

## **Academic Regalia at Oberlin: the Establishment and Dissolution of a Tradition<sup>1</sup>**

S.E. Plank, Ph.D., FBS  
*Oberlin College*

[I]f any season is worthy of symbolical expression and emphasis, it is the Commencement season, the initiation of new members into the international fraternity of educated men. . . . Viewed in this light all the formalism of college life assumes significance; it becomes an awe-full thing to wear a cap and gown.

*The Oberlin Review* (June 21, 1906)

Styles of clothing carry feelings and trusts, investments, faiths and formalized fears. Styles exert a social force, they enroll us in armies--moral armies, political armies, gendered armies, social armies.

John Harvey, *Men in Black* (1995)

### Introduction

With the adoption of the Intercollegiate Code in 1895, American universities and colleges embraced a uniformity of design in academic costume that has held sway until the relatively recent proliferation of university-specific gowns.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, studies of American academic costume may find questions of usage a richer inquiry than questions of design and development, questions of social history more compelling than a study of regalia as autonomous objects unto themselves. A particularly interesting example is the usage and social history of regalia at Oberlin College (Ohio), a usage established around the beginning of the twentieth century as the college experienced a burgeoning interest in “collegiateness,” and a usage dramatically altered in the late twentieth century with the politicizing of the campus and its ceremonial events.

Oberlin College was founded in 1833 in the Western Reserve area of northeastern Ohio as part of a new settlement about 20 kilometers south of Lake Erie. The founding fathers of the community, Philo P. Stewart and John J. Shipherd, envisioned

a colony of elect Christian families, bound together by a solemn covenant which pledged them to plainest living and highest thinking. . . . A school also was to be founded, combining various grades or departments, for the careful education of their own children and those of their neighbors; moreover, to train teachers and other Christian toilers for the boundless and most desolate fields in the [frontier] West. In this seminary-to-be a hearty welcome should be accorded to women, and manual labor should play a most important part.<sup>3</sup>

Explicit in the description is the evangelical focus of the early community, the austerity of its life style, and its social liberality (the education of women). This liberal bent in matters of social conscience was quickly and profoundly evident in the hiring of the college's first faculty, as well; a number of them, including the famous evangelist, Charles Grandison Finney, radically refused to accept positions unless the school was open to people "of color" as well.<sup>4</sup> Thus Oberlin became the first four-year, degree granting American college to accept both men and women and to teach African-Americans. This liberal social conscience has characterized the college throughout its history. The modern college has moved far away from the evangelical Christianity of its founders, although their idealism persists in high academic achievement and activism.<sup>5</sup>

The evolution of the college ethos has a number of visual manifestations. For example, the chronological parade of presidential portraits in the main college library underscores a path that has seen the formal replaced by the informal, the traditional by the new, and the collective by the individual.<sup>6</sup> The history of academic regalia at Oberlin charts a similar course. In this history, two time periods are of particular interest: the period between 1881 and 1907 when traditional academic costume becomes established amid notable signs of general "collegiateness," and the period between 1970 and the present day, during which time academic dress has been rejected by some, embraced by others, customized, individualized and politicized.

We consider these periods in turn.

#### The Establishment of the Cap and Gown: 1881-1907

The establishment of the cap and gown at Oberlin takes place at a time when the trappings of collegiateness in general were on the rise. For example, the college "yell"--a distinctive cheer for sporting events--was adopted in the late 1880s. A note in the student newspaper, *The Oberlin Review* confirms the date and eloquently bemoans a poor rendition of

the cheer:

Oberlin has had a yell for three years and has not yet learned how to give it. As rendered at the ball game Saturday, it sounded like a hymn tune in long meter, sung at a funeral to an accompaniment of dropping clods and clattering coffin lids.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the Student Handbook for 1893-94 specifies colors for the College, the Conservatory of Music, and each respective graduating class. Confirming the degree of interest in such things, the handbook also includes a lengthy table of principal universities and colleges with their distinctive yells and colors.<sup>8</sup>

In 1890, the college pin came into existence as a sign of "college distinction." An editorial in the *Review* urged its development:

Why not have an Oberlin pin or button? The last three years have seen the adoption of college colors and of our unrivalled yell. The next step in the line of college distinction should be a pin with appropriate device or a button in the college colors. In several weeks the students will scatter widely for the Christmas holidays. It would be pleasant to carry around with them some badge or emblem of the college they represent, so that a discriminating public may distinguish them from "the fast set" at Harvard: or from the glittering youth of the agricultural colleges.<sup>9</sup>

The quickness with which the idea took shape was stunning. The very next week the *Review* printed a full-page advertisement for the pin:

The CRIMSON and GOLD!  
WE HAVE A COLLEGE PIN!  
"A Long felt Want" Supplied.  
Buttons for Gentlemen  
For Ladies, Pins.  
Neat, Tasty, Elegant<sup>10</sup>

In the same academic year, a similar impulse led to the creation of emblems for the several literary societies on campus. Interestingly, however, at this juncture the issue of expense and the overtones of extravagance surface, as an editorial in the *Oberlin Review* confirms.<sup>11</sup> Given this rising interest in "college distinctions," it is not surprising that the issue of cap and gown also arises at this time. Certainly it was an issue on other campuses, a development of which Oberlin students were well aware. For example, one editorial in the *Review* notes "Just now a great deal of interest is attached to the subject of cap and gown, in all the larger colleges. Seniors at Yale will wear them during the entire spring term, and in most of the eastern colleges

they will add to the dignity of the graduating class during commencement."<sup>12</sup> And a few weeks later the column "College World," a regular feature of the newspaper that compiled news items from other schools, noted that the mortar-board had been adopted by students at Rochester (with different classes distinguished by the color of the tassel), and that at Dartmouth, seniors would wear the cap and gown at commencement, although around a third of the class were against it.<sup>13</sup> Earlier, in 1881 when Oberlin students first adopted the mortar-board, the *Review* placed the innovation in the context of other colleges: "Oberlin is the last College on the long list that has adopted the "mortar-board" and at the beginning of next term that venerable covering of scholarly youth, will be seen for the first time in our College precincts."<sup>14</sup>

The adoption of cap and gown in the early years of its usage at Oberlin took various forms. It appears that initially things moved from the top downwards, beginning with the cap. Students adopted the mortar-board as their student hat in 1881, with individual classes distinguished by the color of the tassel.<sup>15</sup> By the following year use of the mortar-board was waning because of the advent of warm weather, though at the time some thought that this was only temporary: "when the cool days of another year come, we hope to see all the old oxfords in full array, together with a goodly number of reinforcements, designating by some appropriate color in the tassel, the members of [the class of] '86."<sup>16</sup> Apparently the interest did lag, however, because in 1890 the student newspaper announced that the sophomore class had chosen the mortar-board as their class hat: "the mortar-boards have been brought out from their hiding places at last, as everybody knew they would be."<sup>17</sup> The adoption of cap and gown together was later in coming, with student interest running in advance of faculty sentiment. For example, regardless of student opinion, the faculty rejected cap and gown for students at commencement in 1892, and apparently did so hastily and without discussion.<sup>18</sup> However, by 1896, the garb had been adopted by the senior class as their "badge of seniorhood." In 1898 the *Review* noted:

This year finds the seniors again in the dignified garb of cap and gown. [The class of] Ninety-nine is now the third successive class to adopt this badge of seniorhood, and it is accordingly felt that by the graduating classes to follow, this distinction will be adopted without hesitation.<sup>19</sup>

And from this time forward there seems to have been a variety of occasions on which cap and gown were worn by the senior class. Certain days of the week were so graced: sometimes Fridays, sometimes Wednesdays before noon.<sup>20</sup> Important social occasions were also marked with the distinctive dress. For example, in 1901 seniors wore cap and gown to attend a Class Day breakfast at a Professor's home: The local press reported:

The senior class began their class day exercises by a breakfast in Professor King's yard on East College Street. About seventy members were present, clad in cap and gown, and greatly enjoyed the novelty of their last breakfast together as a class.<sup>21</sup>

Several years later, the college paper offered a description of the “impressive spectacle” of the Senior Prom:

Seldom has Warner Gymnasium beheld a prettier or more impressive spectacle than it did at the Senior Prom, on last Saturday evening, as Miss Chase led the long line of Seniors clad in their distinctions--caps and gowns--while Miss Bullock led the Juniors. After the Grand March the Seniors retired to the booths (fourteen in number) which had been apportioned them, and there awaited their partners.<sup>22</sup>

In the early 1900s, pictures of students in cap and gown appear in the college yearbook, *Hi-O-Hi*: for example, senior class pictures in 1905 and 1907; individual senior pictures in 1908; the Glee Club in 1900.

Modern American practice has found the academic procession the chief occasion for academic regalia, and such processions are important parts of commencement, baccalaureate, and inaugural ceremonies. At Oberlin, students wore caps and gowns at the spring inauguration of College President Henry Churchill King, and this perhaps marks the first time they participated in an academic procession so attired.<sup>23</sup> A cartoon in the 1898 yearbook,<sup>24</sup> however, shows begowned seniors, one of whom clutches a newly-received diploma. This raises the question of whether the image is merely familiarly iconic or whether it represents an (albeit satiric) representation of local practice. If the latter, we might speculate the student use of regalia in processions prior to 1903. Faculty did not wear cap and gown in procession until 1907.<sup>25</sup>

The establishment of this usage was controversial in some quarters, and the years under consideration brought a number of views into play. In considering the issue of regalia from the standpoint of contemporary reception, one finds that the discussions touch on the impressiveness of color and spectacle, individualism, economy, gender, and with particular weight, the relationship of the internal values to external display.

Given the prominence of coeducation at Oberlin, it should not be a surprise gender issues quickly arose. In 1881 with the introduction of the mortar-board for students, the faculty was reputedly concerned with the propriety of a hat that would be worn by both men and women. The *Review* records:

It is rumored that the Faculty propose to interfere to prevent the classical ladies from wearing the mortar-board uniform of their respective classes, on the ground that the caps would not be suitable as a head covering for both ladies and gentlemen. . . . For our part we cannot see the slightest objection to the wearing of the caps by the ladies. We do not believe that it would occasion any uncomfortable remark or scandal, or that in any circles it would be regarded as unladylike. . . . [W]e believe that after a week or two our most conservative matrons would regard them as “just the thing.” We trust that we have been misinformed about this matter and that the faculty never

entertained any notion of interfering with these concerns which belong exclusively to the judgment and good taste of students.<sup>26</sup>

The underscoring of this as a student matter, not one for the faculty, is echoed some years later in the student resentment of faculty action against cap and gown for students in 1892:

[W]hatever our opinion regarding the cap and gown, we question very seriously whether the regulation of the commencement garb worn by the Senior class falls within the sphere of faculty supervision at all; but, be that as it may, the question was worthy [of] some careful consideration out of respect for the opinion which many of the class had made known in regard to the matter.<sup>27</sup>

Just a few weeks earlier, an editorial note introduced the economic issue. After quickly noting the virtues of cap and gown--“added interest to commencement season,” class ties and variety in college life--the writer concludes: “The real question is a practical one, whether it involves unnecessary expense on the class as a whole, and on this basis it should be decided.”<sup>28</sup> In 1898 the question of economy proved no question at all to one writer in the college newspaper, who seems unusually strategic in observing that economy of dress will better position the “austere senior” to give more generously to the college:

As the seniors of the future, following the precedent of the last three classes, adopt, year by year, this distinction [of cap and gown], it will be found the least expensive badge imaginable. And for this reason it will not be long before the graduating class, in addition to wearing the cap and gown, will also feel able and willing to leave behind it lasting monuments in the shape of useful gifts to the college. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Were cap and gown a threat to a healthy individualism? Though occasionally raised as an issue, this seems to have been a concern with little weight. Most interesting, however, is how the cause of individualism itself becomes a point of support for the trappings of ceremonial; that is, if any individual derives meaning and profit from them, their significance ought to be assured. In 1906, an impassioned defense of “Forms and Ceremonies” appeared in the *Review*. Its author writes not only of individualism, but also enumerates a number of common criticisms that undoubtedly had attached to regalia and the ceremonial life at the college. It is an extraordinary document, as memorable in its phrasing as in its point of view, and it bears extensive quotation:

There has been no small number of rather scornful and supercilious objections to the series of ceremonies which constitutes our Commencement week. . . . They say that to those who are not blest with Catholic tastes(?)[sic], formalism is barbaric and physical; that Virginia reel maneuvers are silly; that many of the

ceremonies are not properly symbolic, that is, that they possess no resemblance to or connection with the matters which they are to typify; that phylacteries and vestments<sup>30</sup> are un-Protestant, un-Puritan, un-Saxon and therefore un-Oberlin in spirit; that they have been long since forsaken at the fountainheads where they originated, or are, at least, maintained only with careless tolerance; that ceremony was but devised at first to set a gloss on faint and hollow deeds. . . .

Rituals serve a double purpose. They express the sentiments and emotions of the earnest and the sentimental. And they serve to impress a realization of the significance of the time upon those who would otherwise not feel it. And if any season is worthy of symbolical expression and emphasis, it is the Commencement season, the initiation of new members into the international fraternity of educated men; the "now get busy," after the issuing of work-instructions; the "Bon Voyage" of youth to manhood; the substance, also of things hoped for, the culmination of effort. Viewed in this light all the formalism of college life assumes significance; it becomes an awe-full thing to wear a cap and gown.

The extent to which this pang of awe is inspired, however, varies with temperaments. The fitness of ceremonies, like beauty, resides "in the eye of the beholder." It is simply a matter of taste; and the finest and greatest men have held each view concerning it. If ceremonies have any significance to any person they are justified. And it is certain that when ceremonies have no significance they fall of themselves into innocuous desuetude. As long as anyone can be found to defend a ceremony that very fact proves that it does possess significance and value.

Therefore, just so long as there are students who desire caps and gowns and processions, or who feel that a class ought by rights to present a comedy as the main feature of the conclusion of its college course, just so long will these things be impregnably justifiable as valuable and good.<sup>31</sup>

The language of sectarian strife here, and the pitting of a Protestant, Puritan, Saxon Oberlin sensibility against a Catholically inclined ceremonial one is perhaps born of the fervent views of the founders, and suggests the close permeability of religious and academic concerns at the college. That the newspaper piece is so strong a defense of individual sensibility in these matters shows the degree, however, to which tolerance might be nurtured.

Discussion of the hollowness of external, material things and the greater riches of internal pursuits are sometimes intertwined with the consideration of regalia. An explicit connection is made in a student editorial in 1882, the year following the adoption of the mortar-board. Earlier we noted that the advent of warm weather had caused a waning interest in the cap. In the passage below, we see that to some, however, the cap was a "pursuit of the

externals" at the risk of losing "the inside meaning of life."<sup>32</sup> The anti-Catholic rhetoric seems to anticipate the passage quoted above.

The remarks which were made by the President [James H. Fairchild] at the opening of the term, and which have been re-enforced since that time, in reference to useless expenditures of various kinds, we think deserve more careful consideration than they seem to have received. We have experimented with the mortar-board, and all will agree that it has been a failure. It is fast becoming a rarity on our streets, and the time is not far distant when the sight of one will create as great a sensation as it did last January. Now that the novelty of this antique head-dress is worn off, we have wearied of it, as children of their toys, and we are now, some of us, anxiously looking for some new plaything with which to while away the next year at college. There are persons who find it difficult to believe that they are college students without some mark in clothing or general appearances to assure them of the fact. It is an evil generation that seeketh after a sign. *There are persons who in their eager pursuit of the externals lose sight of the real kernel and the inside meaning of life.* [emphasis added] We believe that they actually confuse the real objects of training, and regard class caps, class socials and class canes as the essential mark of a college life, while mental discipline is merely one of the "accidents." These individuals extend to mortar-boards and silk hats a share of that superstitious veneration with which devout but illiterate catholics bow down to the image of the Virgin Mary. But let us strive to remember that the essence of education no more consists in class insignia, than religion does in the worship of images. We may feel assured that these things add no more to our dignity than they bring credit to our good sense.<sup>33</sup>

We may bring this issue into tighter focus by considering events in the administration of Henry Churchill King (1902-27). King was inaugurated as president in May, 1903. On this occasion, students participated in the academic procession in cap and gown, perhaps for the first time. The faculty considered whether they should adopt regalia for the occasion, as well. The disagreement was drawn on age lines, and although a majority were for the adoption, the strength of the older faculty's opposition led to the motion's defeat. King's view was clear: "We must remember the significance of the ceremony; we must keep it from degenerating into mere show."<sup>34</sup> Four years later, at the baccalaureate of 1907, the faculty appeared in cap, gown, and hood for the first time. The *Commencement Daily* was enthusiastic: "The brightly trimmed gowns of the professors contrasted vividly with the green of the campus grass and trees, the spectacle being one of the most brilliant ever seen at an Oberlin commencement."<sup>35</sup> The *Review* noted that the faculty regalia was a "distinct and very real addition to the impressiveness of the ceremony." And of considerable interest is that this editorial note also pointed out that "the essence of ceremony might be said to consist in exciting inner sentiment by outer appeals."<sup>36</sup> Amid an enthusiastic reception for the innovation, however, were a number of subtle and not so

subtle reminders to keep the mind focused on the inner and immaterial, despite the material, external display. King's sermon at the baccalaureate was entitled "The God of Hope," based on St. Matthew 6:10. From the pulpit he declared that "Religion, is therefore, first of all, no matter of ceremonial. . . . No *external* observance of any kind. A holy God of character can find satisfaction in nothing short of *inner* obedience."<sup>37</sup> Given the rhetoric of the passages quoted above and the innovative ceremonial "material" of the 1907 commencement--the novel external trappings--one may assume King's remarks took on timely, local significance.

Surely the most stunning reaction to the innovation took the form of altering the Biblical text read at baccalaureate. The program specifies that Matthew 6: 5-15, 25-34 was read by Professor Albert H. Currier.<sup>38</sup> The opening of the passage with its admonition to pray in secret, not to make a display, seems also to invite associative meanings on the occasion of a newly bedecked commencement. Apparently the subsequent reference to the scriptural glory of Solomon's raiment was problematical, however. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* featured an article with the grabbing headline: "Alter Bible to suit costume/Those in Charge of Oberlin Services Change Text of Scriptures/Wearing of Black Gowns by Pedagogues is the Cause." The account continues:

Biblical sentences had to be changed today at the services in connection with the delivering of the baccalaureate sermon by President King, because the faculty of Oberlin College wore black gowns.

It was the first appearance of the pedagogical body in somber robes. Fearing inconsistency, those in charge of the services carefully abridged the Scriptures, so that when the sixth chapter of Matthew was read the auditors scarcely recognized it. All reference to Solomon in his glittering robes was left out and every phrase, clause and sentence containing any allusion to brilliant raiment was blue pencilled.<sup>39</sup>

It is not clear at this remove exactly what the specific alterations were, though one must imagine that only gravest concerns might have prompted a community so foundationally devout to engage in any alteration at all. The reporter for the Cleveland paper suggests that it was a fear of inconsistency--the somber black robes and the splendor of Solomon--that prompted the change. However, given the *Commencement Daily's* description of "brightly trimmed gowns" and the brilliance of the scene--the professors were hooded, and thus colorful--it seems more likely that the alteration was to remove the temptation to see one's new sartorial splendor in a Biblically sanctioned light.

Thus, like many American universities and colleges, Oberlin adopted the cap and gown along with other manifestations of collegiateness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At Oberlin, in part due to the prevailing religious sensibility, the adoption of regalia takes place in a context much concerned with the relative importance of inner values and

external, material things. However, the adoption of regalia for faculty and students alike at the Academic Procession endured until 1970.

### The Tradition Dissolved: 1970 to the Present Day

The familiar notion of the late 1960s and early 1970s as a time of youthful rebellion and iconoclastic rejection of mainstream cultural forms and values finds a vivid (and ultimately long-lasting) expression at Oberlin in the dissolution of the student use of cap and gown. This takes place at a time in which the college commencement--arguably its most public exercise--also becomes an arena for explicit political expression. Both of these aspects endure to the present day. It is perhaps no surprise that dress should take on political overtones. John Harvey has observed that "styles of clothing carry feelings and trusts, investments, faiths and formalized fears. Styles exert a social force, they enroll us in armies--moral armies, political armies, gendered armies, social armies."<sup>40</sup> And in 1970, American campuses across the country were galvanized into just such "armies," waging "wars" of moral, political, and social protest and critique.

In the spring of 1970, colleges and universities were thrown into turmoil, disruption, and disorder as faculty and student bodies alike vehemently protested President Richard M. Nixon's decision to send American troops into Cambodia as part of the war against North Vietnam. At the campus of Oberlin's nearby neighbor, Kent State University, the protest took on an unimaginable tragic tone with the death of four students killed by National Guard troops, ordered to Kent to restore and maintain order. The death of the students triggered massive campus response. At some schools, including Oberlin, administrators ended the spring semester early, as part of a strike.<sup>41</sup> *Time* reported in its May 11 issue that

On campus the Cambodian foray brought new eruptions. At comparatively quiescent Princeton, nearly 2,000 students immediately called a "provisional" strike. At New Haven, which was broadly advertised in advance as a new Chicago, demonstration organizers cooled the crowds almost as rebuttal of Nixon's charge of anarchy.<sup>42</sup>

And in its next weekly issue, it brought Oberlin national attention:

At dozens of campuses, university presidents supported student demands for an end to the Cambodian venture and a withdrawal from Indochina. Oberlin College President Robert Carr simply canceled final exams, gave all his students credits for their courses and turned over the campus to antiwar planning.<sup>43</sup>

Oberlin thus ended its semester two weeks early. During that time students and faculty coordinated participation in protest rallies in Columbus and Washington, DC, and drawing on Oberlin's musical prominence, performed Mozart's *Requiem* in the National Cathedral in Washington.<sup>44</sup> And the students also considered what to do about the forthcoming commencement.

At meetings on May 12 and 14, the senior class voted to hold the baccalaureate and commencement ceremonies, though with a number of modifications that addressed the painful contexts of the preceding weeks. Accordingly the procession at baccalaureate was canceled and a silent, fifteen-minute vigil preceded the academic procession at commencement. Moreover, silent reflection followed the benediction at the end of the commencement, and cap and gown<sup>45</sup> were rejected by the students. Regalia was optional for the faculty. Students, explicitly aware that commencement was "an important symbolic event for many seniors, and, even more, for the parents and families of many seniors" decided that there would be, however, a "basic uniformity of dress among those receiving diplomas in the Commencement ceremony": the men wore white shirts, dark pants and shoes or sandals; the women, dresses.<sup>46</sup>

*The Oberlin News-Tribune* (May 28, 1970) featured a front-page picture of the academic procession being formed. The caption is informative.

Pomp and Circumstance were at a minimum among members of the Oberlin College Class of 1970 as they lined up, awaiting the beginning of the academic procession at the commencement on Monday morning. Faculty members and other dignitaries stuck it out with traditional caps and gowns. O[berlin] C[ollege] officials report that reaction to the new informality from visiting alumni and parents of graduates was sympathetic. TV coverage was favorable too and both Lorain County daily papers featured photographs of a hound dog lolling on the ground while the honorary degree party marched by rather than the novelty of a graduation without the standard regalia.

The commencement novelty made national news as well, with a picture in *Time*.<sup>47</sup>

The abandonment of cap and gown by the senior class was multivalent in its effectiveness. The refund money from the gown rental could go to the student, to the Strike Fund (in support of the antiwar activities), or to a class gift fund in support of local community projects.<sup>48</sup> The dramatic contrast from traditional expectation vividly underscored that given the extraordinary circumstances of May, 1970, "business as usual" was an impossible response. Certainly the innovative dress brought wider attention to the issues of the day and to the school itself. And despite the specific political trigger for the abandonment of the tradition--the Kent State events--the new mode of dress was certainly nurtured in a larger cultural sense by pervasive discontent with social norms. In a description of Degas' painting "The Cotton Market, New Orleans," John Harvey underscores that the black that the men wear is tied to formality, position, and the impersonality of expertise.<sup>49</sup> These qualities are easily transferred to

traditional academic costume as well. That is, in rejecting the black gown, the students also rejected the formality and status of the mainstream. Given Oberlin's radical reputation at the time,<sup>50</sup> such a move is unsurprising.

The 1970 commencement marked the dissolution of a tradition, but simultaneously gave birth to the elements that are now seen as traditional parts of the Oberlin commencement. One is the perpetuation of the commencement ceremony as a forum for political protest. Black balloons, colored ribbons, armbands, and a mock funeral procession have all been employed in the protest against the Solicitor General of the US,<sup>51</sup> US involvement in El Salvador (1981), actions of the College Administration (1984), South African investment (1986), and military action in Kosovo (1999). Since the mid-1980's, students have also amended the line of march of the academic procession. The official procession moves beneath a memorial arch commemorating Oberlin missionaries killed in China during the Boxer Rebellion; the unofficial line of march finds students walking *around* the arch in support of Asian-American sentiment on the issue.<sup>52</sup>

Of more prominence is the diversity of costume, now deeply entrenched in the college culture. In the year following the "Kent State" graduation, the senior class voted to make commencement dress entirely a matter for the individual student's discretion, thus rejecting not only the cap and gown, but also the uniform dress of the class of 1970. The faculty has persisted in wearing traditional regalia, regardless of the student dress. The *Oberlin Alumni Magazine* dubbed this a "tradition" right away, and celebrated the resulting color of the event.

Following a "tradition" started last year when seniors did not wear caps and gowns, this year's graduates also marched and received degrees attired in non-academic clothing. Whereas last year men wore white shirts and dark trousers and women wore dresses, outfits this year ran the entire fashion gamut, ranging from quite a few jackets and ties and dress outfits to bib overalls, shawls and long peasant skirts.

The result was colorful and many in the audience were casually clothed. Not being restricted to white shirts, the males showed more variety in their attire. One male student wore jeans and cowboy boots, but most looked well groomed. . . . Girls seemed partial to long dresses and there was one big, floppy brimmed hat.<sup>53</sup>

Thirty years later, press accounts of Oberlin commencements still underscore the unusual nature of the commencement dress as one of its leading characteristics.

Student interest in cap and gown does persist, however. In 1980, for instance the *Oberlin Review* reported "one of the strongest movements in several years to revive the tradition of academic costume at graduation." Ultimately the student vote went against regalia, 292 to 124.<sup>54</sup> Prior to the vote, a newspaper article outlined the spread of opinion: some note a "special" quality about caps and gowns and that conventional costume was important to the

parents who would attend the ceremony. The counter view stresses individuality: "Dress other than robes brings out the individual characteristics of each graduate."<sup>55</sup>

Addressing the individuality issue and comparing it to curricular reforms that would also restrict a measure of free student choice, student Justin Hughes offered a point of view against these signs of "increasing conservatism."

With "pomp and circumstance" ringing in their ears, seniors will be voting this week on whether or not they want caps and gowns as part of the 1980 Commencement ceremony. The proposal to reinstitute caps and gowns shares a lot with recent proposals to reinstitute distribution requirements; both are pertinent to getting that little piece of paper they call a degree; both are anathema for most Oberlin students....

Part of Oberlin's tradition is its individuality and there's no reason to compare our ceremonies with those of any other institution. Gowns create streams of uniformly-clad young people lining up to accept degrees with their faces barely visible beneath cap and tassel. It hardly puts the stress on the individual.

If the seniors are going to dress up, I'd rather see everyone come in costumes representing their major. Classics majors could come in togas, government majors, both international and American, could come dressed as Karl Marx and George Washington respectively. Dual degree candidates would have a chance to appear in two outfits, and, of course, individual majors could design their own costume, much as they designed their own major.

This costume-commencement would have the same effect as gowns; indeed, it would be showy, photos of it would be worth keeping, and parents would be awed if not impressed. Unlike gowns, everyone would retain their individuality and it would certainly make Oberlin unique in yet another field.<sup>56</sup>

In 1981 interest was again keen. The class president said that "More people seem genuinely interested in it. There was a big push for mandatory caps and gowns that got a lot more people interested who were opposed to them." Ultimately the "new" tradition prevailed once again.<sup>57</sup>

Optional dress has not precluded cap and gown; it is one choice among many. In 1982 around 45 seniors donned the traditional robes; in 1983, the African-American students wore them as a group, a tradition that they have maintained.<sup>58</sup> In 1999 the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reported that "more than half of the graduating class of 1999 donned traditional caps and gowns for the ceremony."<sup>59</sup>

The adoption of the gown by African-American students coincides also with the

development of a Black Parent Appreciation ceremony during commencement weekend. This specific acknowledgment of the parents' presence on campus may also nurture the use of regalia, as there is a popular notion that the traditional garb is particularly important to older family members. One may also relate the adoption of regalia by blacks to common experiences of church dress in black communities. One recent writer observes that

Black Americans, especially those of us born after World War II, often speak with bemusement of a collective black experience, 'that no matter where we were raised, when it came to how one acted or dressed in church, our parents preached a 'common gospel.' . . . [the older generation believed] wearing fine clothes, from head to toe, was how mortals showed reverence to God and that God's house--a place that had given blacks hope in times of despair and the dream of heavenly salvation that sustained us for so long, deserved our respect.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps it is a short step from the temple to the temple of learning. Moreover, African-American students in adopting cap and gown have given themselves a high visibility as a group, marked by distinctive ornamentation of the gown--a stole of kente cloth or a vee-shaped stole in the red, green, and black colors of the African National Congress--that renders its wearing, to a degree, political.<sup>61</sup>

The lack of constraints that characterize commencement costume in modern Oberlin has given a free reign to ornamentation and customizing of one's apparel. Sometimes--though rarely-- this has been conservative and historical. For instance, one physics professor who was also an Anglican cleric took particular delight in wearing a Cranmerian Canterbury cap with his Harvard crimson gown. Similarly, one ecclesiastically-minded student, the organist of the local Anglican parish wore cassock and surplice, Canterbury cap, and bachelor's hood to his graduation. Other ornamentation has been markedly playful, such as that of a small group of faculty who in the last decade or so have embraced vintage hats of all sorts to wear with their conventional gown and hood. This playfulness is also reflected in the diversity of student attire.

In the end, the "new" tradition must be seen as a colorful display of individuality combining formal academic regalia with both formal and often decidedly informal street attire. To some, the loss of the older tradition will inevitably represent a severing of community with sister institutions and a loss of continuity with the earlier history of Oberlin itself. And in so colorful a display of individuality, the communal sense of the institution will be veiled. However, the new practice is so deeply entrenched in the college culture, that it has become iconic of the school itself, and remains a distinctive visual manifestation of Oberlin College.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my colleagues Robert Haslun, Secretary of Oberlin College, and Roland M. Baumann, College Archivist, for their kind assistance and encouragement. I dedicate this essay to the memory of Geoffrey Blodgett, Danforth Professor of History Emeritus at Oberlin and devoted chronicler of Oberlin history.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the Intercollegiate Code, see Hugh Smith, *Academic Dress and Insignia of the World* (Cape Town, 1970), II, 1527-75. Smith observes that “by far the most interesting feature . . . of United States academic costume in the period from 1960 to date [1970], has been the deliberate attempt of certain of the best-known and most influential Universities to break away from the uniformity of the Intercollegiate Code. The result of this has been the creation of distinctive academic costume for some or all of the Graduates of at least the following Universities: California, Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Fairleigh-Dickinson, Fordham, New York, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Tufts, Union Theological Seminary and Yale.” To Smith’s now outdated list may be added Adelphi, Arizona State, Boston College, Brown, DePaul, Illinois, Johns Hopkins, Loyola, Michigan, MIT, New Mexico, Rochester, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Rutgers, Stanford, Temple, Washington, and Wayne State Universities. A significant number retain the basic design of the Intercollegiate Code, though they alter the color scheme of the gown to create a robe of distinction.

<sup>3</sup> Delavan L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin* (Boston, 1898), 21. Regarding the early history of the College, see also the standard work, Robert Samuel Fletcher’s *A History of Oberlin College from its Foundation through the Civil War* (Oberlin, 1943).

<sup>4</sup> Leonard, p. 141. In 1835 a resolution was adopted to the effect that “education of people of color is a matter of great interest, and should be encouraged by this institution.” (p. 144) Geoffrey Blodgett pointedly notes that this decision was “as daring and radical for its day as any modern counterpoint—possibly more so.” “Myth and Reality in Oberlin History,” *Oberlin Alumni Magazine* 68, no. 3 (May/June, 1972): 9.

<sup>5</sup> As recently as 1999, College promotional materials asserted that “more of our graduates have earned PhDs in science and engineering than have graduates of any other four-year institution.” *Oberlin* 98, no. 2 (1999): 8.

<sup>6</sup> The “parade of portraits” begins with paintings of four men in formal poses, the first two in street attire, the next two in the black suit and white tie of formal evening dress. Only with the fifth President, John Henry Barrows (1899-1902) does academic regalia appear—Barrows impressively wears formal evening attire with doctoral gown and red hood. The next three portraits, covering 1902-1960, remain formal, and their subjects are attired in gown and hood.

The portrait of the ninth President, Robert K. Carr (1960-1970) breaks the pattern with a casual outdoor scene and street clothes. Most casual—strikingly so in context—is the portrait of the tenth President, Robert Fuller (1970-73). Fuller appears in jacket and sweater with an open-collar shirt against a loud purple-blue background, etched with nervous streaks of black. Subsequent presidents have opted for informal poses and street attire, though none have embraced the pop-imagery inherent in Fuller’s portrait.

<sup>7</sup> *The Oberlin Review* [hence *OR*] (May 26, 1891).

<sup>8</sup> Oberlin College Archives 0/00/10, box 1. Handbook for Students 1893-94. The College colors were (and remain) crimson [or some form of red] and gold. The Conservatory here adopts green and pink, the latter an interesting anticipation of the Intercollegiate Code color for the discipline of music. The class colors are, to modern eyes, unusual: ‘94 royal purple and heliotrope; ‘95 puce and cream; ‘96 mimosa and pactole; ‘97 mousse and Absynthe.

<sup>9</sup> *OR* (Dec. 9, 1890).

<sup>10</sup> *OR* (Dec. 16, 1890). The editorial page in this issue also was enthusiastic about the “immediate fruit” of last week’s suggestion.

<sup>11</sup> *OR* (March 10, 1891).

<sup>12</sup> *OR* (Feb. 16, 1892).

<sup>13</sup> *OR* (March 1, 1892).

<sup>14</sup> *OR* (Dec. 24, 1881).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *OR* (April 22, 1882). It is ironic that in December of 1904 the *Review* would have occasion to note that “the seniors have abandoned the wearing of caps and gowns every Friday *until warmer weather.*” [emphasis added] *OR* (Dec. 8, 1904).

<sup>17</sup> *OR* (March 25, 1890).

<sup>18</sup> *OR* (March 8, 1892).

<sup>19</sup> *OR* (Nov. 24, 1898).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Fn 16 above. See also *OR* (Nov. 16, 1910), Forum.

<sup>21</sup> *The Tribune* (June 21, 1901).

<sup>22</sup> *OR* (April 25, 1907).

<sup>23</sup> Donald Love, *Henry Churchill King* (New Haven, 1956), 109-111. See also Robert Haslun, "Commencement and Tradition at Oberlin," *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, 69, no. 4 (July-August, 1973): 12-14.

<sup>24</sup> *Hi-O-Hi* (1898), p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> *OR* (June 20, 1907), inter alia.

<sup>26</sup> *OR* (Dec. 24, 1881).

<sup>27</sup> *OR* (March 8, 1892).

<sup>28</sup> *OR* (February 16, 1892).

<sup>29</sup> *OR* (Nov. 24, 1898).

<sup>30</sup> NB, just a few years earlier, choir vestments were introduced at Second [Congregational] Church (Easter Sunday, 1903), along with a processional and a recessional. These innovations were controversial. Reporting a few years later (1905) in the *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, S. Eleanor Barrows observed, however, that "it is now universally agreed . . . that not only was unity, simplicity and beauty secured by the vestments but that the music actually sounds better!" (p. 37). A picture with the article shows a large choir in cassock and surplice preparing to enter the church.

<sup>31</sup> *OR* (June 21, 1906).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the modern view voiced by John Harvey in his provocative *Men in Black* (Chicago, 1995): "Our outer dress does inner work for us, and if clothes 'mean,' it is in the first place to ourselves, telling us we are or may be something we have meant to be." (p. 14).

<sup>33</sup> *OR* (Oct. 21, 1882).

<sup>34</sup> Love, p. 109.

<sup>35</sup> June 20, 1907.

<sup>36</sup> *OR* (June, 20, 1907).

<sup>37</sup> Emphasis added. The sermon is reproduced in the *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, 3, no. 10 (1907). See p. 370. Significantly, the commencement speaker, William Allen White, spoke of the "great problem of spiritualizing . . . material things." See *The Oberlin Tribune* (June 21, 1907).

<sup>38</sup> Oberlin College Archives 0/00/14 box 3 Commencement Files 1902-1908. Currier was Professor of Sacred Rhetoric and Pastoral Theology.

<sup>39</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (June 17, 1907).

<sup>40</sup> Harvey, p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> Indicative of the gulf between the Nixon administration and the university communities is the following report from *Time*: "Even as it widened the war in Southeast Asia, the Nixon Administration chose to further estrange itself from the nation's campuses. Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, speaking to Republicans in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., unleashed another blunderbuss attack on colleges as 'circus tents or psychiatric centers for overprivileged, under-disciplined, irresponsible children of the well-to-do blasé permissivists.'" (May 11, 1970), 19.

<sup>42</sup> *Time* (May 11, 1970), [10].

<sup>43</sup> *Time* (May 18, 1970), 8. *OR* reported that the political circumstance made "emergency measures" necessary. The adopted plan stated that "students are to receive the grade in class as of May fourth or the corresponding credit/no entry. Students and faculty will also be authorized to make any other educational arrangements that are mutually acceptable." The canceling of classes was not unique to Oberlin. Boston, Ohio State, Brown, Yale, Princeton, and Harvard also closed. The move was not unanimously popular among students. *US News and World Report* (June 15, 1970), 36 reported: "In a letter published in 'The New York Times,' five students took the Harvard faculty to task for its vote on May 6 to allow students not to complete their academic year but get credit for their courses anyway. This action, the students said, constituted 'a complete abandonment of academic standards by a university faculty previously considered among the world's greatest.'"

<sup>44</sup> Over a thousand Oberlin students participated in the anti-war rally in the nation's capital. See *OR* (May 11, 1970). At the Washington rally it was also announced that Oberlin would host a "Kent-in-exile," providing facilities for Kent students "to live, work, and struggle out of Oberlin."

<sup>45</sup> A traditional uniform that in February had been supported by 102 of 186 seniors voting on the issue. As in early Oberlin, economy entered the picture. "Paper gowns to replace the traditional gown rental has been under discussion by the class officers. The idea was discarded due to the impracticality of such material in the event of an Oberlin downpour. At present the officers are considering acetate gowns, which are also inexpensive, but less perishable." *OR* (February 10, 1970).

<sup>46</sup> See "A Statement by the Class of 1970" in the 1970 Commencement Program (Oberlin College Archives) and accounts in *OR* (May 13, 1970 and May 15, 1970). The student decision made interestingly ironic an advertisement in the *OR* (May 23, 1970). Lawson's Menswear featured a mortar-board with the message "Our Hats Off to Our Grads."

<sup>47</sup> *Time* (June 8, 1970), 12. The text noted that "at Oberlin College, graduates wore street dress, having donated their cap-and-gown fees to a city youth program."

<sup>48</sup> *OR* (May 13, 1970) and "Letter from the Class Gift Committee" in Oberlin College Archives, 0/00/14 box 11 Commencement Files 1966-1971.

<sup>49</sup> Harvey, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Oberlin's reputation was a problem for college admissions. Then Assistant Director of Admissions, Carl Bewig, observed: "[W]hen a lot of people think of Oberlin, they envision long-haired hippies, Communists, and political activists. The image keeps away conservative kids and others from conservative backgrounds whose parents are concerned about their poor little innocent daughters." *OR* (January 30, 1970).

<sup>51</sup> Erwin N. Griswold, Solicitor General of the U.S. and College Trustee since 1936, was the commencement speaker in 1971. Four hundred black helium balloons were released and a cortege of three coffins—"The War Dead," "School Children," and "The Poor"—made its way to the speakers' platform. *The Elyria Chronicle* (May 24, 1971).

<sup>52</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (May 28, 1985).

<sup>53</sup> *Oberlin Alumni Magazine* 67, no. 6 (July/August, 1971): 13.

<sup>54</sup> *OR* (February 26, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> *OR* (February 15, 1980).

<sup>56</sup> *OR* (February 19, 1980).

<sup>57</sup> *OR* (April 4, 1981).

<sup>58</sup> *OR* (April 29, 1983).

<sup>59</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (June 1, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> Lena Williams, cited in Gwendolyn S. O'Neal, "The African American Church, its Sacred Cosmos and Dress" in *Religion, Dress and the Body*, ed. Linda B. Arthur (Oxford, 1999), 125.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. O'Neal, p. 127. "[T]raditional robes worn by preachers in Christian denominations are often modified in the Black Church by using panels of fabric with African motifs or the narrow strip palliums made of kente cloth."