

HUMOR



Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

Miniver Cheevy (1910)

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

Miniver loved the days of old
When swords were bright and steeds were prancing:
The vision of a warrior bold
Would set him 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 mourned the ripe renown
That made so many a name so fragrant;
He mourned Romance, now on the town,
And Art, a vagrant.

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

Miniver cursed the commonplace
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;

He missed the medieval grace
Of iron clothing.

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

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

ANALYSIS

“...poem in iambic tetrameter quatrains...published in *The Town Down the River* (1910). This satirical portrait of Miniver, a worldly failure in Tilbury Town, shows him to be unaware of his personal inadequacies, consoling himself with a romantic melancholy that he carries to absurd lengths. ‘Born too late,’ he ‘sighed for what was not,’ dreaming of ‘medieval grace’ and ‘the days of old.’ Thus his life consists of futile yearnings and frustration, to no end except that ‘Miniver coughed, and called it fate, And kept on drinking’.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Although it reads like a satire on nineteenth-century medievalism—shades of Mark Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee!*—this poem actually foreshadows the poet’s deep interest in the Arthurian stories. If Miniver Cheevy could have written *Merlin* and *Tristram*, perhaps he would not have required the solace of alcohol.”

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953,1961,1966) 909

“One of Robinson’s most famous poems, this character sketch depicts Miniver with sarcastic humor. He feels himself born out of his time, looks back romantically to the Middle Ages...scorns money but ‘is sore annoyed without it,’ and keeps on drinking. The phrasing and technical skill show Robinson at his best.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“Even though the general idea of ‘Miniver Cheevy’ is clear, the reader who does not know what is meant by the expression ‘on the town’ misses half of the humor and irony of the poem. To be ‘on the town’ means to be supported by the town, a charity case. Miniver, in other words, is the town ne’er-do-well, the town loafer. The poem is built on the ironic contrast between the unheroic Miniver as he is and his dreams of adventure, romance, and art associated with heroic knights in the Middle Ages, and the dazzling brilliance and corruption of the Medici in the Renaissance. What a great figure he might have been, Miniver reasons, had he been born at the right time. That he has not succeeded is not his fault; he uses the classic excuse: The world is wrong! But that in all likelihood he would not have achieved much at any time is made clear by the way Robinson handles his material. The sequence of verbs is used with telling effect: *assailed, wept, loved, sighed, dreamed, rested* (‘from his labors!’), *mourned, cursed, scorned*. Mainly, what Miniver did was think. Added irony and humor come from Miniver’s attempts to apply his ‘intellect’ to his situation: ‘Miniver thought, and thought, and thought / And thought about it.’

Ordinarily two ‘thoughts’ would have been sufficient to make a point; three ‘thoughts’ would have emphasized the idea of real, intense thinking; but the addition of the fourth ‘thought’ changes the tone of

the stanza entirely, making it absurd. What all this thinking amounted to is indicated by the continuation of the sequence to its conclusion in the final stanza, where 'thinking' is paralleled by 'drinking' ('kept on thinking...kept on drinking'). The repetition of 'thoughts' creates an impression of circularity, of going round and round, and establishes a link with 'and he had reasons' in the first stanza. Miniver escapes from the world of reality into a world of dreams induced by alcohol. To each stanza the short last line with its feminine ending gives an appropriately tipsy rhythm. The name Miniver with its suggestion of the Middle Ages, patchwork royalty, and minuteness, coupled with the diminutive Cheevy, sums up his minimal achievement. The tone of the poem is one of humor, pathos, and sympathetic understanding, but there is a mocking note also that intimates that Miniver's unfortunate situation is not the result of any cosmic flaw."

Wallace L. Anderson
Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction
(Houghton 1967) 107-08

"'Miniver Cheevy' is probably the most instructive example of a subject that permitted Robinson to write at his best level in the Tilburg Town poems. Miniver is the archetypal frustrated romantic idealist, born in the wrong time for idealism. He is close enough to being Robinson himself so that Robinson can smile at him and let the pathos remain unspoken.... Throughout the poem the relation between what Miniver knows and what the speaker knows is subtle and effective. Miniver wept and the poet does not weep, but not because he thinks there are no *reasons* to weep. Robinson knew too much about the reasons for an idealist to weep to permit him to make Miniver a mere butt of humor. Apart from his intellectual reasons...there were more personal and emotional ones that are relevant to any discussion of Robinson's identification with Miniver Cheevy.

Robinson was born the third son of a family whose hearts were so set on having a daughter this time that they had made no provision for the name of an unwanted son. For more than six months the boy remained unnamed, until strangers at a summer resort, feeling that he ought to be granted an identity beyond that of simply 'the baby,' put slips of paper with male first names written on them into a hat and chose someone to draw one out. The man who drew out the slip with 'Edwin' written on it happened to live in Arlington, Massachusetts, which seemed to provide the easiest choice for a second name; and so by an 'accident of fate,' we have a poet named Edwin Arlington Robinson. Robinson hated the name and thought of himself as a child of scorn—and he had reasons.

Like Miniver too, Robinson 'dreamed of Camelot'—and wrote three very long, and very tedious, Arthurian poems in which the 'dreaming' is compulsive and unrecognized. But in 'Miniver Cheevy' the dreaming is compulsive only for Miniver, not for the poet. Who would *not* turn to the past for his values if he lived in an age when the 'facts' of coldly objective knowledge seemed to leave no room for any 'ideal' values and when a 'mere poet' who made no money was considered a failure by Tilbury Town's standards? For Romance to be 'on the town' meant for it to be the object of the township's charity, in the poor farm or on home relief; in either case the object not only of 'charity' but of the scorn that would accompany it. 'Vagrants'—tramps—would sometimes spend a few days or weeks 'on the town' before wandering on. The connection between Miniver and Emerson comes through Captain Craig, who was also described as a 'vagrant' and was also the object of charity; for the penniless philosopher of the earlier poem was not, as critics have so often said, Robinson himself but Emerson in *extremis*.

But unlike the Captain, Miniver *is* Robinson, or at least that part of Robinson that Robinson recognized as being Romantic and Idealistic. He too had 'thought, and thought, and thought, / And thought about it,' without arriving at any conclusions definite enough to be stated very clearly, even to himself. He too had resented his poverty while condemning practical materialism and popular notions of success. He too had 'called it fate' and for many years 'kept on drinking.' A good deal of the time he was almost as convinced as Miniver that he had been 'born too late'."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 282-84

Michael Hollister (2015)