

1-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Keenan, Oliver James (2010) "How Can Academical Dress Survive in the Third Millennium?," *Transactions of the Burgon Society*. Vol. 10. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1086>

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## How Can Academical Dress Survive in the Third Millennium?

by *Oliver James Keenan*

### ***Introduction: the criminalization of ornament***

If Austrian architectural scholar Adolf Loos' maxim that 'the evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament from useful objects'<sup>1</sup> was extrapolated to cover matters sartorial, the existence and development of academical costume would rapidly be confined to the annals of history, and academical dress would be obsolete.

Indeed, whilst there is no good reason to assume that Loos' hypothesis does apply to costume, academical dress enthusiasts have observed—with a mixture of sadness and consternation—the decline of academical costume during the last several decades. There can be little doubt that academical dress is now absent from such settings as grammar schools and university lecture theatres, where it was once regarded as the norm. For many, academical costume is regarded simply as an historical curiosity, the somewhat bizarre attire that garnishes the graduation day with the quintessential trappings of medieval English ceremonial.

Despite this, special interest groups have emerged with the intention of promoting the wearing of academical costume over and above its use in graduation ceremonial, both on a national<sup>2</sup> and local<sup>3</sup> basis. These groups, whilst not necessarily promoting the rigorous scholarly engagement with the history, design and practice of academical dress that characterizes the mission of the Burgon Society, nevertheless attest to a perceived need actively to encourage the preservation of academical costume.

### ***Tracing the decline of academical costume***

The macroscopic decline in academical dress can be demonstrated by a microscopic case study of the dismantling of the practice at the University of

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<sup>1</sup> I. Bentley, *Urban Transformations* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 116–41.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. The Central Institute London, est. 1989.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. The Cambridge University Cap and Gown Society (possibly now defunct) and St Andrews University's Scarlet Gown Society (est. 2010), currently boasting about 600 members: <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=248032854324>> (last accessed: 1 February 2012).

Cambridge—an institution with a well-developed and (reasonably) systematic scheme of academical dress,<sup>4</sup> as well as a strong and living tradition of its use,<sup>5</sup> and one which has kept an official record of the decline, deposited in minutes of council discussions and amendments to the Statutes and Ordinances.

Academical dress has long been regulated by statute at Cambridge: the earliest recorded statutes (of Peterhouse) require Fellows to ‘appear in the University dressed in the proper robes’,<sup>6</sup> and more extensive regulations were developed in both the Elizabethan code of 1570 and by Lord Burghley in 1587,<sup>7</sup> further being influenced by sumptuary legislation.<sup>8</sup> Academical dress at Cambridge is regulated by both College and University Statute, colleges requiring their members to wear academical dress for such events as formal hall and chapel (often requiring it more frequently than University Statute), and thus an exhaustive study of these statutes is beyond the scope of this paper. The primary University legislative texts, the Statutes and Ordinances, nevertheless provide an important insight into the developments in design and practice of academical dress at Cambridge and a direct comparison of the pre-1923 statute<sup>9</sup> and present legislation underlines considerable evidence of deregulation. Academical dress is to be worn by members of the University *in statu pupillari*:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For all its unfortunate facets (the treatment of PhDs, *inter alia*) Cambridge’s extensive and systematic scheme of academical dress is easily contrasted with the scheme of the University of Oxford, which unlike Cambridge has not adopted a system of faculty colours: the lining of doctoral hoods seeming disjointed from those of bachelors and masters.

<sup>5</sup> Again, the living nature of Cambridge’s tradition is underscored by comparison with Oxford’s, which has not been essentially reformed since 1770. Cambridge’s tradition, by contrast, is somewhat less ossified, being influenced (perhaps subconsciously) by London’s faculty colours reform, adopting a doctoral faculty colour system in 1889 and later acquiring a full system of faculty colours, albeit as late as 1934. (See B. Christianson, ‘Lined with Gold’, *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 5 (2005), pp. 80–89.)

<sup>6</sup> H. P. Stokes, *Ceremonies of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Although no sumptuary legislation applied directly to academical dress, its influence on doctoral robes is alluded to by C. A. H. Franklyn (*Academical Dress* (Lewes: Baxter, 1970), p. 112), and provisions and implications of sumptuary legislation for undergraduates and graduates are explored in detail by N. Cox, ‘Tudor Sumptuary Laws and Academical Dress’, *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 6 (2006), pp. 15–43.

<sup>9</sup> In 1923, following His Majesty’s granting Royal Assent to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge Act 1923, a body of Commissioners was appointed to undertake a significant renewal of the University’s governing legislation.

<sup>10</sup> Note that this includes those of the standing of a Bachelor of Arts: ‘A person *in statu pupillari* is defined as any member of the University who has not been admitted to some office in the University, to a Fellowship or office of a College, or to a degree which qualifies the holder for membership of the Senate (any Doctor’s degree; any Master’s degree other than the degree of Master of Engineering or Master of Natural Sciences; the degree of Bachelor of Divinity), and is of less than three and a half years’ standing from admission to

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... at all University Lectures and Examinations [...], in the University Church, the Senate-House, and the Library; in the streets at all times on Sundays, and on other days after Dusk; and at all other times at which the Vice-Chancellor may, by public notice, direct the Academical Dress to be worn.<sup>11</sup>

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... when attending University ceremonies in the University Church or in the Senate-House, and at all other times at which the Vice-Chancellor may by public notice direct that academical dress be worn.<sup>12</sup>

The first emendation, in fact, occurred before the reform of the Statutes in 1923. During the academic year 1920/21, the Proctorial Syndicate conducted a thorough review of the statutes, tasked to ‘abolish obsolete clauses and, where necessary, to render more precise those clauses which are at present operative’.<sup>13</sup> The resulting ‘Report on the Edicts’, submitted on 9 May 1921, recommended that the requirement that members of the University *in statu pupillari* wear gowns in the street at all times on Sundays be abolished.<sup>14</sup> This recommendation, among several others, was passed into effect without any further notice or comment, by a grace of the Senate House on 10 June 1921.<sup>15</sup> No explicit motivation is attributed either to the Proctorial Syndicate or the Senate, but the fact that the emendation emerges not from a review of academical dress per se, but from a review of legislation conducted by the body responsible for enforcing it, suggests that it was motivated by practical, rather than ideological, concerns. It may be that the growing size of the University made enforcing the rule rather impractical, or that the rule simply had not hereto been enforced. The role of the proctor was certainly expanding: by this time the proctors had come to concern themselves with the ‘reckless and

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his or her first degree (if any).’ See Cambridge University, *Student’s Handbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 3; see also: The Chancellor, Masters, and Scholars of the University of Cambridge, *Statutes and Ordinances of the University of Cambridge and Passages from the Acts of Parliament Relating to the University*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 70–71.

<sup>11</sup> *Statutes and Ordinances of the University of Cambridge ...*, 1885, p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> *Statutes and Ordinances of the University of Cambridge ...*, 2010, p. 189.

<sup>13</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 51 (1921), p. 986.

<sup>14</sup> The report precisely recommends: ‘That in the Ordinances on page 330, Section 1, paragraph 1, seventh line, the words “in the street after dusk” shall be substituted for “in the street at all times on Sundays, and on other days after dusk”’ (ibid.).

<sup>15</sup> Viz. ‘That the recommendations contained in the Report, dated 9<sup>th</sup> May 1921, of the Proctorial Syndicate on the Edicts, be approved’ (Grace 1, 10 June 1921). See *Cambridge University Reporter*, 51 (1921), p. 1154.

inconsiderate driving of motor vehicles' by members of the University,<sup>16</sup> and would shortly establish the office of 'motor proctor',<sup>17</sup> which continues to this day.

A change not directly alluded to in the Statute,<sup>18</sup> concerns the use of headwear. During World War II and the period of rationing that followed, a severe shortage of materials made obtaining a square cap, which had previously been worn or carried as a standard component of academical dress, nearly impossible. It would have been farcical to prevent students from matriculating, taking their degrees, entering the library or sitting their examinations on the basis of not possessing the square, and thus the proctors ceased enforcing the regulation governing the use of appropriate headwear, a fact that was acknowledged by a 'notice concerning academical dress' in the Official Report of 1943.<sup>19</sup>

In August 1950 a grace of the University's Senate (applicable from 1 October 1950)<sup>20</sup> partially reversed this dispensation, once again requiring the cap to be worn or carried at graduation, whilst simultaneously 'not proposing to enforce the wearing or carrying of the cap by persons *in statu pupillari* on all the occasions and in all the places prescribed by Ordinance'.<sup>21</sup> The Senate, therefore, accepted the advice of the Proctorial Syndicate, '... that the cap should be carried by all persons when taking degrees and that its use should also be required on such occasions as the vice-chancellor may direct ...'<sup>22</sup> At this stage, the University falls short of outright abandonment of the square cap, instead tolerating its absence on less formal occasions: the report explicitly declares, '[We] are of the opinion that the cap as part of the academical dress should not be abolished.'<sup>23</sup>

The issue was not considered resolved, however, and in 1953 the Ordinance was emended by grace of the Senate House,<sup>24</sup> with the effect that members of the University *in statu pupillari* are 'no longer [...] required to wear or carry the square cap on any occasion'.<sup>25</sup> Whilst the previous decisions, motivated by practical

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<sup>16</sup> Cambridge University, *University Newsletter*, December 2008, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> T. E. B. Howard, *Cambridge between the Wars* (London: Collins, 1978), p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> Being contained within the contents of the final clause, 'the academical dress', and governed specifically by Statute II, §6.

<sup>19</sup> Viz. 'The Council of the Senate give notice that, until further notice, when academical dress is to be worn, members of the university *in statu pupillari* will not be required to wear or carry the cap' (*Cambridge University Reporter*, 73 (1943) [26 April], p. 510).

<sup>20</sup> Viz. 'That the recommendation contained in the Report, dated 5<sup>th</sup> June 1950, of the Council of the Senate on Academical Dress be approved' (Grace 5, 5 August 1950). See *Cambridge University Reporter*, 80 (1950), p. 1607.

<sup>21</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 80 (1950), p. 1314.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Viz. 'That the recommendation contained in the Report, dated 27<sup>th</sup> April 1953, of the Council of the Senate on Academical Dress, be approved' (Grace 4, 23 May 1953). See *Cambridge University Reporter*, 83 (1953), p. 1326.

<sup>25</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 83 (1953), pp. 1170.

expedience, seem to have been accepted unanimously, this decision was—the record suggests—the product of some considerable debate. On the one hand, the Senate’s Council on Academical Dress acknowledges that there now exists no ‘reason why square caps should not be procurable and the regulation enforced’,<sup>26</sup> on the other hand some Senior Members of the University (including University Teaching Officers, Tutors and indeed members of the Senate Committee), ‘are doubtful [that] the present regulation is worth enforcing’.<sup>27</sup> In the ensuing consultation, five colleges (22% of the University’s collegiate bodies)<sup>28</sup> advocated a return to the pre-war policy (viz. the requirement to wear or carry the square cap at all times when academical dress was required): no reason for their advocating this policy is elucidated in the official record, but it is perhaps symptomatic of a desire to retain tradition in the face of an expanding and modernizing university. The remaining colleges desired either abandonment, or retention of the current policy (qua the 1950 statute), and were reasonably equally divided between the two, although many of those who desired the retention of the 1950 statute expressed this as a weak preference for abandonment.<sup>29</sup> The Council thus settled on the abandonment option, resulting in the present statute, nevertheless noting that this was not an invitation to sartorial innovation, for whilst members *in statu pupillari* are ‘no longer [...] required to wear or carry the square cap on any occasion, [they] will as heretofore, contravene the regulations if [they wear] any other form of headdress with a gown.’<sup>30</sup>

At the same time as establishing the (what turned out to be short-lived) 1950 Ordinance governing the square cap, the Council acknowledged the validity of Faculty Boards’ decision to dispense certain science students from gown wearing in the laboratory.<sup>31</sup> In June 1961, however, a grace of the Senate House<sup>32</sup> would grant far greater dispensation to members of the University *in statu pupillari* who had been admitted to a primary degree or granted the status of a Bachelor of Arts (or equivalent), who were relieved of the ‘obligation to wear academical dress in the streets after dusk’.<sup>33</sup> The reasons for this are two-fold—firstly the considerable practical difficulties in expecting graduate research students (often of mature age)

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Nine fewer than the existing thirty-one, i.e. twenty-two, excluding the more recent foundations: Robinson (1977), Homerton (1976), Wolfson (1965), Lucy Cavendish (1965), Clare Hall (1965), Darwin (1964), Churchill (1960) and Murray Edwards (then New Hall, 1954).

<sup>29</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 83 (1953), p. 1170.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 80 (1950), pp. 1314ff.

<sup>32</sup> Viz. ‘That the recommendation contained in the Report, date 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1961, of the Council of the Senate on the wearing of Academical dress after dusk be approved’ (Grace 1, 23 June 1961). See *Cambridge University Reporter*, 91 (1961), p. 1982.

<sup>33</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 91 (1961), p. 1823.

to wear a gown in the evenings, and the ‘fact that at Oxford a similar provision was allowed to fall into disuse in the 1930s and repealed soon after the last war.’<sup>34</sup> Whilst the tone of the 1953 emendation is cautious, by 1961 the disposition of the Council is made clear—the requirement to wear academical dress is an onerous one from which ‘relief may be given as soon as possible’,<sup>35</sup> and ‘[s]ome speakers expressed the view that the Council’s proposal did not go far enough’,<sup>36</sup> and that whilst the extending of this dispensation to all members *in statu pupillari* (i.e. particularly to undergraduates) would be ‘controversial’, ‘the council think that the question should be further explored’.<sup>37</sup>

The question was duly explored, by the Proctorial Syndicate, and the outcome predictable: a unanimous recommendation that the dispensation be extended ‘so as to rescind this requirement in the case of all members of the University *in statu pupillari*’.<sup>38</sup> There is little narrative to accompany the recommendation, save to cite a handful of practical problems exacerbated by gown-wearing (including the riding of bicycles). That undergraduates found the regulation ‘irksome and unreasonable’<sup>39</sup> resonates with the view of many senior University members that the gown is ‘outmoded’.<sup>40</sup> The Council conclude, therefore, that ‘it is no longer appropriate or useful to require persons *in statu pupillari* to wear gowns in the streets after dusk, and that the abolition of the requirement will be in the University’s interest.’<sup>41</sup> Precisely how this final, somewhat nebulous assertion ought to be interpreted is no doubt open to debate—perhaps the University benefited from no longer having to expend manpower in the enforcement of an oft-flouted regulation, or perhaps it benefited the University’s corporate image in some way. In any event, the necessary changes were passed into Statute and Ordinance by a grace of the Senate House in March 1965.<sup>42</sup>

It was this grace of March 1965 that most decisively confirmed the decline of academical dress at Cambridge. Nevertheless, in 1967, the Library syndicate moved to abandon the necessity of wearing the gown in the University Library (citing its redundancy due to the introduction of a library ticket system replacing academical dress’s former instrumental function in identifying those *in statu pupillari* and thus eligible to use the Library). This was passed unceremoniously

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<sup>34</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 91 (1961), p. 1730.

<sup>35</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 91 (1961), pp. 1822–23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 95 (1965), p. 1031.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 95 (1965), p. 1194.

<sup>42</sup> *Viz.* ‘That the recommendation contained in the Report, dated 8<sup>th</sup> February 1965, of the Council of the Senate on academical dress be approved’ (Grace 1, 10 March 1965). See *Cambridge University Reporter*, 95 (1965), p. 1198.

into Statute without any comment.<sup>43</sup> The requirement to wear gowns to examinations was equally unceremoniously rescinded by a grace of February 1970,<sup>44</sup> thus confining academical dress to a ceremonial role.

### **Pockets of resistance**

Whilst this pattern of regulatory decline is reproduced nationwide, those who seek to write the obituary for academical costume are doing so prematurely. As universities have reduced the number of occasions at which members are required to use academical dress, it seems a shift has occurred: whilst in the past students were apparently inclined to push against the boundaries of the statutes and resisted the wearing of academical dress except when absolutely required, evidence suggests students are now willing to ‘build upon’ the statutes in force and adopt academical costume on occasions when it is not required by statute. Indeed, there are various pockets—Durham, St Andrews, Oxford and Cambridge included—in which academical dress continues to be reasonably widely used in informal and non-ceremonial settings, despite having witnessed some general decline (and indeed evolution) in the rate and mode of use of the gown. Elsewhere, academical dress has been adopted by a number of professional associations and institutions, which had no tradition of wearing it and whose adoption may, in former times, have been regarded as an unacceptable pretence towards pseudo-academia.<sup>45</sup>

These pockets of resistance have generally formed in universities which have embraced a conservative ethos and at which ‘tradition’ is embraced by both the student and staff communities as an important facet of their intellectual inheritance. Interestingly, at St Andrews, the use of the distinctive scarlet gown by undergraduate students in the Faculties of Arts, Medicine and Science is positively promoted (often being worn by students with very casual clothes and for no ‘formal’ event), now virtually forming part of the University’s corporate identity: students being provided with free admission to local tourist attractions on condition of wearing their gowns, and images of engowned students adorning the University’s promotional material. It remains, however, a constant irk to undergraduates in the Faculty of Divinity that university photographers seem less keen on photographing them in their less distinctive gowns of black stuff, and to students in other faculties that photographers insist upon instructing them to fasten the gown’s clasp, a practice anathematized by the student body, which has developed a practice of wearing the gown in a distinctive fashion depending upon

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<sup>43</sup> Viz. ‘That on the recommendation of the Library syndicate, the regulations be amended’ (Grace 8, 14 June 1967): *Cambridge University Reporter*, 97 (1967), p. 1880.

<sup>44</sup> Viz. ‘The regulations for academical dress and discipline be amended as follows ...’ [There follows the existing form of the law] (Grace 1, 18 February 1970): *Cambridge University Reporter*, 100 (1970), p. 1152.

<sup>45</sup> Their adoption of formal academical costume is, in my view, to be welcomed, for reasons outlined below.



their year, gradually being shed from the shoulders as the student progresses towards graduation.

At Oxford and Cambridge, students have consistently supported the retention of academical costume. At Cambridge, in 2003, New Hall<sup>46</sup> reintroduced its undergraduate gown for formal hall, largely due to the undergraduate students' desire for formality. In a 2006 ballot of undergraduate students at Oxford, 81% of the respondents were in favour of retaining the gown at examinations.<sup>47</sup> Students at both universities, and indeed at St Andrews and Durham, are often seen wearing their undergraduate gowns at events where they are not required *de jure*. In St Andrews, the heavy felt-like material the scarlet robe is cut from provides a welcome—and stylish—source of insulation against the winds that batter the east coast of Scotland, and enrobed undergraduates are often spotted buying crates of beer and frozen pizzas from the local supermarket.

Developments such as these—alongside the increasing prevalence of students wearing academical gowns over casual clothes, aside from any ceremonial function such as chapel or examination, demonstrates the living nature of academical dress tradition in these pockets of resistance, in which there is a gap between the university's regulations and the students' practice. The fact that there are occasions when the use of academical costume is required *de rigueur*, but not *de jure*, belies the fact that academical dress remains meaningful for some young students in today's universities.

### ***Meaning, metanarrative and misconceptions***

Whilst academical costume may indeed be a meaningful and valuable feature of university life for many modern students, this fact alone does not guarantee the vibrancy or survival of the tradition, the transmission of which depends upon a degree of internal coherence. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the 'hermeneutic' applied to academical dress within these pockets of resistance, i.e. how the tradition is interpreted and received within the context of a modern university.

Even a cursory examination of the use of academical dress suggests that the tradition is widely misconceived,<sup>48</sup> and that a significant gap has emerged between the historical rationale for academical costume and its modern usage. Indeed, the circulation of a myriad misconceptions—which are so extensive that they

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<sup>46</sup> Now Murray Edwards College.

<sup>47</sup> Notably, recorded turnout was much higher than for other similar University-wide ballots. See P. Foster, '21st-Century Students Vote to Keep Oxford Tradition', *The Times*, 4 March 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the existence of societies to promote understanding of academic regalia attests to the perception of this need. This *prima facie* claim is based, moreover, on my own personal experience of university life, and upon my participation in the Academic Dress eGroup, a forerunner of the Burgon Society.

themselves now form a secondary, detachable tradition—attests to this gap between theory and practice.

Not all developments—whether in design, practice or understanding—are, of course, undesirable. Some developments in practice demonstrate organic growth of the inherited tradition, whilst others arise from neglect, misunderstanding or corruption—emerging either from a lack of historical consciousness or from deliberate attempts to disrupt the tradition. The litmus test of the health of academical dress tradition, therefore, is the extent to which it develops in ‘hermeneutical continuity’ with itself.<sup>49</sup>

Misconceptions occur when no hermeneutic of continuity is applied (either consciously or sub-consciously) to the tradition of academical costume.<sup>50</sup> It is not necessary here to enumerate at length the misconceptions that arise, only to demonstrate their widespread existence to support my thesis of a gap between metanarrative and usage.

‘Misconceptions of disregard’ are the most prevalent, and are not always strictly misconceptions, but the deliberate (sometimes semi-official) or indeliberate disregarding of established norms and practices, often emerging from ignorance of or indifference towards regulation or tradition, and in some cases the evaluation of regulation and tradition in a negative light. Thus, for example, we find members of an academic procession sporting equivalent gowns—say a professor holding a Cambridge PhD borrowing the Oxford DPhil robes of a colleague, perhaps simply because they were to hand. Likewise mix and match approaches to academical costume are often reported,<sup>51</sup> in which the gown of one degree is worn with the hood of another—an irregularity often found amongst postgraduate students, whose motivation might be thrift, buying one gown but multiple hoods, or inheriting a second-hand master’s hood and wearing it over the gown of their bachelor’s degree.

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<sup>49</sup> The ‘hermeneutic of continuity’, contrasted with the ‘hermeneutic of rupture’, is a phrase adopted from Pope Benedict XVI’s first address to the Holy Roman Curia. In the context of academical dress, I take it to mean the extent to which any development and application of the tradition of academical costume is self-referentially coherent, and historically conscious.

<sup>50</sup> Viz., when one applies either a hermeneutic of rupture, or applies no hermeneutic whatsoever.

<sup>51</sup> I refer here to the mixing and matching of hoods that are not intended to be worn over another institution’s gown. There are some institutions whose regulations inevitably lead to such ‘mixed bathing’, i.e. those that prescribe hoods to be worn with the gown of the holder’s degree. For example, the Institute of Physics MInstP hood (worn with the gown of the holder’s degree), and the Burgon Society Fellowship hood which may be worn with ‘any suitable black gown to which the Fellow is entitled’. For evidence of the prevalence of this practice, and the relatively permissive attitude of academical dress enthusiasts, see message §30772, Academic Dress eGroup.

‘Local misconceptions’ are particularly prevalent in those pockets of resistance that have retained or promoted the use of academical costume. These take two forms—a variant in practice and a variant in narrative. The variant in practice emerges as a change in the practice of academical dress that may or may not be in hermeneutical continuity with inherited tradition. For example, the personalization of undergraduate gowns by St Andrews students with ‘raisin strings’<sup>52</sup> signifying their belonging to a particular ‘academic family’ may be seen as a variant in continuity with the early history of academical costume which often served as a badge of belonging to various groups within a university, some more or less formal than others.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, it is increasingly the case that during Halloween formals at Cambridge colleges, undergraduate students wear a comedy hat whilst wearing their undergraduate gowns—something proscribed by statute (which does not require the use of the square, but nevertheless does not allow the wearing of any other hat). Such a jovial embrace of the gown to the social heart of college life, even whilst technically in breach of the University’s Statutes and Ordinances (and thus liable to be fined by the proctors), is perhaps something that all but the most legalistic advocates of academical costume would welcome.

‘Narrative misconceptions’ affect the story that accompanies the practical usage—often an effort to explain a facet of a university’s dress by the retrospective imposition of a plausible—but often unprovenanced—explanation. Thus a plethora of explanations circulates concerning why Cambridge PhDs are denied the scarlet full-dress robe afforded the higher doctors, and the scarlet colour of the St Andrews undergraduate gown has been explained by a myriad of myths,<sup>54</sup> including honouring the ‘blood of the martyrs’,<sup>55</sup> as a means of honouring student John Honey,<sup>56</sup> and as the result of a personal order of James VI & I.<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Cooper’s

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<sup>52</sup> These are threads woven together attached to some chosen object deemed to represent the academic family in question, attached in some way to the gown’s facings (often with an oversized safety pin). The number of strings indicates the numbers of years standing within the University of the matriarch of the academic family.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. the relative spontaneity of grouping masters into the nations of Albania, Angusia, Laudonia and Britannia at the University of St Andrews in 1472. See J. Sharpe, *The Mediaeval University*, St Andrews’ University Library Publication (St Andrews: St Andrews University, n.d.), pp. 1–2.

<sup>54</sup> It is indeed notable that most of the mythological explanations for the scarlet undergraduate gown at St Andrews are advanced without reference to its concomitant adoption at the other ancient universities of Scotland!

<sup>55</sup> The legacy of the Scottish Reformation Martyrs is exceedingly strong in St Andrews, and is the subject of commemoration within the University. Particularly notable are Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart, the sites of whose executions are marked prominently within the town. See J. Foxe and W. G. Berry, *Martyrs* (St Andrews: Fleming Company, 1999 reprint), Ch. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Died 1831, long after the scarlet gowns were adopted. Honey was a student of the University who, it is told, died whilst swimming to save passengers of a ship sinking in St Andrews Bay.

lengthy investigation of the history of the scarlet gown, however, offers no support for these rumours, finding that the gown emerged some time between the death of King James in 1625 and its codification by the Covenanting Commission of 1690.<sup>58</sup> The speculation that the three chevrons adorning the undergraduate gown of Clare College, Cambridge, (which are derived from the arms of foundress Lady Elizabeth de Clare), reference Lady Elizabeth's three husbands is less easily dismissed, but likely also a retrograde imposition of meaning.

Another group of seemingly ubiquitous misconceptions is latent within contemporary culture, perhaps emerging in large part from the suggestive influence of the broadcast media. Media portrayal has left many with the impression that the distinctive garb of a graduate is the square academical cap, often termed the 'mortar-board', which was worn by schoolmasters until the mid-twentieth century and remains an iconic symbol of the teaching profession. Whilst the square cap may have historically been reserved to masters, it has long since been prescribed for both bachelors and undergraduates. In reality—given the proliferation of schemes and prescribing institutions—it is not possible to identify any single component of academical dress as reserved to graduates alone. Nevertheless within the university sector, it is the hood that marks those who have been admitted to degrees:<sup>59</sup> undergraduates are prescribed gown and square, but no hood.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, the most rampant urban legend of all academical dress misconceptions relates to the square cap, found in multiple variants at numerous universities, clustered around a central maxim that men abandoned its use at graduation as a form of protest against the admission of women to the university. This undoubtedly emerged as an effort to explain why women wore their square caps at graduation

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<sup>57</sup> This theory, discredited by Jonathan C. Cooper's article, 'The Scarlet Gown' (printed in this issue of *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, pp. 8–42), as inherited speculation from the works of R. G. Cant, is found in W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley's *magnum opus*: 'All undergraduates of the university, irrespective of their college, were instructed by King James VI, perhaps in the latter part of his reign, to wear a scarlet gown, as were those of other Scottish universities' (*A History of Academical Dress in Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 139).

<sup>58</sup> 'The Scarlet Gown', pp. 13–14.

<sup>59</sup> Here, I use 'degree' in the widest sense of the term: there are many, more modern, universities that prescribe hoods for diplomates et al. Outside of the tertiary education sector, institutions prescribe hoods for members on receipt of their membership subscription (e.g., The Academy of St Cecilia), and some argue for the possibility of ordained non-graduates wearing the so-called literate's hood. See N. Groves, 'Who May Wear the Literate's Hood?', *Burgon Society Annual*, 2002, pp. 15–16.

<sup>60</sup> It seems that at the University of Durham some undergraduates have taken to wearing the literate's hood, i.e. an unlined black hood [f6]. This is, however, an unofficial grassroots development and not one advocated or supported by the University. It seems difficult to support the adoption of a literate's 'hood' by non-clerical undergraduates when the literate's hood is in fact 'a decent tippet of black, so it be not silk' (not, therefore, a hood at all) and is prescribed for liturgical use!

ceremonies, whilst men either carried (or did not use) one. In reality, academical headwear follows the principles of more general hat etiquette: men remove their headwear upon entering a building, whilst women do not. In more recent times many universities have simply abandoned headwear for graduands entirely.<sup>61</sup>

These misconceptions are all, however, symptomatic of a more fundamental disconnection of academical dress practice from its basic explanatory narrative: they reveal a fundamental misrepresentation of the nature and purpose of academical costume and its relationship to the academic degree.

For many modern graduands, academical costume assumes an adjunctive role. In the minds of many people nowadays, a degree is something ‘awarded’—a graduate is one who ‘possesses’ a qualification, an independent agent whose degree qualifies them for employment or recognizes their completion of a course of studies: fundamentally, something that marks their departure from an institution. Many modern degree certificates speak of a degree being ‘awarded to’ or ‘conferred upon’ the recipient, and it is the certificate (or perhaps even the academic transcript) that takes priority over academical costume. To ‘possess a degree’ is less about standing in a particular relationship with a university than it is about standing in a particular relationship with the rest of the world (including professional bodies and the employment market, *inter alia*), and this outward focus has reduced the significance of academical costume to inconsequential garnish.

Historically, however, one was ‘admitted’ to a degree, which was a particular rank or grade of membership within the university, conferring both rights and privileges alongside duties and responsibilities. It is strictly more accurate, therefore, to say that someone is ‘possessed by’ their degree, rather than being a ‘possessor’ of that degree! Admission to the degree of bachelor in a faculty was a staging post on the way towards ‘mastery’ of a subject, permitting the recipient to participate in the disputations necessary to further their education. In addition, students were required to study the Arts before proceeding to study in the higher faculties of Divinity, Law and Medicine, being admitted to the various ‘degrees’ of membership in those faculties also. The route of progression through the ‘degrees’ of membership was thus admission to BA, then MA, followed by the bachelor’s degree and doctoral degree in the relevant higher faculty (for example BCL<sup>62</sup> and

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<sup>61</sup> At Cambridge, the wearing of headdress at graduation is optional. At St Andrews, Imperial College, Glasgow, The Open University, et al., graduands do not wear or carry headdress (although university officers do). At King’s College London, graduands receiving a University of London award wear a cap whilst KCL awardees do not. At the University of Leeds, hats are not prescribed for bachelors and masters, but are used for higher degrees. At Loughborough, those admitted to the degree of bachelor are not obliged to (and do not usually) wear headwear, although the cap is prescribed, but those admitted to master’s and subsequent degrees are obliged to.

<sup>62</sup> The BCL remains a postgraduate award at Oxford, being a taught postgraduate award in English law, of roughly equivalent standing to an LLM elsewhere. At the University of Cambridge the Faculty of Civil Law was renamed as the Faculty of Law when English

DCL or BD<sup>63</sup> and DD). The admission to the degree of Master of Arts bestowed both rights and responsibilities:<sup>64</sup> whilst the ‘student’ became a full-member of their university, and gained the right to vote and dispute in the Convocation House, they were also required to undertake teaching duties as a regent master for a specified number of years, after which—as a non-regent master—they would be permitted either to leave the university or to continue reading for admission to further degrees in a higher faculty.

Visible remnants of this foundational narrative are found in various ancient universities,<sup>65</sup> where membership of the governing body of the University (i.e. Convocation, General Council or Senate) is afforded to Masters of Arts.<sup>66</sup> A further remnant at Oxford and Cambridge is the retention of the ‘MA Status’, granted at Oxford (before 2000)<sup>67</sup> as a means of allowing membership of Congregation to graduates of universities who did not qualify for incorporation, and at Cambridge as a means of granting membership of the Senate to postgraduate students over the age of 24 (who do not otherwise hold membership of the University).<sup>68</sup> The degree therefore is most authentically a means of the internal constitution and organization of the university—a means of determining ‘who is who’ within the sometimes nebulous world of the academy. Historically, therefore, academical dress, served an important function as the ‘uniform’ of membership both of the University and of

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Common Law was added to the curriculum in the nineteenth century, initially awarding the LLB in place of the BCL. The LLB was renamed as the LLM, presumably to emphasize its postgraduate character, in the twentieth century.

<sup>63</sup> The BD remains a postgraduate award at Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin and Durham. At Oxford, admission to the BD as a stand-alone qualification was suspended in 2005, and candidates can now be admitted to it only by accumulation with the DD. At St Andrews, the BD is a first award in theology, to be eligible for which students must have been admitted to a BA or equivalent.

<sup>64</sup> Technically, a proctor can still call upon an Oxford MA to assist in the suppression of a riot by uttering the words ‘*siste per fidem*’ (‘stand by your oath’). See *Oxford University Gazette*, 22 April 1999: <<http://www.ox.ac.uk/gazette/1998-9/weekly/220499/notc.htm>> (last updated April 1999; last accessed 1 February 2012).

<sup>65</sup> In addition to the organizational remnants there is the naming of degrees, perhaps the most prominent example of which is the Oxford BPhil, a taught postgraduate qualification—of significant professional standing—in Philosophy. Several degrees now termed ‘Masters’ were initially ‘Bachelors’ when they were introduced in the nineteenth century: the Cambridge LLM (see above), the Oxford MSc and MLitt.

<sup>66</sup> F. R. S. Rogers, *The Story of University Degrees and Academical Dress* (Sutton: privately printed, 1952), pp. 5–6.

<sup>67</sup> In 2000, membership of Congregation (the ‘Parliament of the Dons’) at Oxford was opened to any graduates, although many pre-2000 admissions to Congregation retain their MA Status.

<sup>68</sup> Postgraduate students under the age of twenty-four are admitted to BA Status. Both BA and MA Status entitle the holder to wear the appropriate Cambridge gown, without strings.

various forms of association within it, including the faculty, the college and the national groupings.

It is, therefore, the erosion of this basic metanarrative—the notion of academical costume indicating the rank of belonging within the academy—from its role in underpinning the understanding of academical dress that has provided the fertile seedbed for misconceptions to arise. Indeed, efforts to string together the remaining fragmentary pieces of academical dress's narrative in a meaningful way are akin to the rebuilding of scientific knowledge in Walter M. Miller, Jr's *Canticle for Leibowitz*.<sup>69</sup> Without its coordinating narrative, academical dress is not only subject to recurring misconception, but cast onto the tides of the ocean of cultural whims and trends. The rediscovery of this underpinning narrative, however, provides the opportunity for securing the longevity and vitality of the ancient tradition.

### ***Disconnection and disenchantment: academical dress and modernity***

The disconnection of academical dress from its metanarrative (i.e. its cultural story, the narrative which offers a comprehensive explanation of its history and experience) is not an eiphenomenon, but deeply embedded in a kaleidoscope of societal change, and particularly in a group of tendencies within intellectual culture identified by sociologists as 'modernity'. Therefore, an exploration of the declining use of academical dress—underpinned by its disconnection from its metanarrative—requires a brief examination of the phenomenon of modernity.

Whilst this exploration must necessarily be brief, care must be taken to avoid presenting a caricature of 'modernity' as a singular, homogenous and monolithic movement: it is a deeply diverse phenomenon that lacks the centralizing and coordinating locus necessary to describe it as a 'movement' in the strictest sense. Rather, modernity emerges as the result of a complex interplay of epistemological and socio-cultural forces, sometimes lacking self-conscious expression. Social and intellectual modernity embraces such post-medieval sub-movements as rationalization, capitalism and industrialization, but penetrates into the realm of culture and the liberal arts as an aesthetic movement whose influence spans architecture, fine arts and popular fashion.

The regulatory decline of academical dress—as outlined above—occurred mostly within the temporal era marked out in the periodization of Marshall Berman

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<sup>69</sup> (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960). Miller's work of post-apocalyptic fiction imagines the reconstruction of scientific knowledge from the fragmentary remnants of human knowledge that have survived a putative nuclear war of cataclysmic consequence. The task is undertaken by a group of enclosed monks, whose work is driven by the hope that civilization will one day reconstitute itself with sufficient conceptual readiness for the restoration of the scientific insights of an annihilated generation.

as ‘Later Modernity’,<sup>70</sup> but—as Theodor Adorno points out—‘modernity’ is strictly a qualitative approach rather than a chronological period.<sup>71</sup> Defining modernism systematically is notoriously difficult, but it is universally acknowledged to involve a shift in historical consciousness, a movement characterized by Michel Foucault as a ‘heroization of the present’.<sup>72</sup> This heroization of the present is a reflection of an acute awareness of what Heidegger termed our *Geworfenheit* (i.e. the reality that we are thrown through time) and an awareness of the seeming discontinuity of moments of time, with the consequent belief that each temporal era—even each moment—is a new and unique blank canvas.<sup>73</sup>

Despite its preoccupation with the ‘now’, modernity—in its pure philosophical form—has no desire to extend the present moment, nor to pass on its fruits as a harvest for future generations. Indeed, modernism is not straightforwardly a fashionable rebellion against inherited tradition, but a conscious affirmation that it is in the present era, independent of its connection to history via tradition, that one finds everything necessary to formulate meaningful existence. It is a call not to discover our identity in relation to the past, but to create one: to project meaning onto the blank canvas of our time.<sup>74</sup>

Philosophically, then, we might say that ‘modernity’ is a fundamental anthropological orientation toward awareness of man’s being thrown through time, and to the eternal penultimacy of the present moment.<sup>75</sup> In the concrete *Sitz im Leben* of the decline of academical dress, this expresses itself in precisely the disruption of metanarrative and practice elucidated above: a deliberate movement away from what is regarded as a superficial appearance of coherence corroborated by repetition throughout history, towards an innovative construction of meaning, projected onto the present era. Ezra Pound’s poetic exhortation to ‘make it new’

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<sup>70</sup> Roughly, the period that follows the Second World War. See Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Fuller, 1983), pp. 570–87.

<sup>71</sup> *Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Berlin: Horkheimer, 2005), p. 218.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’, interview conducted 20 June 1978, trans. by M. Henson.

<sup>73</sup> T. Chanter, ‘The Problematic Normative Assumptions of Heidegger’s Ontology’, in N. J. Holland and P. J. Huntington (eds), *Feminist Interpretations of Heidegger* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2001), p. 105.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. C. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. by J. Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> Here I adapt a concept from the philosophy of mind. The ‘systematic elusiveness of the notion “I”’, made famous by philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle and John Macquarrie, holds that the self is never caught in pure abstraction without a perception, and is thus confined to eternal penultimacy. The present moment is ‘eternally penultimate’ because once it is grasped it is immediately superseded, changed *ipso facto* by its being perceived from the unperceived moment to a second-order, past—yet perceived—moment. We are, the moderns would have it, a *hegemonikon*, cutting through time and yet constitutionally unable to gain epistemic access to the moment that we encounter, unable to prolong it without altering it. See I. T. Ramsey, ‘The Systematic Elusiveness of “I”’, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 5.20 (1955), pp. 193–204.



was the modernists' mantra: innovation is the sine qua non of this final gasp of the Enlightenment, the axiomatic quest for certainty dwindling in view of a critical assessment of inherited tradition (including academical costume), which culminates in efforts to 'disenchant' tradition, questioning its meaning and value for the present era.

The inherited tradition of academical dress, then, was enthusiastically dismissed to make way for a simultaneously reactive and revolutionary movement that delighted in the destruction of inherited tradition, and yet feared its own ironic nihilism. Academical dress was particularly vulnerable: the integrity of the modern university was at stake, as both intellectual validity and corporate image demanded that the ornamental trappings of inherited academia were cut away with Ockham's razor.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to the influence of cultural-intellectual modernity over academical costume, the declining use of academical dress is embedded in a related aesthetic movement. Indeed, the intellectual and cultural heroization of the present moment demanded, and inevitably resulted in, distinctive aesthetic expression,<sup>77</sup> the distinguishing characteristic of which was the deliberate adoption of a hermeneutic of rupture: the devaluing and abandonment of traditional theories and methodologies. In music Arnold Schoenberg straightforwardly rejected the system of tonal harmony;<sup>78</sup> in the liberal arts, Wassily Kandinsky rejected the notion that reality governed artistic expression and instead conceived of art as the manipulation of pure colour;<sup>79</sup> in architecture Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris dramatically parted with traditional theories of functionality by arguing that modern technology demanded modern building: buildings were no longer simply homes, but 'machines to live in'.<sup>80</sup> These movements are analogous to the decline of academical dress because they all involve disruption of an inherited tradition from its foundational narrative, some degree of minimalism, and are marked by rationalistic elevation of instrumental function over the emotions (the so-called 'criminalization of ornament').

The emergence, and popularity, of these new aesthetic movements lies in a reversal of the direction of aesthetic pressure. With the emergence of modernism,

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<sup>76</sup> See J. Twigg, 'Clothing, Age and the Body', *Ageing and Society*, 27.2 (2007), pp. 285–305.

<sup>77</sup> Perhaps the most common and enduring symbol of the rise of the new modern and minimalist aesthetic was the London Underground roundel, designed in 1919 by Edward Johnson. See S. Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History* (New Haven, CT. and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 109.

<sup>78</sup> See A. Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), *passim*.

<sup>79</sup> H. Duchting, *Wassily Kandinsky: A Revolution in Painting* (Berlin: Taschen, 2000), p. 51.

<sup>80</sup> A. von Saldem, *The Challenge of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Michigan Press, 2002), Ch. 3: 'Instead of Cathedrals, Dwelling Machines', pp. 93–114.

combined with the rise of mass production and a degree of economic prosperity, aesthetic priority lies with popular culture, not—as in the past—with the high esoteric culture of the elite. Pierre Bourdieu claimed that this represented a liberation of ‘cultural capital’ (viz. non-financial social assets), which facilitated a social mobility that transcended economic means.<sup>81</sup> This realized the Humean theory of aesthetic judgment, which emphasized the universal nature of the standard of taste,<sup>82</sup> against the former theories of Aristotle, Plato, et al., in which the capacity to make true aesthetic judgments was limited to those with particular education and training, who were recognized as experts.<sup>83</sup> In academia, therefore, the abandonment of academical costume is closely tied to the discourses of empowerment, widening participation and relevance, which have governed educational theory for decades. The abandonment of academical costume was perhaps, therefore, seen as a stand against elitism, a visual sign of the university’s commitment to liberate intellectual capital, to widen participation beyond the esoteric few, and to undertake studies of ‘relevance’ to the world beyond the academy.

For academical dress, the two-pronged assault from cultural-intellectual and aesthetic modernism resulted in a toxic synthesis of socio-cultural forces, that potentially undermined its supporting metanarrative. From the apperception of intellectual modernity, the apparently ossified and rigid tradition of academical costume is an embarrassing and meaningless anachronism, and one that demonstrates an institution’s inability to shed the shackles of tradition, thus fundamentally undermining its academic credibility.

Indeed, Charles Baudelaire, whilst not specifically treating of academical dress, was particularly critical of those who revert either to the use or artistic depiction of earlier clothing (both medieval and ancient).<sup>84</sup> The reversion to earlier forms of costume, however significant or aesthetically pleasing they may seem, is—for Baudelaire—a complete failure in the vocation of the modernist to ‘heroize’ (and thus make meaningful) the costume of their own day.

The modern view—that abandoning academical costume somehow enhances a university’s academic credentials—is clearly reflected in Douglas Anderson’s 1964 exploration of the dress of the University of Sydney. Anderson revels in his

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<sup>81</sup> ‘Forms of Capital’, in J. G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (London: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241–58.

<sup>82</sup> B. Kalar, *The Demands of Taste in Kant’s Aesthetics* (Leicester: Continuum, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. also Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*; D. J. Crowley, ‘Aesthetic Judgment and Cultural Relativism’, *American Society for Aesthetics*, 17.1 (1958), pp. 187–93.

<sup>84</sup> ‘On the Heroism of Modern Life’, in J. Mayne (trans.), *The Mirror of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1955), p. 127.

University's abandonment of academical costume:<sup>85</sup> pouring scorn on the ceremonial dress of the chancellor of the University of Oxford, he boasts that the chancellor of the University of Sydney, 'clearly does not need the magic of bands!'<sup>86</sup> Indeed, he claims that the 'English University man of the [nineteenth] century was a backward-looking man, and that this was reflected by his dress'.<sup>87</sup> In contrast—we are informed—the University of Sydney man's forward-looking commitment to academic innovation and discovery is reflected in his costume. Closer to home, just one year after Anderson had written his article, Cambridge suppressed the ordinance requiring all members *in statu pupillari* to wear the gown in the streets after dusk, and it seems very likely that it is this concern to portray the University as innovative and modern that underpins the nebulous and mysterious comment that such a move has benefited the University.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, Anderson opens his exploration with the declaration that 'academic dress today is a bit of a joke'.<sup>89</sup> Under a subtitle 'Tradition and the pseudo-traditional', he argues that much of what is perceived as authentic academical costume tradition is, in fact, 'pseudo-tradition': a corruption of the original, historically grounded sartorial tradition of academia. Particularly, Anderson claims, on (perhaps dubious) historical grounds, that faculty-based and university-based variants of academical hoods are an invention of the robemakers, emerging from fiscal motivations. The introduction, as late as Victorian times, of a plethora of Cambridge undergraduate gowns he attributes to the robemakers' desire to limit the sale of second-hand gowns. On the one hand the robemakers purport 'to codify a vast miscellany of divergent bygone fashion and to create—with the semblance of authority—a different style for each faculty',<sup>90</sup> whilst on the other hand the students of the University of Sydney have adopted a hitherto unheard of (and admittedly somewhat gaudy) gown for their union president.

Anderson sees these developments not in terms of organic growth, but as improper corruption, and therefore as *prima facie* evidence of the invalidity of the tradition in the first place, and of its meaninglessness for modern university students. It is in the identification of developments as corruption, however, that Anderson's fundamental category mistake is found: a mismatch of pseudo-tradition and tradition. The ossified historical curiosity that Anderson defines as 'tradition' is, in fact, a 'pseudo-tradition'. Tradition, from the Latin *tradere* ('to hand on') is fundamentally verbal: tradition ought be defined as an organically developing and living entity which presents itself in different forms and schemes at different times,

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<sup>85</sup> 'Academic Dress', University of Sydney *Union Recorder*, 44 (1964), pp. 22–24, 38–40 (p. 24).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Cambridge University Reporter*, 95 (1965), p. 1194.

<sup>89</sup> Anderson, 'Academic Dress', p. 22.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

without losing sight of its unifying centre of gravity, its *raison d'être*. Therefore, precisely the developments Anderson cites as examples of academical dress's comic anachronism are evidence of its strength and vitality.

### **Relevance and rebellion: academical dress in postmodernity**

Modernity, however, is not the final intellectual and socio-cultural movement to influence academical dress. The great works of modernity have been evaluated and, broadly, found both wanting and—on a human level—most unsatisfactory.<sup>91</sup> The Newtonian and Leibnizian efforts to create systems of order, along with the Bauhausian aesthetics of controlled purity and the Darwinian-Hegelian quest to portray everything in terms of an economy of orthogenic evolution, have—it would seem—failed to offer a metanarrative capable of answering the fundamental questions of human existence. Many sociologists and philosophers now argue that modernity's methodological focus on control, order and systematization has degenerated into the apparent chaos of the existentialism of 'postmodernity'.

Postmodernity is yet more nebulous than modernity itself, despite being—at least initially—a centralized, self-styled and intentional movement, scholars are divided as to whether it exists at all, or whether it is simply another gasping expression of modernity. Graham Ward contrasts the movement from modernity to postmodernity in terms of a movement from the pure geometry of the circle or the square to the unpredictable maelstrom of the rhizome,<sup>92</sup> an object consisting not of dimensions but of directions in motion, and one that is intrinsically irreducible to its parts. Postmodernity is, broadly, a rejection of both the existence of universal, objective truth and of the possibility of elucidating a global metanarrative. It expresses itself most powerfully in the rejection of authority: challenging not only the authority of tradition but also of human intellect, this qualitative erosion of authority resulting in a 'loss of certainty, and the realization that certainty can never be established, once and for all'.<sup>93</sup>

This general sociological 'suspicion' was reflected in an altered standing of professionals, whose confident pronouncements were regarded with deep suspicion

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<sup>91</sup> A particularly notable example of this is found in Jaewon Kim's philosophy of mind, in which he dismisses Cartesian dualism, attempting to resolve the mind-body problem in favour of an essentially reductive physicalist conception of mind, proposing a dualism close enough to physical in which only *qualia* are non-reductive and thus epiphenomenal to brain states. This is the inevitable and only possible conclusion of Kim's modernist paradigm, but he himself acknowledges it to be 'surely incomplete and certainly unsatisfying' (*Physicalism, Or Something Near Enough* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 73).

<sup>92</sup> 'Postmodern Theology', in D. F. Ford and R. Muers (eds), *The Modern Theologians* (Edinburgh: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 322–38, *passim*.

<sup>93</sup> G. Delanty, 'Modernity', in G. Ritzer (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Edinburgh: Blackwell, 2007), Vol. VI.

as premature. Fred Craddock observes that the clergy now preach ‘as one without authority’,<sup>94</sup> a statement that could be extended to include doctors,<sup>95</sup> schoolteachers, and academics (whose expertise is often derided as somewhat ethereal,<sup>96</sup> with little relevance to the ‘real’ world). Firm exclamation marks have slumped into questions; concluding full stops slouched into commas.

The shift from unity, certainty and authority to autonomy, plurality and suspicion, coupled with the renunciation of tradition, brought a new perspective on academical costume. Indeed, it seems that in many cases academical costume is regarded as the trappings and symbolism of ‘authority’, a concept repudiated by the postmoderns. The academic postmodern, therefore, is unable to preach their gospel of hyperbolic suspicion and scrutiny of authority whilst wearing the embarrassing hangover of symbolism from the bygone era of appeal to authority. Academical dress thus represented an outmoded didacticism, a false certainty, and was simply a remnant of an authoritarian and hierarchical era that could be afforded no place in pedagogical or socio-political thought.

This equation of academical dress with ‘authority’ is clearly seen in Great Britain, Europe and the United States, where academical dress came to be regarded by student protesters as a symbol of the existing order of government and other authorities. The refusal to wear academical costume was a tool of the student activists in America seeking to protest against the war in Vietnam,<sup>97</sup> and in Germany by Marxists seeking to establish an alternative system of order. In Germany the students’ revolution of 1968 successfully achieved the outright abandonment of academical dress, by associating the gown with the horrors of Nazism as well as with the perceived irrationalism of the Middle Ages, encapsulated in their maxim, ‘Unter den Talaren—Muff von 1000 Jahren’, alluding directly to the ‘dust’ (*Muff*)<sup>98</sup> of tradition and the Nazi’s self-proclaimed millennial rule.<sup>99</sup> Elsewhere, academical dress was regarded either as a symptom of

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<sup>94</sup> *As One Without Authority* (London: Chalice, 2001), *passim*.

<sup>95</sup> It is particularly notable that many doctors have now dispensed with professional courtesy titles.

<sup>96</sup> Professor Christianson noted, in personal correspondence, that there are many who regard being ‘derided as ethereal’ more in complimentary terms than not. I endorse his view entirely.

<sup>97</sup> W. Smith and T. Bender, *American Higher Education 1940–2005* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 375.

<sup>98</sup> Although ‘dust’ is the most frequently acknowledged definition, Thorsten Hauler argues that *Muff* is better rendered by the arcane ‘frowst’, the fusty, stuffy, overly warm and inadequately ventilated atmosphere of certain rooms. See T. Hauler, ‘Academical Dress in Germany’, *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 5 (2005), pp. 13–35 (p. 21, n. 26).

<sup>99</sup> R. Emig, ‘Critical and Cultural Theory in Germany Today’, *Critical and Cultural Theory*, 2.1 (1992), pp. 241–56. See also *Der Spiegel*: <<http://www.spiegel.de/unispiegel/wunderbar/0,1518,grossbild-162447-364924,00.html>> (last updated: unknown; last accessed: 1 February 2012).

academia's latent 'elitism',<sup>100</sup> or indicative of a theory-practice gap,<sup>101</sup> and nevertheless something abrogated in the quest for 'accessible' and 'relevant' higher education.

### ***Survival: moribund remnant vs. living tradition?***

If the evaluation of the implications of modernity and postmodernity for academical dress reads somewhat like the account of its demise, the earlier account of academical costume's surprising health suggests that this presents an incomplete account of the meaning and value of the tradition in contemporary academia.

The renewed interest in 'academic regalia' in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is of somewhat mysterious origin.<sup>102</sup> The renewal of academical dress tradition in the British Isles followed an earlier, nineteenth-century, rejuvenation of interest in North America, culminating in the Intercollegiate Commission of 1895's nationwide standardization of academical costume.<sup>103</sup> A key factor in the rejuvenation of interest in America was undoubtedly the explosion of new colleges and universities following the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, allowing for the creation of the land-grant colleges and universities. In the United Kingdom, an explosion of new universities occurred in the era of the Robbins Report of 1963 and again following John Major's Education Act of 1992. Without the national standardization of the American system, this resulted in the development of many new, post-CNAA, schemes of academical dress, often incorporating elements of local tradition (e.g. the adoption of Stewart blue by Dundee University, following the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Royal Burgh of Dundee)<sup>104</sup> or university livery (as in the case of the Open University),<sup>105</sup> and sometimes appearing to embrace considerable innovation

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<sup>100</sup> A. Marks, 'A Polytechnism for British Universities: Embracing a Revised "Soviet" Model for Academia', *Higher Education*, 6.2 (2001), pp. 275–80.

<sup>101</sup> I have adopted the phrase 'theory-practice gap' from nursing research, where it has become an oft-cited maxim, specifically decrying the gap between what is done in 'practice' and what is best practice as determined by 'research evidence', with dominance given to the latter. I here reverse the direction of pressure and use it in a more general sense to refer to the popular belief that academia has little or nothing to do with 'real life' and must make every effort to become 'relevant', of which the current obsession with 'research impact' is symptomatic.

<sup>102</sup> J. Rapoport, 'Pomp and Circumstance', *Slate Magazine*, 11 June 2010: <<http://www.slate.com/id/2256753/>> (last updated: 11 June 2010; last accessed: 1 February 2012).

<sup>103</sup> S. Wolgast, 'The Intercollegiate Code of Academic Costume: An Introduction', *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 9 (2009), pp. 9–37.

<sup>104</sup> C. Mackie, *The Town of Dundee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1836/2007), p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> G. W. Shaw, *Academical Dress of the British and Irish Universities* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1995), p. 177.

(Stirling's decision to add fur to masters' hoods, whilst serendipitously a reversion to pre-Reformation rubrics,<sup>106</sup> is nonetheless noted by several scholars as an example of hermeneutical rupture,<sup>107</sup> and—notably—with little warmth).<sup>108</sup> The result of this proliferation of new institutions was quite simply more students and more schemes of academical dress, a factor that may have piqued interest in its history, design and practice.

Furthermore, there has been a rediscovery of medieval modes of discourse in the arts, the Church and in academia. The influence of the Tractarian Movement, particularly in England and Scotland, permeated the liberal arts, liturgy, and theology. Theology, and even psychology and anthropology, re-engaged with high medieval scholasticism as a means of correcting the errors of modernism, and both academy and the Church were forced to rethink their initial flirtations with modernism. Interestingly, in the Church, this movement is paralleled in both the 'high' and 'low' Churches. On one hand those of high churchmanship rediscovered and emphasized anew sacrality in the liturgy, whilst those of low churchmanship seem largely to have abandoned the 'new homiletic' in favour of a balanced inductive didacticism.

In addition, the post-1992 expansion of the higher education system opened up the possibility of a university education to those who had previously felt excluded from it. During the late twentieth century government education policy was rooted in the axiom that any academic institution—and indeed every student therein—could achieve academic excellence,<sup>109</sup> and the trappings of academical dress—ultimately iconic of the elite 'ivory tower'—provided a concrete and tangible expression of the profoundly held conviction that academic excellence was not reserved to the esoteric few. One institution particularly encapsulates this movement: the now defunct Homerton School of Health Studies (formerly the Homerton College School of Health Studies), the institution responsible for providing nurse training at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge. Following the Project 2000 movement (commencing in the early 1990s), nurse training moved into the university sector, and all student nurses were expected to complete either a bachelor's degree or a Diploma of Higher Education. Homerton School of Health Studies had its roots in (and was a wholly owned subsidiary company of) Homerton College, Cambridge—and although Cambridge University never

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<sup>106</sup> C. A. M. Fleming, 'Academical Dress of the University of Stirling, 1967–2006', *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 6 (2006), pp. 54–76.

<sup>107</sup> Shaw describing the University as a 'law unto itself' (*Academical Dress*, p. 200).

<sup>108</sup> The punctilious and indefatigable C. A. H. Franklyn notes tersely: 'This University has broken the tradition, established over 500 years, that only bachelors have fur on their hoods!' (in F. W. Haycraft, *Degrees and Hoods of the World's Universities*, 5th edition, ed. by F. R. S. Rogers et al. (Lewes: Baxter, 1972), p. 26).

<sup>109</sup> M. Henkel, *Academic Identities and Policy Change in Higher Education*. (London: Kingsley, 2000), p. 77.

accredited Homerton's nursing degrees, nursing students were suddenly acknowledged to be undergraduate students of Homerton College, and thus were entitled to (and frequently did) wear the undergraduate academical gown of a Cambridge University college. This anomaly was resolved a few years later, when the Homerton School of Health Studies became part of the Anglia Polytechnic University (now Anglia Ruskin University), but the evidence nevertheless attests that students of a traditionally non-academic discipline are willing to embrace the trappings of the intellectual elite, in part at least, to affirm the validity of their academic pursuits.

Indeed, it suggests that academical costume is seen, at least in part, not in terms of an outmoded didacticism or hierarchy, but is adopted as part of the discourse of empowerment and intellectual capital. It is particularly notable that in many cases the movement to promote the wearing of the gown emerges from the grassroots of the students themselves, rather than from the universities, and is thus a bottom-up, rather than top-down imposition. Elizabeth Scott's suggested merging of academical and vocational regalia attests to the possibility of mutual enrichment between the traditions of academia and the traditions of those previously non-academic subjects that are now assimilated into the university.<sup>110</sup> Whilst it is a shame that Scott's proposal has not yet been widely adopted, taken together with the adoption of academical dress by nursing students in East Anglia,<sup>111</sup> it demonstrates the willingness of students of non-traditional disciplines to adopt, and make their own, ancient forms of costume.

A key example of such a movement is found in the early history of The Open University, whose commitment to innovative pedagogy led them initially to propose dispensing entirely with academical dress and other forms of regalia such as the mace, only to succumb to pressure from its students to retain these aspects of academic tradition. As the first chancellor of the University notes in his personal memoirs:

We had also to decide whether to follow tradition in having the regalia common to other universities. Would we have gowns and hoods, a mace, all the trappings of mediaeval universities copied by the modern ones? Amongst the staff of The Open University there were some who felt these trappings should be swept away.<sup>112</sup>

The eventual scheme of academical dress settled upon by the University was an attempt to mediate between the desires of its students and the innovative

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<sup>110</sup> 'Merging Traditions', *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 6 (2006), pp. 77–125.

<sup>111</sup> HSHS had sites in Cambridge, Fulbourn, Peterborough and Huntingdon. Anecdotally (c. 2003–04), the use of the undergraduate gown was more prevalent at Cambridge, but was certainly found amongst student midwives at Peterborough and amongst student nurses at Huntingdon.

<sup>112</sup> W. Perry, *Open University: A Personal Account* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1976), p. 47.



modernism of its staff. By adopting a distinctive blue colour scheme for its gowns, the University had nailed its innovative credentials to the mast,<sup>113</sup> but has failed to placate its students who have repeatedly and persistently campaigned for the right to wear square caps at graduation,<sup>114</sup> despite their use having been abandoned by several of the most ancient universities.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the resurgence in interest in the use of academical dress is found largely amongst undergraduates of the ancient universities, particularly those that continue to admit a high percentage of independent school candidates. It may be, that in the context of the ‘democratization’ of higher education, these students (or indeed the institutions themselves) seek to express their historical pedigree and stress their distinctive traditions.

The survival and enduring appeal of academical costume might readily be contrasted with the dwindling significance of a related branch of ceremonial costume, court dress, which seems to be in terminal decline. Indeed, whilst court dress has demonstrated a certain brittleness and resistance towards becoming ‘inculturated’ in modern times, academical costume’s survival is perhaps owed to its existence not as an ossified and fixed system, but as a living and organically developing tradition. Indeed, the history of academical dress demonstrates considerable interaction between academical costume and lay fashion, alongside the ongoing tension between sartorial elegance on the one hand, and practical necessity and comfort on the other. Such interaction is found as early as the late fifteenth century, when academical robes open up and become simpler (in accordance with the fashion of an active age) with the discarding of the heavy outer cloak.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, the extent to which early regulations were either discarded or ignored suggests that it has always been the role of members of universities to push the boundaries of their community’s academical costume regulations!

### ***Rediscovering the narrative***

More optimistically, however—if my thesis that the decline of academical dress results from its disconnection from its fundamental narrative is accepted—the socio-cultural context of our times is latent with the possibility of rediscovering academical costume’s metanarrative.

The modern assault on academical dress is predicated upon a particular mentalist-individualistic conception of personhood: the hyperbolic suspicion of

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<sup>113</sup> V. K. Nanda, *Theory of Distance Education* (New Delhi: Anmol, 2004), p. 41.

<sup>114</sup> See: Archived discussion from the Open University website. <<http://web.archive.org/web/20100504052715/http://www.open.ac.uk/platform/campus/people/the-open-university-and-mortarboards-whats-the-story>> (captured: 4 May 2010; archive last accessed: 25 February 2012).

<sup>115</sup> Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 9.

Descartes-built anthropology upon the *cogito ergo sum*, portraying the human person as a subject—an individual thinking monad looking out towards the world, and possessing certain personal rights and privileges. Modern psychology entirely presupposed ‘radical interiority’—that only a first-person perspective can narrate who ‘I’ am, for ‘I’ have a privileged self-knowledge that is not open to external scrutiny.

The possibility of rediscovering academical dress’s metanarrative in postmodernity is found in postmodernity’s re-evaluation of modern anthropology. Postmoderns broadly reject an individualistic understanding of Boethius’s definition of a person as an ‘individual substance with a rational nature’.<sup>116</sup> Wittgenstein systematically dismissed the notion of privileged interiority (emphasizing that we stand within the world,<sup>117</sup> not as a disinterested observer),<sup>118</sup> and John Macmurray (cited by Tony Blair as a key influence in his political project)<sup>119</sup> portrayed personhood as irreducibly about relationship: ‘I’ am an agent, fundamentally and intrinsically existing in relationship with others,<sup>120</sup> belonging to ‘community’ and ‘society’, the basic units of psychopolitical thought.<sup>121</sup> The reconnection of academical dress to the notion of a form of ‘belonging’ to a community of scholarship that stands in relation to broader society, which opposes the more prevalent adjunctive view, is likely something contemporary socio-political thought and pedagogical philosophy would embrace.

In the context of this sociological paradigm of belonging, the use of academical costume signifies not the attempted elevation of an individual to a superior state (per many early postmodern readings), but the recognition of an individual as occupying a certain role within a community, thereby bypassing the concerns of authoritarian paternalism and playing directly into discourse of identity politics and communitarian empowerment. Strictly, academical dress is not a celebration of the

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<sup>116</sup> Fergus Kerr, OP, notes that the monadic understanding of *substantia* and *ov̄sia* does no justice to its medieval nuance (*After Aquinas* (Edinburgh: Blackwell, 2002), p. 66).

<sup>117</sup> His famous *Lebensformen*.

<sup>118</sup> Wittgenstein is himself not postmodern, but his rejection of Cartesian anthropology and groundwork in laying the firm foundation for the nuanced rediscovery of Scholastic anthropology (especially that of Aquinas), which would be the life work of his literary executor, Elizabeth Anscombe, allows his inclusion here. See F. Kerr, ‘The Solipsist in the Flyglass’, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, 2nd edition (Oxford: SPCK, 1997), pp. 55–76.

<sup>119</sup> F. G. Kirkpatrick, *John Macmurray: Community beyond Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 158.

<sup>120</sup> J. Macmurray, *Self as Agent* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), *passim*.

<sup>121</sup> ‘The notion of a self-as-agent (and not the self-as-subject) compelled Macmurray to advocate the abandonment of traditional individualism or egocentricity. Instead, he declared that philosophy should introduce the second-person as the necessary correlative of the first, and do our thinking not from the standpoint of “I”-alone but of the “You-and-I”’ (S. Prideaux, *Not So New Labour* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2005), Ch. 4: ‘John Macmurray, the Parsonian Conflict and the “Forgotten” Lessons on Community’, p. 57).

individual, but of the collective, nevertheless being a recognition of the individual's particularity within community. It is not hard, therefore, to see why the adoption of new schemes of academical costume has been an essential part of the formation of the identity of the new universities, nor why students of subjects transposed from vocational settings have very deliberately adopted academical costume. To use a phrase borrowed from biblical studies, academical dress is a 'badge of community membership'.

### ***Safeguarding the future***

Despite having good reason to be hopeful, we academical dress enthusiasts cannot afford to be complacent. The Burgon Society has realized since its earliest inception that the aim of preserving a living tradition of academical dress is not best served by the establishment of a 'dressing-up club'.<sup>122</sup>As Ebeling and Fuchs note, tradition is truly a verb,<sup>123</sup> and the survival of any tradition depends upon its ability to express the same material truth to a new time, a task that frequently demands 'new words' (perhaps even a change in formal methodology) rather than the formulaic recitation of 'dead dogmas'.

Within any group of adherents to a particular tradition there are those who resist innovation and simply wish to maintain the tradition as it formerly existed, as a historical curiosity. Their desire to preserve historical consciousness is, indeed, a valuable and necessary component for the preservation of the tradition itself. Their approach, however, risks draining the tradition of its organic dynamism and, if it were applied to academical costume, would result in an ossified artefact that disappeared in due season. Students of academical dress should, therefore, attempt to preserve an openness to innovations in both design (including both formulaic developments such as new schemes of academical dress and more innovative movements such as new hood shapes) and practice (with particular sensitivity towards bottom-up movements emerging from non-academical dress scholars). These ends might well be met by the Burgon Society's consultative role.

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<sup>122</sup> '[W]e have tried to keep ourselves focused on making our Society credible and worthwhile. We have even forsaken the temptation to go ahead with official robes, for Council members, until more important goals have been achieved' (P. Goff, 'Chairman's Speech to Congregation', *Burgon Society Annual*, 2001, pp. 6–8 (p. 8)).

'[W]e do not set out to entice people into joining our Society with [...] a hood or a gown. [...] We are determined not to be seen as a dressing-up society, however much we might all admire our new Officer's robes, [...] Instead we seek to keep alive an interest in, and formal study of, our rather specialised area of costume; concerned at all times with academic enquiry into the origins, evolution and design of such dress, and all that flows from its study, for example: the history of universities and degrees; dyeing; weaving; the social history of robemaking and the use of academical dress in society today.' (P. Goff, 'Chairman's Address', *Burgon Society Annual*, 2002, pp. 6–8 (p. 6)).

<sup>123</sup> G. Ebeling, 'The Word of God and Tradition', in C. E. Gunton et al. (eds), *Practice of Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2001), pp. 98ff.

Notwithstanding this, the survival of academical dress tradition depends also upon its connection to its historical controlling metanarrative, and thus upon its internal historical consciousness. Particularly useful, therefore, are those pamphlets that promote historical consciousness among graduands and their families on degree-days—particularly those that emphasize the ancient origins and medieval development of the tradition, such as Philip Goff’s *University of London Academic Dress*.<sup>124</sup> This end is well served by the production of such items, and by the publication of these *Transactions*. The Burgon Society’s already considerable pedagogical role could be further augmented by an ‘educational outreach’, including the provision of educational materials on its website, and by the production of materials for university registries, graduation day officials, etc.

In conclusion then, academical dress scholarship is tasked to look to the past without staring: to take account of the demands of history whilst being sensitive to the needs of the present time, attempting to connect the former meaningfully with the latter. This objective will only be met by conscious self-evaluation, both by peer-review and the continued work of honest interaction within the learned society. To use an analogy, the Burgon Society must be an institution with windows and mirrors.

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<sup>124</sup> London: University of London Press, 1999.