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Counting Crow's Feet

After a lapse of three decades, Harvard gives back to its honorary doctors the third loop on their gowns, Stephen Wolgast writes

Calling for attention at an academic ceremony in America is the crimson doctoral gown of Harvard, the oldest university in the US. Yet despite Harvard's pedigree as the second college founded in North America, academic dress does not appear to have been part of its traditions until the early eighteenth century, and even then it was not consistently worn: a Harvard document written in 1876 refers to wearing gowns at the year's commencement ceremony as a practice 'intermitted for a few years'.¹

Primary Source

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Another of Harvard's academic traditions that was, until recently, intermitted involves a detail of its dress that takes a sharp eye to notice: the crow's feet symbols that identify definitively a Harvard gown.² The insignia have been in place since 1902 and appear on both sides of the front of all Harvard gowns just below the yoke, embroidered in the colour of the wearer's degree, according to the ICC—mostly.³ The crow's foot has two loops for an earned degree, worn by bachelors, masters and doctors. (See Fig. 1.)

The honorary DD and LLD, however, are indicated by three loops, and it is this distinction which was overlooked for about thirty-five years at Harvard until recently.⁴ When Nick Hoffman pointed out the oversight in 2009, Harvard had awarded dozens of honorary doctorates in previous decades, with DD and LLD recipients since at least the mid-1980s wearing gowns no different from any other graduates', whether honorary or exam-

1 'President's Report, 1875–76', Harvard College, p. 40. Quoted in Nicholas Hoffman, 'Crow's Feet and Crimson', *TBS*, 9 (2009), pp. 38–58 (pp. 44–45).

2 Its hoods offer another tip. Instead of adopting the ICC's hood shapes, Harvard uses no colour or trim for degrees and in choosing a shape followed New York University in adopting the Edinburgh simple shape [s4] by 1891. *The University of the City of New York: Catalogue and Announcements 1891–1892*, p. 193, quoted in Wolgast, 'King's Crowns: The History of Academic Dress at King's College and Columbia University', *TBS*, 9 (2009), pp. 80–137 (p. 99).

3 The exceptions are Engineering (golden-orange, instead of orange), and Business (medium grey, instead of drab). Hoffman, p. 52; cf. Hoffman, p. 47, n. 73, for Harvard's degree colours in 1902, when Science was gold-yellow, the Code standard. Harvard also uses peacock blue for Government, which is not part of the Code but used widely. See Kenneth L. Suit Jr, 'Conforming to the Established Standards: American Degree Colours (1936–1961)', *TBS*, 17 (2017), pp. 39–75 (p. 55).

4 John S. Rosenberg, 'Something Old, Something New', at 'Honor(ands) Served', *Harvard Magazine*, 24 May 2017, online at <harvardmagazine.com/2017/05/harvard-commencement-regalia-new-2017> [retrieved 1 July 2018]. The three loops for the LLD and DD are specified in a 'permissive scheme' approved by the Harvard Corporation on 8 Dec. 1902 and published in the student newspaper the following day, online at <www.thecrimson.com/article/1902/12/9/academic-costumes-defined-pon-the-recommendation/> [retrieved 1 July 2018]; note that this is the new url for the same citation in Hoffman, n. 73, now with an abbreviated domain name and an alternative spelling ('pon' instead of 'upon').

ined.⁵ The university's alumni magazine goes so far as to assert that honorary graduates' gowns were bereft of crow's feet, though photographs of ceremonies since 1990, when Ella Fitzgerald received her doctorate, belie the claim.⁶

When I first noticed Harvard's reversion to tradition, it was through the press coverage of Mark Zuckerberg, who after co-founding Facebook became one of Harvard's most famous dropouts. Acknowledging Zuckerberg's contributions to online obsessives, Harvard belatedly awarded him his degree: an honorary LLD.⁷ In the several photos of that May morning in 2017, a pair of triple crow's feet announce that his degree is honorary (three loops) but in Philosophy (dark blue thread), rather than the purple of Law.⁸

Zuckerberg was not the only cultural luminary to be fêted that day. Nine others received honorary doctorates during the ceremony, in Arts, Science, and Music. Photographs of the conferrals reveal that each recipient, whether Twyla Tharp with an ArtD or Rita Dove with a LittD, wore a gown adorned with the triple crow's feet in blue. That these honorary degrees came with three blue loops marks an expansion of the tradition beyond divines and legal minds, and a flattening of it, in which each field of study is represented by the same colour.

Since one year's use does not make a pattern, I waited eagerly for Harvard's 2018 exercises, and recognized the three-looped needlework again. The most notable example appears in a photo posted to social media of US Representative and civil rights icon John Lewis posing with Dr Michelle Williams, Dean of the T. H. Chan School of Public Health of Harvard, reproduced in Figure 2, on the day he gave the commencement address.⁹ Lewis had already received his honorary degree, an LLD, from Harvard in 2012. But when the degree was given six years earlier Lewis wore a gown with only a double crow's foot, which was typical of the time.¹⁰

Indeed, in 2018 the honorary degree recipients wore dark blue triple crow's feet regardless of the degree, reflecting Harvard's view all recipients of a doctorate *honoris causa*

5 In the caption to Fig. 2, at p. 48. Hoffman's article uncovers several other nuggets of Harvardiana that set straight the popular record promoted by some Harvard enthusiasts.

6 Rosenberg, at 'Honor(ands) Served': Fitzgerald photo is at <wjla.com/news/local/gallery/photo-of-ella-fitzgerald-going-on-display-at-dc-museum#photo-3> [retrieved 15 July 2018]. More photographic evidence: Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon in 2003, at <n7.alamy.com/zooms/6992d92cf59a4418bf80709e3c7d36cd/former-mexican-president-ernesto-zedillo-1-accepts-an-honorary-doctor-h0x655.jpg>, shortened, at <bit.ly/2uNEc0O> [both retrieved 25 July 2018]. Oprah Winfrey and others in 2013, at <dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2333524/Oprah-gets-teary-receives-honorary-degree-Harvard.html> [retrieved 24 July 2018].

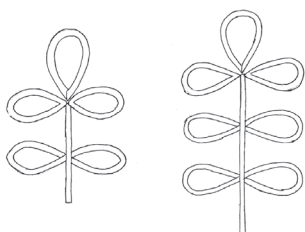
7 Described, as Harvard would, as elevating the 'Genitor maximus Libri Facierum'. 'Honoris Causa', *Harvard Magazine*, July–August 2017, online at <www.harvardmagazine.com/2017/07/honoris-causa> [retrieved 1 July 2018].

8 A quick web search turns up dozens of photos of Zuckerberg in Tercentenary Theatre. Several helpful images appear with Mark O. [*sic*], 'Mark Zuckerberg bags honorary degree from Harvard University', *The Info*, 26 May 2017, online at <www.theinfo.ng/2017/05/mark-zuckerberg-bags-honorary-degree-from-harvard-university-photos/> [retrieved 1 July 2018]. The third photo from the top contrasts Zuckerberg's three-looped crow's feet in dark blue with, in the background, two-looped crow's feet in white on a bachelor's gown.

9 John Robert Lewis, BA (American Baptist College), BA (Fisk); member of Congress from Georgia since 1987. Michelle A. Williams, AB (Princeton), MS (Tufts), SM, ScD (Harvard). The photo, taken 24 May 2018, is at <www.instagram.com/p/BjSOQlunXvk/?taken-by=harvardchansph> [retrieved 12 June 2018].

10 The photo, from *Harvard Magazine*, is at <harvardmagazine.com/sites/default/files/img/article/0612/12ja_comm_4_Image_0002_.jpg> [retrieved 1 July 2018].

Fig. 1 (below). The double crow's foot, left, of earned degrees, and the triple crow's foot, right, originally of the honorary DD and LLD but now for all honorary degrees.



Hoffman, 'Crow's Feet', p. 48



Instagram.com/HarvardChanPH

Fig. 2 (right). US Rep. John Lewis, left, wears the gown of an honorary doctorate (LLD '12), indicated by its triple crow's feet, as the commencement speaker in May 2018. His silver tassel corresponds to his honorary degree. He posed with Michelle Lewis, Dean of the T. H. Chan School of Public Health of Harvard, whose four-sided cap identifies her as a member of the University Council (Hoffman, p. 49).

be distinguished by the colour of The University's highest honour, the PhD.¹¹ Table 1 lists the degrees with their corresponding loops and colours as they were worn compared to written guidance demonstrates the changes.

The story behind Harvard's crow's feet for its graduates goes back a century before the decoration was approved for gowns, and honorary degrees at Harvard take us even further back, to 1692, making them the first in what would become the US.¹² At that time Harvard's degree recipients, whether examined or honorary, wore no academic dress. According to Hoffman, Harvard first recommended black gowns at commencement in 1790, and in 1808 included in its rules a coat of blue, grey, or black as an alternative to a black gown.¹³

¹¹ Interview with Stephan Magro, Harvard commencement director, 17 Aug. 2018.

¹² It was not until 1693 that America's second-oldest college, William & Mary, was founded. Harvard has granted about 2,300 honorary degrees since 1692: 'Commencement: Honorary Degrees', Harvard University, online at <www.harvard.edu/on-campus/commencement/honorary-degrees> [retrieved 30 June 2018].

¹³ 1790: Arthur Wentworth Eaton, 'Cap and Gown', *The Harvard Register*, 1.7 (June 1880), pp. 118-19, a source uncovered by Hoffman. 1808: Hoffman, p. 43, citing Cynthia W. Rossano, 'Reading the Regalia: A Guide to Deciphering the Academic Dress Code', *Harvard Magazine*, May 1999, online at <harvardmagazine.com/1999/05/ner.reading.html> [retrieved 30 June 2018].

Table 1

Degree	Traditional Harvard		2017 Harvard		2018 Harvard	
	Colour	Loops	Colour	Loops	Colour	Loops
ArtD	Brown	2	Blue	3	Blue	3
DD	Scarlet	3	<i>Not awarded</i>		<i>Not awarded</i>	
LittD	White	2	<i>Not awarded</i>		Blue	3
LLD	Purple	3	Blue	3	Blue	3
MusD	Pink	2	Blue	3	Blue	3
ScD	Golden Yellow	2	Blue	3	Blue	3

Harvard’s early cousins—Princeton, Columbia, Yale, Brown—had adopted or at least had permitted academic dress by 1786. Why did Harvard let 154 years pass from its founding before recommending black gowns in 1790? One explanation could be the college’s Puritan founders’ questioning whether clerical vestments were theologically permissible or appropriate, and their forebears’ related attitude towards academic dress.

Most of the students in Harvard’s first class were the sons of clergymen or magistrates.¹⁴ Their parents’ backgrounds are worth taking into account because of the religious disagreements with the Church of England that drove them to the New World. Known today as the Elizabethan Vestiarian controversy, the disagreements that swirled in the 1560s and ’70s had at their centre the legal requirement that Anglican ministers wear the surplice and square cap, which at the time was a soft cap that was a step in the evolution toward the academic square cap. Some Anglican clergy and their followers strongly disliked the Church of England’s outward resemblance to the vestments of Roman clergy. Seamus Addison Hargrave points out that John Hooper, bishop of Gloucester (1550–53), considered both academic and religious garments to be ‘the livery of the Antichrist’.¹⁵ Included in the denunciation was the contemporary square cap, which was noticeably different for clergy in the Church of England compared to the Catholic church.¹⁶ The founders of Harvard could well have shared these views, being Puritans themselves—a name that originated in England during the Vestiarian controversy as ‘a term of abuse’ directed at those who wanted to purify the Church of England of its perceived connections to Rome by abandoning vestments.¹⁷ I suggest that when Harvard was founded six decades later, the religious leaders in Massachusetts would still have been

14 Bernard Bailyn et al., *Glimpses of the Harvard Past* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 116, quoted in Hoffman, p. 39.

15 ‘The Church and the Trencher: An Examination into How England’s Changing Theology and Church Have Influenced the Evolution and Design of the Square Cap Causing its Use as Academic Attire’, *TBS*, 14 (2014), pp. 16–34 (p. 27), citing William H. Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of Radical Christianity* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2012), p. 257. Hooper, c. 1495–1555, BA (Oxon), deprived of his bishopric and executed.

16 For a full discussion, see Hargrave, who includes images of these two caps in Figs 3 and 4, p. 20, and in the Appendix, p. 34.

17 Karl Gunther, *Reformation Unbound: Protestant Visions of Reform in England, 1525–1590* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 190. Showing the significance of the shapes of hats, the English Catholic priest Thomas Dorman wrote from exile to lambaste Anglicans who would not abide by Queen Elizabeth’s sumptuary law: ‘euen in a matter of no greater importance then is the wearing of a square cappe, they refuse the ordre of the supreme gouernour in all things.’ Dorman, *A disproufe of M. Nouvelles reprocufe* (Antwerp: John Laet, 1565; STC 7061), in Gunther, p. 198.

opposed to ‘popish rags’ in church as well as in the academy. The actions of one Harvard graduate support that idea.

Of the three men who received their degrees *honoris causa* in Sacred Theology in 1692, the only one to be made a doctor was Increase Mather, who had earned his AB from Harvard in 1656, aged 17, completed his MA at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1659, and then held preaching posts in the Channel Islands and England before returning to the Massachusetts Bay Colony where he successfully persuaded his fellow Massachusettsans to refrain from submitting their absolute obedience to Charles II in 1683. Resisting the king was only one way he expressed independence. At his commencement at Trinity, he refused to wear cap and gown. Going gownless at Trinity does not prove he did the same at Harvard, but it indicates a certain dislike of academic dress.¹⁸

It was about a century later that crow’s feet became regulated on undergraduate dress. The needlework did not appear on late eighteenth-century academic dress, however, but their daily outfits, which were to include a dark blue or Oxford grey coat with ‘three “crows’-feet”’ on a senior’s sleeve. A junior wore two, a sophomore one, and the freshman had to go unadorned.¹⁹ Without academic dress to identify themselves, Harvard students may have substituted crow’s feet for a similar purpose.

One detail left unclear in that description is whether a junior, for example, wore two individual crow’s feet or one crow’s foot with a double loop. Another detail unspecified is its size. On modern graduates’ gowns the crow’s feet measure just over an inch tall, but the design, sometimes referred to as a clover, has appeared on the sleeves of military uniforms for centuries, often extending elaborately from the cuff to the elbow, and today can be glimpsed in gold on the sleeves of doormen’s livery at certain clubs and urbane apartment buildings.²⁰ In these cases they are made of cord, for something simple, or gimp, rather than embroidery.²¹

How long crow’s feet appeared on the sleeves of Harvard students into the nineteenth century is unknown; in the 1820s Dartmouth students wore a single-breasted black frock coat whose left sleeve bore a similar design: ‘half a sprigged diamond for freshman, two halves placed one above the other for sophomores, three for juniors and four for seniors’. The coat also sported a sprigged diamond on its breast.²²

Harvard today, like a handful of other universities in the US, uses some of its own colours for degrees. When it reintroduced the triple crow’s foot insignia in 2017, it also

18 The other two men received the BTS. ‘Commencement: Honorary Degrees’. Dates: ‘Increase Mather Papers: Historical Summary’, Massachusetts Historical Society, online at <www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0239> [retrieved 30 June 2018]. Refusals to academic dress and royal obedience: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. ‘Increase Mather’, online at <www.britannica.com/biography/Increase-Mather> [retrieved 30 June 2018]. Mather would become president of Harvard in 1685, after turning down a request four years earlier to do so, and would serve for sixteen years under three titles. ‘History of the Presidency’, Harvard University, online at <www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance/history-presidency> [retrieved 30 June 2018].

19 Eaton, ‘Cap and Gown’.

20 See the sample at <www.flhuniforms.com/doorman_uniforms/New%20_doorman_uniforms/ENY_2791.jpg> [retrieved 1 July 2018].

21 For more on gimp, lace, and braid, see Charles Rupert Tsua, ‘A Study of the History and Use of Lace on Academic Gowns in the United Kingdom and Ireland’, *TBS*, 12 (2012), pp. 103–27, especially pp. 104 and 120–23.

22 Wilder Dwight Quint, *The Story of Dartmouth* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1914), pp. 123–24.

announced that its masters of various engineering degrees (it confers the SM (Master of Science) and ME (Master of Engineering)) would wear crow's feet in golden-orange, which is a mixture of golden-yellow for Science and orange for Engineering.²³ Its graduates of a combined AB and SM programme, however, wear white crow's feet 'because a student must technically be awarded the bachelor's degree *before* a master's', a rare case in which a graduate's degree colour represents a lower degree held rather than the higher one.²⁴

The story of how Harvard came to notice its oversight is one of desuetude. When Cotrell & Leonard, which had been supplying Harvard's gowns for decades, went into business troubles in the 1980s, the University switched gownmakers. The new one did not continue the honorary degree distinction, and the tradition was lost. Adding to the confusion was a policy of permitting honorary degree recipients to wear the dress of their highest earned degree instead of the gown for the degree they would receive from Harvard. That policy ultimately reverted to the tradition of wearing the dress of the degree for which one was a candidate, along with the third loop. Harvard's commencement director was familiar with Hoffman's article and looked further into academic dress. When he presented his findings to administrators who approved them, Harvard got its third loop back.²⁵

Giving a bit of credit to one source, the writer of an article in *Harvard Magazine* includes the link to an earlier volume of this journal, for at the end of the article announcing the resumption of the third loop is a note referring curious readers to Nicholas Hoffman's research on Harvard in the *Transactions*. And from the online version of *Harvard Magazine*, you can even click the link to burgon.org.uk.²⁶

²³ Magro interview.

²⁴ Emphasis in original. Rosenberg, at 'New Kids on the Block'.

²⁵ Sophia Nguyen, 'Harvard Portrait: Stephan Magro', *Harvard Magazine*, May–June 2017, online at <www.harvardmagazine.com/2017/05/stephan-magro> [retrieved 1 July 2018]. Presenting to committee: Magra interview.

²⁶ Rosenberg, at 'A Final Note'.