Images and Contexts of Avarice in Al-Jahiz's
*Book of Misers*: A Comparative Study

Dr. Nedal Al- Mosa, The Hashemite University, Jordan

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the images and contexts of avarice in Al-Jahiz’s *Book of Misers* in comparison with the dramatic expositions of the theme of Avarice in Plautus' *The Pot of Gold*, Molière's *The Miser* and Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*. These three works will not be thoroughly examined; they will be rather referred to mainly to provide deeper insight toward our definition of the distinctive nature of the treatment of the theme of avarice in Al-Jahiz’s *Book of Misers*.

The study hopes to reveal that Al-Jahiz’s treatment of the theme of avarice is carried out on a more comprehensive and larger scale than we have in the above mentioned three works.

Our study of the theme of avarice in its development, in its variations, and in its persistence in the four works, hopes to explain and illustrate that literature represents faithful reflection and expression of fundamental human preoccupations.

Literary works should be studied together, whatever their national origins, as soon as they are ideationally or factually related, as soon as they belong to the same current or period of time, the same aesthetic category or genre, or as soon as they illustrate the same themes or motifs (Jost, 1974: 12-13).

It is in the light of Jost’s definition of the nature of the
comparatistic inquiry that this paper examines the images and contexts of avarice in al-Jahiz’s Book of Misers (869 A.D.) in comparison with the dramatic expositions of the theme of avarice in Plautus’ The Pot of Gold (195 B.C.), Molière’s The Miser (1668), and Balzac’s Eugénie Grandet (1833).

Obviously, these works do not belong to the same genre or period of time, yet they are lumped together in this comparative study in so far as they deal with images of avarice in various literary, psychological, social, rational and satirical contexts.

Plautus’ play, The Pot of Gold, provides the earliest example of dealing with avarice as a literary theme in psychological and social contexts. Plautus’ keenness to deal with the psychological image of the miser makes itself felt in the initial utterance of his miser Euclio. Euclio’s first speech reveals how far he is consumed by his anxiety (Plautus, 1971: 68) about his pot of gold. Addressing himself to his old housekeeper, Grape, Euclio in an outburst of anger says: “Out! Out, I say! God damn it! I want you out of here, you pry-eyed spy in petticoats, you!” (Plautus, 1971: 68) In the same scene, a little bit later on, Euclio goes on to say: “Aha! The sneak’s whispering secrets to herself (To Grape) So help me I’ll gouge the eyes out of your head—that will keep you from spying on what I am doing.” (Plautus, 1971: 184).

Euclio’s persistent anxiety is such that when Megadorus asks for the hand of his daughter in marriage, he suspects him too of having ulterior motives. The wedding is arranged, and cooks arrive to prepare the banquet (of course at Megadorus’ expense); they too are accused of thieving intentions.

Plautus’ insight into the psychology of the miser is developed further in his portrayal of Euclio’s avarice as an obsessional passion, an idée fixe which determines all of his hero’s actions throughout the whole play. Euclio’s powerful obsessional passion makes of him a
personification of the theme of avarice. In the terminology of François Jost, this contributes towards establishing Euclio as a literary type. "A type", Jost argues, "may be defined as a written incarnation of either a motif or a theme in the form of outstanding figures, be they mythical, fictional, or historical." (Jost, 1974: 184)

The anxiety-obsession syndrome, as it were, found its way as the main psychological complex in Molière’s *The Miser*, the most outstanding reincarnation of Plautus’ play. In an obvious echo of Plautus’ play, Harpagon, in his main initial speech, expresses his typical anxiety by accusing his son’s valet, Lafieche, of spying on him:

Go wait in the street, then! Don’t let me see you in the house any more, standing there keeping a watch on everything that goes on, an eye for anything you can pick up. I want no spy forever watching my affairs, a sneaking dog with his confounded eyes on everything I do devouring everything I possess and rummaging everywhere to see if there’s anything he can steal. (Moliere, 1962: 115-116).

Molière’s masterly dramatization of his miser’s anxiety turns it into a kind of paranoia bordering on madness. So much is implied by Harpagon’s famous speech made immediately after his discovery that his money was stolen:

Thieves! Robbers! Assassins! Murderers! Justice! Merciful Heavens!..... Give me my money back, you scoundrel! Ah, it’s me I’m going out of my mind.... I must go. I'll demand justice. I'll have everyone in the house put to the torture, menservants, maidservants, son, daughter everyone-myself included. (Moliere, 1962: 159).

Like Euclio, Harpagon suggests himself to be a recognizable psychological type by becoming incarnation of the motif of avarice.
All areas of experience in Harpagon’s life are influenced by his obsessional passion. While Plautus and Molière dramatize obsessional passion as a means of penetrating deeply into the psychology of the miser, they are also interested in dealing with this type of passion as a comic device which provokes laughter at the expense of someone who is possessed by one particular quality; however, it is typical tendency of comedy to mock excess.

Avarice is presented as an effective medium for developing obsessional passion and generating typical anxiety in Balzac’s Eugénie Grandet. Just as anxiety turns into madness in Molière’s play The Miser, so in Eugénie Grandet, the typical anxiety of the old miserly Grandet takes on panic dimensions. This comes out in the death scene towards the end of the novel:

At last death drew near, and the cooper’s strong frame wrestled with destruction. Even then he obstinately sat in his accustomed seat by the fire, in front of his strong-room door; and he would pull off all the blankets they tried to keep round him, and roll them up, saying no to Nanon, ‘Lock it up, Lock that away, so that it won’t be stolen’. So long as he could open his eyes, which still looked wide awake and full of life, in contrast to his inert body, he would turn them at once to the door of his strong-room where all his treasure lay, and say to his daughter, ‘Are they there? Are they there?’ in a voice which betrayed a kind of panic fear. (Balzac, 1979: 218).

As is the case in The Pot of Gold and The Miser, in Eugénie Grandet the theme of anxiety is associated with obsessional passion for avarice. Throughout the whole novel Grandet’s actions are coloured and determined by his obsessional passion for money. Commenting on Balzac’s dramatization of obsessional passion in Eugénie Grandet, F.W.J. Hemmings suggests that Balzac’s undertaking should be interpreted in terms of his philosophical
idiosyncratic concept of human personality:

The fascination of the phenomenon [obsessional passion] for Balzac lay probably in the witness it bears to the enormous strength of the human personality which can withstand every assault, however violent, that the social order can mount against its independence. (Hemmings, 1978: 65).

Balzac’s interest in obsessional passion has more to it than this. First, it suggests the continuity of the tradition of the miser as a recognizable psychological type. Second, it relates to Balzac’s realism which involves his penetration into the inner world of his fictional characters. Revealing his acute penetration into the psyche of Grandet, Balzac highlights the ravages of an obsessional passion by small but significant sayings. I am referring here to the dialogue between Grandet and his wife in which they discuss the fortunes of Charles after the death of his father. Before taking his own life Victor-Ange Guillaume Grandet sends his son Charles to Saumur in the hope that his uncle will help him. Grandet tells his wife of the suicide of his brother. In her response to this, Madame Grandet, thinking of Charles, says: “That poor young man!” Yes answers Grandet, “poor indeed; he hasn’t a penny.” (Balzac, 1979: 104).

Plautus and Molière in their turn place special emphasis on the ravages of obsessional passions in the lives of their misers. In The Pot of Gold Megadorus has come to Euclio’s place to ask for his daughter’s hand: “Megadorus (gravely) Euclio, give me a minute of your time. There’s something I’d like to discuss with you-won’t take long—which should be a good thing for both of us.” (Plautus, 1971: 77).

Blinded by his obsessional passion Euclio retaliates: “Oh my God, I’m done for! My gold’s been snatched! And now he wants to make a deal with me, I know it! I’ve got to take a look in the house.” (Plautus, 1971: 77).
In Molière's _The Miser_ a similar situation develops when Valere and Harpagon get involved in a dialogue in which the former talks about Elise (Harpagon's daughter) and the latter (confusing money and romance) mistakes him for talking about money.

Our discussion of the three works so far has revealed that anxiety and obsessional passion for money feature as defining characteristics of the psychological image of the miser as a literary type.

Against this background let us now turn to al-Jahiz's _Book of Misers_, the first Arabic book in which avarice is dealt with as a literary motif. We have no evidence that al-Jahiz was familiar with Plautus' play; nor is he concerned with creating the miser as a literary type in the sense defined above. Yet he is at one with the other three authors in underlining anxiety as a typical psychological trait of the miser. Even in his "Introduction" to the _Book of Misers_ al-Jahiz draws our attention to the susceptibility of a miser to experience anxiety. Reflecting on the inner workings of the misers' minds al-Jahiz says: "They behave as though they were afraid of losing their wealth and not as though they hoped it would last; they pile up so many anxieties for themselves and reduce their share of hopes." (Pellat, 1969: 238).

Anxiety in its extreme form in the _Book of Misers_ is best exemplified in one of the stories of _Musjidyyun_ narrated by one of their prominent figures. It is the story of Mu'adha al-'Anbariyyah whose cousin gave her, as a present, a blood sacrifice. She is overwhelmingly anxious lest she might not benefit from every single part of the sheep. Thus she uses the horn as a hook; the guts to make strings of hand-gin; the skull and other bones are broken up and boiled with the grease skimmed and used as lamp-fuel. She uses the skin to make bags. The sheep's wool has innumerable uses. Mu'adha al-'Anbariyyah even uses blood to smear her Damascene pots." (Al-Jahiz, 1963: 33-34).
Al-Anbariyyah is a poor woman, yet she is listed as one of al-Jahiz’s misers. Her story reveals al-Jahiz’s interest in dramatizing a miser’s typical anxiety. That avarice is exposed with psychological insight in the story is also revealed in al-Jahiz’s portrayal of how avarice can contribute to gross acceleration of the miser’s mental activity as is suggested by Al-Anbariyyah’s dexterity and inventiveness in benefiting from each part of the sheep. Avarice produces similar effect in Grandet who strikes us as a genius businessman. Here is how Balzac describes the sharpness of Grandet’s mind:

As a matter of fact, Grandet, who slept little, was in the habit of spending half the night considering and reflecting, working out the preliminary calculations which made his views, observations, and plans so astonishingly accurate and clear, and ensured the unfailing success which the inhabitants of Saumur watched with perennial wonder... A miser’s life is a constant exercise of every human faculty in the service of his personality. (Balzac, 1979: 130).

Harpagon’s thoughtful instructions to his servants how they should act thriftily during his wedding party point also in the same direction.

Overlooking al-Jahiz’s deep psychological insights into the inner world of his misers, Shafiq Jabri argues that unlike Molière, whose portrayal of the miser is based on psychological analysis, al-Jahiz confines himself to external description of his misers’ behaviour and movements. (Jabri, 1946: 63).

This is untenable argument. However, more recently, critics have begun to acknowledge that al-Jahiz’s psychological insight and his concern with portraying the inner workings of the minds of his misers are greater than had been previously recognized (Afifi, 1971) For instance, in her book Structures of Avarice: The Bukhala' in Medieval
Arabic Literature, Fedwa Malti-Douglas cites several examples (Malti-Douglas, 1985: 149) of al-Jahizian misers other than Mu'adha al-‘Anbariyyah who in a typical fashion experience definitive anxiety as is the case in The Pot of Gold, The Miser, and Eugénie Gradent.

However there is a fundamental difference between the Book of Misers on the one hand, and these three works on the other, that is whereas in The Pot of Gold, The Miser, and Eugénie Gradent anxiety is presented as a sustained pattern of behaviour throughout the whole work, in the Book of Misers it is presented as a primary trait of a miser with no attempt at developing it as a sustainable typical theme. This is simply because we are not presented with complete individuals in the Book of Misers, but merely with brief sketches of ordinary individuals in whose lives avarice in its various facets of thrift, economization, and frugality is presented as the foremost passion in an exaggerated manner. Al-Jahiz deals with the theme with a great deal of humour and amusement based mainly on exaggeration and on reaching down into what is common place and seemingly trivial. It is perhaps on these grounds that Marshall G. S. Hodgson maintains that in writing his book al-Jahiz was inspired by Theophrastus’ book Characters in which the author presents a large number of sketches of human behaviour including avarice and meanness. “The genre presumably continued in Arabic a tradition going back to the Greek Characters of Theophrastus.” (Hodgson, 1961: 466) Theophrastus’ method of sketching human behaviour is very well described by R. C. Jebb:

The Book of Characters which tradition ascribes to Theophrastus, the pupil of Aristotle, contains thirty sketches from Athenian society in the age of Alexander the Great. If they do not go far into human nature, they touch things upon its surface with a good deal of humour and acuteness. As illustrations of manners, again, they have this merit that they treat of commonplace people and of everyday life. But it is not
as pictures of men or of manners that they seem most interesting. (Jebb, 1909: 1).

Al-Jahiz in his turn does not provide full-length portraits of misers, rather provides a single-angle view of individuals representing certain aspects of avarice.

But there is a fundamental difference between the Theophrastian and the al-Jahizian characters. The Theophrastian exaggerated sketches of characters that have come down to us represent a type of behaviour rather than the actions of any individual person, whereas al-Jahizian sketches represent the actions of individual persons who, as Hodgson himself suggests, are “allegedly true”. This point will be more elaborately discussed later on in this study.

In an insightful comment on al-Jahiz’s characteristic tendency to present examples of various facets of avarice, rather than to portray complete pictures of misers, Fedwa Malti-Douglas argues: “there is a sense in which the separate portraits of bakhils coalesce into an image of the bakhil as an ideal type.” (Malti-Douglas, 1985: 147) In his commentary on the same aspect of al-Jahiz’s book Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, in a more subtle manner has this to say: “The reader may encounter Molière’s miser spread over the pages of al-Jahiz’s Book of Misers, and may recognize al-Jahiz’s misers accumulated in a composite figure in the French play.” (Al-Aqqad, 1959: 683-685).

As a result of al-Jahiz’s non-portrayal of complete misers, his misers also hardly experience avarice as an obsessional passion. Yet al-Jahiz achieves the same psychological effect of the obsessional passion through exaggeration which is conceived by the majority of commentators on al-Jahiz as the most important defining characteristic of his literary writings. Through exaggeration as is exemplified, for instance, in the already quoted story of Mu‘adha al-Anbariyyah, al-Jahiz’s misers strike us as personifications of this human vice. Thus exaggeration in al-Jahiz’s book is not only a comic device as Shafiq
Jabri would have us believe; it rather serves the same psychological function as the obsessional passion in *The Pot of Gold, The Miser*, and *Eugénie Grandet*, in that it heightens our awareness of the powerful grip that avarice has on the soul of the miser.

Al-Jahiz’s concern with the portrayal of the psychological image of the miser goes further than what we have already pointed out. Here again, the “Introduction” to the *Book of Misers* provides us with a clue to al-Jahiz’s multi-faceted interest in depicting the psychology of the miser.

To my mind, you go on, a man who gives his greed free rein frankly lays himself open to censure, and only opens his mouth to make violent assaults on his opponent by means of arguments exclusively culled from books is less surprising, and a fool who cannot help showing his failing still less so, than a man who is aware of his own greed and excessive niggardliness and yet strives to overcome his own nature and suppress his own character [in order to appear generous].

No doubt in the belief that his vice is known and the position clear to all, he is at pains to patch over and gild that which no amount of gilt or patching can conceal. (Pellat, 1969: 238).

The story of Muhammad bin Mu’mil furnishes a concrete example which illustrates al-Jahiz’s notion that no matter how hard the miser tries to conceal his miserliness his vice will express itself in a trivial action or indiscreet conduct. Here is a summary of the story which takes the form of a long dialogue between al-Jahiz himself and Muhammad bin Mu’mil. Muhammad bin Mu’mil is a miser, but he tries to conceal his miserliness by providing large quantities of food to his guests. Unconsciously he tends to reduce the number of loaves of bread at the banquet, thus betraying his failure to pass himself off as a generous person. In other words his act of providing a small number
of loaves signifies the power of the instinct of avarice to express itself in an unguarded action or indiscreet conduct.

Al-Jahiz’s peculiar capacity for delving into the psyche of a miser reveals itself also in his description of one of his misers whose blood has been stirred upon his acquisition of a new dirhem. His excitement is such that he fondly addresses himself to the dirhem reassuring it that it would no longer keep moving from one bag to another. It would rather enjoy peace and everlasting rest in his own bag. Apparently, on account of his powerful instinct of avarice this miser is described by al-Jahiz as a “shaikh” of avarice. (Al-Jahiz, 1963: 137).

In all of the four works under consideration avarice is also portrayed in a social context in which emphasis is mainly laid on the problematic relationship between the miser and his family and society at large. In The Pot of Gold, Euclio’s obsessional passion for gold contributes to the destruction of family ties and obligations. Euclio is beside himself with delight when Megadorus presents his pleas for cancelling dowries: “Aside (rapturously) believe me, it’s a sheer pleasure to listen to him. Marvelous plea for parsimony he’s made.” (Plautus, 1971: 93) And when Megadorus decides to ask for Phaedria’s hand in marriage, Euclio reminds him, “Be sure you don’t forget our agreement; you don’t get a penny of dowry with my daughter.” (Plautus, 1971: 80).

Harpagon in his turn makes no secret of the fact that he is tempted to marry his daughter to his elderly friend Anselme mainly because he is willing to resign his right for taking dowry: “Harpagon: No! An opportunity like this won’t stand delay. What is more, there is a special, a unique advantage. He [Anselme] is willing to take her – without dowry.” (Moliere, 1962: 123).

Under the influence of his obsessional passion for money, Harpagon goes so far as to compete with his son to marry Marianne, his son’s beloved, just because she is wealthy. Moreover, Harpagon
turns a deaf ear to his daughter’s pleas to let her marry Valère who is in love with her, that is in favour of marrying her to Marianne’s father Anselme.

Grandet’s familial relationships do not of course fare better. We find Grandet a miser and watch him grow into a maniac, indifferent to the unhappiness of the daughter he once cared for; he even robs her of her inheritance from her mother. Nor is he able to offer a helping hand to his nephew Charles after the bankruptcy and consequent suicide of his father.

Like Plautus, Molière, and Balzac, al-Jahiz is also keen to portray familial disintegration and social meanness brought about by avarice. For instance, when the avarice Shaikh whose story has been above referred to dies his family heave a sigh of relief that they have got rid of him. There is also the story of two miserly brothers who own a company. But they have decided to put an end to their business partnership because of the failure of one of them to cope with the relative generosity of the other.

The story of abu al-Qamaqim furnishes a good example of how avarice leads to undignified social behaviour. Abu al-Qamaqim is desperate to marry a better off lady in the hope that he will enjoy her wealth heedless of his friends’ rebukes and reproaches on such an act of careerism. This marriage of convenience is comparable with the avaricious acts of withholding dowries in The Pot of Gold and The Miser.

However, like his portrayal of the psychological image of the miser, al-Jahiz’s presentation of the social image of the miser is immeasurably wider than we have it in The Pot of Gold, The Miser, and Eugénie Grandet. Al-Jahiz’s wide range is underlined in a remark made by Clifford Edmund Bosworth with reference to the whole body of al-Jahiz’s works: “The wide-ranging intellectual curiosity of al-Jahiz and his interest in what we would now call sociology, and
anthropology and psychology, are well-known.” (Bosworth, 1976: 36)
Al-Jahiz’s interest in avarice in sociological context is so wide that it include his presentation of the miser as a landlord, a host, a guest, a father, a brother, a merchant, a money-lender. His book is packed with misers of every conceivable type, and we are given ample opportunity to see how al-Jahiz’s misers eat, drink, dress up, economize, hoard money, and seek a cure.

Al-Jahiz also makes use of the theme of avarice to depict newly developed socio-economic conditions brought about by the interaction between Arabic culture and foreign cultures during the early period of the Abbasid era. For instance, Fedwa Malti-Douglas cites twenty-two stories and anecdotes of inhospitality mostly on the part of Khurasanians. By exposing non-Arab inhospitality al-Jahiz aims at highlighting the Arabs’ characteristic hospitality which was threatened and undermined as a result of cultural interaction.

Charles Pellat points out another important aspect of the development of new sociological circumstances, which plays a vital role in boosting avarice and economization during the period in which al-Jahiz’s book was written:

A genuine Arab is associated with generosity, he tends to spend extravagantly, paying the least attention to economization. His belief in fate, his trust in the Divine Providence, and his dependence on God contribute to his indifference to what the future may hold for him (Pellat, 1985).

In contrast with this, a new idea emerged especially among those who had recently embraced Islam, namely, the idea of economization as a means of self-protection against adversity and the turning of the wheel of fortune. (Pellat, 1985: 32).

The gist of this statement is very well reflected in what ‘Abbas al-
‘Aqqad refers to as the “constitution” of avarice formulated by Sahl bin Harun in his letter with which the Book of Misers begins. In this constitution al-Jahiz establishes obvious connections between the people’s lack of trust in Divine Providence, their fears of the turning of the wheel of fortune on the one hand and their acts of economization, thrift and frugality on the other. These three synonyms for avarice are used by al-Jahiz’s misers by way of defending their practices against the accusations levelled against them of being miserly:

Let no one be deceived by his long life, his bent back, his brittle bones and the depletion of his strength to be so generous. Let not that (long life) induce him to spend his money, to give it out to others or indulge in extravagance and succumb to desires. He may be long living without knowing it, and fated to longevity without feeling it. He may beget children at the age of despair, or things may happen for him that no mind can conceive, so that he may try to recover his money from ones who do not give and complain to ones showing no mercy…. You have admonished me for that. ‘Amr bin al-‘Aas had said: “Toil for this world as one who lives forever. Toil for the Next World as one who would die tomorrow.” (Al-Jahiz, 1963: 12-13)

According to Charles Pellat, al-Jahiz’s treatment of avarice as a literary theme reflects also the people’s awareness of the significance of money during the early period of the Abbasid era as a means towards climbing the social ladder especially among the members of the newly emerging class of bourgeoisie: “The Book of Misers enables us to recognize symptoms of social mobility at Basra and to witness the emergence of the bourgeoisie as a social class.” (Pellat, 1985: 310).

Pellat goes on to add that the majority of al-Jahiz’s misers belong to this class.

Similar views to those presented by Pellat are held by Wadi'a
Taha an-Najm especially when she points out that the period in which al-Jahiz lived witnessed the birth of what she describes as "pecuniary consciousness." (An- Najm, 1965: 155) which plays a crucial role in the people's cultivation of the habit of hoarding money. The Book of Misers provides a very revealing textual evidence as for the ferocious pursuit of money during the early 'Abbasid period. In Abi al-'Aas's letter to ath-Thaqafi, we read:

Money is avidly sought. It is sought at the bottoms of seas; in mountain peaks; in the weeds of moors. It is sought in the rough as it is in the smooth; down in ravines and up the highways; in the Eastern ends of the world, and its Western ends. It is sought in honour, and in ignominy; through faithfulness and through treachery. It is sought through asceticism as it is through murder; through truth and through mendacity; through scurrilousness and sycophancy. No deception is left unspared in its quest. It is sought by blaspheming God as it is by Faith in Him. (Al- Jahiz, 1963: 36).

Against this background avarice develops into a powerful social phenomenon closely related to ambition and self-improvement. In these terms, instructive analogy can be drawn between al-Jahiz and Balzac. Commenting on the financial motivations in the lives of Balzac's fictional characters and on the crucial role money plays in nineteenth century France, F.W.J. Hemmings has this to say:

The importance Balzac attributes to financial motivations (and it is hard to think of a novel of any substance in La Comédie Humaine where such motivations do not loom large) is part of his peculiar realism. Alone in his generation of writers, he saw clearly the implications of the final triumph of the bourgeoisie in 1830. Wealth, the private ownership of property, conferred every kind of power, permitted every

In Eugénie Grandet, Balzac in a direct comment on the interrelationship between money and ambition writes: “Where is the man without ambition? And what ambition can be attained in our society without money?” (Balazc, 1979: 131)

Avarice is a vice that we have always had with us, but apparently the word had a new meaning in al-Jahiz’s and Balzac’s times when hoarding money was conceived as a means towards realizing social ambition. To push the analogy between the two authors further, one would argue that the two authors’ peculiar interest in financial motivation and avarice stems directly from their shared realism as well as their interest in dealing with contemporary issues in their writings.

It is a well-known fact that Balzac is considered one of the leading realist writers and that as he himself points out in the “Introduction” to the Human Comedy that he tends to think of himself as a kind of “secretary” whose main task is to observe and chronicle in a fictional context contemporary social reality. Al-Jahiz is similarly concerned with observing and recording social reality in the period in which he lived. Shawqi Deif, for instance, argues: “we find him [al-Jahiz] concerned with representing his age in such a precise manner that makes his works important references revealing to us facts about the nature of the period in which he lived.” (Deif, 1959: 163) Charles Pellat also points out al-Jahiz’s realism and his representation of the age in which he lived:

It is quite certain that the intellectual resources offered by his home town would have been fully adequate to give al-Djahiz a broad culture but the Iraki metropolis, then in its apogee, had a decisive influence in helping to form his mind. It left its rationalist and realist imprint so clearly on him, that al-Djahiz might be considered not only one of the most
eminent products of his hometown, but its most complete representative. (Pellat, 1913: 385).

An important qualification seems indispensable here, namely that there is a basic difference between al-Jahiz’s distinct brand of realism and Balzac’s typical form of realism. In Balzac’s realistic method, the creation of a character, in the terminology of Robert Shcoles, is the product of a combination of two impulses: “the impulse to individualize and the impulse to typify.” (Scholes, 1981: 11) Thus we remember Grandet’s individualizing habitual patterns of speech, action or appearance and we remember the way he represents something larger than himself, namely, avarice. Whereas in the Book of Misers, the scale is tilted in favour of individualizing characters simply because al-Jahiz deals with historical personalities and well known individuals taken from the actual world of reality. Al-Jahiz’s tendency to draw on the actual world of reality in his portrayal of his misers is pointed out by Hodgson when he says: “Al-Jahiz delighted in anecdotes; his Book of Misers lists every breed of that unpleasant but variously eccentric species illustrating his points with appropriate tales, some hung on prominent personalities and all allegedly true.” (Hodgson, 1961: 466). In some instances al-Jahiz even provides brief biographical sketches of his misers. Having stated this, I should hasten to add that while al-Jahiz derives his personalities from the actual world of reality, he at the same time resorts to invention in portraying them. This is embodied mainly in the element of exaggeration by which, it has been already pointed out, a certain amount of typification is produced. As Robert Scholes rightly observes: “No character in a book is a real person.” (Scholes, 1981: 11)

Taha al-Hajiri argues that the vividness which characterizes al-Jahiz’s description of the behavioural patterns of his misers is based on the element of invention. Al-Hajiri goes so far as to suggest that even the letters included in the Book of Misers and ascribed to historical personalities are not authentic, they are rather written by al-
Jahiz himself. The greatness of the *Book of Misers* as a literary work, al-Hajiri adds, is based on the element of invention which informs al-Jahiz’s method of characterization.

In Charles Pellat’s last quoted remarks, he states that the Iraki metropolis left its “rationalist imprint” on al-Jahiz’s mind. This comment has significant implications in that rationalism plays a very important role in weaving the texture of the *Book of Misers* and in determining some of the stylistic devices and techniques employed by al-Jahiz in writing his book. One needs recall here that al-Jahiz was a leading member of Mu'tazila: a theological school whose doctrines emphasize the supremacy of human reason (Al-Jahiz, 1962: 292) and the great importance of logic and dialectic in argumentation. All of these rationalistic qualities are extensively used throughout the *Book of Misers*, especially in the three main letters included in the book: the letter of Sahl bin Harun, the letter of Abi al-‘Aas bin Abdulwahhab bin ʿAbdulmajid ath-Thaqafi to ath-Thaqafi, and finally Ibn al-Taw'am’s Reply. The first letter concerns itself with defending avarice as an act of prudence and economization; the second criticizes avarice on account of the meanness it generates; and the third letter is written in defence of avarice again, as an act of frugality and wisdom. In these three letters the style is characterized by heavy use of proverbs, (Malty- Douglas, 1985 ) hadiths, and verses taken from the Qur’an; all of these are used to sharpen the writer’s argument be it in favour of avarice as a form of prudence and economization or in condemnation of avarice as a vice. Rationalization in its different forms is not of course confined to the letters; a large number of stories and anecdotes which constitute the main bulk of the *Book of Misers* are based on stratagems and logical argumentation adopted by misers in defence of their thrift or economization. All of this comes within the framework of al-Jahiz’s peculiar concern with presenting avarice in what can be described as rational context. Shawqi Deif’s general comments on the impact of the Mu'tazila’s emphasis on the greatness
of human reason on al-Jahiz’s writing method is particularly applicable to the *Book of Misers*: “Al-Jahiz was peculiarly fascinated with the doctrines of the Mu‘tazila ... He was incomparable in debate and argumentation based on solid proofs ... We find this reflected in all of his writings.” (Deif, 1996: 589) It is perhaps on account of the different aspects of rationalization present in the *Book of Misers* that some commentators argue that the book provides a “philosophy” of avarice. In spite of their remarkable attempts to rationalize their avarice, al-Jahiz’s misers remain targets of his satire. Charles Pellat argues that al-Jahiz’s interest in satire plays a vital role in his attraction to the portrayal of social groups and human types not only in his *Book of Misers*, but also in other books in which he portrays schoolmasters, singers, scribes, thieves, etc.. “His acute powers of observation, his light-hearted scepticism, his comic sense and satirical turn of mind fit him admirably to portray human types and society” (Pellat, 1913: 386).

The treatment of avarice in a satirical context is at work in the four works under consideration. It is of course natural that the four great authors would condemn avarice as a repugnant human vice. In Plautus’ play Euclio is exposed to satire especially in the passage in which we are told that he goes to bed with a bag over his mouth so as not to lose any breath while he is asleep or when Stroibilus says: “Do you know the other day when he had his nails manicured at the barbers’, he collected all the clippings and took them home with him.” (Plautus, 1971: 83).

Satire has always been associated with comedy, thus in Molière’s *The Miser* Harpagon in his turn becomes a target of satire in his deeds, sayings, and in what is being said about him. Molière’s most obvious satirical attack against his miser is presented in Valère’s speech in which he ironically comments on Harpagon’s obsessional passion for money and his insistence on marrying his daughter to Anselme without dowry:
Valère: Yes money is the most precious thing in all the world! You ought to thank Heaven you have such a good father. He knows the value of things. When a man offers to take a girl without dowry there's no point in looking further. That's the only thing that matters. 'Without dowry' – it counts far more than good looks, youth, birth, honour, wisdom, and probity. (Molière, 1962: 125-126).

Neither Plautus nor Molière is a primary satirist in the sense that his chief purpose was clearly satirical. Thus their light-hearted satire lacks the fierce indignation of a Juvenal or the bitterness and anger of Swift. They are rather concerned with exposing man's foibles and deformity in a humorous manner which makes us laugh at their misers without hating or despising them. In the Pot of Gold, there is even an attempt at rationalizing or presenting a plausible explanation for Euclio's avarice. This is suggested by Megadorus' speech: "Damn, I'm afraid that the minute I mention marrying his daughter, he'll think I'm playing a joke on him. Poverty's made him the stingiest man alive, bar none." (Plautus, 1971: 66) Plautus' understanding of his miser's avarice here suggests a certain amount of compassion.

This invites comparison with al-Jahiz whose act of rationalization of his misers' avarice seems to soften his satirical treatment of them. And in the case of Mu'adha al-Anbariyyah, like Euclio, she is a poor woman who cannot afford to lose any part of the sheep, thus, I would suggest, her poverty serves as a rational basis for her avarice. Yet, side by side with his compassionate attitude, al-Jahiz tends to expose his misers' avaricious behaviour in a humorous manner which generates laughter at their expense. This is obviously reflected in the story of the Marwazis who wear their shoes for three months on their toes and on their heels for three months. In this manner, it is as if they wore the shoes for only three months, this is out of fear that the soles of the shoes might get worn out. The anecdote of the rooster, here again in
connection with the Marwazis, provides another conspicuous example of satire in al-Jahiz’s book. Thumama has told al-Jahiz that he has always seen roosters give grains to their hens, except those of Merv who wrest the grain from the beaks of the hens. This kind of humorous light-hearted satire is reminiscent of Chaucer whose humorous exposure of the defects of his pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales testifies to the fact that he was too gentle and humane to be a great satirist. The same holds true for al-Jahiz whose gentle humour and softened satire provide evidence for his detachment, balance, and love for the world and his fellow human beings. However much he might laugh at his misers he could never really hate them. Al-Jahiz’s strength as a satirist lies in the fact that he writes about real people in real human situations.

The harshest satirical treatment in the four works under discussion is reserved for Grandet. In a direct authorial comment on Grandet, Balzac writes: “There, incarnate in a single man, revealed in the expression of a single face, did there not stand the only god that anyone believes nowadays – Money, in all its power?” (Balzac, 1979: 66). In a more comic manner we read: ‘He [Grandet] was so unobtrusive and noiseless in his comings and goings that he seemed to be trying to economize his expenditure even of muscular energy.” (Balzac, 1979: 66)

According to Arthur Pollard, it is typical that in the novel the satiric meaning emerges in direct authorial comments: “Allowing drama (and here I include the novel) is, in Aristotelian terms, character in action, we have at least four ways by which the satiric meaning may emerge, namely, by what a man does (or fails to do), by what others do and say to him, by what he says of himself; and, in the novel by what the author says of him.” (Pollard, 1982: 24)

Our study of the theme of avarice in its development, in its variations, and in its persistence in the four works, explains and
illustrates how literature represents a faithful reflection and an expression of fundamental human preoccupations, attitudes, and norms of character and behaviour.

صور البخل وأطره في كتاب البخلاء للباحثة: دراسة مقارنة

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تناول صور البخل والسياسات التي يعالج فيها موضوع البخل في كتاب البخلاء للباحثة، وذلك بالمقارنة الفعلية بمعاهدات الأدبية لموضوع البخل في ثلاثة أعمال هي جرذانة الذهب تأليف بلاوتس والبخيل للكاتب الفرنسي مولير ورواية أوجيني جرانديه تأليف بلزاك. إن هذه الدراسة لا تهدف إلى المعالجة الشاملة لموضوع البخل في هذه الأعمال الثلاثة، بل ستتم الإشارة إليها ضمن المقارنة لتحديد الملامح المميزة لمعالجة البخل لموضوع البخل مما أضيف عليه طابعًا خاصًا، وتمثل هذه المحاولة الهدف الرئيسي لهذه الدراسة. وتأمل أن تبرز أن معالجة البخل لموضوع البخل في إطار أدبي هي أكثر شمولية مما هو عليه الحال في الأعمال الثلاثة الألفة الذكر، ومحاولة الدراسة أيضا أن توضح أن تناول موضوع البخل في تطوراته وصوره المختلفة والاستمرار في تناوله في الأعمال الأدبية يعكس اهتمام الأدب بتصوير القضايا الإنسانية الأساسية عبر العصور والحقب التاريخية المختلفة.

* The Paper was received on 4/11/2001 and Accepted for Publication on 8/4/2002.

Bibliography


