



BOOK REVIEW

Timothy Alborn. *Misers: British Responses to Extreme Saving, 1700–1860*

Political Economies of Capitalism, 1600–1850. Abingdon: Routledge, 2022. Pp. 260. \$180.00 (cloth).

Anne L. Murphy 

University of Portsmouth

Email: anne.murphy@port.ac.uk

Timothy Alborn uses the invented idea of the miser to explore attitudes to saving between 1700 and 1860. The miser, he argues, was initially not observed but invented, imagined by authors, poets, playwrights, clergy, and economists. The lessons offered in these works were overtly about saving, spending, investment, and charity. In particular, the use and management of money by the miser in the various literary forms studied by Alborn focuses on the differences between appropriate saving and investment and inappropriate hoarding. This book also delves into misers' relationships. We learn about passion, affect, and sympathy from the way that writers treated the miser and those persons who interacted with them. At its heart though, this is a book about capitalism. The miser offered a means of critiquing capitalism's worst excesses without undermining the system itself. Depictions of misers as outsiders "enabled everyone else to congratulate themselves for getting capitalism right" (12).

Throughout, Alborn's extensive knowledge of the period and of the intersections between economic, social, and cultural history are on show. This is an incredibly well-researched book, based on the study of hundreds of works of fiction, as well as religious and economic discourse and other forms of public commentary, such as newspapers. It is detailed and covers a vast array of primary sources, although, frustratingly for the reader, the bibliography does not list them. Those wanting to explore the primary source list as an important work in itself are asked to go through the endnotes.

Misers were not just careful with their money. They were desperate, sad, and, sometimes, pitiable individuals. They refused to use money for the benefit of the economy or society, and they refused to use money for themselves, often to the point of extreme personal deprivation. They also inflicted pain on those around them. Moreover, they often would not, or could not, reflect on their lives and see the error of their ways. Writers of the later eighteenth century declined to rehabilitate the miser; they were too useful as a model of unacceptable behavior. During the nineteenth century, however, this attitude changed and, as with the most famous miser, Charles Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge, change and redemption became both possible and desired.

Alborn organizes the book in two halves. The first half, chapters one to four, focuses on the period before 1790. In those early chapters we meet misers in their various fictional and allegorical guises. For religious writers, the miser was destined for hell. Their lack of generosity and rejection of charity meant that there was no opportunity for redemption, even despite what they may have bequeathed after their death. Their lives served as a warning and a reminder to other Christians. Secular writers were somewhat more generous, although the miser was still to be condemned, as harmful to themselves and to others, especially their

own families and, in particular, their wives and daughters. Interestingly, in the contrast between the spendthrift and the miser, it was the former who was regarded as of more benefit to society. At least their wealth was redistributed. Secular writers also made misers the butt of all jokes. They appeared as Philistines and boors on the stage and in joke books and, through these mediums, became a way to denounce the worst excesses of the market economy without denying its basic tenets (99).

Chapters five to seven take the discussion into the nineteenth century and detail a shift in the presentation of the miser from moral turpitude to social isolation. The miser became less dangerous to society and more eccentric. There was also a shift from entirely fictional representations to depictions of real individuals in a raft of miser biographies. The female miser also emerged at this point, women like Margery Jackson and Nancy Nicholson, made famous in their localities through ballads, biographies, and obituaries. In identifying this shift in the depiction of misers, Alborn asks questions about what needed to change in British society to allow them to move from being “extreme examples of pervasive vice to being antiquated outliers” (153). He identifies how saving, rather than spending, became a central British virtue making the miser an, albeit extreme, example of that characteristic. As such, from the late eighteenth century, misers attracted far less attention in sermons and religious tracts. Fictional representations persisted, however, and indeed increased in number. But now they presented misers as capable of conversion and their personal connections became sympathetic and willing to guide that conversion, rather than seeking revenge for the hurts inflicted on them.

For Alborn, these new types of misers illustrated what would become a “Victorian consensus” (225) that valued the power of saving and encouraged the conversion of personal wealth into credit for the benefit of all. Although nineteenth century fictional misers did not always see benefit from their relationships, their tales were also about new family values, the power of filial devotion, and praise for those who put family first.