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Is beauty useless?

Fashion, gender, and British wartime society in Punch Magazine, 1915

Andrea Kollnitz

“The war, in fact, as all wars do had a deadening effect on fashion, and there is little of interest to record until the conflict was over.”¹ Those are the words of James Laver in his *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History* from 1969. The quote presents the end of half a page on fashion at the outbreak of the First World War in Great Britain. Laver assumes fashion ended in 1914 and was “picked up again” in 1919.² Laver’s survey, as well as several others on (British) fashion history, exemplifies a perspective on fashion as identified, interpreted, and evaluated through its historical changes and innovations, and thereby more or less leaves out the war years of 1914–18.³ As Cheryl Buckley states, when looking at representations of British female fashion during wartime:

Discussion of women’s fashion in Britain during the First World War has been surprisingly generalized and lacking in detailed primary research. Typically, characterized by a number of “truisms”; it has been summed up thus: that uniforms were worn most of the time; that fashion was temporarily suspended; and that practical clothing predominated.⁴

As an alternative perspective, Buckley claims that “Fashion, as both social and cultural artifact and as representational process, was increasingly discursive during the period of the First World War and it provided a highly charged space in which femininity, modernity and class identity were negotiated.”⁵

Agreeing with Buckley's focus on fashion as an important site for the construction of (new) identities, this article will problematize an established and generalizing classification of British fashion as "suspended" during the First World War and will instead look at this imagined gap as a crucial period of fashion distinction. Through an analysis of the visual fashion discourse in the satirical images of the British satirical magazine *Punch* during the year 1915, it will investigate the representation of fashion as a tool of conservatism, identity negotiation, and a provider of social security during a period of rising insecurity on all possible levels.

This essay will argue that during wartime, fashion gains special significance through its power to establish distinctive visual codes and to manifest constant stereotypical identities in order to resist an on-going and seemingly uncontrollable political and social change. The choice of the year 1915 as focus for this case study is not only based on the need for delimitation, but also highlights the peculiar state of British society during the first year of the war. In 1915, British society was already aware of and observing the war on the continent while still only partially participating on the battleground. The historian Adrian Gregory has identified different stages of war awareness in Britain. He defines the period 1914–16 as a transition "from spectatorship to participation" and "from volunteering to compulsion."⁶

I see this transitional state in British society as a period of insecurity and acclimation where fashion and dress came to play an exceptionally important role in the visual performance of social transformation. A look at the cartoons in *Punch* from 1915 shows how fashion serves as distinctive "costume" in the social dramas enacted in the cartoons and helped shape the identities or "role characters" performed within the jokes. While these costumes can be related to their actual use in contemporary society and politics, they also bear visual rhetorical significance in the images per se.

Punch, or *The London Charivari*, founded in 1841 as a counterpart to the French humoristic magazine *Le Charivari*, was a weekly illustrated journal containing news, satirical texts and cartoons, poems, reports on cultural and sports events etc. It was one of the first examples of what the publisher Charles Knight in 1862 called "picture journalism" with an important function of providing visual news for the contemporary reader.⁷ *Punch* also played a pivotal role in developing the cartoon as a major visual and narrative element in international print media. Since its beginnings, it presented a rich number of fashion-related cartoons and caricatures that were meant to entertain, but also provide effective socio-political commentary for the contemporary British educated reader.⁸

While not all of these cartoons are explicitly about fashion, fashion plays a crucial performative role in all of them. Accordingly, this study examines cartoons that use fashion/s and dress as visual signifiers of the social roles and relationships they present. The fashion images and jokes in *Punch* are interpreted as performative in their staging of contemporary British society as they express, emphasize, and demarcate distinctive "characters" in their different "costumes". In accordance with Erving Goffman's metaphorical understanding of social relationships as a theatre, developed in *The*

Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, these costumes are examined as a perceivable *front* or mask with a crucial function on the social stage; here, that stage frames the gender and class relationships of contemporary society.⁹

Starting from examples that focus on conspicuous female fashionability and its different significations, this article will identify diverse role characters, dramatic scenarios, and visual tropes which are repeated, manifested, or also transformed throughout the year of 1915. Those gender and class identities are, furthermore, closely related to questions of national identity, or rather national duty, which direct and color the roles staged in the public debate of *Punch*.¹⁰ As demonstrated by Shu-chuan Yan, the magazine had used fashion metaphorically to “stir nationalist sentiments” since its beginnings in 1841. In her investigation of *Punch* caricatures in the context of gender, nation, and Victorian fashion discourse she considers “*Punch* as not simply a humorous weekly magazine, but as an important vehicle for the dissemination of media narrative into nationalist discourse” relying “on the conceptual axes of gender and power to evoke the myths of nation through the rhetoric of fashion.”¹¹ The following visual discourse analysis of *Punch* will take a similar approach.

The examined cartoons cannot really be called caricatures as their humor is predominantly created by the texts added to images that most of the time could be read as realistic classical drawings without expressing the illustrators’ specific personal stylistic signatures.¹² The seemingly objective and “matter-of-fact” depiction of contemporary British society in those drawings makes them even more effective as tools of documentation of an actual social situation performed by actors in naturalistic contemporary apparel. As Lou Taylor argues, cartoons can be considered “‘average’ images of supposedly typical period characters who were instantly recognizable to the contemporary reader.”¹³ Disregarding the subtexts, some of them could almost be read as fashion illustrations.

Yet, following Roland Barthes’ emphasis on the semiotic functioning of textual captions as “anchorage” and “relay” in order to direct and complete the visual messages in an image, this analysis will also focus on the interaction of image and text and the latter’s impact on the meanings of fashion.¹⁴ The stereotypical visual impression of the fashioned personalities in the cartoons is further directed and confirmed by the textual captions. The verbal conversations between the presented characters further define, dramatize, and distinguish social roles. Image and text work together in constructing types that indicate and affect on-going social developments.

Looking at the semiotic meanings and performative effects of the cartoons, it is finally crucial to highlight the textual formulations defining and demarcating the “role characters” of the theatrical “scenes” performed by *Punch* for the British readers’ audience. The cartoons stage so called “scenes” enacted by roles such as “Bright youths,” “Youthful Lieutenants,” “Mothers,” “Ladies,” “Wives,” etc., all of them characters and stereotypes with neutral facial traits and physical shapes but dressed in conspicuous costumes and fashions that stand out through their stereotypical, recognizable features and speak of their function, or malfunction, in contemporary national society.

Creative transformation

A first look will highlight female fashion and fashion practices typically emerging from the restrictive conditions of wartime fashion consumption. While much focus has been given to the masculinization of female dress and identity during the First World War in adaption of male military uniform, this article examines a type of more feminine attires presented in the cartoons of *Punch* during 1915. Some of these images are explicitly about fashion—which plainly refutes Laver’s argument on the “deadening” effect of the war on fashion. They both celebrate and ridicule the creativity of the fashionable woman facing war restrictions and “the standard dress.”

One such series of images drawn by Lewis Baumer (1870–1963), one of the main cartoonists of *Punch* active during a period of 50 years, covers a whole page and is titled “The standard dress comes home’ with the caption: “It has been suggested, in connection with the Thrift campaign, that all ladies should adopt one form of evening dress, as men do, and one only.”¹⁵ This cartoon is early evidence of a project to create a National Standard Dress—a multifunctional garment supposed to be worn at any occasion and time of the day to be established, but never realized, in Great Britain in 1918.¹⁶ The first image shows an elegant lady dressed in a plain dark dress, gazing sadly into the mirror, with her somber maid in the background. In the next image, both the lady and maid are happier and start to dance. The lady’s body, style, and mood are visibly brightened and transformed. Following her mistress’s orders, the maid has removed, cut, draped and rearranged the conservative, long, rigid and concealing dress from the first image into a short skirted one, with a dynamically swinging silhouette that reveals bare arms and a wide décolleté. The stiff, depressed, and conservatively dressed woman from the first image has transformed into an exuberant, happy, and fashionably dressed figure reminiscent of a chorus girl.

In another example of creative female transformation, also drawn by Baumer, a conspicuously so called “fashionable mother,” “stricken by remorse by the cry of her children” who wonder why they cannot have any new clothes, chooses to transform her own garments into three costumes for her children.¹⁷ Her mink muff and scarf are turned into a hat and bodice for her youngest, her high lace collar becomes a hat for her second, and the different layers of her flounced skirt are turned into skirts for her two elder daughters. The mother herself remains fashionable, though in a simpler and less extravagant style. While we do not know who actually executes the transformative design and construction of these new garments, the idea and initiative seems to come from the mother, familiar with both practical and stylistic matters of fashion. All four characters are turned from sad and subdued personalities into fashion mannequins proudly showing off their new apparel.

While these two image series are not focused on change in fashionable trends, they show fashion as a field of female creative activity and personal transformation which cannot be suppressed even in times of restriction. Yet, while applauding women’s creative capabilities, the jokes also criticize women.

As Lucy Noakes states: “[t]he female concern with individual appearance and dress was out of place in a militarised society, where uniformity of dress was seen to echo uniformity of purpose.”¹⁸

Still, even in wartimes *Punch* features cartoons that focus on novelties in fashion as such, which again contradicts the generalizing idea of a stagnation in British fashion during the war established by some fashion historians. Showing “Miss Kensington Gore as she was—and is” one cartoon, again by the obviously fashion-aware Lewis Baumer, juxtaposes two contrasting images of the same woman: on the left, she is drawn with a fashionable hat that covers her eyes and a wide décolleté that reveals her neck and part of her chest. On the right, her dress highlights opposite features: the upper part of the face is revealed, while her mouth and chin are hidden under an exaggerated version of a large plissé collar.¹⁹

Both versions communicate a lack of visibility when it comes to showing the face of Miss Kensington Gore. She is hiding behind fashions that consequently make her appear distant, suspicious, and unreachable for the (male) spectator. This cartoon stems from a long history of fashion discourse wherein predominantly male writers and caricaturists comment on the quickly-changing female fashion in openly misogynist ways. It also implies that the viewer and reader of early twentieth century *Punch* were predominantly male and that these men applied what Laura Mulvey coined as a male, objectifying gaze.²⁰

Accordingly, cartoons focusing on conspicuous fashionable trends worn by vain young women socialites who showed off in the streets or parks of London—the name Miss Kensington Gore seems to allude to an important promenade street in central London close to Hyde Park—can be seen as a historical convention within fashion caricatures that ridicule and shed light on quickly passing trends and the ephemerality of (female) fashions.²¹ They show that fashion development and its doubtful influence on the female gender was seen as an on-going process, even during the war.

Heartless vanity and fashionable ignorance

While the images analyzed so far may be read as praising wartime fashion creativity, they also hint at the supposed superficiality of (female) fashion consumers who kept to their fashionable needs despite the war. A more outspoken critique against such vain feminine concerns comes from a visual theme that more openly opposes female and male positions during the first year of war. A fashion-plate-like image by C. A. Shepperson shows three elegantly dressed lady-friends with fashionable V-necked dresses and hats with conspicuous feather and veil decorations chatting away on a London bridge; the cartoon depicts a so-called “fond” upper class mother complaining: “Isn’t the war dreadful? And so awkward when poor Sylvia is just coming out.”²² The lack of men during war reduced the audience for fashionable debutantes and the cartoon makes the point that women, particularly the upper class, cared about nothing more than matchmaking and social distinction.

In an even more aggressive and openly accusative mode, a cartoon title used several times during 1915, mainly by the cartoonist and artist Arthur Wallis Mills (1878–1940), states the “People we should like to see interned.”²³ In a British society with an intensifying class struggle and rising Republican and Democratic values, the people that “we”—that is, on the one hand, literally the editors and artists of *Punch*, and on the other, the readership they represent and address, or the educated British middle class—would want to see interned were exclusively upper-class women in fashionable attires.

Thus, one cartoon shows a lady—wearing a narrow black dress, large white fur muff, high hat with long and thin feathers in the newest Parisian style—accompanied by a small dog with a large bow, telling her more modest hosts: “You really must dine with us on Sunday. I shall have a couple of the dinkiest little wounded subs to show you.”²⁴ This cartoon speaks to a macabre social phenomenon: the showing off of male war victims in high-society circles and their objectification or even fetishization by the beautiful and frivolous female representatives of the upper class. In her study on the First World War British army uniform, Jane Tynan points to the centrality of the public image of the ordinary soldier and a general curiosity on soldiering and the soldier’s body as “[m]yths and memories of the war [that] are formed around the figure of the uniformed soldier.”²⁵ Such mythification may be part of the superficial and heartless sensationalism exemplified above.

Another cartoon by Mills with the title “More people we should like to see interned” shows two ladies in dark elegant dresses, fur muffs, hats with feather decorations, with painted lips and shingled hair (Figure 19.1). One woman is quite fat, the other extremely thin. They have come to see a hospital

Figure 19.1 Arthur Wallis Mills, “More people we should like to see interned,” *Punch*, March 24, 1915. *Punch Cartoon Library/TopFoto*.

nurse who comes across as a model of normality in contrast to the two ridiculous visitors; the nurse is average in body shape and, the reader is led to assume, rational in mind. In the background the reader glimpses three wounded soldiers. “Well, we’ll bring the car tomorrow, and take some of your patients for a drive. And, by-the-by, nurse, you might look out some with bandages that show—the last party might not have been wounded at all, as far as anybody in the streets could see.”²⁶

In those jokes the reader observes drastic contrasts and polarizations, both in social and in visual terms: the antithetical staging of elegance and conspicuous beauty or superficial fashion against the wounded, damaged, uniformed, or poorly dressed young soldiers who are to be shown off like freaks makes the soldiers signifiers of truth, honest patriotic commitment, and genuine misery while the ladies and their fashions become repellent examples of selfishness, falsity, and stupidity. Upper-class ladies come forward as representatives of a useless class. They belong to a passive and shallow feminine sphere that should be interned in order to gain true understanding of the war.

A final example of this trope of irresponsible female shallowness comes from a cartoon, again by Mills, depicting a young lady, showing off her charming profile under a veiled hat and exposing her tiny pointed fashionable boot. She leans forward to ask an invalid soldier lying in bed, whose face is almost totally covered by bandages: “Now, chatter away, and tell me all about it.”²⁷ Her light, transparent veil could be seen as a metaphor for the lightness and insubstantiality of her speech. It contrasts with the much stronger, stable, and useful fabrics providing the bandages and slings for the surrounding war victims. Bodies, fashions/clothes and fabrics as well as words become metaphors and interact in creating an opposition between different worlds and values. Fashionable ephemerality and insubstantiality is put in contrast to functional authenticity, reliability, and substantial material value.

Discourse on female fashion is thus repeatedly interwoven with messages on female stupidity, naiveté, or careless ignorance, not only in objectifying upper-class women but also in family scenarios where mothers play a pivotal role. A number of images stage conspicuously elegant mothers who respond to their innocent children’s revealing questions. Even though the mothers are not the main focus of these cartoons, they dominate the “stage” through their fashionable appearances. Their presence serves to represent and create a superficial feminine sphere in which ignorance on the serious matters of war is emphasized. In six different cartoons, mothers with their children are either shown strolling in English parks and the countryside, or resting and relaxing in their sofas; that is, they are always represented in inactive poses. These poses highlight their bodies and silhouettes in the most advantageous way, much like in fashion illustrations printed in the female fashion press.

For example, one such cartoon by the illustrator F. H. Townsend shows a promenading mother with her pretty little girl; the girl is wearing a lace dress and is clumsily trying to imitate the marching soldiers in the background.²⁸ Again, the joke is activated through the physical contrast between the true male militia in the background and the superficial imitation enacted by the female population. Another cartoon by Shepperson shows a mother who looks and poses like a fashion model, in a tight,

black dress combined with abundant white fur accessories, and a flat broad hat of the newest model, standing on a lawn with a mansion in the background.²⁹ Such a pose could be taken from a fashion drawing were it not for the smartly dressed little boy with his rifle. Sandy, “member of a martial family, returning from tea with some friends of a like age,” complains about his friends not having any weapons in their home. “Why, you wouldn’t know there was a war on!” Here, the superficiality of the aristocracy is shown off not only through the fashionable looks of its female members, but also through its sons, who treat the tools of war as toys, while seeing themselves as contributors in defending the nation.

In another example by the same illustrator, the focus is again on fashion: a smartly dressed “Vicar’s Daughter” on a promenade in the countryside, leans elegantly on her walking stick and reveals a pointed shoe. She asks a little girl where she has acquired her nice khaki mittens.³⁰ The girl answers: “Daddy sent them home from the front at Christmas.” Again fashion is shown in its deceitful character, misinterpreted by a naive female mind who thinks only about looks, while the authentic meaning and true value of the garment in focus lies in its use at the war front.

In a final example, drawn by Baumer, the cruelty of war in contrast to the ignorant and irresponsible comfort of bourgeois life-style is emphasized when an innocent young girl, sitting on the floor, tells her beautifully coiffed and dressed mother, who is sitting on the sofa and reading the newspaper, “Oh, Mother! How I wish I was an angel!”³¹ The mother asks, “Darling! What makes you say that?” “Oh,” the child replies, “because then, Mother, I could drop bombs on the Germans.” Reality and lack of reality, true war efforts and naive imagination, are juxtaposed in a macabre joke which is staged in an elegant feminine sphere.

(Feminine) looks versus (masculine) function

As the *Punch* jokes analyzed have shown so far, feminine fashionability and a lifestyle which ignored the war were commonly opposed to or juxtaposed with masculine war efforts. This was done through the written dialogues and the narrative content of the cartoons, but also through the visual (and metaphorical) contrasting of female fashion with military attire—mostly drawn as uniforms. As Cheryl Buckley has written:

[War] offered men the escape from the routines of social, economic and sexual responsibilities; it released them from the private sphere of the home—the feminine world—and propelled them into “the domain of the masculine, the army or navy, to the world of discipline, obedience, action.” The spaces of war were clearly articulated as masculine, whereas women’s spaces, particularly those of middle-class women, were predominantly represented as domestic.³²

Catriona Pennell extends Buckley's assertion, writing, "The entire home front was morally subordinated to the fighting soldier."³³

Though clearly part of a male sphere of war, the role of the male uniform on the stage of British First World War society created by *Punch* is manifold. Jane Tynan states that: "[a]s a motif for transformation, the uniform appeared to signify symbolic distinctions between military and civilian, the link between home and battlefield."³⁴ Such a distinction is confirmed through the uniform's links to the simplicity ideals of anti-fashion. It stands for practical functionality, heroism, and patriotic commitment, not only when worn at the front, but also when displayed at the wounded victims at home and contrasted against feminine fashion.

However, in some contexts, uniforms in *Punch* connoted masculine vanity, pretentious exposition of rank, and superficial fashionability. One "scene" (as the caption calls it), drawn by Shepperson, shows a "youthful 2nd Lieutenant trying on his new uniform, which has just arrived."³⁵ His mother comments: "I don't like all that decoration on the sleeve, dear. Couldn't you have it taken off?" Pointing out the fashionable, decorative aspects of the uniform, the young man's mother reveals her own (female) misunderstanding of the uniform—thinking about the uniform in terms of fashion. The cartoon also evokes male vanity, masquerade, and "dressing up" or "costuming" that takes place when young, bourgeois, civil men attempt to turn themselves into military men.

Several cartoons by Shepperson reveal the interactions between mothers or other elderly female relatives and their progeny, as seen through the trope of the mother commenting on the uniform. The young men in these cartoons have similar facial traits—long, thin faces with inexpressive eyes in the form of tiny dots as well as small mouths and noses. They are drawn as rather feminine characters; lacking virility, they appear too weak to even defend themselves against the women who control them with their sharp eyes and critical comments. Another "Dear Old Lady" cartoon by Shepperson depicts an old aunt speaking to her small-eyed, feeble "nephew" about war economy: "Well, you do look nice, Reggie, dear; but don't you think you might wear out your old uniform first and keep this one for Sundays?"³⁶ The joke attacks both the stupidity of the aunt who fails to grasp the true function of military dress (a garment that protects men in battle and serves to distinguish their rank), and also the listless, young, weak upper-class or bourgeois men, who seem transported into military roles which they cannot live up to, in spite of their new apparel.

Military or war-related garments, accessories, and tools such as uniforms, arms and protective gear are recurrently shown as superficial objects opposed to their real function in cartoons that are used to ridicule women as well as men. Thus, one such cartoon by Baumer illustrates a fashionably dressed mother with a pretty profile, her shining shoes slightly uplifted, her scared daughter at her side. A merchant shows her two versions of gas masks, explaining: "Well, Madam, we sell a good many of both. The solid rubber is perhaps the more serviceable article, but the other is generally considered the more becoming" (Figure 19.2).³⁷ Very clearly, utility and beauty are not compatible when it comes

Figure 19.2 Lewis Baumer, "Well, Madam, we sell a good many of both . . .," *Punch*, August 18, 1915. *Punch Cartoon Library/TopFoto*.

down to the difficult choice of which gas mask to acquire in order to provide protection for those who until then were mostly concerned about superficial matters of outer appearance.

While joking, *Punch* addresses the phenomenon of marketing of gas masks to civilians, not least worrying mothers. As Susan R. Grayzel writes, such jokes "expressed some of the outrage on the use of chemical weapons . . . The choice was seemingly about the type of protection, but the prospect of women and children needing to safeguard themselves from a weapon of such horror was no joke."³⁸ Grayzel also highlights the role of mothers and women's "relational response to the war" as that of worrying less about themselves than about their loved ones—a pattern that seems to be confirmed by several mother-child or mother-son jokes in *Punch*.³⁹

Another case of looks prioritized over function comes from a cartoon of a conspicuously slim, elegant, "Bright Youth," drawn by Shepperson, with a lorgnette, oiled hair, and a walking stick, who chats with a similarly fashionable young lady, dressed much like Shepperson's previously mentioned mother with her narrow black dress and the white furs.⁴⁰ Gazing at a uniformed officer who has just passed by, the "Bright Youth" reflects: "Yes, I'm thinkin' of gettin' a commission in something. What about joinin' that crowd with the jolly little red tabs on their collars? They look so doocid smart." The

scene stages the trope of the unemployed dandy with his superficial motivations for joining the army; this trope is not unconnected to the weak, uniformed sons and nephews analyzed above.

Another recurring female stereotype used in the discussion of male uniforms is, of course, the role of the “wife.” In a cartoon by Baumer, the “Wife of an Officer (just starting for the Dardanelles),” takes her tea dressed in a elegant flounced dress; revealing her smart shoes with crossed ribbons covering the calves, she boasts: “My husband’s got an inflated waistcoat.”⁴¹ To which a “Sympathetic Old Lady” answers: “Dear, dear, dear! I do hope it won’t involve an operation.” Once again, these cartoons reveal that what women are concerned about shows ignorance about what really matters. The title of this cartoon confirms the joke on “Our volunteer reserve.”⁴²

Further examples make clear that the hitherto sketched discourse on what one might call both men’s and women’s “abuse” of the uniform as a fashion garment was connected to an urgent and much debated question in the British society of 1915. Namely, the different aspects of recruitment and volunteering, the so-called and largely women-based home defense, and the different ways in which the male and female population tried or pretended to try to take responsibility for their home country. According to Gregory, in 1914 and 1915, Britain raised the second largest volunteer army in history thanks in part to propagandistic recruitment meetings with spectators cheering for the brave recruits. However, a large number of soldiers were still acting on compulsion and bribery and the majority of the male population chose not to “volunteer.”⁴³

Showing off military identity for spectators was a status-enhancing action. Thus dressing up in uniforms, in public or at private occasions, could serve a man’s vicarious performance and representation of military responsibility in spite of not participating on the actual battlefield. As Gregory writes, “Once in uniform, men became ‘patriots’ whatever the initial impulse for volunteering had been . . .”⁴⁴ Further, Pennell writes:

The experience of volunteering involved all members of society regardless of gender, and also of class and age. Whilst some men enlisted out of a desire to protect their wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, women were actively involved in encouraging men to enlist—or publicly humiliating them if they did not.⁴⁵

Such anxieties are certainly reflected in several of the jokes mentioned above, as well as in the following example: In another cartoon by Baumer, a sweet-looking, fashionable, young “Admiring Wife who has been to watch her husband’s corps drill in uniform for the first time” speaks to her much older husband. (The reader understands this as a typical marriage of convenience). “I thought you all looked splendid my dear,” the wife declares, “There’s just one thing I should like to suggest; and that is that you all wear socks to match your puttees.” The wife’s superficiality colors the figure of the husband, who, drawn as old and engaged in the “feminine” and passive act of tea-drinking, appears impotent and weak. His masquerading in military costume seems to be mainly about visual effects rather than true strength and efficiency.

Good (visual) impressions are also what counted for upper-class ladies drawn wearing luxurious coats while they purchased military accessories for their husbands or sons. In a cartoon by Frederick Pegram, a “Lady” in a dark, lavish fur coat asks a vendor for studs for her son. When the “shopman” asks if they are for the front, she replies, “No—home defence.”⁴⁶ Similarly, in a joke by Baumer entitled “Doing her bit,” another Lady (“about to purchase military headgear”) tells her sheepish-looking husband, sitting on a sofa in the background: “I know it’s more expensive than the others, dear, but—well, you see, you’re too old to enlist, and I really feel we ought to do *something!*”⁴⁷ This scene also exemplifies the so-called relief work that non-combatants volunteered for “in an effort to make their response to the war equal to the soldiers’ sacrifice.”⁴⁸ As Pennell wrote, “Those who could not fight, particularly women, could contribute by supporting the troops and comforting their families in a time of need. This kind of work also shielded non-combatants from accusations of ‘not doing their bit.’”⁴⁹

Yet, as the joke in *Punch* shows, some of these women and men were obviously suspected of just showing off. Besides the motif of unmanliness that is indicated by women taking charge of men’s military “fashion,” the *Punch* reader once again finds warfare reduced to superficial garments whose inauthentic use made them far from functional. These cartoons offer another version of *Punch*’s commentary on the hypocrisy and cowardice of the upper class hiding away in home defense, instead of making a real effort at the front.

Making a real man

Crucial aspects of masculinity and its staging or negotiation through uniforms are revealed in *Punch* jokes about the symbolic transformation uniforms may affect in a male character. Thus, in a cartoon by Frank Reynolds, a “Near-sighted Old Lady” who is called “a keen Recruiter,” mistakes a life-size cartoon figure of Charlie Chaplin in his typical tramp attire as a fit young man: “Now look at that young fellow. A couple of months in the army would make a new man of him!”⁵⁰ The belief in the transformative effect of war as a state that brings out ideal masculinity and manhood is thus clearly related to dress and visual appearance. Reflecting on the impact of uniforms and physical discipline, Jane Tynan discusses how “the civilian body can easily be exchanged for a military body” and “preparations for war centered on bodily transformations.” In wartime, Tynan writes, “popular culture had a role in recruitment in inviting civilians to alter their habits and “‘become’ soldiers through the inviting prospect of discipline and adornment.”⁵¹

Returning to the question of volunteering, several *Punch* cartoons reveal how men don the uniform as a way to quickly engage in the war “effort” without much effort at all. Again drawn by Baumer, who seems to especially engage in the theme of the Volunteer reserve, a small, listless boy called “Bobbie”

stands in the living room with his mother and sister, who all look unenthusiastically at the father “exhibit[ing] his new Volunteer uniform.” “Well! Mother—I say! This brings war home to us, doesn’t it?” Bobbie declares.⁵² The use of the word “exhibiting” reveals the performative aspect of the uniform as a theatrical costume for an insincere and unfit male character who is drawn with puffy cheeks, glasses, and a slightly protruding belly. The father, the cartoon implies, can only pretend to be a real war hero. Only the children are deceived by this masquerade.

Besides elder men with physical traits that make them inadequate for military service at the front, another recurring theme in the *Punch* cartoons are the aforementioned “thin” young men demonstrating different versions of irresponsibility, often signaled by their clothing. A cartoon by Mills consists of three images showing a uniform transforming only the outside appearance, but not the inner morals of its wearer.⁵³ The series is called “Reversion to type.” Its first picture shows a young man “before the war,” in smart suit and hat, striking a fashionable pose, smoking and nonchalantly swinging his walking stick in the air. The second picture shows the same young man in the “First weeks of war,” standing upright in a proper uniform, holding an officer’s straight stick, with a listless face (much like the boys analyzed above); his body expresses the stiffness and inactivity of someone who is unsure of what to do. The third picture in the series shows the young fellow having come “back to the old form.” He is now dressed in a combination of the military jacket with its belts and badges and the wide cap and trousers from “before the war.” He is drawn smoking, swinging with his officer’s stick, and strolling in a happy manner and in an irresponsibly careless mood.

While the first image signifies a dandy’s nonchalance, the second shows the empty artificiality of a dressed up figure that does not really fit into his clothes. The third reveals the man’s ingrained immorality, sloppiness, and lack of moral character, symbolized by his spineless mixing of different styles and types of masculinity.

Another example of the symbolic transformative power of the uniform, again by Baumer, expresses clear class critique.⁵⁴ A first image in the cartoon shows how “Sir Benjamin Goldmore and his junior clerk used to pass one another if they met in the city” (Figure 19.3). The second shows “how they pass one another now,” that is, in 1915, when the junior clerk has not only enlisted, but then surpasses his boss in military rank. While the first picture contrasts the formal dark suit and shining top hat of an upright wealthy businessman against a young, subdued clerk who bows while taking off his hat for Sir Goldmore, with his thick cigar and haughty profile, the roles are exchanged in the second picture. Now the earlier rich and—as his name implies—greedy Sir Goldmore is dressed in simple soldier’s garments and putties, and it is he who blushingly salutes his young clerk, who is haughtily passing by, shoulders back, neck out, and elegantly dressed in an officer’s uniform with a pretty young lady at his side. The two men’s new positions lead to new outfits, bodies, and body language. The war and its visual (dress) codes have removed traditional roles and social positions.

Figure 19.3 Lewis Baumer, “How Sir Benjamin Goldmore and his junior clerk . . .,” *Punch*, April 28, 1915. *Punch Cartoon Library/TopFoto*.

The spectacle of war

The study so far has shown that in 1915, *Punch*’s cartoonists seem less concerned with the real-political happenings in Europe than with the gender and class questions raised in England that were being renegotiated in the light of the beginning war and its demands. The notion of “spectatorship” as an initial position of British society in connection with a common myth about British war enthusiasm in 1914 and 1915 is clearly exemplified in two series of jokes that mainly appeared during the summer months, both relating to entertainment during weekend trips and vacation.⁵⁵ These also react to what Pennell has identified as “changing landscapes,” or visual changes, affected by the war, especially in the area of London and the surrounding countryside.⁵⁶

The first set of cartoons partly imitates advertisements announcing the sensational zeppelins, which could be observed at certain locations. It exposes fashionable couples as naïve spectators viewing the zeppelins as entertainment ignoring their function as weapons of warfare. One such false advertisement (author unnamed), called “A hint to the railway companies,” shows a romantic scene of

an elegant couple gazing dreamily at a night sky where two zeppelins fly, one of them dropping a bomb into the glittering surface of the sea.⁵⁷ The caption says “Be in the movement and go to Northend—on Sea. Frequent zeppelin displays.”

Just as fashionable and mundane, and just as naïvely detached from war’s actual concerns, are an upper-class couple in another cartoon by Shepperson, evidently dressed for an evening at the theatre or the opera. The husband, wearing a lorgnette, and the lady, displaying her elegant high-heeled shoes on the night streets of London, ask a police officer, “Oh, have you seen the zeppelin? Which way did it go?” The policeman answers, “Up the street opposite, madam, and first turning on the left.”⁵⁸

A third example, drawn by Townsend, shows “A Zeppelin Picnic” consisting of a group of young people in relaxed summer outfits, resting on the grass and engaging in typical picnic socializing. All of them, though, even their dog, wear gas masks under their fashionable sun hats.⁵⁹ In all three cases, upper-class fashionability is made to symbolize an unawareness of the proximity of the war, a trivialization of the war’s gravity, and mundane sensationalism of warfare. These jokes and fake ads hark back to the earlier analyzed examples criticizing the curiosity with and fetishization of the soldiers wounded in war.

While the cartoons examined above mainly deal with the upper class, the leisurely pleasures of the middle class were also criticized in jokes that demonstrated the naive spectacularization of war in Great Britain. Fashion and costume had a distinctive role to play in scenarios where military uniforms were opposed to the relaxed holiday garb and bathing outfits worn by an “audience” ignorant of the war’s severity.

The entire issue of *Punch* published on July 7, 1915, was devoted to the pleasures of summer holiday.⁶⁰ Here the reader finds fake touristic advertisements captioned: “Spend your holidays on the famous Cleekton Links. New Bunkers. New Hazards.”⁶¹ The illustration depicts smartly dressed golfers of both sexes watching and trying to enter a military zone. On the same page, an elegant lady strolls between two uniformed men, with the accompanying caption: “Come to Breezy Brightsmouth. More Soldiers to the Square Yard than in Any Other Spot in England.” Here, the soldiers and warzones become an objectified spectacle, expressed through the absurdity of civilians clad in casual summer and sporting fashions that have invaded the spaces of the uniformed male militia.

Another version of the war as a tourist attraction is revealed in the images of bathers playing “war” in a cartoon titled “War-time holidays.”⁶² It shows different scenes of holiday activities such as, “A hint to beach photographers,” depicting a photographer offering two passing men in summer suits the opportunity to pose behind a wooden backdrop with cutout faces of soldiers engaging in gunfire. Listless, ignorant, and irresponsible young men enjoying their holiday are invited to act and dress up as soldiers, as are the fashionable female consumers who, in the next image, are given the fashion tip, “Bathing costumes should have the military touch.” The illustration shows a model wearing a swimming suit inspired by the Scottish militia’s uniform.

As Lucy Noakes discussed in her article on British women and the First World War military uniform, the pejorative notion of females “playing at being soldiers” was widespread as “[w]omen in uniform walked a fine line between expressing patriotism and threatening both the continuity of gender roles and the status of combatant men.”⁶³ Such gender anxiety was confirmed in these *Punch* cartoons as well as in several other cartoons on volunteering women in uniform printed in other issues.⁶⁴ Military identity is thus presented as a superficial game and a source of entertainment for people who ignored the ongoing war and its atrocities. In these cartoons, life continued as usual for an unknowing and selfish segment of the population who preferred to watch the war from a safe distance.

Conclusion

The First World War restructured gender identities. Yet, in the British wartime society depicted and criticized by *Punch*, questions of gender were tightly interwoven with questions of class, professional roles and national identity. As Pennell writes when explaining how the First World War was constructed as a “National Cause” in public British opinion:

Explaining why Britain was at war involved constructing heroes, victims, scapegoats, and villains, however simplistic or idealistic. It was not enough to vilify the enemy: what Britain stood for in wartime had to be defined. Often these ideas were latent in peacetime but came to the fore once the nation was in crisis. Values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that were inherent and implicit in Edwardian society, became explicit.⁶⁵

In conclusion then, we may ask ourselves which costumed characters *Punch* demarcates as the actual national heroes in British First World War society? Who are the ideal Brits that are indirectly performed in the jokes about male and female stereotypes that do *not* properly engage in national service? The figures that are depicted to readers as “good,” “useful,” and “normal” in *Punch* are mainly nurses and wounded soldiers. That is, ordinary lower or middle-class men and women, clad in plain, functional dress, with inconspicuous bodies, and who act with rational human behavior; good citizens beyond gender-specific expressiveness, class-distinction, and interest in self-fashioning of any kind.

These brave men and women who serve their nation are staged in contrast to the ones “we would like to see interned”—the ones whose beauty, fashion and self-display come forward as deceptive and morally weakening. In spite of its aesthetic qualities, fashionable appearance was most of the time suspected of leading to false pretensions, empty role-play, passive nonchalance, and alienation from reality in a time when true commitment and strong actions were demanded.

As a final citation from *Punch*, the following poem from 1916 seems to summarize the magazine’s, and probably the dominating British public opinion:

You who when the world is mourning
 Only think of self-adorning
 Sadden Punch, your friend.⁶⁶

The cartoonists of *Punch* staged fashionable and superficial versions of female and male citizens in order to satirically demarcate their opposite—that is, ideal and functional women and men who worked and fought for their nation. Maybe the moralizing discourse against fashion exemplified by *Punch* has contributed to dress history mainly focusing on sartorial styles that emphasize efficiency, practicality, normality, and usefulness and their practical function during the First World War. Buying into the largely pejorative tone on fashion and fashion practices that the jokes have communicated, historians may have unconsciously erased, hidden, or silenced other stories on fashion and fashionability as less politically correct in the (dress) history of the Great War in Britain. Rather than merely looking at and laughing at *Punch*'s cartoons, a close analysis of the discourse, rhetoric, and representation of fashion within the magazine reveals the function of fashion as a performative instrument of power. “Undressing” the role-play enacted in these cartoons, means “undressing” different gender-related or sociopolitical agendas.

Notes

1 James Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History*, reprint (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002 [1969]), 229f.

2 Ibid., 230.

3 Other examples are Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Lou Taylor and Elizabeth Wilson, *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day* (London: BBC Books, 1989) or Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

4 Cheryl Buckley, “‘De-Humanised females and Amazonians’: British wartime fashion and its representation in *Home Chat*, 1914–1918,” *Gender & History* 14, 3 (November 2002): 516.

5 Ibid., 524.

6 Adrian Gregory, “From spectatorship to participation: From volunteering to compulsion 1914–1916,” in *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 70–111.

7 Janice Carlisle, *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 13.

8 As the introduction to its first edition in 1841 states, *Punch* “has the honour of making his appearance every SATURDAY, and continues, from week to week, to offer to the world all the fun to be found in his own and the following heads: politics, fashions, police, reviews, fine arts, music and the drama, sporting, and the facetiae (1841: iii–iv).” Further, *Punch* is well-known for redefining the concept of *cartoon* in its July 1 issue of 1843, where it announced “the publication of several exquisite designs, to be called PUNCH-CARTOONS!”—transforming the meaning of cartoon from a design for an art object to its now familiar meaning of “a humorous image in black and white,” *ibid.*, 89.

9 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1956), 14f.

- 10 See also my earlier study on the relationships between nation and gender in the visual fashion discourse of cultural and satirical magazines in Germany and Sweden during the 1910s and 1920s. Andrea Kollnitz, "The devil of fashion: Women, fashion and the nation in early-twentieth-century German and Swedish cultural magazines," in *Fashion in Popular Culture: Literature, Media and Contemporary Studies*, Joseph H. Hancock II, Toni Johnson-Woods, and Vicki Karaminas, eds. (Bristol and Chicago, IL: Intellect 2013), 225–41.
- 11 Shu-chuan Yan, "'Politics and petticoats': Fashioning the nation in *Punch Magazine* 1840s–1880s," *Fashion Theory* 15, 3 (2011): 346f.
- 12 See Carlisle on the almost realistic style developed in *Punch's* engraved illustrations. Carlisle, *Picturing Reform*, 14.
- 13 Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 140.
- 14 Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the image," in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath, ed. and trans. (New York: Hill and Wang 1977), 32–51.
- 15 *Punch*, August 18, 1915.
- 16 As the *Encyclopedia of Fashion* writes: "In 1918 the British government introduced a new garment called a 'National Standard Dress,' a simple loose, mid-calf dress made with no hooks and eyes. Because cotton and wool were needed for the war effort, the National Standard Dress was made from silk and was intended to be an all-purpose dress that could be worn for any occasion, any time of day or evening." "Civilian Dress in Wartime," *Encyclopedia of Fashion*, at: <http://www.fashionencyclopedia.com/> (accessed July 29, 2020); see also Laver, *Costume and Fashion*, 230.
- 17 *Punch*, December 1, 1915.
- 18 Lucy Noakes, "'Playing at being Soldiers?': British women and military uniform in the First World War," in *British Popular Culture and the First World War*, Jessica Meyer, ed. (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2008), 129.
- 19 *Punch*, November 17, 1915.
- 20 On fashion discourse and dress and morality, see Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (London: Berg, 2003). On the male gaze, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833–44.
- 21 For further case studies on early-twentieth-century European fashion discourse on fashion, gender, and the nation, see also Kollnitz, "The devil of fashion."
- 22 *Punch*, July 28, 1915.
- 23 The jokes come also with titles in other variations, such as "people we 'ought to,'" "more people we . . ." See also the following examples.
- 24 *Punch*, January 20, 1915.
- 25 Jane Tynan, "'Tayloring in the trenches': The making of First World War British Army uniform," in *British Popular Culture*, Meyer, ed., 71.
- 26 *Punch*, March 24, 1915.
- 27 *Ibid.*, April 28, 1915.
- 28 *Ibid.*, June 3, 1915.
- 29 *Ibid.*, March 17, 1915.
- 30 *Ibid.*, May 5, 1915.

- 31 Ibid., February 3, 1915.
- 32 Buckley, “De-Humanised females and Amazonians,” 518. Buckley is referring to Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 12f.
- 33 Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 77.
- 34 Tynan, “Tayloring in the trenches,” 71.
- 35 *Punch*, August 11, 1915.
- 36 Ibid., October 20, 1915.
- 37 Ibid., August 18, 1915.
- 38 Susan R. Grayzel, “The Baby in the Gas Mask: Motherhood, Wartime Technology, and the Gendered Division Between the Fronts During and After the First World War” in *Gender and the First World War*, eds. Christa Hämmerle, Oswald Überegger, and Birgitta Bader Zaar (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 132.
- 39 Ibid., 127f.
- 40 *Punch*, February 17, 1915.
- 41 Ibid., October 20, 1915.
- 42 Ibid., March 17, 1915.
- 43 Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 73ff.
- 44 Ibid., 81.
- 45 Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, 158.
- 46 *Punch*, January 27, 1915.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, 76.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 *Punch*, July 28, 1915.
- 51 Tynan, “Tayloring the trenches,” 90.
- 52 *Punch*, February 17, 1915.
- 53 Ibid., July 28, 1915.
- 54 Ibid., April 28, 1915.
- 55 On the myth of British war enthusiasm, see Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, 3–6.
- 56 Ibid., 205–9.
- 57 *Punch*, September 15, 1915.
- 58 Ibid., November 10, 1915.
- 59 Ibid., July 7, 1915.

- 60 “Mr. Punch’s Holiday Pages,” *ibid.*
- 61 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 63 Noakes, “‘Playing at being soldiers?’” 143.
- 64 See, for example, *Punch*, December 15, 1915, where a “Gallant Highland officer” is “taking a Lady Volunteer’s salute,” by spreading out his kilt like a skirt and smiling while the “Lady” in uniform takes a “masculine” pose with severe facial expression.
- 65 Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, 57.
- 66 *Punch*, March 22, 1916, quoted in Noakes, “‘Playing at being Ssoldiers,’” 129.

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