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Miniver Grows Lean

by MICHAEL G. MILLER

WHEN EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON tells us that Miniver Cheevy “grew lean” as he assailed the seasons, he clearly intends this emaciation to parallel and emphasize Miniver’s spiritual wasting away. In fact, so closely are the two conditions connected that one might easily diagnose Miniver’s physical state as largely psychosomatic, a result of his gnawing meditations and their attendant drinking. But when Robinson further informs us that Miniver “coughed,” and earlier in the poem, that he “rested from his labors,” he renders another reading possible; for both these signs, as well as Miniver’s growing lean, can be ascribed to a purely physical disease, one rampant in Robinson’s time that in its then common nomenclature carried a significance easily overlooked by present-day readers. Its modern designation, of course, is pulmonary tuberculosis, and its symptoms, as described in *Haydn’s Dictionary of Popular Medicine and Hygiene* (1882), unmistakably resemble Miniver’s: “It commonly begins with a slight cough, which, however, persists, and will not go away, and the patient gets gradually thinner.”

The endemic nature of pulmonary tuberculosis around the turn of the century assures us that Robinson could have alluded to the disease fully confident of his readers’ comprehension. Although no longer now the threat it was, tuberculosis was at that time the leading cause of death in all age groups, and few lives were untouched by it. Certainly Robinson’s life was no exception, and his acquaintance with the disease was direct. In 1907, the year “Miniver Cheevy” appeared, Robinson’s brother Herman was hospitalized with pulmonary tuberculosis and had undoubtedly shown its symptoms before this date. Moreover, in his drinking and in his largely misspent life, Herman has obvious, if general, affinities with Miniver. Not only, then, does Miniver show signs of tuberculosis, but Robinson, just prior to the appearance of the poem, had direct contact with a tubercular who shared some of Miniver’s qualities.

As frequently as tuberculosis and tuberculars are met in American literature, however — and there are examples from Thoreau, Whitman, and Twain down to Harold Fredric and Thomas Wolfe — they are rarely termed such. Instead, as in these authors, the disease was most often referred to as consumption, and those afflicted with it as consumptives; Rene and Jean Dubos in their *The White Plague: Tuberculosis*,

Man, and Society have noted that only in this century has the disease gradually come to be called tuberculosis. Although Robinson apparently used neither the term consumption nor tuberculosis in his poetry or published letters, it is beyond question that he was as aware of its then common appellation as he was of the disease itself.

If Robinson does mean to suggest consumption as a cause of Miniver's state, then his strategy in doing so is apparent. When one broods morbidly over some real or imagined injustice, as Miniver does over the failure of the objective world to fulfill his grandiose dreams, it is a commonplace to say he feeds upon or is eating at himself. To make Miniver a literal consumptive as well would be a brilliant reinforcement of such a mental state, and the disease could have even further implications within the parallel. While no one has ever held Miniver's bleak ruminations to be salutary, precisely how destructive Robinson intends them is clear when we realize that Miniver may well suffer from a disease always debilitating and often fatal that in name, and therefore in nature, reflects his mental state. In his exacerbation of this disease — he continues drinking, evidently refuses treatment, in fact may fail to recognize he is seriously ill — the prognosis is grim. So too with his mental and spiritual state, for Miniver continues "thinking," continues his scornful evaluation of his world in comparison with an imagined, distorted past, and fails likewise to perceive the hopeless enervation led to by such broodings. If Miniver's physical condition is attributable to consumption, then Robinson does more than play wryly with verbal associations. He tells us that misdirected dreamers such as Miniver drift ineluctably toward spiritual degeneration and death.

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