In the final section of this paper I will attempt to address why the clothing of the dead can exert such considerable power, arguing that it has two

principal roots; its power to connote, simultaneously, the presence and the absence of the deceased and the historical power of clothing to both shape and change the world.

### 1.5.1 The presence and absence of the deceased

To fail to find someone in a place you expect them to be is to encounter their absence as a "real event" specifically associated with that location (Sartre, 1957: 10): the location appears haunted by the one who isn't there, their absence rendered tangible by the tension between physical absence and emotional presence (Maddrell, 2013: 505). What is experienced is what Barthes (2010: 69) elegantly describes as "the presence of absence". Objects as well as places can conjure this effect; absence is intensely present when the dead are found to be gone from the clothes that their bodies have shaped, when they are no longer among the things where their scent lingers and their traces remain. The more closely associated the deceased was with an item, the more strongly it proclaims their absence

"*The furniture from her flat, crockery, books, none of these things had he throat-catching impact of something she had worn, a blouse she had been fond of, a pair of shabby slippers" (Bawden, 1994: 16)*

Abandoned clothing functions as a potent visual symbol, "impos[ing] meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it" (Barthes, 1973: 110). It confronts the individual with memories of the deceased and the shared past but also (simultaneously, horrifically) with the knowledge that these are irrefutably lost. The memories embedded in clothing and the secrets they reveal have currency, use-value, for the bereaved, but the fact that they can conjure immersive memory experiences which are shot through with acute knowledge of loss can make them, in the early stages of bereavement, unbearably powerful;

*"the lovely clothes you always wore, pretty tops – I could see you in them, and when I smelt them, everything smelt of you. So powerful, so*

*painful. I sobbed and sobbed. Oh how I want you back" (Carol Chase cited in Hunniford, 2008: 271f)*

### 1.5.2 Clothes that create and transform the world

The second factor that gives clothing their unexpected power in the death context is the fact that, historically, they have been regarded as able to change the individual, the social and even the eschatological world. In an age where we pick up clothing with our grocery shop (and may not even notice the increase to the bill) it is hard to appreciate just how valuable and significant garments used to be. In Renaissance England a single garment could cost substantially more than a house (Gurr, 1980: 13). Until textile production was mechanised, clothing was a substantial investment, and for this reason people writing wills gave significant thought to who would receive it. One study of 16th century wills[1] estimates that around 25% included bequests of clothing. Up until the Reformation, clothing was often left to the church. Under the system of "soul-scot" or "mortuary" a payment was made to the church every time someone died. Ostensibly this was to compensate for any failure in tithing during life, but it is probable that soul-scot was a Christian re-interpretation of the pagan practice of making an offering at the time of death to ensure prosperity in the afterlife. The normal form of payment was the "second best chattel" (Stenton, 1971: 153); in rural areas this was often an animal, but in towns it was likely to be a garment. Thus the fine clothing that pagans would have "offered" by placing it in the grave was handed over to the church instead (ibid, Daniell, 1996: 189). Miles Metcalfe of York wrote in his will of 1485-6

*"I geve my saule to God Almighty, our Lady Seynt Marie and the hole company of heven….Also I will that the parson of my paryssh churche have my best gown in the name of my mortuary" (Raine, 1869: 9)*

[1] The Giggleswick Project, http://northcravenhistoricalresearch.co.uk/Outreach/The%20GigWills16cProject4XL.pdf

Testators saw the payment of mortuary less as a tax than as payment made to ensure prayers were said for their soul. The clothing and other items of portable property donated in this way were often kept by the church rather than being sold: fine cloth might be recycled into vestments or furnishings (Basl, 2001) smaller items kept on display to remind parishioners to pray for the soul of the deceased as it journeyed through purgatory (Daniell, 1996: 189). Sir William Compton's will of 1552-3 was quite clear on this matter. In addition to endowing two chantries to pray for his soul he left

*"To the Abbey Church of Winchcomb in the county of Wigorn Worcester[shire] my wedding gown of tinsel satin to make a vestment to the intent that they shall pray for my soul." (Nicolas, 1826)*

Alternatively, clothing might be willed to relatives and friends. The high value of clothing made it an effective way to redistribute one's estate, but, unless the clothing was sold by the heirs, it also functioned as an heirloom, a connection between past, present and future generations (Stallybrass, 1999: 38). Such legacies also carried the obligation to remember the dead and to pray for them. Katherine, countess of Northumberland specified in her 1542 will that she gave

*"Elinor Haggas, gentlewoman, which hath bene my servaunt of old tyme, xxs in money and a blake gown, to pray for me" (Raine, 1869:180)*

Unlike cash, clothing could rarely be apportioned equally between heirs: testators had to give careful thought to the matter of who would inherit what, so the reading of the will often revealed a complex hierarchy of favour and affection, perhaps with the most valuable item going to one family member, but the most *valued* item going to another. Thus Lady Anne Conyers of Skelton, 1547 wrote

*"I give to my doughter Jayne all my rayment except one gown of tawney damask, which I bequeath to my doughter Place" (Raine, 1869:263)*

Readers today cannot know whether Place was blessed or condemned by this legacy, but she would have known, Jayne would have known, and these stipulations would have critically affected the way in which they remembered their mother. While some wills carefully distribute goods between heirs, others seem almost to enjoy the distinctions made, perhaps savouring the power to pass judgement from beyond the grave.

It is now very uncommon for people to leave specific instructions for the distribution of their clothes, but, as already noted, it is very common for those tasked with sorting out those clothes to feel that the dead might care about the decisions being made and getting it wrong would be dreadful. The purpose of this extended historical aside has been to provide the basis for an argument that the clothing of the dead feels portentous because in the past it had the power to reallocate wealth, reconfigure relationships and assist the deceased in purgatory; individually we may know nothing about this, but *culturally*, we remember.

## 1.6 A personal conclusion

So did I, having learnt all this, understand what I had been doing when I wore my sister's clothes and kept the best of my father's? Clearly several explanations were available, but some resonated while others did not.

My first reading of the evidence was that I had worn my sister's clothes because I wished to incorporate something of the person she had been into my own self; once I had managed this I was happy to relinquish her clothes. This was not the whole story. Two years after Jen died, and sometime after I had last worn her clothes, I packed them up and took them to a local charity shop. I regretted it terribly. I even returned to try and buy them back but they were gone. A year later I encountered her monsoon dress and her green wool coat again. I went to midnight mass on Christmas Eve and saw them both on a young woman with long hair and small children; she looked like Jen had looked as a young mum,

amazingly so. This comforted me greatly: I had no idea who this woman was, but she was carrying the essence of Jen-ness into the future. Clearly then, I had not only wanted to internalise the elements of her person that I most treasured, I had also wanted them to be sustained "out there" in the public domain.

My behaviour with my father's clothes I quickly recognised, was part of the project of imaginatively replacing the father I had watched die with his respectable and competent predecessor. That worked. I think of my father daily, I base many decisions on my knowledge of what he would have done, the dementia years are all but forgotten. His turkey-carving jumper remains in my office at work. It is on its way to the Yorkshire Fashion Archive I think, but until it gets there it continues to assure me that I can cope with whatever life throws at me because the wise, strong man who raised me remains faintly present.

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