

A Marginal Follower of Fashion

Historians of fashion often look to the court of King Richard II when discussing the birth of *haute couture*. It was during Richard's reign, from 1377 to 1399, that the aspirant bourgeoisie started to ape the fashions of the court, having become sufficiently prosperous to afford the silks and luxury textiles that were such a hallmark of the age. The aristocrats, so as to preserve the outward and visible signs of their exclusive station in life, were compelled to change their codes of dress regularly; and even if the business of staying one step ahead did not yet quite involve the exhausting iterations of Milan or Paris or New York, the 'current' mode of dress was used for the first time as a statement of exclusivity. One of the more outré items of display introduced during Richard's reign was the 'crakow', a pointed, long-toed shoe, whose length steadily increased as the aristocrats sought to outrun their imitators—although physically outrunning anyone at all would have been impossible, for the toes eventually became so elongated that courtiers had to tie them to their legs so as not to trip over them. Crakows became popular in 1382 after the marriage of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia; it was Bohemia where the fashion originated; Kraków in Poland is the city from which the shoe takes its name. Needless to say, New College's founder, Bishop William of Wykeham (d. 1404), would have had little patience with any foundationer who might have felt moved to flaunt crakows on his own feet. Wykeham's statutes state that 'it is absolutely forbidden to each and every scholar and fellow to wear red or green hose, pointed shoes or hoods with frogging, within the University or without' (rubric 23).

New College was not, however, entirely free of specimens of the fashion. A manuscript in the Library, MS 242, has the remnant of an illumination (fol. 178r) of a man wearing a pair of crakows. Since the illumination, like the script, is datable to the last quarter of the fourteenth century, the picture may well be the earliest representation of crakows in English art. The volume was once richly illuminated, but this, alas, has been its ruin since whole leaves have been robbed for their decoration, the thief's knife cutting crudely into neighbouring pages. The volume carries two works by the prolific Oxford philosopher Walter Burley, his commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*. The opening page to the *Ethics* (fol. 2r) is intact, showing a golden initial historiated with a vignette, displayed behind striped curtains, of the tonsured author presenting his book to a seated, bearded king-priest, cloaked in blue and holding a crossed staff. Substantial border bars to four sides use blocked colours of blue and violet with white scrollwork, foliate at intervals and outlined in gold, and there is a roundel in the centre of the lower bar containing a lion's face, tongue extended. A very similar page by the same artist once marked the start of the commentary on the *Politics* (fol. 178r) but this has been extensively cut away. Among what remains, below the initial, can be seen the trunk and legs of a page dressed in violet hose and a blue doublet with red vents, a sheathed dagger at the belt, and, drooping pendulously, a glorious pair of red crakows.

The book was very probably made in Oxford: the parchment is of Oxford manufacture and the book was certainly in Oxford while still new, in the hands of two fellows of Exeter College who pledged it in the Giffard Chest in 1409; it was pledged again in 1429 and 1431 by fellows of Queen's. It was given to New College by the prominent churchman and humanist Thomas Chaundler (c. 1417–1490), who had been a fellow of New College from 1437 to 1450 and then warden from 1454 to 1475, after a four-year spell as warden of Winchester. The blank verso of the first leaf was filled with a painting of his arms, using gold, surmounted by the red cap of a doctor of theology, surmounted in turn by the black hat of a papal protonotary (which he was) with black knotted tassels flanking the blazon, and underneath that at the foot of the page a bombastic inscription in an ornate script proclaiming his entitlements. Chaundler was certainly a man who, in a different walk of life, would have had the temperament to flaunt a pair of crakows.



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