

Doctors' Greens

by *Bruce Christianson*

Everybody knows that doctors wear scarlet, at least on red-letter days.¹ Many are aware that, in addition to scarlet, Henry VIII's Act lists cloth of the colours mulberry² and violet³ as proper alternatives to black for the holder of a doctor's degree,⁴ although considerably fewer know that this section of Henry's Act applied only to the clergy.⁵

However, virtually nobody seems to be aware of the evidence that there was once a time when doctors, along with other important people, such as judges and bishops, sometimes wore *green* robes on formal occasions.⁶ The purpose of this short note is to call attention to this suggestive coincidence. I have no space here to air the issues raised, my intention is rather that others may be motivated further to pursue the interesting analogies between doctoral, judicial, and episcopal robes.

Probably the most convincing direct reference to a green doctor's robe occurs in the will of one Richard Browne (alias Cordone) of Oxford, dated 8 October 1452: 'Item, do et lego Magistro Johanni Beke, sacrae theologiae professori, [. . .] unam togam viridem longam, cum tabardo et caputio ejusdem coloris, foderato cum "menivere".'⁷ Robinson wants to argue that green was therefore the distinctive

¹ Although the ancient Cambridge ordinance 'induti togis murice tinctis' (Baker, 'Doctors Wear Scarlet', p. 33, n. 2) literally means wearing purple robes (from the root *murex*). See notes 23 and 25 below.

² The use of claret-coloured cloth by universities such as London probably just about qualifies under this heading.

³ This term includes colours that we should probably now refer to as blue-purple, as well as lilac.

⁴ 24 Henry VIII, c 13 An Act for Reformation of Excess in Apparel 1533 section II.

⁵ For the full text of the Act, along with an excellent commentary, see Cox. I am indebted to Professor Noel Cox for sight of an early draft of this article. By 1533, scarlet, mulberry and violet were all produced using kermes (*Coccus ilicis*, known in England as 'grain'), probably with different mordants: see Greenfield and de Graaf. I am indebted to Susan North for providing me with these two references, and many helpful comments.

⁶ Not black robes which had faded into green with age, but robes which had been deliberately dyed green to begin with.

⁷ Robinson, p. 195, n. 1, quoting Anstey, p. 647: 'I bequeath to Master John Beke, Professor of Divinity, [. . .] a long green dress robe, together with a habit and hood of the same colour, lined with "miniver".'

colour of the Faculty of Theology,⁸ but I part company with him here: I believe that systematic faculty colours are a relatively modern convention,⁹ with colour of cloth in the fifteenth century being determined primarily by the quality of the cloth¹⁰ or the rank of the wearer, and by the time of year or importance of the occasion. In any case Browne bequeaths robes of scarlet and violet in addition to the green ones already noted.

There are other examples of green doctor's robes from the fifteenth century (see Robinson, especially p. 195, n. 1, and p. 197, n. 2) but the use of green cloth by doctors seems to have fallen into abeyance some time during the sixteenth century.¹¹ A reference in an old student song to their teachers' change from green robes to red may have been preserved in *Carmina Burana*, of all places: 'Color saepe pallis et forma mutatur / Color, cum pro viridi rubrum comparatur.'¹² Interestingly, both the use and abandonment of green by doctors appear to have parallels in other areas, as we shall now see.

There are references to the robes of English judges being of green cloth, as early as 1387,¹³ and by 1442 they wore summer robes of green cloth lined with green tartarin stitched with gold, and winter robes of violet cloth dyed in grain, and lined with miniver.¹⁴ As with doctors, scarlet cloth seems to have displaced green for judges by the sixteenth century,¹⁵ although green, and not scarlet, robes were worn

⁸ This hypothesis was subsequently accepted, apparently without Robinson's caveats, by Brightman, see Kerr, p. 45, n. 14.

⁹ See my 'Lined with Gold', p. 81, n. 10; 'Oxford Blues', p. 26, n. 11, etc., etc.

¹⁰ In medieval English the word 'scarlet' denoted a particular weave of fine woollen cloth: scarlet was available in green and blue as well as in red, and Will Scarlet probably wore green like the other outlaws, but considerably further upmarket. By the start of the sixteenth century, the term had become glued to the colour in which this fine cloth was by then most usually dyed.

¹¹ Although in the 1546 portrait by Gerlach Flicke, NPG535, at the National Portrait Gallery, London, Cranmer appears to be wearing an olive-green chimere, which may possibly be a doctor's habit. See Robinson, p. 194, and Plate IV, opp. p. 216.

¹² See Robinson, p. 196, n. 6, quoting Schmeller.

¹³ Both Hargreaves-Mawdsley, 'Legal Dress', and Baker, 'Judges' Robes', cite Dugdale, pp. 98–99, 103–04, on this and the following point.

¹⁴ Loc. cit. Note that this is the opposite of the modern rule, dating from the eighteenth century, that judges wear violet only in summer.

¹⁵ Red was the colour of the House of Lancaster, and one hypothesis is that this accounts for the change from green to scarlet, judges' robes being by way of royal livery. See Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Legal Dress*, p. 51, n. 7. I am not convinced. By 1654 the rector of Padua also wore scarlet robes in the summer and purple robes in the winter, see Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Academical Dress*, p. 21, and in any case the Tudor colours were green and white.

by the judges at the trial of Lord Dacre as late as the summer of 1534,¹⁶ and the use of green robes by judges was not officially discontinued until the rules of 1635.¹⁷

Green robes were also at one time a prerogative of bishops. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 preserved to prelates the right to wear cloth of red or green.¹⁸ As with doctors and judges, the use of red or purple robes eventually prevailed over green.¹⁹ There are still some survivals of the old episcopal monopoly of green: for example in the green galero worn by Roman Catholic bishops until 1817, the green lining for a bishop's biretta, the green cord for the pectoral cross, and the green carpet covering the cathedra of a bishop who is not a cardinal. Green is still the episcopal colour in ecclesiastical heraldry.²⁰

Green robes were also worn by the Knights of the Bath, created at the coronation of Henry IV in 1399,²¹ and the aldermen of London were required to wear green cloaks in 1382.²² Again, the green robes fell into disuse, although the aldermen, like judges but unlike doctors, still have their violet robes as well as their black and scarlet ones. It is not clear when doctors ceased regularly to use violet 'second-best' robes.²³

There is an interesting relationship between the dyeing processes anciently used to produce green, purple, and scarlet wool cloth, with green being obtained by interrupting the photochemical development of the dye at an intermediate stage.²⁴ In particular, the colour anciently described as double-dyed Tyrian purple, and which was used for cardinals' robes prior to 1464,²⁵ was obtained by first dyeing

¹⁶ See Baker, 'Judges' Robes', p. 32, n. 14. The use of green instead of scarlet was, by then, sufficiently unusual to be explicitly recorded.

¹⁷ Described in Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Legal Dress*. pp. 60–68.

¹⁸ Constitution 16. Interestingly, the inferior clerics were not inhibited from wearing violet until much later, see Beck, II, pp. 374–76, and cf. IV, pp. 446–47. It is perhaps no coincidence that green, red, white, and black were the four liturgical colours in the system established by Innocent III, although violet had replaced black (except on Good Friday) by 1286, see Tyack, p. 121.

¹⁹ Although Nicholas, Bishop of Myrna, continued to wear his ancient green robes as well as the more modern robes of blue/purple and red, right up until he was kidnapped by Haddon Sundblom in 1931.

²⁰ See Noonan. I am indebted to Professor William Gibson for providing me with this reference.

²¹ See the article 'Robes' in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

²² Loc. cit. John Seley was fined for not having his green cloak correctly lined with green taffeta in the Whitsuntide procession of that year.

²³ One complication is the fact that many references to 'purple' garments actually refer to scarlet, see n. 1 above and n. 25 below.

²⁴ For a technical account from a modern perspective see Dedekind.

²⁵ In 1464 the cardinals switched from murex to a dye based on kermes, although their robes were (and indeed are) still officially referred to as 'purple'. Cf. n. 1 above.

the cloth green (*viridis*) using one dye,²⁶ and then immediately overlaying this by re-dyeing with a different dye.²⁷

Depending on one's point of view, the green doctor's robes of Leeds and of the other universities which currently use them can thus be thought of either as a re-introduction of an ancient tradition, or as symbolic of a process only half completed.²⁸

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²⁶ Probably obtained from murex pelagium.

²⁷ Probably obtained from murex buccinum. There is a description of the process in Pliny (HN9.135), see Sebesta, p. 69, but the interpretation of this particular passage in Pliny is fraught with controversy.

²⁸ See Hopman, p. 563, n. 22, for more on such symbolism.

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