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of Sutherland, and his wife, the former Harriet Elizabeth Georgiana (1806-1868), daughter of George Howard, 6th Earl of Carlisle. After the death of Grey in July, 1845, Dorothy Lieven received from his executor all her correspondence with Grey. In 1846 she requested the Duke of Sutherland to keep these letters. When Lady Grey was preparing a memoir in justification of her husband's political career she asked to see these letters, but her request was refused by Princess Lieven. The letters were kept under lock and key until Guy Le Strange prepared them for publication in 1890.



A READING OF "MINIVER CHEEVY"

By LAURENCE PERRINE

EDWIN Arlington Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy" would seem to require no special elucidation. It has been popular with both public and critics. But partially for that very reason "Miniver Cheevy" is an excellent poem for demonstrating how poetry "works": how the poet, by his peculiar juxtaposition of words, by his employment of connotation and figurative language, and by his management of sound, meter, structure, and stanza pattern, adds extra dimensions of meaning and suggests more than he states. Ezra Pound has described poetry as language charged with meaning. An intensive reading of "Miniver Cheevy" will show how the poet gives his words their charge. It will also serve to deepen some tones in Robinson's portrait.

The main features of the poem are immediately apparent. Here is the portrait of a misfit, a failure. Unable to adjust himself to the present and meet the problems of reality, he escapes this reality in two ways: first, by dreaming of the romantic past which he has read about in story books, poetry, and history; and second, by drinking. The past seems romantic

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to him because it is not the present. Miniver is the kind of person who is always longing for "the good old days" and who thinks the present cheap and commonplace, unromantic and unexciting.

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
He wept that he was ever born,
And he had reasons.¹

"Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn." The first phrase to greet us in the poem is deliberately ambiguous. It means, first, that Miniver, like some of the heroes of whom he reads, has a mythological paternity. His father was Scorn personified, and Miniver is of the first generation, inheriting the attributes of his father. He scorns everything connected with the present: its art, its warfare, its society. He scorns gold, and the materialistic aims of men who seek money rather than glory. And he scorns labor. But the phrase also means that Miniver was the *object* of scorn, as a child of misfortune is one whom misfortunes happen *to*. Miniver receives scorn as well as gives it. He is "at outs" with society, but is also *outcast* from it. And here already we begin to suspect that Miniver's scorn of society is simply a rationalization of his failure to be accepted by it. Henry Thoreau was "at outs" with society and voluntarily withdrew from it for two years at Walden Pond. But Miniver's isolation is not voluntary, and he withdraws, we infer, only as far as the corner table of a city café. There is something superficial about his contempt for the present. The word "child" contributes to this meaning by suggesting his essential immaturity.

Is this ambiguity intentional or simply the product of a reader's ingenuity? If we had to choose between the two readings we should choose the first, for we are told in so many words that Miniver "scorned . . . gold," and in the next line that he "assailed the seasons," and throughout the poem that he "cursed" the modern and the commonplace. Nowhere else are we told explicitly that he was in addition the object of scorn. But unless we are not also to take this interpretation, why did

¹ "Miniver Cheevy" is reprinted with the permission of Charles Scribner's Sons from *The Town Down the River* by Edwin Arlington Robinson. Copyright 1910 Charles Scribner's Sons; renewal copyright 1948 Ruth Nivison.

not Robinson capitalize Scorn — as he has done with the personifications of Romance and Art later in the poem?

"Assailed the seasons" is a peculiar phrase. Ordinarily we should say of a man that he "railed at the times." But "seasons" is a figurative equivalent for "times" that has a peculiar value. The rotation of the seasons suggests the persistence in time of Miniver's detraction — spring, summer, fall, winter, year in, year out — in a way that the more common phrase does not. And when "seasons" is combined with "assailed," the four recurring "s" sounds give us the very hiss of Miniver's attacks.

Miniver "grew lean," the context suggests, because of his discontent. We think of the traditional contrast between the lean nagging type and the fat jolly type. We remember that the discontented Cassius had "a lean and hungry look." But "grew lean" also looks forward to later information in the poem. Miniver rests from his labors; he has no money; he drinks. Unlike that of Cassius, Miniver's hunger is physical as well as spiritual. And again, is not the relationship reciprocal — Miniver's leanness being not only a result but a cause of his discontent?

The concluding line of the first stanza is, of course, ironical understatement. The absence of a qualifying adjective actually serves to intensify the effect of the line, to multiply Miniver's "reasons." It leaves the effect as of something not all said.

Miniver loved the days of old
 When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
 The vision of a warrior bold
 Would set him dancing.

"Days of old," "swords . . . bright," "steeds . . . prancing," "warrior . . . bold": This is trite language, but not trite writing. For the triteness is appropriate here. It suggests the superficiality of Miniver's idealization of the past, an idealization based not on an intimate personal knowledge of the past but on hand-me-down sentiments. The phraseology also suggests the source of these sentiments: romantic history and literature. Miniver would be right at home with the current vogue for historical fiction. "Steeds" and "warrior" are romantically connotative words. Substitute "horses" and "soldier" and a certain poetic patina is lost. But in this context the effect of this romantic connotation is ironical: it suggests not a real but a false

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patina. It suggests that Miniver's love of the past inheres in words rather than in reality. "The vision of a warrior bold/
Would set him dancing" may be interpreted literally or metaphorically. We may imagine that if Miniver ever really saw a medieval knight, he would arise and do a little jig of pleasure. The imaginary vision — the picture in the mind's eye — sets his soul dancing.

Miniver sighed for what was not,
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,
And Priam's neighbors.

Miniver "rested from his labors." This is ironical understatement. Read literally, it would mean that he took a short time out from hard work to recuperate his strength before returning to work again. In context it means that he desisted from labors that were probably almost non-existent in the first place. The effect of pluralizing "labor" — ordinarily we should expect the singular — is twofold. It exaggerates the irony by increasing the "labor" that Miniver desisted from. One thinks, perhaps, of the labors of Hercules. But it also suggests a certain discontinuity in the labor that Miniver actually rested from. We may presume that Miniver never held one job long.

The allusions to Thebes, Camelot, and Troy again indicate the source of Miniver's love of the past, for all three cities are centers of rich legendary cycles. Priam's "neighbors" included, of course, Hector, Helen, Paris, Cassandra, Laocoön, Troilus and Criseyde, and, by implication, Achilles, Ajax, Ulysses, Agamemnon, and all the rest. The effect of introducing the homely word "neighbors" into this context is ludicrous; and the ludicrousness reacts not on Troy but on Miniver. There were, of course, two ancient cities named Thebes, both famous, one in Greece, one in Egypt. The primary reference is to the city in Greece. Founded by Cadmus, its walls built to music by Amphion, the birthplace of Dionysius and Hercules, it achieves its greatest fame as the scene of the stories centering around Oedipus and Antigone. But the Egyptian Thebes is equally famous, is mentioned in Homer, and is noted for its majestic temples. The effect of the ambiguity is to enrich the reference, and to make it hold good for a reader familiar with either Thebes more than the other.

Miniver mourned the ripe renown
 That made so many a name so fragrant;
 He mourned Romance, now on the town,
 And Art, a vagrant.

"Ripe" is not the adjective we expect to be coupled with "renown." Thus juxtaposed, the two words interact, each giving the other a slight pejorative twist in connotation. "Renown" gets a twist in the direction of "notoriety": the suggestion is of something juicy, too-much-talked-of; "ripe renown" is not the same as "great renown." "Ripe" concurrently loses the entirely favorable connotation that it has when used with words like "wisdom" and "age" and is twisted in the direction of "over-ripe." "Fragrance" is even more affected by this context. Ordinarily it might suggest springtime and blossoms; with "ripe" in the context it suggests fall and decayed fruit. Obviously Robinson is preparing for his conjunction in the next stanza of Medici and sin, the Medici being more notorious than glorious. But the influence also acts backward to remind us that Troy, Camelot, and Thebes mean not only Hector, Galahad, and Antigone, but Helen, Guinevere, and Jocasta — a harlot, an adulteress, and a woman who married her own son. Miniver is interested not only in bright costumes, heroic deeds, and feats of arms, but also in love affairs not always legitimate.

Romance and Art are personified, and both are down in their fortunes. The collocation of the eloquent word "Romance" with the slang phrase "on the town" emphasizes the shabby company the former finds herself in. It also suggests a cause. "Town" in this context really means "city," and the disappearance of romance for Miniver parallels the growth of modern metropolitan civilization. Literally the phrase means "engaged in prostitution" or "living off organized charity." Romance can eke out an existence today only by selling herself or accepting such hand-outs as the city will give her. Art is a tramp; that is, not only a shabby beggar but a wanderer — someone who has gone away.

Miniver loved the Medici,
 Albeit he had never seen one;
 He would have sinned incessantly
 Could he have been one.

"Miniver loved the Medici." The alliteration and metrical similarity of the two nouns links them together in sound as well

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as in thought. The placing of the Medici between references to Art and to sin is as strategic as was the placing of "ripe renown" between Troy and the Medici, for the Medici were patrons of one as they were perpetrators of the other. Miniver "would have sinned incessantly." Again the hissing "s" sounds reinforce the meaning, lending an evil undertone and perhaps suggesting the repetition of act proposed and Miniver's glee in the prospect. The false rhyme ("seen one-been one") furnishes an echo of the false note in Miniver's romantic imagination.

Miniver cursed the commonplace
 And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;
 He missed the mediaeval grace
 Of iron clothing.

Alliteration again operates powerfully in the next stanza, linking "cursed," "commonplace," and "khaki" together in one unit of meaning, and "missed" and "medieval" in another. But the main effect of the stanza is its irony, the word "grace" standing for its opposite, "metallic rigidity." The irony is established by the ludicrous substitution of "iron clothing" for "armor." "Grace of armor" might pass muster; "grace of iron clothing" brings out a clank. The irony is functional, for it again suggests the superficiality of Miniver's medieval idealization. Miniver saw the grace, missed the clank, had obviously never read the chapter in which Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee gets a fly inside his helmet. The superficiality is doubly emphasized by the fact that for Miniver romance inheres in clothes, themselves a superficial thing.

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
 But sore annoyed was he without it;
 Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,
 And thought about it.

"Miniver scorned the gold he sought." Does the paradox in Miniver's behavior represent an unconscious ambivalence of values or merely a conscious bowing to the hard facts of living? Thoreau denounced materialism but knew that a man must earn his bread and he made provision for it in his scheme of life. Miniver's scorn is rationalization of the fact that his seeking has been unsuccessful. We know this from his selective use of literature and history. The heroes of Thebes, Camelot, and

Troy were upper class people with plenty of wealth, who killed each other for love, not money. And are not the Medici even more famous for money than for sin? They could sin so gloriously precisely because of this money. If Miniver could have been any character in history, he would have chosen to be of the richest family of all. That Miniver "thought, and thought, and thought, and thought about it" reinforces the suggestion.

Robert Frost has recorded his delight at the placing of the fourth "thought" in this stanza. "There is more to it than the number of 'thoughts'. There is the way the last one turns up by surprise around the corner, the way the shape of the stanza is played with, the easy way the obstacle of verse is turned to advantage."² The last "thought," of course, is the drop that overflows the bucket. It emphasizes the futility of Miniver's thinking, which gets nowhere, as the repetition emphasizes its repetitiveness.

Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
Scratched his head and kept on thinking;
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
And kept on drinking.

"Born too late" has ironical implications, for the reader knows by now that Miniver would have been the same in any era. It is his inability to cope with present reality that is Miniver's curse, and this curse is an accident of character, not history. But Miniver calls it "fate," rationalizing to the end, externalizing the blame, not realizing that character is fate. "Miniver coughed" — he has been drinking too much and eating too little — "And kept on drinking." The alliteration of the key verbs — "kept," "coughed," "called," "kept" — and the feminine rhymes underline the continuance of the activity. The last line is a vivid stroke of poetic economy. We have not been told before that Miniver has been drinking. Usually we are told that someone has been doing something before we are told that he "kept on" doing it. But Robinson omits the former, and still makes us feel that we have known this all along. He prepares us with "coughed," and then with the parallelism of "kept on drinking" with "kept on thinking" causes the reader

² Emery Neff, *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, (New York, 1948), 157-158.

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to supply a “drank, and drank, and drank, and drank” to match the previous repetition of “thought.”

So much for the internal structure of the poem. Of the stanza form Ellsworth Barnard, in his able analysis of Robinson's technique, has pointed out the felicity: “The short last line with its feminine ending provides precisely the anticlimax that is appropriate to the ironic contrast between Miniver's gilded dream and the tarnished actuality.”³ He also comments on the submerged refrain in the use of Miniver's full name at the beginning of the first and last stanzas and his first name at the beginning of the others.⁴ This refrain keeps both the character and his name constantly before us.

And what of the name? It is perhaps the most unusual one in all of Robinson. It sounds a little silly, and certainly out of place in our world, as Miniver himself is. But there are other reasons that may have suggested it. “Miniver,” according to Webster, is “a fur esteemed in the Middle ages as a part of costume (from *menu* small, plus *vair* a kind of fur).” “Cheevy” is not too distant from “chevalier” and “chivalry” — knights and knighthood. Or, if we search the New English Dictionary, we find *chevy*, a “chase, pursuit, hunt” or “hunting cry”; or the obsolete *cheve* — “to do homage to”; or *chevesaile* — “The collar of a coat, gown, or other garment; in the 14th c. often richly ornamented,” a word used in *The Romance of the Rose* and more recently by Rossetti. Whichever of these words we link it to, Miniver's name, first and last, represents the kind of things he dreamed about, and links him to the middle ages.⁵

One consideration remains to be discussed — Miniver's relation to his creator. A reader unfamiliar with Robinson's life and temperament, coming across Hagedorn's assertion that in “Miniver Cheevy” Robinson “spoofed” himself,⁶ would and should properly be shocked. Here surely, he would say, if ever there was one, is an objective poem. But the more we know of Robinson, the more plausible Hagedorn's suggestion

³ Ellsworth Barnard, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Analysis*, (New York, 1952), 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵ I am indebted for the above suggestions to a former colleague, James Rushing.

⁶ Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1938), 238.

becomes. The objectivity lies in Robinson's ability to look at himself with humor, to externalize one side of himself.

Three aspects of Robinson's life and character are embodied in *Miniver Cheevy*: (1) All his life Robinson denounced the materialistic standards of his age. In poems like "Cassandra" we hear Robinson himself, under the thinnest of disguises, "assailing the seasons" and "scorning the gold." Robinson judged and condemned the materialistic standards of success and failure in *Tilbury Town* (whose god was the till). But paradoxically Robinson could not keep from judging himself by those same standards. He was haunted by the idea of failure; he worried and tormented himself by seeing himself through his neighbors' eyes as a misfit and dreamer who rested from his labors. There was thus a real ambivalence in Robinson's attitudes. He at once rose above but could not completely shake off the standards of his society. He judged others by his own yardstick, but could not forbear measuring himself by society's. He scorned the gold he sought but was sore annoyed without it. And he "thought, and thought, and thought, and thought about it."

(2) No less than *Miniver* did Robinson dream "of Thebes and Camelot, and Priam's neighbors." In "Isaac and Archibald" he records directly and beautifully his early love of the Greek classics, of "ships and sunlight, streets and singing,/Troy falling, and the ages coming back, . . ."

And Agamemnon was a friend of mine;
Ulysses coming home again to shoot
With bows and feathered arrows made another.

In his twenties he translated Sophocles' *Antigone* into English blank verse. His work throughout makes manifest the enduring quality of this love. The love of Malory was also early and eventuated finally in his three long poems *Merlin*, *Lancelot*, and *Tristram* (which are distinguished, however, by their realistic treatment and the absence of medieval trappings and "iron clothing").

(3) And, like *Miniver*, Robinson fell prey, for a period in his life, to the drink habit; feared, indeed, that it might get the best of him — and it did come close to ruining his talent. But unlike *Miniver* Robinson cured himself, though the effort was not easy. The curious reader will find the experience sym-

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pathetically related in Hagedorn's biography. In Robinson's poetry it is allegorically treated in "The Dark House" and is undoubtedly made use of in *The Man Who Died Twice*.

In "Miniver Cheevy" Robinson embodied one side of himself, consciously exaggerated, and perceived with a wry ironic humor. But it was one side only, and the very existence of the poem testifies to the vast difference between that one side and the totality. For the poem testifies to the existence of an insight, a self-knowledge, a grip on reality, and a humorous perception, that Miniver utterly lacked. It is this self-knowledge, this humor, this reality, which reveal Robinson's central sanity, and completely and forever separate the creator from his creature.



ROUNDING THE PRESIDENTIAL CYCLE

By RICHARD CARY

THE COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY for September 1960 contains a descriptive census of presidential autographs then in the Edwin Arlington Robinson Room in Colby College Library. The total of letters and documents signed by our national executives came to fifty-six. It was reported that we still lacked Washington, Jackson, Polk, Arthur, and Harding to fill out a cycle, and that our only John Quincy Adams signature held subsidiary place to that of James Monroe on a certificate of registry. Not long after the appearance of these particulars, a new president assumed office, thereby increasing our desiderata to seven.

With extreme satisfaction it can now be proclaimed that this chasm has been bridged. The ever-dependable Colby Library Associates came forward with Adams and Arthur; the ever-generous Philo Calhoun of Bridgeport, Connecticut, pitched in with Washington, Jackson, Polk, and Harding; and the Honorable Edmund S. Muskie, U. S. Senator from Maine, graciously responded with one of his John F. Kennedy letters.