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The Double-Edged Irony of E. A. Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy"

by WINIFRED H. SULLIVAN

"MINIVER CHEEVY" is generally regarded as a self-portrait. The tone, characteristics sketched by Robinson and shared by the poet and Miniver, and the satiric humor of the poem all lead to that interpretation. Yet, although as a satire of the poet himself it is a delightful poem, Robinson jousts with a double-edged satiric lance. More than a clever spoof of Robinson as Miniver, the poem satirizes the age and, especially, its literary taste.

The more readily acknowledged thrust is, of course, his satire on himself. David Nivison offers as evidence that the poem is a self-parody the fact that the poet customarily found some compassion for his characters and some redeeming quality in failure. In this poem Robinson does not sympathize with Miniver, but lampoons his faults and "laughs at him without reserve in every line." Moreover, Robinson frequently made fun of himself in letters to his friends and, like Miniver, he was lean, he drank, and in the eyes of early twentieth-century America he was a failure. In that materially-oriented, production-minded society Robinson, like Miniver, was a "minimal achiever." The poem's combination of feminine endings and short final stanzaic lines contribute to the satiric effect, Ellsworth Barnard notes, as do the images and thoughts conveyed. Overtly, "Miniver Cheevy" emphasizes Miniver and gains its unity by the repetition of the name, the full name appearing at the beginning of the first and last stanzas and "Miniver" opening the intervening stanzas. Furthermore, by making his character ludicrous, Robinson makes clear within the context of the poem that Miniver is out of tune with the age.

The brilliance and sharpness, however, of the Miniver edge of the satiric blade (to use the metaphor that seems in keeping with Miniver's visions of swashbucklers) or, more precisely, the reader's tendency to see the poet in Miniver, put into shadow the other edge of the blade, the poem as a satire on the age. Although Robinson recognized himself as out of step with the time in which he lived, the anomaly was based on his choice

to continue as a poet despite the public's lack of acceptance of his poetry. He objected, also, to the ideology of materialism and was not alone in criticizing the age. In "Miniver Cheevy" three aspects of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American culture, as analyzed by T. J. Jackson Lears, resonate: materialism, which with its components of work, action, and acquisition formed the ethos of the age and the measure of progress; militarism, a manifestation of the effort to overcome the ennui of the age and what was perceived as the feminization of American culture in the latter nineteenth century; and antimodernism, an expression of the desire to escape the material-spiritual dilemmas that persisted and an effort to retrieve, if only in the imagination, the glories and principles of an earlier time. Clearly, the three are inter-related and all find satirical rendering in Robinson's poem.

Materialism is the root cause of the manifestations of militarism and antimodernism, and although Miniver hardly can be called a man of the hour in terms of acquisition, he places himself with his more successful countrymen in the one respect that he "scorned the gold he sought." For while accumulating wealth the bourgeoisie of the age also "scorned" it in the sense that they needed to create a Spartan image to offset the ennui that their wealth brought. But Robinson rotates this image, for although Miniver may wish for wealth (even while, ostensibly, scorning it), he does no more than wish, or dream (and the scorn, as well, is a dream); he is a negation of the work ethic that culminates in riches. His ostensible search for gold is mere delusion, and his "rest . . . from his labors" merely a rest from dreaming. Yet he is no more the poser than were the bourgeoisie of real life, for it is questionable whether the work ethic was a moral stance or simply a lust for gold. There is a tie, paradoxically, between Miniver Cheevy and society in the self-delusion of both.

It is with antimodernism as manifested in much of the writing of the period, however, that Robinson would particularly quarrel and against which the satire of "Miniver Cheevy" has its greatest force. In his study of "antimodernism and the transformation of American culture" between 1880 and 1920, Lears discusses the rise of the medieval-style romance in the 1890's as a relief from the daily cares that realistic literature did not give and as a means of rejuvenating the spirit. It was a literature urged by many antimodern critics who believed "men sang in a manlier way" in the Middle Ages. This new, rousing literature of medieval battle was a reaction against "feminine" literature and the "sentimental ethos" of the society during previous decades as luxury became a concomitant of the industrial age and economic growth. And in the "contemplation that

7. Lears, p. 106.
medieval wilfullness might jolt modern readers into more effective action in the present” this “revitalizing, therapeutic function of premodern character reaffirm[ed] the bourgeois ethic of autonomous achievement.” There resulted, first, a resurgence of interest in the works of Sir Walter Scott. Platoons of knights-in-armor stories and poems followed, purveyed by the “leaders of an educated bourgeoisie” and feeding the contemporary taste, and although most were derivative and can hardly be termed literature, the public welcomed them like a liberating army. With some other literature of value Robinson’s poem (in a 1907 Scribner’s) stands apart from numerous medieval stories and poems that found their way into even the most prestigious periodicals. Miniver seems to have read them all.

Defending the chivalric romance, Agnes Repplier, an essayist writing in 1896, asserted that in an earlier age men “saw life in simpler aspects, and moved forward unswervingly to the attainment of definite and obvious desires.” Earlier she had written that poets in the old days, when “people lived more and thought less... , sang of love and... war, of fair women and brave men, of keen youthful passions and of the dear delight of battle.” She admires Scott and agrees with his comment that “The thinker’s voluntary life in death” was not the power that moved the world and that “genius can not make amends” for a lack of “pluck.” Repplier (whose literary taste is generally abominable) advises writers, when writing about war, to adhere to “that good old-fashioned simplicity which was content to take short obvious views of life.”

The similarity of Miniver to the type of character Repplier criticizes is remarkable, but probably coincidental. No proof that Robinson read Repplier’s essays, written a decade and more before he wrote “Miniver Cheevy,” has come to light. References to the Atlantic Monthly, in which the essays appeared, are scattered throughout his letters from 1891 onward, however, and the kind of literature Repplier calls for increased in the last decade of the nineteenth century, flourished until 1910 and is found in periodicals which published some of Robinson’s poetry. A poem called “The Victor,” for example, accompanied by a half page illustration of a mounted knight in armor and a medieval-style border, appeared in Scribner’s a year after the same periodical published “Miniver Cheevy.” Robinson was thus well aware of the literature and probably aware of Repplier, as well, although these probabilities do not alone suggest the modeling of Robinson’s Miniver. The more important points are that her essays are characteristic of the attitudes of the times and that Robinson certainly would have opposed her ideas. For he objected strongly to literature that lacked truth and, moreover, said he “could never read
Scott."12 Robinson would have agreed, rather, with William Dean Howells who, decrying the new historical novel, in 1900 declared that "nothing of late has been heard but the din of arms" and that current works, lacking truth in the present, were also "untrue to the complexion of the past." Asserting that riches have vulgarized society he believed these romances implied that "our race, having more reason than ever to be ashamed of itself for its lust of gold and blood, is more than ever anxious to get away from itself, and welcomes the tarradiddles of the historical romancers as a relief from the facts of the odious present."13 Even though they are not taken seriously, such novels—and, one can add, the abundant poetry of like subject—might to some extent and for a time "debauch the minds and . . . morals of their readers" by flattering the public fancy with "false dreams of splendor in the past, when life was mainly as simple and sad-colored as it is now."14 When Robinson himself later turned to medieval legend, it was not as escape from reality but as study of human behavior and the human dilemma and as an indictment of war and the claims of empire. Although Miniver Cheevy has been flattered by "false dreams" of splendor in the past, his creator recognized the "simple sad-color" of life past and present and the debauchery of art in his own time. Howells adds in his essay that while the new romance "addresses mostly a crude and ignorant audience, . . . some better informed person may overhear . . . ."15 Robinson overheard.

In "Miniver Cheevy" his choice of medieval knights-in-armor as the focus of Miniver's dreams most firmly connects the poem with modern romance literature, but the structure and diction as well as the imagery all point to a comment on contemporary society and its literature underlying the more apparent satire of himself. Sketching a physical description and Miniver's attitude and problem, the first stanza may be said to be external. The next five stanzas then dwell mostly within Miniver's ruminations on a more glorious past before the poem moves outward again in its conclusion. While the first stanza thus sets the scene and introduces the character, it is chiefly in these inner stanzas that the double meaning—the two-edged satiric blade—is wrought.

The neatly juxtaposed and sharply contrasting images and diction of the first and second stanzas point up Miniver's problem and his temporary escape from his everyday misery:

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

15. Howells, p. 945.
Miniver loved the days of old
When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
Would set him dancing.  

Although his finer tastes run to the classics, Miniver has been infected by his literary surroundings. And while real life is a cause for weeping, romance is a cause for dancing. The very ludicrousness of the latter image not only sharpens the satire but, significant to the underlying theme, heightens the sense of contrast between the real and the unreal. Miniver's escape into Romance parallels that of the contemporary reader.

But ideas of weeping and dancing play back and forth, for Miniver is aware that those days of old and all they held—he believes—of dash and glory have been lost in modern times, and in the fourth stanza we learn he “mourned Romance, now on the town, / And Art, a vagrant.” Robinson's use of the “local idiom” takes on deeper satirical coloring, however, by the fact of fictional romances overrunning the market, feeding Miniver's dreams and a tasteless reading public. Robinson's placing of the reference to art in the last line of the stanza reinforces the satire. Its position and brevity—it is the only specific note on art—relegates his character's mourning for art to little more than a passing thought. Miniver's concentration, like that of contemporary society in its escape from real life, is on knights in shining armor, as the return to that image two stanzas later shows. Robinson's is on art. Although he may parallel Miniver in having been “born too late,” it is for an age when literature, not knighthood, was in flower that the poet yearned. Robinson's literary integrity that insisted on realism in all its colors has been noted. Similarly, he had few illusions about the past. His greatest stroke of satire in “Miniver Cheevy” is thus his devastation, by his allusion to the Medici, of the notion that the past was all glory and honor:

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

The stanza is the more humorously, satirically striking for its having been placed immediately after the reference to art. The vagrant art is in fact the modern romance that wanders so far from truth. And Miniver Cheevy, so similar on the surface of the poem to his creator, paradoxically is symbolic of the society hypnotized into forgetting or ignoring the evils of the past—or the present, for that matter. There is no didacticism in the stanza, of course, the diction keeping the Medici reference on the satirical plane and Miniver on the ridiculous. The opposition of “loved” and

“sinned,” the juxtaposition of the rather lofty-sounding word, “Albeit,” with the absurd idea that follows, the ingenious inclusion of the one four-syllable word, “incessantly,” among two lines otherwise containing all single-syllable words, and the images and references suggested by the stanza cause it to vibrate in two satirical directions, one enlarging the picture of a humorously pathetic character, the other destroying the image of a glorious past.

An equally absurd idea, in the next stanza, is that of armor being graceful:

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

More significant is Robinson’s graceful motion back toward the present through the image of the khaki suit, emblematic of modern American militarism. The poet continues with images of the present in the penultimate stanza with its allusions to the lust for gold. In fact, three strategically placed words, labors, khaki, and gold in the third, fifth, and sixth stanzas, respectively, keep important aspects of the present before the reader even while most of the allusions are to the past. In the final stanza the imagery of the poem is drawn from the real world, with a clear picture of Miniver sitting in a barroom, scratching his head, coughing, and drinking. These final images contrast not only with the visions of the romantic past but also with the description of the current era’s typical American: vigorous and active, progressive and financially successful. Miniver is here again the caricature of the poet (whose sense of humor and self-irony helped rescue him, however, from his demon) sunk in drink and in the inertia of thought—anathema to this age of action. But in Robinson’s deeper-cutting satire not only Miniver the drunkard, but the age, is degenerate: in its materialism and, most offensive to Robinson and other serious writers, in its literary taste.

Robinson’s central concern in the visions of romance he gives to Miniver is the shallowness of a large amount of the published verse and fiction that leaves “art a vagrant.” His method in poetry often was “simply to present his story, leaving the application to his reader, ending a poem, however, in a manner that may prompt reflection.”18 Because “Miniver Cheevy” is so easily perceived as simply self-ridicule, the further reflection that Robinson’s poetry usually demands may seem unnecessary. But while an easy poem may now and then be granted this complex and often obscure poet, “Miniver Cheevy” functions at the deeper level as well. This poem, popular and enjoyable in any reading, thus warrants reflection, after all, and by the demands and rewards of reflection proves the richer.

And at a time when America loved vigor but produced (with notable exceptions) an anemic literature, a final irony, in retrospect, is that the ingenious double satire of "Miniver Cheevy" proves Robinson's own vigor, a vigor not physical, but artistic.

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