*Political Economies of Capitalism, 1600–1850*

# MISERS

## BRITISH RESPONSES TO EXTREME SAVING, 1700–1860

Timothy Alborn

# Misers

This volume uses the extreme case of misers to examine interlocking categories that undergirded the emergence of modern British society, including new perspectives on charity, morality, and marriage; new representations of passion and sympathy; and new modes of saving, spending, and investment.

*Misers* surveys this class of people—as invented and interpreted in sermons, poems, novels, and plays; analyzed by economists and philosophers; and profiled in obituaries and biographies—to explore how British attitudes about saving money shifted between 1700 and 1860. As opposed to the century before, the nineteenth century witnessed a new appreciation for misers, as economists credited them with adding to the nation's stock of capital and novelists newly imagined their capacity to empathize with fellow human beings. These characters shared the spotlight with real people who posthumously donned that label, populating a cottage industry of miser biographies by the 1850s. By the time *A Christmas Carol* appeared in 1843, many Victorians had come to embrace misers as links that connected one generation's extreme saving with the next generation's virtuous spending.

With a broad chronological period, this volume is useful for students and scholars interested in the representation of misers in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain.

**Timothy Alborn** is Professor of History at Lehman College and the City University of New York. He is the author of *All That Glittered: Britain's Most Precious Metal from Adam Smith to the Gold Rush* (2019) and, previously, books on life insurance (2009) and corporate governance (1998).

## Political Economies of Capitalism, 1600–1850

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# Misers

## British Responses to Extreme Saving, 1700–1860

**Timothy Alborn**

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2022
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*



*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-52462-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-52464-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-05805-2 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003058052

Typeset in Times New Roman
by MPS Limited, Dehradun

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# Acknowledgments

I got the idea to write this book in the autumn of 2017, when I had lunch with Carl Wennerlind to discuss some chapters he had read from a book I was finishing on gold in Britain. Carl mentioned in passing that he, with Phil Stern and John Shovlin, were starting a new series with Routledge on "Political Economies of Capitalism" and asked if I had any ideas for a book. Misers, who had skulked in the corners of my gold book, emerged as that idea over the next few months, and I was ready with a proposal when they formally launched the series two years later. As the book evolved from a shorter set of essays into a longer monograph and grew in scope, Carl—and my editor at Routledge, Rob Langham—have consistently offered patience, constructive criticism and no end of encouragement.

Although I had been collecting material on misers since 2018 (and earlier, adjacent to my gold book), the actual writing of the book unfolded in a feverish (but not COVID-induced!) rush, between February 2020 and September 2021. I thank my students and colleagues at Lehman College and the City University of New York Graduate Center, and especially my wife Alix Cooper, for their patience with me during this period of miser-obsession. Alix's good humor, perpetual warmth, and partnership in the best senses of the word, saw me through both the writing process and the living process during those remarkably strange times.

In one sense, I wrote this book in isolation. COVID interrupted my sabbatical halfway into the spring of 2020 and cut short the rich conversations with colleagues over lunch and coffee that usually help me get my thoughts in order. In another sense, I am even more indebted than usual to the many people who graciously read my manuscript or responded to clueless questions, as I exceeded my comfort zone in terms of both chronology and genre. Dermot Coleman, Brian Cooper, Sarah Covington, Meredith Gamer, Nancy Henry, Talia Shaffer, Erika Vause, and Brodie Waddell all provided incredibly generous and insightful feedback. Peter Buck, Penny Ismay, and Deborah Valenze read the complete manuscript and helped me see additional glimmers of a big picture emerging from the wayward details.

When I was a college freshman, I wrote a term paper about Jorge Luis Borges's short story about "Funes the Memorious," who read and remembered everything, and since then his malady has been my Quixotic aspiration. Since 2000 or so, it has no longer been necessary to fall off a horse to achieve the mixed blessing of near omniscience. The cottage industry of digitization, which Google Books and subscription databases have ruthlessly monetized, has converted miles of shelves worth of printed sources into fodder for my book and my developing ability to organize it all on my laptop. I offer my deepest thanks to the invisible labor that I have been insatiably exploiting for these past two decades. In terms of people I have actually gotten to know: two CUNY doctoral students, Sam Bussan and Bradford Pelletier, provided valuable research assistance for this book in its early stages, and the battalion of research assistants who helped with my previous book on gold might also notice occasional signs of their handiwork in these pages. The Interlibrary Loan heroes at the CUNY Graduate Center merit thanks, although this time more for wrangling pdf files rather than books from libraries that were undoubtedly as short-staffed as their own during COVID. The executive committee of the North American Conference on British Studies, which I served as treasurer while writing this book, was a constant source of friendly collegiality.

Finally, numerous libraries and museums helped me procure illustrations for this book. For their patience and, in some cases, remarkable efficiency, I thank Art Resource, the British Library, the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle at the New York Public Library, the Butler Library at Columbia, the Kroch Library at Cornell, the University of Edinburgh Library, the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the Newberry Library, the Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton, the Rare and Special Books Collection at the University of Buffalo, and the Beinecke Library at Yale for permissions and for assistance in reproducing images. I'm especially grateful to Meredith Self and Tara Craig at Columbia, Doucet Fischer and Liz Denlinger at the Pforzheimer, Juan Molina Hernández at the Newberry, Andrea Immel at Princeton, and Bruna Lago-Fazolo at the British Library for their help.

I first encountered a miser at the age of ten, while reading my brother's copy of Norris and Ross McWhirter's *Guinness Book of World Records*. That modern-day equivalent of the eccentric biographies of yesteryear devoted an entry to the "Greatest Miser," which profiled Hetty Howland Green in a short paragraph accompanied by a grainy photograph. This "notorious miser," who continues to reside in the *Guinness Book*'s back pages today, is literally a ghost of misers past: eight years old when Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, she saved $95 million by 1916, "lived off cold oatmeal because she was too mean to heat it, and died of apoplexy

in an argument over the virtues of skimmed milk."[1] I have hoarded hundreds more misers since that fateful morning in my childhood dining room, but I will always hold a soft spot for Hetty Green.

## Note

1 Norris and Ross McWhirter, *Guinness Book of World Records* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 1971), 423.

# Introduction

Long before thrift appeared as a prominent Victorian virtue, and long before Charles Dickens and George Eliot respectively imagined the redemption of Scrooge and Silas Marner, British misers tested the limits of permissible levels of wealth accumulation. *Misers* uses this class of people—as invented and interpreted in sermons, poems, novels, plays, jokes, and songs; analyzed by economists and philosophers; and profiled in obituaries and biographies—to explore how British attitudes about saving money shifted between 1700 and 1860. It uses the extreme case of misers to interrogate several interlocking categories that undergirded the emergence of modern British society, including new perspectives on charity, morality, and marriage; new representations of passion, affect and sympathy; and new modes of saving, spending, and investment. Besides connecting these developments, this approach forces us to think about the paradoxes that pile up as we contemplate a contemporary culture that only sporadically pays lip service to generosity, that ambivalently accepts the compromises demanded by capitalism, and that ponders a bleak future of irreversibly scarce resources.

The miser emerged as "an avaricious, grasping, or stingy and parsimonious person" when Britons discovered with a start in the seventeenth century the extent to which money was inevitably and comprehensively social. To help make sense of this, they invented characters who radically removed that strange commodity from society and refused to use it for the good of the community—or even for their own personal gratification. Golem-like, misers sat on a shelf, to be brought to life whenever people wanted to make a point about money's double-edged nature. Different interested parties cobbled them together from materials that lay at hand. Preachers made do with a smattering of Biblical admonitions against avarice, poets and moralists mixed in ancient fables and satires, and novelists and playwrights added more modern ingredients. To give these characters a name, writers repurposed a label that had originally, and more straightforwardly, referred to "a miserable or wretched person." The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits Shakespeare with the first unambiguously new usage in 1616, when Charles VII urges his father not to be "weak or

DOI: 10.4324/9781003058052-1

niggardly" in preparing for war in *Henry V*, and "like a miser, spoil his coat with scanting / A little cloth."[1]

After gaining momentum in broadsides and ballads during the Restoration, the new definition of *miser* came into its own after 1700, assisting Britons who sought a scapegoat to help them voice their worst fears about their country's rapid accumulation of riches. This usage peaked in the 1760s and remained a fixture across multiple genres through the 1840s, before commencing a steady decline (Fig. 0.1). By the dawn of the eighteenth century, misers personified the deadly sin of avarice, earning eternal damnation for preferring earthly dross over God's heavenly riches and for disowning the duty of charity until the hour of their demise. In ensuing decades, moralists refashioned miserliness as a necessary evil accompanying property rights and economic growth, while humorists recast the miser as the butt of comedic plots. Over time, as misers passed from one genre to the next, they gradually acquired flesh and bone—and eventually, by the nineteenth century, something that might have passed for a soul. The nineteenth century witnessed a new appreciation for misers, as economists credited them with adding to the nation's stock of capital and novelists newly imagined their capacity to empathize with fellow human beings. *Silas Marner* (1861), in which a miser learns to love his ward after losing his hoard, marked the culmination of dozens of such plots. These Marner-like misers shared the spotlight with real people who posthumously donned that label, starting in the 1790s and blossoming into a cottage industry of miser biographies by the 1850s.

A glimpse into the divide separating the eighteenth from the nineteenth century regarding British perspectives on misers can be achieved by comparing three Christmas scenes, one from the 1710s and the other two from the 1840s. Richard Gwinnett's play *The Country Squire: Or, a Christmas Gambol*, published posthumously in 1732 but performed in Gloucestershire two decades earlier, opens when an impecunious fiddler named Scrape and a "sturdy impudent Beggar" named Rag request holiday provision from Pinch-Gut, a "most avaricious old Miser" and "a great Exclaimer against keeping up the Hospitality of Christmas." He shoos them away, wisely suggesting that they will have better luck at the house of the play's title character, who is "a meer Voluptuary, who talks of nothing but Eating, Drinking, and Gaming." Later they encounter Pinch-Gut a second time and he expresses "a great Liking to [their] Manner of Life," which provides exercise and a varied diet at no cost. They convince him to bury his savings in a safe place in order to pursue this new occupation. Their plan is to steal his hoard, appealing to the excuse that "'tis better the Money should do some Good, than lie like Dirt under Ground."[2]

More than a century later, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) ended where *The Country Squire* began, but its concluding Christmas scene famously upended traditional assumptions about misers' holiday habits. When Ebenezer Scrooge celebrates by promising to raise the salary of his

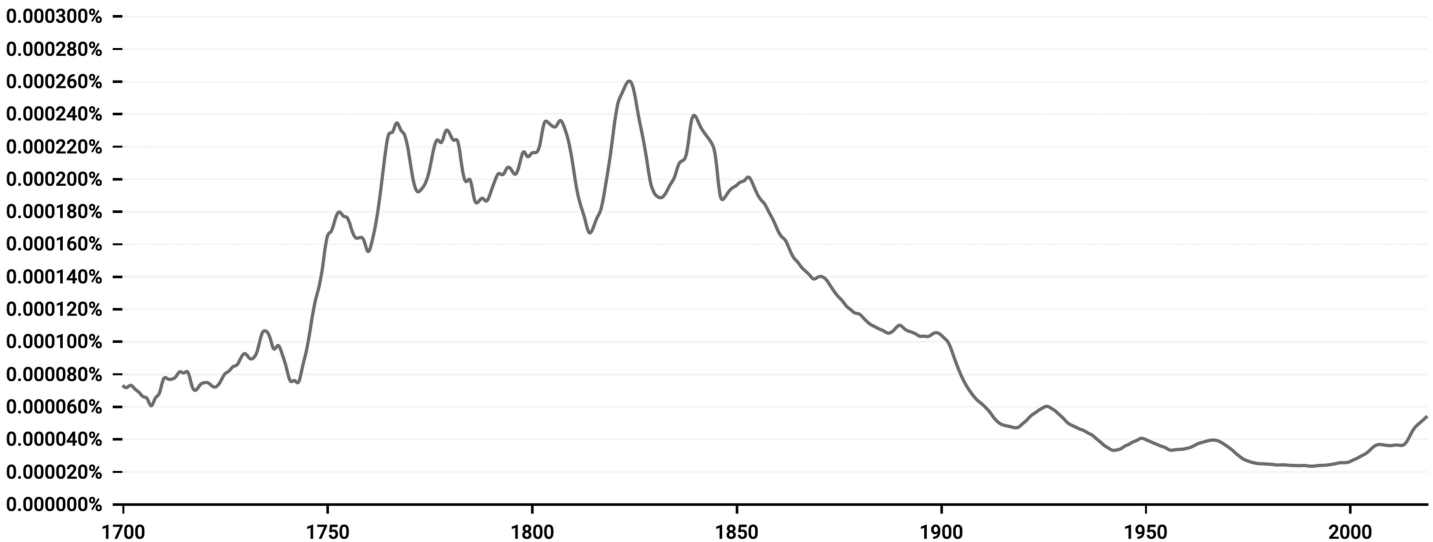


*Figure 0.1* Ngram for "miser," 1700–present. Google Books Ngram Viewer, http://books.google.com/ngrams.

long-suffering servant, Bob Cratchit, Bob considers "calling to the people in the court for help and a strait-waistcoat" (Fig. 0.2). He finally discerns in Scrooge "earnestness that could not be mistaken," and Scrooge adjourns to his nephew Fred's home, where they have "a jolly day of it" with Bob and his son, Tiny Tim. Across town, meanwhile, Marmion Savage presented a very different miser's Christmas in her novel *The Bachelor of Albany* (1847), distinguishing the dinners provided by Mr. Narrowsmith and his business partner Mr. Spread. In contrast to Spread's spread, which featured "many breads and many meats, substantial as the prosperity, and various as the resources of England," Narrowsmith's guests dine on "inexplicable gravies and appalling soups," using "argentine and albata [that] did their best to look silvery." Like his faux-silverware, Narrowsmith at least makes an effort, and in this sense his laughable attempt to entertain sits somewhere between Scrooge's pre-Christmas "humbug" and Tiny Tim's "God Bless Us, Every One."[3]

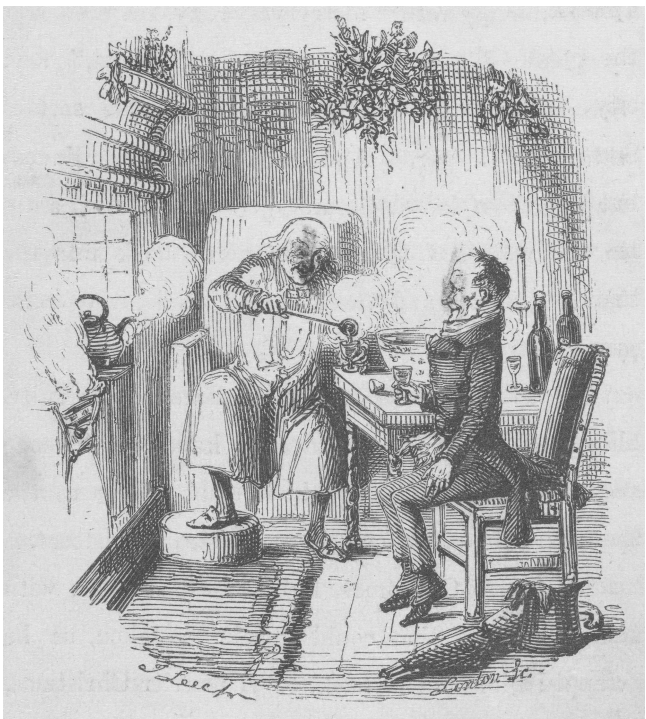

*Figure 0.2* "'A merry Christmas, Bob!,' said Scrooge, with an earnestness that could not be mistaken, as he clapped him on the back." Illustration by Hablot Knight Browne, from Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Rare Book Library, Columbia University.

As this pair of early Victorian examples suggests, at least two things had changed since the early eighteenth century, apparently at odds but for the most part converging on new attitudes about saving, spending, and credit. The first was that misers themselves, as imagined in novels and plays, were capable of changing their behavior, or at least shifting their emotional attachment from money to fellow human beings. Scrooge's sentimental transformation would have been close to unimaginable a century earlier, when a succession of misers in novels, plays, and sermons numbingly repeated Pinch-Gut's woeful incapacity to change his ways, to their dear cost. The second was that even in the many instances in which misers did not change—as was the case with Narrowsmith, and with most misers whose lives were documented in biographies and obituaries—it was shrugged off as an example of eccentricity, and often embraced as good for the economy. One key to this second development was a newfound recognition of credit as an engine of economic growth. As economists started to identify saving with investment instead of with hoarding, they recast misers as part of the solution, not a problem that needed to be condemned or, at best, tolerated with resignation.

One way to interpret this double departure would be to follow Mary Poovey and suggest that it marked a cleavage between literary and economic "genres of the credit economy," setting up an opposition between the humanities and social sciences that remains in force today. Indeed, Poovey cites Silas Marner's capacity to trade his avarice in for paternal love as a "particularly clear example" of how novelists "subjected economic matters … to the alchemy of a moral lesson."[4] A different interpretation, pursued in this book, views economic and literary genres (among others) as converging on the same awkward embrace of capitalism by different means: the first falteringly focusing on wealth maximization as an abstract ideal, and the second emphasizing the relevance of affect to economic prosperity. On this reading, economists and novelists employed misers for parallel reasons, in the first case holding them up as exemplary accumulators, and in the second celebrating the power of filial love to channel their savings in virtuous directions. Both came to embrace them, warts and all, as links in a chain connecting one generation's saving with the next generation's productive spending.

This outcome marked an abrupt transition away from the century before 1780, when almost nobody thought it was possible to reform misers and only a few defended them as anything other than inevitable excrescences of capitalism. Part of this transition was the result of revising the list of ingredients for who counted as a miser, which in turn derived from the new application of the term to real people as opposed to figments of a poet's or preacher's imagination. But part of it was also due to shifts in how people measured saving and selfishness against spending and giving. With that in mind, it pays to be heedful of those in the eighteenth century who used misers to make trenchant points about money's many moral hazards at a time in which, as E.P. Thompson long ago reminded us, the "moral economy" was still waging the occasionally successful battle against the

rising tide of "political economy."[5] Misers performed crucial cultural work in this contest, by exhibiting behavior that exceeded the limits on what was deemed a proper level of capital accumulation.

In this context, misers remind us that for much of the eighteenth century, moral philosophers were in the minority when they insisted that commercial society enabled the victory of "interests" over "passions." Albert Hirschman, who famously identified this premature "political argument for capitalism" in the writings of David Hume, Adam Smith, and others, astutely observed that it tried to convert the insatiable desire for money from a dangerously mortal sin into a harmless virtue.[6] To make this point, such thinkers appealed to misers as little as possible, and only as exceptions to prove the rule they were attempting to establish. Throughout the eighteenth century, others ceaselessly harped on misers' barbarically quenchless thirst for money, their paranoid fear of losing it, and their salacious lust for women—all to make the point that the love of money was not nearly as harmless as others were starting to claim. It was only when money came to be "detoxified" after 1780, to borrow Deborah Valenze's evocative term, that depictions of misers also changed, and in the process assisted in redrawing the boundaries between the virtuous use and vicious abuse of capital.[7]

The transition to this newly forgiving depiction of misers accompanied an equally profound shift from landed to mobile property as an engine of British social and economic life. Throughout the eighteenth century, the British aristocracy assiduously hoarded their land, which was their most prized possession—and they passed along their concentrated ownership of it to future generations through the mechanism of primogeniture.[8] Nothing about this practice carried the faintest whiff of miserliness, in large part because landed elites atoned for their monopoly on the soil with a generous dispersal of their rental income, sometimes to the point of prodigality. In this era, misers were those who stopped mobile property in its tracks, often with an eye to breaking into the landed ranks themselves, but without bothering to acquire the stipulated prerequisite of noblesse oblige. The rise of a newly self-conscious middle class, first in London and then in northern industrial towns, tipped the scale in favor of mobile property and drew attention to the uncertainty that it entailed. Saving emerged as a virtue in this context precisely because mobile wealth, in the form of cash, credit, and machinery as opposed to broad acres, was much more precarious. An activity that had once been derided as antisocial, unreasoning, and unpolished now emerged as a responsible strategy for ensuring the succession of property from one generation to the next. Misers accordingly taught a new lesson, that carefully husbanding money was a beneficial gift to family and society alike.[9]

Whether before or after 1790, the century and a half after 1700 witnessed a uniquely sustained focus on misers: unique both to the period under discussion in this book and to the British Isles among neighboring nations. Why this was the case, and what it tells us about Britain during the long

eighteenth century, is the focus of this book. It starts with a hypothesis: that misers, however constructed, enabled Britons to talk about how to regulate their rapidly accumulating wealth (both as a nation and as individuals within that nation) without actually confronting that subject head on. As the "first industrial nation," Britain was both the first to accumulate so much property and the first to start worrying about that barbed blessing as a sort of national pastime.[10] Openly confronting this was difficult, precisely because the people who dominated print culture gained so much from this wealth—whether in the form of heaping collection plates, healthy tax revenues, theater tickets, or book sales.[11] Inventing misers, then railing against them, allowed such people to warn against wealth without openly assaulting the source of their individual influence and the nation's power.

The result was that although misers were certainly not unique to Britain, uniquely British misers emerged over the course of the eighteenth century, who were paradoxically both more sharply defined and harder to pin down than their continental counterparts. Seventeenth-century French comedies and Italian *Commedia dell'arte* provided British playwrights with some of their best ideas for misers, but these characters almost always appeared in British settings and possessed uniquely British traits.[12] These characters needed to be made British in order to keep audiences aware that excessive devotion to wealth was *their* danger, not someone else's. The same transformation took place with covetous characters from Britain's preindustrial past, who either appeared more cartoonish in the eighteenth century or were denied to be misers because they had been presented with too much sympathy. John Gay converted the criminally errant knight in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*'s *Tale* into a "base miser," while Shakespeare's Shylock went from being an archetypal Elizabethan miser to being merely an "unfeeling villain" or "a character of common life, acted upon by the harshest passions in their harshest state."[13]

Besides residing in Venice, and hence too foreign to be a useful miser for British purposes, the fact that Shylock was Jewish may also have worked to strip him of that label. Although it might seem surprising in retrospect, given the well-documented disparagement of Jews in most British forums during the long eighteenth century, the presence of Jewish misers in British sermons, novels, plays, and biographies in that period was relatively minor.[14] They occasionally turned up in sermons to reinforce an identification between miserliness and idolatry, while a lingering (though waning) association between misers and usurers also occasioned a few depictions of British misers as Jewish. But mostly, while Jewish characters did often appear alongside misers as abettors of their avaricious schemes, they usually ceded that label to their Christian counterparts. Of the hundreds of misers whose lives were recounted in obituaries, only a handful were identified as Jewish, and none at any length.[15] Although it is difficult to account for an absence, it seems likely that a Jewish miser would have been less effective in teaching British Christians what to do with their money, since readers may have assumed that whatever negative lesson was being taught did not apply to them.

*Misers* is organized thematically within two distinctive eras, with four chapters on the period from 1700 to 1790 and three chapters on the period from 1790 to 1860. This break coincided with the rise of numerous intellectual and cultural shifts that altered the way misers were both constructed and perceived, among them the rise of self-help as a dominant British ideology; the consolidation of classical economics in the wake of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776); and the emergence of the novel as a central organizer of British social relations. Misers figured in all these transitions, but they did so in complicated ways. For one thing, their appearance in the midst of these new modes of thinking about self and society accompanied many surviving echoes from the eighteenth century. Reprints of Puritan sermons and revivals of eighteenth-century comedies jarringly presented misers in their older reprehensible garb, even as new images came to the fore. For another thing, there was never a clear consensus about what it meant to be a miser on either side of this divide, with the result that invoking the term was almost always the start, not the end, of a debate.

The first section of *Misers* surveys their appearance across numerous connected disciplines and genres prior to 1790. Chapter 1, "Miserable Sinners," concerns religious reproaches of the miser as a personification of covetousness. The fact that the term *miser* never actually appeared in the Bible did not prevent hundreds of preachers from invoking it, in order to uphold the values of an earlier moral economy against what they viewed to be capitalism's dangerous incursions. Chapter 2, "Necessary Evils," identifies secular revisions of this characterization, in which poets used misers to rail against a corrupt commercial society while moral philosophers carved out weak excuses for them as burdens to bear on behalf of property rights and industry. Chapter 3, "Misers, Sex, and the Family," moves from spiritual and social concerns about extreme saving to the domestic sphere, where novels and advice manuals worried about misers' insidious influence on marriage, hospitality, and inheritance. Chapter 4, "The Butt of All Jokes," reveals how plays, novels, jokes and songs refashioned the miser as a comic figure—bearing in mind that comedy, in this period, was often at least as cruel as the divine displeasure that preachers imagined to be the miser's fitting fate.

These four chapters are broadly organized by genre: sermons and religious treatises, poetry and philosophy, novels and advice manuals, and jokes and plays. Like a Greek chorus, these overlapped considerably in their treatment of misers, and appear here and there in all four chapters, but generally pursued distinctive threads. Put another way, they all described the same figure but ended differently. Preachers imagined the unhappiness and sinfulness of misers on earth, and almost always consigned their souls to hell. Poets and philosophers echoed these themes (with more emphasis on unhappiness than sin) but struck a more hopeful tone, either by casting sin to the wind and claiming that misers were good for economic growth, or by hoping that better laws or pedagogy would mitigate their most egregious social harms. Novelists took a similar tack but expanded the circle of misers'

victims to include friends and family members. And comedies got the last laugh, by ending their tales with cruel tricks that they hoped would deter their audiences from following the miser's example, if not reforming misers themselves.

The second section of the book opens with Chapter 5, "Characters," which describes the portrayal of real-life misers in biographies and newspaper obituaries. This chapter exposes a precise pivot between the two sections of the book, since in 1789 the death of John Elwes, a wealthy landowner and MP, inspired an outpouring of such recollections. Chapter 6, "Saving Graces," picks up where the first two chapters leave off, linking new views of miserliness with a new embrace of saving and investment by economists, preachers, and philosophers after 1790 and a corresponding suspicion of charity. Chapter 7, "Succeeding Misers," shows how novelists and playwrights recast misers' money after 1790 as capable of doing good, on rare occasions during their lifetimes but more commonly after they bequeath it to a sufficiently sympathetic friend or relative. In the process, these writers industriously resolved their plots—and redeemed capitalism—with a surplus of virtue. Although these disciplines and genres cast misers in different shades after 1790, they all described the same figure, and they all drew extensively from the novel genre of miser biography that coincided with this alteration in how misers were depicted.

These variously defined misers were hiding in digitally-improved sight throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, as I discovered upon thoroughly searching various electronic databases. Following the term "miser" wherever it led—resulting in close to 5000 distinct hits—built on my strategy for researching a previous book about gold in Britain.[16] In neither case did I engage in the sort of content analysis favored by some sociologists and by the burgeoning field of digital humanities. I did not code the texts I uncovered, nor (with a few exceptions) did I quantify what I found there. Rather, I treated the sources I found as an exceptionally comprehensive library, which provided illustrative and entertaining quotes that enabled me to add no end of nuance to the stories I discovered. These digital resources served me as a sort of gillnet, which I used to trawl British books and periodicals and come back to shore with an abundant catch. Once I had determined the contours of the book, I could also return to these databases to search in a more targeted fashion for references to specific misers or for the afterlives of specific works of literature.

This type of panoptical search enabled me to add exponentially to what has been written about misers by previous scholars. Instead of focusing on their appearance in a handful of canonical novels, for instance, I was able to place those characters in the context of hundreds of other works of fiction as well as cross currents in religious and economic discourse.[17] Other appearances have gone almost wholly unnoticed by scholars, including a vast newspaper archive of miser obituaries and ubiquitous references in eighteenth-century charity sermons. In other domains, where misers have

attracted more thorough attention from scholars, my strategy has enabled me to put these fields in dialogue with one another. To cite one example, I have been able to draw from historians and literary critics who have established eccentric biography as an important nineteenth-century genre and locate their insights in the context provided by compelling new scholarship on eighteenth-century British notions of comedy. The same bridge-building possibilities emerged in relation to largely distinct scholarships on the family, sex, and marriage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The risk of looking so intently for a single figure through such a long sweep of history is that its many neighbors will fade from view. The covetousness that misers personified for much of the eighteenth century was only one of seven deadly sins, and the eccentric misers who took their place shared space with numerous fellow oddballs. To a large extent, I have taken advantage of scholars who have dwelt on the different ecosystems that misers occupied to populate them with their supporting actors. Greed, for instance, which was apparent in many people who were never called misers, has received ample attention from historians and theologians alike.[18] A second self-imposed limitation concerns my choice to focus only on the portrayal of misers in British sources. In part, this was a logistical matter: tracking change across such a large span of time was challenging enough without adding national variants to the mix. In part, it is the consequence of a lack of scholarly attention paid to misers in other national contexts, which made comparison difficult.[19] Such attention would certainly repay the effort for the United States, which vied with Britain in its outpouring of fictional misers; or for France, which supplied British writers with some of their most enduring miserly characters.

I have never before written about things or people who resemble misers, in one specific sense. I have written about gold (a thing) and corporations (both people and things, legally speaking). Each of these indisputably existed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and still exists today. People had many different opinions about them, but nobody ever argued that gold was not really gold, or that a company was not a company—although companies did undergo changing legal definitions. No company's board of directors denied the existence of what they represented, and gold was mostly inert and always speechless, with the exception of the occasional it-narrative. The term *miser* has always been derogatory, and there is a long history of commentary regarding the tendency of misers to insist that they had merely perfected the art of prudence. The miser's "fav'rite Vice the garb of Virtue wears," according to one poet in 1761; he thought "well of himself, for not practising the opposite of the one which he is at the time indulging," according to a preacher a century later.[20] Alleged misers rarely if ever "owned" the term, the way gays and lesbians came to own *queer* or some African American rappers attempted to own the n-word in the late-twentieth century.[21]

Writing about misers, in that regard, is like writing about racial and ethnic slurs: it is a complicated, but still very important, exercise in exploring

changing perceptions of a character trait by tracing a term that was used almost exclusively by haters, belittlers, and would-be reformers.[22] Even in the nineteenth century, when a more forgiving public came to see misers as merely eccentric rather than reproachful, examples of people owning the term were rare. Historian Victoria Carroll's warning, regarding eccentricity, that it would be a mistake to see it only "as something attributed from outside rather than cultivated from within," applies less to misers than to most of her other subjects.[23] Also, the closer people came to resembling the ideal type of a miser, the further they got from being actual human beings. Yet in a different, deeply meaningful sense, everybody has always been able to locate themselves somewhere on the spectrum between extreme saving and its opposite. The universal desire to retain a portion of our pelf, even for just a few moments on the way to purchasing something, has always created a basic sympathy with misers, whose synapses skip many more beats than the rest of us between the urge to save and the impulse to spend.

In this context, one of the most important issues in this book concerns boundary-drawing: when did someone qualify as a miser, and when were they just extraordinarily prudent? As saving surpassed spending as a virtue over the course of the long eighteenth century, people were less likely to be labeled as misers and more likely to be defended as wrongly placed in that category. This was the same sort of question that framed debates about the "deserving poor" and it had similar outcomes. At the end of the nineteenth century, "New Liberal" British politicians cautiously argued that all lives, even those who lived below a specified level of destitution, mattered.[24] That assumption remains contentious today; so do the premises that once informed who should and should not belong to "the fraternity of misers."[25] How much saving is too much saving—and how much greed is over the top, as opposed to a sign that capitalism is working properly—remain contested questions that we all still struggle with. Where to draw the line between financial security and selflessness still unsettles relatively affluent people. This book explores how British people answered the same unsettling questions in the past.

The other important point that emerges from a discussion of labels is that *Misers* is not, in a narrow sense, a book about the history of capitalism. Although it often abuts the topic—especially the subtopic of capital accumulation—it seldom directly addresses either the formation or distribution of capital. As Karl Marx put it, the miser and the capitalist both "personified capital," but what was "mere idiosyncrasy" in the miser was in the capitalist the culmination of a social revolution.[26] The so-styled miser almost always merely saved money, as opposed to working for it or, self-evidently, spending it. An occasional exception to this rule concerned usury, which was at times closely identified with miserliness—and even this homology, although it refused to die completely across multiple genres, was on the wane by 1700. Much more often, misers appeared on the scene with their hoard in hand, and they typically added to it by avoiding additional expense rather than actively engaging in market transactions. In other cases, they had occupations that did

intersect with capitalism, but these activities were either ignored or barely mentioned.[27]

In another sense, this is very much a book about capitalism, since whenever people invoked misers it was with an eye to comment—usually critically—on that system's invasive influence. In the eighteenth century, preachers reviled them as mammon-worshipping worldlings, who were so focused on life's material rewards that they forgot about the infinitely more valuable treasures awaiting them in heaven. Novelists and conduct books scolded them for sacrificing romantic love and filial respect on the altar of accumulation. Philosophers and poets used them as a foil to praise the merits of a virtuous life, while playwrights used them to shame excessive savers into emptying their pockets. The more sympathetic depictions of misers after 1790 persisted in making these points, albeit in softer shades. Biographers smirked at misers' eccentricities, smugly assuming that their readers were in on the joke. Economists praised some misers for preserving a store of reproductive capital, but joined preachers in urging others to circulate their savings by converting coin into credit. Scrooge and Silas Marner, and countless other fictional characters after 1790, needed to learn that the only proper way to love money was to employ it as a means of expressing affection for family and friends.

Yet even in these many appearances as shorthand for disparaging capitalism's excesses, misers also permitted Britons to fall well short of criticizing its core principles. Whether evoking moral outrage, bemusement, or hesitant sympathy, the miser's perpetual status as an outsider enabled everyone else to congratulate themselves for getting capitalism right.[28] Most British preachers after 1700 relied on the figure of the miser to divert attention from the inconvenient truth that much of their discourse bought into the logic of capital and credit. Good deeds were mortgages to be repaid in heaven, salvation converted the debt of sin into eternal grace, and hovering above it all was an afterlife that sparkled with metaphorical gold. From just as early on, philosophers imagined misers as acceptable side effects of a system of property rights that they defended at all costs—a position that solidified with the rise of classical political economy. Novelists and playwrights, finally, faulted misers for being stubborn iconoclasts who refused to apply for membership in a club that challenged the market economy around the edges, but seldom rejected its core premises. As Victorians came to embrace this economy as the beneficent end of history, their depictions of misers softened (depending on genre) from anxious to amused, or from cruel to caring—and in the process perpetually postponed a more trenchant critique of capitalism.

## Notes

1 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *miser*; William Shakespeare, *The Life of Henry V* (London: J. Tonson, 1734), 29. Its next example came twenty years later, when Milton referred in *Comus* to "the unsunn'd heaps/Of misers' treasure": John Milton, *Comus: A Mask* (London: Bell, 1774), 16.

2 Richard Gwinnett, *The Country Squire: Or, a Christmas Gambol* (London: n.p., 1732), 1, 3–5, 46, 67, 72; David Hill Radcliffe, "Richard Gwinneth," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online resource).
3 Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol… being A Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 29, 163, 166; Edward Stirling, *A Christmas Carol* (Lord Chamberlain's Plays [1844], BL Add Mss 42972); Marmion Wilme Savage, *The Bachelor of the Albany* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1847), 88, 109, 111. The concluding "jolly day" at Fred's only appeared in the play, not the novel.
4 Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 383. For two cogent critiques of this perspective see Aeron Hunt, *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014) and Supritha Rajan, *A Tale of Two Capitalisms: Sacred Economics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).
5 E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1993), 185–351. For a useful recent summary of this concept see Brodie Waddell, *God, Duty and Community in English Economic Life, 1660–1720* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 2–20.
6 Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 48–63.
7 Deborah Valenze, *The Social Life of Money in the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 260–267.
8 Paul Starr, *Entrenchment: Wealth, Power, and the Constitution of Democratic Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 32–55; Samuel Clark, *State and Status: The Rise of the State and Aristocratic Power in Western Europe* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 193–242.
9 See, e.g., Natasha Glaisyer, *The Culture of Commerce in England, 1660–1720* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006); Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); R.J. Morris, "The Middle Class and the Property Cycle during the Industrial Revolution," in *The Search for Wealth and Identity*, ed. T.C. Smout (London: Macmillan, 1979), 91–113.
10 Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation: The Economic History of Britain, 1700–1914* (London: Routledge, 2001); Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Liz Bellamy, *Commerce, Morality and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
11 David J. Jeremy, ed., *Religion, Business and Wealth in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 1998); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Michael Cordner and Peter Holland (eds.), *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses: Investigating Performance, 1660–*1800 (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 83–350.
12 Jonathan Patterson, *Representing Avarice in Late Renaissance France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). On the "translation" of these misers into a British idiom see Chapter 4.
13 Dryden, *Fables Ancient and* Modern (London: Jacob Tonson, 1713), 470; Betsy Bowden, *The Wife of Bath in Afterlife: Ballads to Blake* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2017), 65–92; *General Evening Post* 7–9 May 1772; *Edinburgh Annual Register for 1810* (Edinburgh: John Ballantyne, 1812), 399; Michael

Caines, *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55–76.

14 On British antisemitism during this period see Antony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 148–440; Bernard Glassman, *Protean Prejudice: Anti-Semitism in England's Age of Reason* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1998). For a useful interrogation of scholarly assumptions that connect Jews, misers, and psychoanalysis (another common association that is not explored in this book) see Stephen Frosh, "Psychoanalysis, Antisemitism and the Miser," *New Formations* 72 (2011): 94–106.

15 "A Jew Miser," *Examiner* 22 April 1838 (Samuel Josephs); "Sudden Death of a Miser," *Morning Post* 23 September 1841 (John Saunders, "of the Jewish persuasion"); "Sudden Death of a Jew Miser," *Morning Post* 7 August 1845 (Isaac Isaacs); "Death of a Miser," *Morning Post* 25 January 1849 (Levi Abraham).

16 Timothy Alborn, *All That Glittered: Britain's Most Precious Metal from Adam Smith to the Gold Rush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 40–45, 183–186. The databases I used most were Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Making of the Modern World, 17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers, British Periodicals, 19th Century British Newspapers, and Google Books.

17 For typical discussions of misers in canonical literature see, e.g., Poovey (cited above) and Jeff Nunokawa, "The Miser's Two Bodies: 'Silas Marner' and the Sexual Possibilities of the Commodity," *Victorian Studies* 36 (1993): 273–292.

18 See, e.g., Jared Poley, *The Devil's Riches: A Modern History of Greed* (New York: Berghahn, 2016); Phyllis Tickle, *Greed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

19 Exceptions to this rule fall outside the period covered in this book or concern cultures that had little contact with Britain before 1860. For France see above; for the United States see Walter Benn Michaels, "The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism," *Representations* 9 (1985): 105–132; for Russia see Jillian Porter, *Economies of Feeling: Russian Literature under Nicolas I* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017); for China see Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Durham: Duke university Press, 1995).

20 James Scott, *Purity of Heart: A Moral Epistle* (Cambridge: T. and J. Merrill, 1761), 10; Ralph Wardlaw, "The Stringency of the Law Shutting Up the Grace of the Gospel" (1851), in *The Evangelical Pulpit* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1853), 114.

21 Karen Stollznow, *On the Offensive: Prejudice in Language Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 20–22, 114–115; Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

22 On slurs in general see David Sosa, ed., *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Stollznow, *On the Offensive*.

23 Victoria Carroll, *Science and Eccentricity: Collecting, Writing and Performing Science for Early Nineteenth-Century Audiences* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 44.

24 Steve Hindle, "Dependency, Shame and Belonging: Badging the Deserving Poor, c.1550–1750," *Cultural and Social History* 1 (2004): 6–35; Alan Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 48–108; Michael Freeden, *Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 60–77.

25 "Memoirs of Remarkable Misers," *Bankers' Magazine* 23 (1863), 513.

26 Karl Marx, *Capital*, quoted in David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 238.

27 Exceptions from nineteenth-century novels include the miser in Ann Hatton's *Lovers and Friends: Or, Modern Attachments. A Novel* (London: A.K. Newman 1821), who "was possessed of extensive plantations and numerous slaves" (1: 151); and William Carleton, *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine* (London: Simms and M'Intyre, 1847), which provides a detailed description of a miserly corn factor's job-related activities.

28 On the role played by moral outrage in upholding capitalism's institutions see Timothy Alborn, "Money's Worth: Morality, Class, Politics," in *The Victorian World*, ed. Martin Hewitt (London: Routledge, 2012), 209–224; Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694–1994* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 154–172. On focusing on extreme viewpoints to gain insight into what counted as consensus see G.R. Searle, *Morality and the Market in Victorian Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

# 1 Miserable Sinners

In 1771, John Ryland, the precocious teenage son of a Northampton preacher and the future founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, included a poem on "The Parable of the Rich Miser" as one of more than a hundred "Serious Essays on Experimental Religion, attempted in Verse." His attempted poem, based loosely on a parable in the *Book of Luke*, features a rich farmer whose love of gold banishes the "starving beggar" and "neighbour poor… from his iron door," and who builds a bigger barn to hold his hoarded wealth after asking himself: "What shall I do? Where my provisions lay?… On what? The poor to feed! / No, no, this miser, Sir, was one indeed." After he secures his treasure, "death's angel comes" and berates him: "Unthinking fool! this night the Lord demands / Thy soul—Whose now is all thy corn and lands?" Spreading its "sable pinions," the angel carries off the miser's spirit, "leaving the carcase breathless on the bed." This story taught the stern lesson: "Hail, gold! that pay'st thy worshippers so well, / First with short joy, but last with endless hell."[1]

Ryland's poem was typical of religious commentary on covetousness over the course of the eighteenth century in Britain—not least because he went out of his way to personify that sin as a miser, a figure who would have invited instant recognition among the "serious and experienced Christians" to whom he addressed his poem.[2] Although the rich man in the original parable does build bigger barns to store his "fruits and goods," and does die prematurely, no explicit mention is made of his cruelty toward starving beggars. And while he hoards his wealth, the man in the original parable (who was more typically called a rich fool) states his intention on the eve of his destruction to "eat, drink, and be merry."[3] Moreover, neither this parable nor the dozens of other references to covetousness in the King James translation of the Bible ever actually mentions misers by name—mainly because the term had only just entered the English language when that book appeared in 1611.[4] That task was left to hundreds of sermons, treatises, poems, and hymns, which energetically exposed the trespasses and tribulations of these most miserable of sinners.

Although misers played a leading role in religious diatribes against bad behavior, they shared the spotlight with a large supporting cast. Since the

DOI: 10.4324/9781003058052-2