"Daisy Miller" and the Romantic Poets

By Jeffrey Meyers

Though Henry James mentions Byron only once by name in "Daisy Miller" (1878), his many allusions to Shelley, Keats, and Byron create a rich context for his tale of a charming young innocent abroad.[1] All three Romantic poets were Protestants who died young in a foreign country dominated by an alien religion; all three had dubious reputations and remained defiant in the face of notoriety. Keats—attacked first by Byron and, in the Victorian era, by Carlyle and Arnold, Croker and Lockhart—was not in the nineteenth century generally recognized as a great poet. Shelley was driven from England by scandals about his atheism; Byron was propelled into exile by accusations of incest. Both Shelley and Byron not only described the picturesque locales Daisy visits but also expressed opposition to conventional standards of morality. A provincial American girl, pretty, ignorant, careless and naïve, Daisy first falls victim to the snobbery and malice of expatriate old ladies and then, misled by her Italian escort, to Roman fever. James sets Daisy's excitement and pleasure in her travels on Lake Geneva and in Rome in the historical context of the Protestant Cemetery, the Château of Chillon, and the Colosseum, places filled with blood, pain, and death, which foreshadow her untimely end.

Even the heroine's name has Romantic associations. In the preface to his elegy "Adonais" (1821), Shelley specifically mentions daisies and alludes to the famous line in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" in which he yearns for release from his agonizing illness: "I have been half in love with easeful Death."

> John Keats died at Rome of a consumption [on February 23, 1821] . . . and was buried in the romantic and lonely cemetery of the protestants in that city, under the pyramid which is the tomb of Cestius, and the massy walls and towers, now mouldering and desolate, which formed the circuit of ancient Rome. The cemetery is an open space among the ruins covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place. (258)

The Henry James Review 28 (2007): 94–100.

At the end of "Daisy Miller," Winterbourne, the expatriate American who has briefly befriended her, visits the lonely place of her burial. In a clear but hitherto unnoticed allusion to Shelley's description of Keats's grave, James writes that "Daisy's grave was in the little Protestant cemetery, in an angle of the wall of imperial Rome, beneath the cypresses and the thick spring-flowers" (53).[2]

The Blue Guide to Rome, describing the locale and its historical associations, states that "across the line of the city wall is the Pyramid of Gaius Cestius (d. 43 B.C.), praetor and tribune of the plebs . . . who had charge of solemn banquets. This is a tall pyramid of brick faced with marble" (Rossiter 87). Close to the Pyramid and outside the Aurelian wall that circled ancient Rome is the Protestant cemetery, romantically surrounded by the traditional dark cypresses. After inspecting the site, the painter Joseph Severn praised its bucolic character and told Keats that "there were sheep and goats grazing among the graves, and early violets and daisies growing prolifically" (Motion 564). The moribund Keats associated "daisy" with death and replied that "he could already feel the daisies growing over him" (Motion 564).

Shelley's prefatory description of Keats's character and death suggests the analogy James makes between Keats and Daisy: both died in Rome in their youth (Keats was only twenty-five, Daisy even younger) and were buried in the Protestant cemetery. Shelley notes that Keats (like Daisy) was "delicate and fragile," "a young flower blighted in the bud," condemned by "savage criticism," and wantonly wounded by bitter insults and slanders (258). Alluding to Christ's defense of the woman taken in adultery in John 8.7, Shelley attacks the moral hypocrites who destroyed that sensitive spirit by casting the first "opprobrious stone" (259).

In "Adonais" itself, Shelley emphasizes four themes that James would take up when developing the similarities between Keats and Daisy: their youth, their beauty, the envy of their enemies, and their burial in Rome: "But now, thy youngest, dearest one, has perished," "O gentle child, beautiful as thou wert," "Struck by the envious wrath of man or God," "[Buried in] that high Capital, where kingly Death / Keeps his pale court in beauty and decay," "[Near] one keen pyramid with wedge sublime" (lines 46, 235, 42, 55–56, 444). "Adonais" was not only a lament for Keats, but soon became associated with Shelley himself, who drowned at the age of twenty-nine in 1822, the year after Keats's death, and joined him in the Protestant cemetery.

Keats's friends had "faith in Rome's healing powers" and believed a change of climate would cure his consumption (Motion 554). Keats and his devoted companion Joseph Severn arrived in Rome on November 15, 1820, and took rooms on the Spanish Steps, just below the twin-towered church of the Trinità dei Monti. Three months later Keats was dead. Keats came to Rome with a fatal consumption and died there; Daisy Miller is healthy but catches a fatal fever. Keats's sad epitaph, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water," suggests the poet's grief about his wasted potential and neglected poetry. It equally suggests the inconsequential life of Daisy, who slips out of the world and is forgotten.

In 1879, fifty-eight years later, Severn died in Rome and was also buried in what Shelley called the "sweet" Protestant cemetery. Reviewing an exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1897, James—sympathetic to and identifying with Keats—wittily praised Severn's portrait of the poet:

> Delightful is Joseph Severn's small John Keats, in queer pantaloons and flat-soled pumps, trying, near a window that opens upon Hampstead Heath, to make himself comfortable, over Shakespeare or Spenser, on two impossible chairs—on the bare back of one of them in particular, and on a tired elbow and a brow-supporting palm; above all on what we fancy a headache delicious to posterity. (*PE* 260)[3]

Just as the spirit of Keats and Shelley pervades the Protestant Cemetery in "Daisy Miller," so the spirit of Lord Byron dominates the Château of Chillon—on the eastern end of Lake Geneva, beneath the snow-capped peaks of the Swiss Alps—and the ancient Colosseum in the center of Rome. Like Daisy, Byron died of a malarial fever (in 1824, aged thirty-six, two years after Shelley's death). Daisy visits both Chillon and the Colosseum, which seem romantic (especially in moonlight) but have blood-soaked histories and reek of death. When Shelley, accompanying Byron, saw the "towers and torture chamber and the dungeons where political prisoners and heretics had been chained to the columns, [he] was sunk in the depths of melancholy at this monument of 'cold and inhuman tyranny'" (Marchand 631). Chillon featured a sluice gate to drown its victims and a blackened beam with the executioner's rope still swinging overhead. François Bonnivard (1496–1570), the hero of Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon" (1816), was a Swiss patriot and historian who opposed Charles III, Duke of Savoy, in his efforts to control Geneva. He was imprisoned from 1530 to 1536 in the lower dungeon of the Château, where the water of the lake crashed against the damp underground walls.

The morbid description in Byron's poem (using the "mould" and "massy" that appeared in Shelley's preface to "Adonais") drew many visitors to the exquisitely placed Château:

> There are seven pillars of Gothic mould,
> In Chillon's dungeons deep and old,
> There are seven columns, massy and grey,
> Dim with a dull imprison'd ray,
> A sunbeam which has lost its way. (2.1–5)

After long years of cruel confinement, Bonnivard grew accustomed to his chains and could not enjoy his freedom when he was finally released:

> And I felt troubled—and would fain
> I had not left my recent chain. . . . (13.26–27)
>
> It was at length the same to me,
> Fetter'd or fetterless to be,
> I learned to love despair. . . . (16.7–9)
>
> And the whole earth would henceforth be
> A wider prison unto me. (12.5–6)[4]

In James's story, Winterbourne, prompted by Daisy, escorts her, unchaperoned, on a boat trip along the lake to visit the Château. (He had gallantly offered to row her "over to Chillon in the starlight" (21), but the ten-mile round-trip journey would have been quite beyond his powers, and they wisely decide to take the little steamer.) Her willingness to go on this excursion reveals her charming naïveté as well as her mother's foolishness and damages her reputation with Winterbourne's formidably moralistic aunt, Mrs. Costello. James writes that the deliciously egoistic Daisy is more interested in herself than in Chillon:

> In the castle, after they had landed, the subjective element decidedly prevailed. Daisy tripped about the vaulted chambers, rustled her skirts in the corkscrew staircases, flirted back with a pretty little cry and a shudder from the edge of the *oubliettes*, and turned a singularly well-shaped ear to everything that Winterbourne told her about the place. But he saw that she cared very little for feudal antiquities, and that the dusky traditions of Chillon made but a slight impression upon her. . . . After he had told her the history of the unhappy Bonnivard, [she disdainfully says] "I never saw a man who knew so much!" (24–25)

The trip is slightly spoiled for him by Daisy's dismissal of his pedantic explanations and for her by his displeasing confession that he must return to his residence in Geneva the very next day. He makes amends, however, by promising to see her in Rome that winter.

The three principal outdoor scenes take place in "the Pincian Garden that overhangs the wall of Rome and overlooks the beautiful Villa Borghese" (39), just north of the Spanish Steps, where Keats died; in the massive Colosseum, south of the Pincian Garden, visited and described by Shelley and Byron; and in the Protestant Cemetery, south of the Colosseum, where Keats and Shelley are buried. The Blue Guide notes that "the Pincio, laid out as a park . . . in 1809–14 on the Pincian Hill, [was] the first and most magnificent of the monumental gardens of ancient Rome. . . . The only large public garden in Rome . . . it is a favourite afternoon promenade and on holidays it is thronged" (Rossiter 170).

In the Pincian Garden Winterbourne sees Daisy out walking with his Latin rival, Giovanelli, who "smiled and bowed, and showed his white teeth; he curled his mustaches and rolled his eyes and performed all the proper functions of a handsome Italian at an evening party" (41). Though Daisy is perfectly innocent, her lack of a chaperone outrages Mrs. Walker in Rome, as it had Mrs. Costello on Lake Geneva. Mrs. Walker, threatening never to speak to him again if he accompanies Daisy, insists that Winterbourne leave her to Giovanelli. He cravenly obeys her command and steps into her carriage, abandoning Daisy and aligning himself with those who ostracize her.

Toward the end of the story Winterbourne, "a lover of the picturesque," feels the moonlit interior of the Colosseum "would be well worth a glance" (50). He therefore enters (James writes in evocative prose) "the cavernous shadows of the great structure and emerge[s] upon the clear and silent arena. The place had never seemed to him more impressive. One-half of the gigantic circus was in deep shade, the other

was sleeping in the luminous dusk." The elliptical amphitheater, the most impressive monument of classical Rome, is nevertheless redolent of death. During the hundred-day inaugural festival in AD 80, many gladiators and 5,000 wild beasts were killed while the sandy floor absorbed their blood. According to tradition, many Christian martyrs were also slaughtered there. Shelley, recalling its horrific history, observed that "the stupendous Colosseum loomed at them shaggily, a giant emblem of cruelty and broken power" (qtd. in Motion 553).

As Winterbourne stands in that evocative ruin, he begins to recite Byron's famous lines from act 3, scene 4 of "Manfred" (1817):

> I stood within the Coliseum's wall,
> 'Midst the chief relics of almighty Rome;
> The trees which grew along the broken arches
> Waved in the dark blue midnight, and the stars
> Shone through the rents of ruin. . . .
> . . . . . .
> Ivy usurps the laurel's place of growth;
> But the gladiators' bloody Circus stands
> A noble wreck in ruinous perfection. (lines 10–14; 26–28)

James adds that "before he had finished his quotation he remembered that if nocturnal meditations in the Colosseum are recommended by the poets, they are deprecated by the doctors" (*DM* 50), who still considered it a deathly place.

Earlier in the story Daisy's mother had warned her that if she continued to walk around the city, "You'll get the fever, as sure as you live" (32). Daisy, with characteristic carelessness, refuses to change her habits. But why does Giovanelli, native to Rome, subject her to the "villainous miasma" and "nest of malaria" (50, 51)? Giovanelli, who later feebly explains: "For myself I had no fear" (54), takes her to the Colosseum because she wanted to see it by moonlight, just as Winterbourne had escorted her because she wanted to see Chillon. Giovanelli wishes to please her in every way, hoping perhaps that she might, in that delightful spot, agree to marry him and share her fortune. Though Daisy's mother and Winterbourne's aunt are both valetudinarians, the healthy Daisy is ironically the one who dies.

Daisy's apparently superficial and transparent character is actually ambiguous. Is she naïve and innocent or flirtatious and seductive? Is she unaware of conventional moral standards or merely indifferent to them? Does Winterbourne engage her emotions or merely amuse and distract her? Is she aware of Eugenio's impertinent familiarity and his apparent collusion with Giovanelli? Is she in love with, engaged to, and planning to marry the handsome Giovanelli or only flirting with him? As Giovanelli and Winterbourne—both complicit in Daisy's death—stand next to the mound of earth above her newly excavated grave and stare "at the raw protuberance among the April daisies," Giovanelli surprises Winterbourne by mentioning the qualities she shared with Keats and by concluding: "'She was the most beautiful young lady I ever saw, and the most amiable'; and then he added in a moment, 'and she was the most innocent'" (54).

James himself confirmed this view of his insouciant heroine in a revealing, elegiac letter of August 1880:

> Poor little Daisy Miller was, as I understand her, above all things *innocent*. It was not to make a scandal, or because she took pleasure in a scandal, that she "went on" with Giovanelli. She never took the measure really of the scandal she produced, and had no means of doing so: she was too ignorant, too irreflective, too little versed in the proportions of things. She intended infinitely less with G. than she appeared to intend—and he himself was quite at sea as to how far she was going. She was a flirt, a perfectly superficial and unmalicious one, and she was very fond, as she announced at the outset, of "gentlemen's society." (*HJL* 303)

In "Daisy Miller" Calvinist Geneva is contrasted to Catholic Rome and America favorably compared to Europe. (It's significant that James's father, born in Albany, went to Union College in nearby Schenectady, Daisy's hometown.) Daisy, the quintessential American girl, teases and tries to rescue Winterbourne. But she knows too little and he too much about Europe. The latter-day prisoner of Chillon is so cut off from his vital roots and so emotionally desiccated by long residence in Europe that Daisy is unable to draw him out of his repressed and unlived life. Allying himself with the respectable but joyless Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker, Winterbourne misjudges Daisy's character and callously rejects her. "Daisy Miller" is both an elegy for Daisy and lament for Winterbourne's lost youth and wasted life.

After Daisy's death Winterbourne finally realizes that he has made a radical mistake and has "lived too long in foreign parts" (54). By choosing celibacy in Geneva over married life in New York, perhaps with Daisy, who would have reciprocated his affection, Winterbourne resembles the steamship *City of Richmond* (a name that alludes to the hometown of another doomed Romantic poet, Edgar Allan Poe). As her brother shrewdly observes, the ship that brought Daisy to Europe was "turned the wrong way" (30). Winterbourne's petrified desire recalls Keats's description of the fair youth in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820), who realizes that though he cannot possess his beloved "unravish'd bride," she will—like Daisy—remain forever young and be transformed into a work of art (210):

> Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
> She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (lines 17–20)

NOTES

[1]Four critics have discussed Byron's role in this story (see Randall; Wood; Kirk; and Koprince). But none of these critics mentions the pervasive influence of Keats and Shelley. I extend their argument and discuss the biographical, geographical, and historical background of the story.

[2]For an earlier discussion of the story, see my "Velázquez and 'Daisy Miller.'"

[3]Severn's painting of 1821, now in the National Portrait Gallery, London, is reproduced in Coote (after 244).

[4]Byron's life would later inspire "The Aspern Papers" (1888).

WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

DM—"Daisy Miller." *Great Short Works*. Ed. Dean Flower. New York: Harper and Row, 1966. 3–55.
HJL—*Henry James Letters*. Ed. Leon Edel. Vol. 2. London: Macmillan, 1975.
PE—*The Painter's Eye*. Ed. John Sweeney. London: Hart-Davis, 1956.

OTHER WORKS CITED
Byron, Lord. *Poetical Works*. London: Oxford UP, 1939.
Coote, Stephen. *John Keats*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995.
Keats, John. *Poetical Works*. Ed. H. W. Garrod. London: Oxford UP, 1956.
Kirk, Carey. "*Daisy Miller*: The Reader's Choice." *Studies in Short Fiction* 17 (1980): 275–83.
Koprince, Susan. "The Clue from *Manfred* in *Daisy Miller*." *Arizona Quarterly* 42 (1986): 293–304.
Marchand, Leslie. *Byron: A Biography*. Vol. 2. New York: Knopf, 1957.
Meyers, Jeffrey. "Velázquez and 'Daisy Miller.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 16 (1979): 170–78.
Motion, Andrew. *Keats*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997.
Randall, John. "The Genteel Reader and *Daisy Miller*." *American Quarterly* 17 (1965): 568–81.
Rossiter, Stuart. *The Blue Guides: Rome and Environs*. London: Benn, 1971.
Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Selected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Kenneth Cameron. New York: Rinehart, 1958.
Wood, Carl. "Frederick Winterbourne, James's Prisoner of Chillon." *Studies in the Novel* 9 (1977): 33–45.

ever-after a story of ugliness and horror and pain.

Rubery, Matthew.

- *Wishing to Be Interviewed in Henry James's* The Reverberator
  [Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]
  Subjects:
  - James, Henry, 1843-1916. Reverberator.
  - Press and journalism in literature.
  Abstract:
  While Henry James's journalists have long been taken as the author's protest against the invasion of privacy, this essay suggests that it is not the journalist who poses the greatest threat to privacy but rather the public itself. James's fiction addresses people's willingness to share their most intimate experiences during the journalistic interview in a way that ran counter to James's own preference for impersonal narration. A reading of James's The Reverberator suggests the interview may be a problem whose implications reach well beyond the limited interaction with the journalist to all conversation involving the selective disclosure of information with an unseen audience in mind.

Storm, William, 1949-

- *The "Impossible" Miriam Rooth: Performance, Painting, and Spectatorship in* The Tragic Muse
  [Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]
  Subjects:
  - James, Henry, 1843-1916. Tragic muse.
  - James, Henry, 1843-1916 -- Characters -- Miriam Rooth.
  - Rooth, Miriam (Fictitious character)
  Abstract:
  The Tragic Muse embodies the problem of how arts other than the literary (primarily theatrical performance and portraiture) are conveyed in narrative, an aesthetic issue reflected chiefly in the elusive and contradictory aspects of actress Miriam Rooth. One reference to Miriam ("beautiful actual fictive impossible") reflects James's sense of contrary qualities that arise partly because she is portrayed only through spectatorship-- the altering observations of other characters. Miriam's histrionic temperament, and her varied acting roles, add to what is finally a problem of representation itself, particularly in regard to how visual and kinetic arts coexist in narrative, albeit "scenic," description.

Meyers, Jeffrey.

- *"Daisy Miller" and the Romantic Poets*
  [Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]
  Subjects:
  - James, Henry, 1843-1916. Daisy Miller.

- Miller, Daisy (Fictitious character)
- Byron, George Gordon Byron, Baron, 1788-1824 -- Allusions.
- Keats, John, 1795-1821 -- Allusions.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 1792-1822 -- Allusions.

Abstract:

In “Daisy Miller” (1878), Henry James alludes to Shelley, Keats, and Byron, three defiant Romantic poets of dubious reputation who died young in a foreign country, to create a rich context for his tale of an innocent abroad. James sets Daisy’s excitement and pleasure in her travels on Lake Geneva and in Rome in the historical context of the Protestant Cemetery, the Château of Chillon, and the Colosseum, places filled with blood, pain and death, which foreshadow her untimely end.