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“Feminine” Clothing at Harvard in the 1830s

Robin McElheny

The Harvard College laws of 1816 included the following curious entry: “If any [student] . . . shall put on indecent apparel or women’s apparel . . . the Government may inflict any of the College censures, at their discretion.”¹ This prohibition stands out because it is the only one that alludes to the gender of the (male) audience. What prompted it? Was the wearing of women’s clothing frowned upon because it fell in the category of dissolute behavior? Or theatrical entertainment (also prohibited)? Or vanity? Was there a rash of cross-dressing at the time?

In 1838 Samuel Longfellow, Harvard class of 1839, drew a sketch of the “Summer Costume of the Cambridge Students.” It depicts a person wearing a long-sleeved coat with a full skirt, attached cape, wide collar, and long sleeves. The coat is trimmed with fringe or lace. To complete the outfit, the person wears long pants and a wide-brimmed hat. The Harvard University Archives has just such a coat among its holdings. Made of green and white cotton gingham with white trim, it was supposedly worn by David Haskins, class of 1837, and given to the archives by his daughter in 1939, where it is described in the original shelf list as a “toga.”²

At the time of the gift, Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison regarded the costume with suspicion, considering it “too sissy to have been worn by the deep-drinking young hellions of President Quincy’s administration.”³ It wasn’t until an archivist found the following passage from Sidney Willard’s *Memories of Youth and Manhood* that Morison was convinced that Harvard undergraduates would have worn such an unmasculine outfit. “In summer long gowns

of calico or gingham were the covering that distinguished the collegian, not only about the College grounds, but in all parts of the village.”⁴

[See image 3: The Harvard “Toga”]

In his own recollection, “The College Toga,” David Haskins attributed its origins to “the creative genius and skilful fingers of ‘Ma’am’ Dana, the College tailoress of that day, who was the principal, if not the sole, manufacturer of the garment.”⁵

Recent research by Sarah Carter, Harvard class of 2002, and an examination by costume historian Nancy Rexford provide a context for Willard’s and Haskins’ comments. Haskins’ “toga” is an example of a “wrapper,” a loose-fitting, informal housecoat dating back to the eighteenth century and worn by men and women. In fact, the toga is nearly identical to a “cloak dressing gown,” the pattern for which appeared in an 1838 British sewing manual, *The Workwoman’s Guide, containing instructions to the inexperienced in cutting out and completing those articles of wearing apparel, &c., which are usually made at home. . .*⁶ According to the *Guide*, the cloak dressing gown was suitable for men, women, and children. Possibly access to an earlier version of the *Guide* inspired Madam Dana to make the outfits that Harvard students of the 1830s found so appealing. Or perhaps cloak dressing gowns were popular enough in England and the United States that any sewing manual worth its purchase price included such a pattern.

No matter what the source of the College toga, its popularity among teenagers has a familiar ring, similar to the more recent popularity of sweat shirts and sweat pants. Clothing that in one setting is comfortable and practical in another setting attains a distinctive cachet. As Sarah Carter has written, “Then as now, college was a peer directed place in which rules were

broken, followed and bent in a context of self expression. . . . It [the toga] highlights a unique student culture, the material facets of which are still virtually unexplored.”⁷

Notes

1. Harvard University, Board of Overseers, *Laws of Harvard College, for the use of the students. With preliminary notices and an appendix* (Cambridge, Mass.: Printed at the University Press, by Hilliard and Metcalf, 1816), Harvard University Archives [hereafter, HUA], call no. HUD 816.48.
2. HUA call no. HUD 837.87.
3. Samuel Eliot Morison, "Summer Costume of Harvard Students a Century Ago," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* (Feb. 10, 1939), n. p., HUA call no. HUK 137.
4. Sidney Willard, *Memories of Youth and Manhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: J. Bartlett, 1855), HUA call no. HUG 1876.9654 hd.
5. David Haskins, "The College Toga," *College Recollections and Stories*, place and date of publication unknown.
6. *The Workwoman's Guide [by a lady]* (Guilford, Conn.: Opus Publications [1987]. Reprint. Originally published: London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1838).
7. Sara Anne Carter, "Dressed for Undress: David Greene Haskin's 'Toga' and Its Context." Student paper submitted for History 1610, Harvard College (May 2002), HUA, accession no. 14584.