



“Wealth has much to do with it”: The Economics of *Sense and Sensibility*

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IN 1795, AS JANE AUSTEN was writing *Elinor and Marianne*, to be revised in 1797 and 1798 as *Sense and Sensibility*, Britons were experiencing the first financial crisis of Austen's lifetime, the economic results of a harvest failure of biblical plague proportions. Everyone in Britain was affected by the disaster, and for most Britons it was a financial reversal every bit as devastating as the Dashwood sisters' loss of their father's income. Just as the Miss Dashwoods turn to their wealthy brother John for assistance, the British public looked to their government for help. Both John Dashwood and the Members of Parliament initially promised to provide for those entrusted to their care, and surely it is no coincidence that Austen's characters and her contemporaries were both destined to be disappointed. Thus, the plight of the Dashwood ladies in *Sense and Sensibility* is a fictional reenactment of the actual national economic crisis, and the heroes who save the day in the novel were the same type of people who behaved generously and responsibly to help the poor in the English countryside.

The summer of 1794 was unusually hot and dry, and the withering drought in the autumn was followed by a severe winter. The late spring of 1795 brought a series of what Edmund Burke in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* described as “unnatural frosts” that killed one crop after another, oats, wheat, rye, barley, turnips, peas, and beans (271). According to Burke, the clover was stunted and the hay ruined: “Even the meadow-grass in some places was killed to the very roots.” By harvest time in the autumn of 1795,

there was “only withered hungry grain” where there was grain at all, and the price of cereal, flour, and bread doubled. Farmers flooded the market with livestock they could not feed, causing the price of meat to temporarily drop and inspiring cartoonist James Gillray to produce a print that was a radical Whig version of the situation: *The British Butcher: Supplying John Bull with a Substitute for Bread* pictures an emaciated John Bull being offered cheap meat by an apathetic Prime Minister William Pitt. Once the country’s livestock had been thinned out, the cost of meat, milk, butter, and cheese doubled. Other commodities increased in price along with the higher cost of food. Even before the harvest failure, most laborers spent two-thirds of their incomes on food (Porter 215), so by 1795, the majority of the working class had no disposable income at all and were subsisting on a diet of bread, cheese, potatoes, and weak tea.

As bad as the harvest failure was, people knew that the disaster was a freak of nature, a temporary if devastating setback, and they assumed that the economy would make a full recovery in two or three years. Meanwhile, the prudent gentry, like *Sense and Sensibility*’s Elinor Dashwood, were economizing, but the working class was becoming increasingly hungry, ragged, and frustrated. There was growing pressure on Parliament to assist the laborer, whose daily wages for a ten- to twelve-hour workday were now insufficient to buy a loaf of bread from a baker, which was, due to the high price of fuel, cheaper than baking bread at home.

According to Edmund Burke, there was an outpouring of private charity, “a care and superintendence of the poor, far greater than any I remember” (277). Frederic Eden in *The State of the Poor* concurred: “in consequence of the very great price of bread-corn during the whole of 1794, the distresses of the Poor were unusually great, and the sums expended on their relief beyond all former example” (111). *The Hampshire Chronicle* published reports of “Relief to the Poor,” subsidizing the price of bread, voluntarily raising employee wages, or distributing food among the needy in Yorkshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex (9 January 1796). But scattered acts of charity, while applauded in the press, were woefully inadequate to deal with the national problem, and far too many wealthy landowners were doing nothing.

In the spring and summer of 1795, food riots broke out across the country, and when some soldiers in Henry Austen’s regiment joined with the local poor in a food riot, Jane Austen’s brother and the rest of the 10,000 troops at the Brighton Garrison were assembled to witness the soldiers’ execution by firing squad (Fullerton 207). Meanwhile, the 1795 *Hampshire Chronicle* reported numerous thefts of food and livestock. Newspaper coverage of the trials



James Gillray's The British Butcher: Supplying John Bull with a Substitute for Bread (1795), pictures Prime Minister William Pitt as the butcher, offering cheap meat to John Bull, who can no longer afford bread. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

of thieves almost always ended with the same terse phrase: “The jury found him guilty—Death.” Anyone who helped himself to one shilling’s worth of another man’s property could be hanged, and a thief was more likely to hang than a murderer (Porter 135–36). Judging by *The Hampshire Chronicle’s* coverage of

criminal court proceedings, very few convicted thieves were shown leniency: “They were all three found guilty—Death: the boy was recommended to mercy on account of his youth, being only nine years old” (12 December 1795). The child criminal was transported to Australia in December of 1795. No doubt, many hungry people felt they were doomed to one of two eventualities, hanging or starvation.

According to the Poor Law, enacted in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, no one could be allowed to starve to death, and the very poor were to be provided with bread by a tax on landowners. However, a growing and increasingly wealthy class paid no poor tax at all. Bankers, businessmen, merchants, and manufacturers, unless they were also landowners, paid no Poor Law taxes, and their incomes had never been larger. Between 1782 and 1790, the value of exports had nearly doubled (Hibbert 466), but as the profits of the wealthy soared, the wages they paid their employees decreased (Hibbert 472). In general, the old-money landed gentry accepted, although perhaps grudgingly, the idea of taxation in order to provide for the poor, but the new-money merchant class did not seem to share their sense of *noblesse oblige*. The only taxes the radical Whigs in Parliament would vote for were sales taxes, which spread the tax burden throughout society, and sales tax revenue was specifically used to wage war, not to feed the poor. While William Pitt and his liberal Tory/moderate Whig coalition were trying to raise taxes to pay for the war and to provide food for the poor, Pitt’s political opposition was proposing tax cuts.

By 1795, Britain had compiled an unprecedented national debt as the government was annually borrowing around £20 million from the Bank of England in order to finance the military. So far, William Pitt had only been able to raise about £1 million a year in new tax revenue, mostly by increasing consumer taxes on commodities like salt, tea, and soap, but the new taxes were barely enough to pay the interest on the government’s loans, which were about to increase yet again by another £20 million (Hague 376). Pitt was proposing a new tax on legacies, which was doomed to failure, and, even bolder, an income tax on the wealthy. There had never been a tax on income before, and the radical Whigs were determined to keep it that way, in spite of the national debt and widespread poverty. With so much at stake for the nation, people were choosing sides, and in such a context the redundancy of Johns in *Sense and Sensibility*—John Dashwood, Sir John Middleton, and John Willoughby—is suggestive.

John was the most common first name for Englishmen at the time, but all three of *Sense and Sensibility*’s Johns are roughly the same age, and all three are rural landowners, although from three different counties. Austen appears

to be suggesting that John Bull, the stereotypical prototype of the English country squire and British public, can be categorized as one of three distinct types: the miserly John Dashwood of Sussex, the generous Sir John Middleton of Devon, or the extravagant John Willoughby of Somerset. While John Dashwood will cheerfully impoverish anyone in order to enrich himself, Sir John Middleton uses his private resources at Barton to assist the less fortunate. The third type of John Bull, John Willoughby, is “expensive, dissipated, and worse than both” (210). John Willoughby is too busy being a cad to attend to his own estate, Combe Magna, and to the situation of his dependents there, who are presumably suffering from neglect in Somersetshire. In this equation, the generous squire is outnumbered, two to one, to the obvious detriment of rural England.

Occasionally slipping a spare coin into the outstretched hand of a particularly pathetic beggar was practically unavoidable; even stingy Fanny Dashwood buys “a needle book, made by some emigrant” for each of the Steele sisters (254). In Fanny’s singular act of charity, however, she shows a sympathy, perhaps solidarity, with the displaced French aristocracy, not with England’s poor. Raising taxes to buy or even to subsidize bread for the great unwashed was quite another matter. When it came to actually parting with a large sum of money in order to feed the poor until the following harvest, or to committing to an annual tax to aid the poor in the immediate crisis and into the future, both Tories and Whigs in the House of Commons seemed gripped by inertia, the same kind of inaction that John Dashwood succumbs to in fulfilling his promise to “assist” his sisters (9). As John and Fanny agree, an annual outlay, “those kind of yearly drains on one’s income” (11), were more than the wealthy were willing to bear: “To be tied down to the regular payment of such a sum, on every rent day, is by no means desirable: it takes away one’s independence.” In 1795, this loss of freedom due to taxes was precisely the same argument Edmund Burke was making against “this scheme of arbitrary taxation” in the House of Commons (255).

When John Dashwood assumes his place as an English landowner, and member of Britain’s ruling class, he faces the problem everyone else in his situation was struggling with or trying to avoid in 1795: to what extent were the wealthy obliged to help the poor? And John Dashwood is blessed with a superfluity of wealth, enabling him to afford whichever option he chooses. Already “amply provided for by the fortune of his mother” (3), John’s income has just doubled as he has also inherited, through his mother’s marriage settlement, his father’s annual income from his first wife’s estate, but as John be-

comes richer, just like the Whig merchants, he perversely becomes greedier. Moved by the crisis of the moment, his father's dying wish, John, like the members of Parliament contemplating the plight of the poor, "promised to do every thing in his power to make them comfortable" (5), and the narrator gives John, and by extension the Tories, credit for originally having good, if fleeting, intentions: "He then really thought himself equal to it. . . . He thought of it all day long, and for many days successively, and he did not repent." However, when it comes to acting on his benevolent impulse and actually giving his sisters a fraction of his superfluous wealth, John hesitates, and his wife Fanny, opposing him and yet "a strong caricature of [John] himself" (5), seizes her opportunity to manipulate her all-too-willing spouse into keeping all of his, and their, money in his own pocket. A political analogy is embedded in this scene of marital collusion.

In a union of like-minded people, John, the landowner—read Tory—and Fanny, the monied interest—read Whig—have formed an unholy alliance in order to protect their own selfish and intertwined financial interests. While Tory MPs were making speeches about assisting the poor, most Whig MPs employed the tactics of Fanny Dashwood and remained ominously silent, but, when pushed, Whigs like Burke, Frederic Eden, and Patrick Colquhoun insisted that a working man's meager wages were, in fact, already adequate to, if not in excess of, his needs, just as Fanny Dashwood argues about the impoverished Dashwood women: "It strikes me that they can want no addition at all"; "I am sure I cannot imagine how they will spend half of it" (10, 12). Masking greed as merely reasonable behavior, Fanny methodically counters every suggestion John makes and chips away at his increasingly modest proposals, until, by the chapter's end, the Dashwood sisters, like the nation's poor, will get nothing at all.

John Dashwood's offers and counteroffers mirror exactly what was happening in the House of Commons. The first proposals to aid the poor were large, one-time expenditures meant to get the needy through the present crisis until the next bountiful harvest. John Dashwood's initial proposal to help his sisters is similarly a large, one-time expenditure of £3,000, a doubling of his sisters' inheritance from their great uncle, like Prime Minister Pitt's proposal to double the Poor Law tax. Fanny's objection is the same as the Whig opposition in Parliament: it was too much money to part with at once, "and why was he to ruin himself, and their poor little Harry, by giving away all his money . . . ?" (8). Fanny's ridiculous overstatements are no more outrageous than Burke's depiction of the rich being impoverished by a tax to feed the poor:

as Burke put it, “a very small advance upon what *one* man pays to *many*, may absorb the whole of what he possesses, and amount to an actual partition of all his substance among them. . . . Such is the event of all compulsory equalizations. They pull down what is above” (258–59). It is significant that Sir John Middleton and Colonel Brandon are never impoverished due to their generosity.

When John Dashwood next suggests “something of the annuity kind,” like an annual tax, Fanny considers the suggestion equally repugnant: “An annuity is a very serious business; it comes over and over every year, and there is no getting rid of it” (10). Fanny suggests an additional problem, “the trouble of getting it to them” (11). William Pitt was proposing that the tax money for the poor should be distributed by local magistrates and justices of the peace. Burke, however, objected that the tax was “to be levied at what is called the discretion of justices of peace” (254), who, he alleged, would be extravagant.

The two bills that gathered the most support in the House of Commons also drew the strongest opposition. Moderate Whig Samuel Whitbread proposed a minimum-wage bill in the winter of 1795, but Whitbread’s bill was opposed by Prime Minister William Pitt and was voted down in 1796. Certainly, Whitbread’s plan had its limitations; William Pitt’s objection was that it was far too limited. With the bill, a working man’s wages would have increased to match the price of a loaf of bread (a national version of the Speenhamland System), but Whitbread’s proposal would have done nothing to help the unemployed, nothing for orphaned or abandoned children, nothing for the infirm, handicapped, or elderly, and nothing for working women and children. Whitbread’s bill also appeared to be exactly what it was, a wage subsidy that would aid employers as it would enable the employer to pay the laborer even less since the government would make up the difference. The advantage to employers won Whitbread’s bill considerable crossover support from Tories, but radical Whigs like Burke claimed that a minimum wage would impoverish the rich by distributing a man’s wealth among his employees: “what is it, but to make an arbitrary division of his property among them?” (258).

Pitt countered Whitbread’s proposal with his own much more comprehensive and generous bill, focused on feeding the poor in the short term and helping them to feed themselves in the long run. For instance, there was a provision to purchase a cow for every poor family who qualified, common land was to be reserved for the use of the poor—meaning a moratorium on acts of enclosure—and the proposal included a form of national welfare for the sick and elderly. Pitt’s bill was in turn opposed by the radical Whigs, who considered the plan much too expensive and who had no intention of being taxed to

pay for it. Jeremy Bentham led the Whig attack and claimed personal credit for the proposal's demise, but Edmund Burke, Frederic Eden, and Thomas Paine were also outspoken opponents. It is worth noting that William Pitt and the liberal Tories and moderate Whigs who supported him were willing to raise their own taxes in order to provide for the poor. The radical Whigs and reactionary Tories were not. The characters in *Sense and Sensibility* divide into two similar groups, those who are willing to help the less fortunate at their own expense and those who staunchly refuse to do so.

The radical Whigs argued that charity to the poor was a private matter and not the business of government. Government welfare, they argued, compelled individuals to participate in charity through taxation and therefore deprived the citizen who was taxed of his freedom. Edmund Burke claimed that charity was, in effect, a legal contract, a mutual understanding between two people, the one who gave and the one who received. Thus, their agreement to participate in charity was entered into voluntarily or else no obligation existed: "When a contract is making, it is a matter of discretion and of interest between the parties. In that intercourse, and in what is to arise from it, the parties are the masters. If they are not completely so, they are not free, and therefore their contracts are void" (255). According to Fanny Dashwood, her mother entirely agrees, at least when it comes to fulfilling the requirements of her late husband's will to make annual payments to her retired servants: "Her income was not her own, she said, with such perpetual claims on it" (11). When challenged to offer solutions, the radical Whigs proposed radical bills.

Jeremy Bentham suggested a National Charity Company, a government subsidized but privately owned joint-stock company that would build and manage a workhouse system where the poor would be compelled to labor under constant supervision, just like the criminals housed in Bentham's 1785 Panopticon prisons. Everyone in the workhouse would be employed to pay for his or her own upkeep and to turn a profit for the company's investors. This workforce included the sick and infirm, the elderly, and children from the age of four. Bentham's plan for the National Charity Company was more fully explained in his 1798 book, *Pauper Management Improved*, but Members of Parliament understandably hesitated to treat the poor like criminals, although many radical Whigs, particularly Patrick Colquhoun, argued that the poor actually were criminals and that their immoral behavior had created Britain's poverty. Whether or not they were guilty of any crime, Bentham's proposal would certainly have turned the poor into an enslaved workforce. There is no indication that anyone other than Bentham took his proposal very seriously, but it certainly made a good diversion from more practical schemes.

Another radical Whig, Thomas Paine, proposed what appeared to be an early form of a welfare state, but what seemed benevolent on the surface was entirely self-serving. On one hand, Paine favored a relatively generous government subsidy to provide for abandoned or orphaned children and for the elderly, but the funds to finance Paine's welfare proposal were to come from doubling the existing tax on rural landowners—that is, increasing the taxes on the Tories, Paine's political opponents. Whig merchants, bankers, and businessmen would continue to pay no taxes for the poor, and the bill would additionally eliminate the existing taxes on houses and windows, meaning a tax break for the wealthy.

Paine's proposal to aid the poor, but only at someone else's expense, is similar to John Dashwood's shirking his responsibility to his stepmother and sisters and leaving other people, like Sir John Middleton, Mrs. Jennings, and Colonel Brandon, to assume what was John Dashwood's own financial obligation. Like Bentham's National Charity Company, Paine's welfare proposal was far too impractical to have even a remote chance of being approved by the House of Commons, but it served the purpose of demonstrating the radical Whigs' theoretical generosity to the poor. Just as Fanny Dashwood congratulates her husband, "[Y]ou have such a generous spirit!" (9), the radical Whig Members of Parliament could claim to be kindly and concerned while actually doing absolutely nothing.

In light of the politicians' many pledges to assist the poor, the public waited, more or less patiently, just as Mrs. Dashwood waits for her stepson to live up to his promise: Mrs. Dashwood assumes that "their welfare was dear to him, and, for a long time, she firmly relied on the liberality of his intentions" (14). While Members of the House of Commons repeatedly proposed, deliberated, debated, and rejected, Britons were becoming increasingly embittered by Parliament's apparent apathy. According to historian John Archer, the government's prolonged dithering caused "a turnabout in popular sentiment" (61), a growing skepticism of the political power structure: "Increasingly, many people began to view the authorities with distrust," just as Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters learn that John Dashwood is not to be relied on.

John Dashwood consoles himself with the thought of "whatever I may give them occasionally" (11), a "present . . . now and then," the leave-it-all-to-private-charity solution Edmund Burke championed: "the manner, mode, time, choice of objects, and proportion, are [best] left to private discretion" (261). But John's vague noncommittal charity illustrates the fundamental problem with relying entirely on private charity, as John's "whatever" never materializes, and his "present" is never given. In *Sense and Sensibility*, there is

a definite morality or immorality in managing one's financial resources, and John Dashwood's inability to handle his money ethically suggests Jane Austen's condemnation of the selfishness of the majority of the members of the House of Commons. Further proof of John's apathy is the enclosure of Norland Common.

Part of William Pitt's plan for assisting the poor was a moratorium on acts of enclosure. This proposal was meant to guarantee that the poor would continue to have access to common land in order to raise food and thus to help feed themselves. Before the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Enclosure Movement, Britain's poor enjoyed the many advantages of common land, where they could raise gardens, harvest fruit, nuts, and berries, graze livestock, and gather kindling, wood, and turf to fuel their fires. The communal use of common land was an ancient practice, but an individual with enough money to pay the legal fees could apply to claim common land as his personal property. The application to enclose a common had to be reported in a local paper, in case another local landowner wanted to dispute the claim, and then the bill went to the House of Commons, where it was voted on and almost invariably approved. The new owner then proceeded by enclosing the formerly common field with a fence or hedgerow and denying access or use of the property to anyone else. John Dashwood wastes no time in filing his application to enclose Norland Common, an act which would be a crippling blow to the poorest people dependent on him as the local squire. And like the Dashwood sisters, the poor had no legal recourse.

Members of Parliament rarely met an enclosure bill they did not like; since the MPs themselves or the men who elected them were the people applying for enclosure, parliamentary approval was a foregone conclusion. Between 1761 and 1801, Parliament approved two thousand acts of enclosure that deprived England's working class of the use of 3,180,871 acres of land (Hammond and Hammond 41). Throughout the winter of 1795 and the spring of 1796, the front page of *The Hampshire Chronicle* printed numerous announcements of the "Inclosure" of common land, often two or three enclosures in one week. Once a village was enclosed, the only common land left was the road bank.

In *The Village Labourer*, historians John Hammond and Barbara Hammond vividly illustrate the economic impact of the enclosure of a common:

Enclosure had robbed [the laborer] of the strip that he tilled, of the cow that he kept on the village pasture, of the fuel that he picked up in the woods, and of the turf that he tore from the common. And while a social revolution had swept away his possessions,

an industrial revolution had swept away his family's earnings. To families living on the scale of the village poor, each of these losses was a crippling blow, and the total effect of the changes was to destroy their economic independence. (106)

According to one cottager cited in *The Bedfordshire Report*, "I kept four cows before the parish was enclosed, and now I don't keep so much as a goose" (qtd. in Hammond and Hammond 101).

Seemingly oblivious to the suffering he will be causing, John Dashwood relishes the thought of "[t]he inclosure of Norland Common, now carrying on" (225). John cheerfully informs Elinor of his enclosure act as they stroll in London, and he chats about "politics" and "inclosing land" as casually as Sir John Middleton talks about horses at the Dashwoods' dinner party for the Middletons (233). The irony of John Dashwood's feasting while he simultaneously deprives the poor of food would not have been lost on Austen's original readers. Yet, throughout the novel, Elinor Dashwood only listens to John and makes no attempt to correct him. Like the vast majority of Britons at the time, Elinor realizes that she has no power to intervene. There is nothing she can possibly say that will have any influence on John Dashwood.

In fact, Norland's location in Sussex is also a clue to John's selfishness as, at the time, by Frederic Eden's conservative estimate, one in four people living in Sussex were classified as paupers (323). Another problem in Sussex was that the taxes collected to aid the poor were being diverted to pay for other expenses, such as "repairs to the church" and county taxes (Eden 324). Perhaps most telling of all, Eden reported finding "no [private] charities" in Sussex (325).

Edmund Burke claimed that such single-minded greed was not only advantageous to the rich, it was their right: "the producer should be permitted, and even expected, to look to all possible profit which, without fraud or violence, he can make; to turn plenty or scarcity to the best advantage he can, . . . to account to no one for his stock or for his gain" (262). Not only should the rich man grow richer, his doing so inadvertently aids the poor: "But, if the farmer is excessively avaricious?—why so much the better—the more he desires to increase his gains, the more interested is he in the good condition of those, upon whose labor his gains must principally depend" (257). And, after all, it was God's will: "the benign and wise Disposer of all things, who obliges men, whether they will or not, in pursuing their own selfish interests, to connect the general good with their own individual success" (257). John Dashwood, however, behaves contrary to Burke's theory, rarely feeling any benevolent impulses at all and never acting on one.

The concept of helping anyone is so alien that John Dashwood is puzzled by Colonel Brandon's gift of the parish church income at Delaford to Edward Ferrars: "This living of Colonel Brandon's—can it be true?—has he really given it to Edward?" (294). According to John, "now that livings fetch such a price," Colonel Brandon "might have got I dare say—fourteen hundred pounds" by advertising the Delaford rectory for sale (294–95). Like everything else, John Dashwood sees the church at Delaford, and by extension the Church of England, as a marketable commodity for sale to the highest bidder, thus exposing the morally bankrupt end of John's unchecked greed.

John Dashwood's polar opposite is Sir John Middleton, and the reader's first clue that Mrs. Dashwood's relative is a very different kind of man is the placement of Sir John in Devon. Frederic Eden reported that the landowners in Devon believed that "[n]o labourer can at present maintain himself, wife and children on his earning. All have relief from the parish in money, or corn at a reduced price" (173). Eden found that Devon's poor rates had been "regularly progressive" and thus continually higher than the national average (175), and about 1,000 acres in South Tawton parish was common land, roughly one fifth of the total land in the parish (174). As a result, milk was part of the daily diet of Devonshire's poor whereas in most counties, milk was considered to be a luxury. Private charities were also abundant in Devon. In Tiverton parish, Eden reports that there were "more than 90 charities," including alms-houses, endowed schools, scholarships to universities, loans to the poor who were self-employed, pensions "for the old and infirm," and charities that distributed clothes and food. *Sense and Sensibility's* Sir John Middleton would fit right in with Devon's other benevolent squires.

Like a knight in shining armor, Sir John Middleton comes to the Dashwood ladies' rescue first by offering them a home and himself as their patron "in the true spirit of friendly accommodation" (23). Sir John charges only token rent, so the Dashwoods have their four-bedroom house "on very easy terms." Additionally, the Dashwoods are frequently invited to dine at Barton Park, Sir John stocks their pantry with meat, fruit, and vegetables from his own larder, and he is "for ever forming parties to eat cold ham and chicken out of doors" (33). As expensive as food was in 1795, constantly feeding the Dashwoods is a significant financial contribution to their household budget. Sir John puts his own carriage at his tenants' disposal and even pays their postage and provides them with his newspaper. Only a self-absorbed teenager like Marianne could be so ungrateful as to complain: "The rent of this cottage is said to be low; but we have it on very hard terms" (109). A "[b]enevolent,

philanthropic man” (119), Sir John models the behavior of a good squire who uses his financial resources ethically and compassionately: the “friendliness of his disposition made him happy in accommodating those, whose situation might be considered, in comparison with the past, as unfortunate” (33). In 1795, most of the population of England fit that description, and the Dashwoods are not the only ones to benefit from Sir John’s generosity. All of Barton thrives.

When Edward Ferrars walks through Barton’s countryside and into the village, what Edward observed “exceedingly pleased him” (96), the “snug” valley with its “neat farm houses” and “a troop of tidy, happy villagers” (97, 98). Edward detects no signs of poverty or neglect, no “ruined, tattered cottages.” Willoughby calls Sir John a “good-natured, honest, stupid soul” (330), but Sir John demonstrates that a squire does not have to be particularly clever in order to know what to do, or in order to actually do it.

For his part, John Willoughby is just as Sir John Middleton labels him, “a scoundrel of a fellow” (215). Willoughby calls himself “a poor dependant cousin” (75), but he is neither poor nor dependent, only deeply in debt: “for though Willoughby was independent, there was no reason to believe him rich. His estate had been rated by Sir John at about six or seven hundred a year; but he lived at an expense to which that income could hardly be equal, and he had himself often complained of his poverty” (71). Willoughby’s extravagance is only one manifestation of his flawed personality, but his inability to manage his income responsibly is the Dashwoods’ and the reader’s first clue that Willoughby is not to be trusted. Willoughby’s home county in Somerset was, not surprisingly, a difficult county for the poor. The wages were low, 16–18 pence a day, not enough to buy a shilling loaf of bread, and the poor taxes were also low, half the tax rate in Devon (Eden 302). Perversely, Willoughby is not only a wastrel, he is fully aware of the fact and yet unwilling to curb his excess.

John Willoughby’s conversation with Elinor Dashwood at Cleveland is, for the most part, a confession of his financial irresponsibility, and as Mrs. Jennings reports, Willoughby “is all to pieces” (194). Mrs. Jennings suggests the logical and obvious solution: “Why don’t he, in such a case, sell his horses, let his house, turn off his servants, and make a thorough reform at once?” (194). On further reflection, Mrs. Jennings concludes that Willoughby is merely a typical young man of his social class at the time: “But that won’t do, nowadays; nothing in the way of pleasure can ever be given up by the young men of this age.” And John Willoughby and other young Whigs like him were filling seats in Parliament and voting against any proposal to raise their taxes in

order to help the poor, whom they accused of being wasteful, immoral, and irresponsible.

Colonel Brandon's disgust with Willoughby mainly hinges on the fact that Willoughby left Eliza Williams "poor and miserable" and "in a situation of the utmost distress" (209). Like her mother, Eliza Brandon, who ended up in debtor's prison, Eliza Williams is abandoned, insolvent, and pregnant. Had Willoughby financially provided for his discarded mistress and for their illegitimate child, Brandon's low opinion of him might have been somewhat mitigated, and the duel, "to punish his conduct" (211), might never have taken place. As Mrs. Jennings reminds Elinor and the reader, illegitimate children were common enough: "the little love-child, indeed; aye, I had forgot her; but she may be 'prenticed out at small cost, and then what does it signify?" (196). Like Colonel Brandon, Elinor Dashwood is also primarily appalled by Willoughby's financial irresponsibility towards Eliza Williams.

At Cleveland, Elinor takes Willoughby to task, not so much for his seduction of Eliza as for his "cruel neglect of her" (322). Elinor reminds Willoughby that Eliza "was reduced to the extremest indigence," but Willoughby protests that "upon my soul, I did *not* know it" (322). Obviously, had Willoughby thought about Eliza at all, he would have deduced that she had nothing to live on. Fortunately for Eliza, Colonel Brandon, the real hero of the novel, saves her once again.

Alone among Austen's heroes, Colonel Brandon is never given a first name, but, if he were John Brandon, he would certainly be in the Sir John/generous-squire mold. Perhaps christening Colonel Brandon John, however, would have encouraged Austen's first readers to attempt to categorize Colonel Brandon right away when Austen wished to keep her character something of a dark horse until his actions revealed his generosity. In fact, Brandon is a serial savior, who repeatedly rescues other characters with his checkbook and provides the financing necessary to bring about *Sense and Sensibility's* happy ending.

On his first mission of mercy in aid of a former servant, Brandon finds his cousin/sister-in-law Eliza in a debtor's prison. Brandon promptly pays Eliza's debt to free her, provides for her care as she is dying, and assumes financial responsibility for little Eliza Williams, who, as a teenager, falls into poverty yet again. This time, Brandon accepts the financial burden of Willoughby's baby as well. The morality or immorality of the poor was the criteria radical Whig philanthropists used to categorize people as either the deserving or undeserving poor. Anyone judged immoral was considered un-

worthy of charity. In 1806, Patrick Colquhoun estimated that three quarters of all paupers were undeserving poor (236). The alleged immorality of the poor was extremely convenient as it justified a huge tax savings by eliminating them from the welfare rolls. Using the radical Whigs' criteria of morality, Eliza Brandon and Eliza Williams would both be undeserving of charity, but Colonel Brandon, like Prime Minister William Pitt, makes no distinction based on the morality or immorality of those in need.

Colonel Brandon also rescues Edward Ferrars from penury by giving him a church living, and, by extension, Brandon thus indirectly saves Elinor Dashwood from penny-pinching spinsterhood. Of course, Brandon rescues Marianne from the same fate by marrying her. It is interesting that these characters seem incapable of economically helping themselves. In the idealization of Colonel Brandon as a model of compassion and generosity to those in need, Jane Austen sides with William Pitt and the liberal Tories and moderate Whigs of her day, men who were willing to assist the poor at their own expense. But, alas, John Dashwood and John Willoughby remain unconverted, and Willoughby is not the only landowner in Somersetshire who neglects his responsibilities.

When he is not otherwise occupied in wandering through Sir John's house in search of a billiard room, Mrs. Jennings's son-in-law, Thomas Palmer, spends his time "going about the country canvassing against the election" (113), hoping to become a Member of Parliament. John Willoughby is already an MP, as Charlotte Palmer observes that Willoughby "is in the opposition" (114), implying a Whig actively opposing Prime Minister William Pitt. Edward Ferrars's family has been encouraging Edward to become a politician or at least to ingratiate himself with a politician in order to secure a lucrative government appointment: "His mother wished to interest him in political concerns, to get him into parliament, or to see him connected with some of the great men of the day. Mrs. John Dashwood wished it likewise" (15–16). No doubt, their choice of a political career for Edward is motivated by their *nouveaux riches* status and social aspirations. As historian John Burnett reminds us, there were numerous lucrative political appointments to be had, but "political office was the greatest prize, which could elevate a family from obscurity to an earldom in a generation" (150). To Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny, it is a consummation devoutly to be wished, but, given the public opinion in 1795, Edward's reluctance to become a politician would generally have been thought admirable. Critics consider Edward Ferrars to be Austen's least appealing hero, but, within the context of the novel, Edward is truly heroic in his passive

resistance. In his unwavering commitment to remain an honorable man, untainted by selfishness and greed, Edward thus aligns himself with Sir John Middleton and Colonel Brandon, an alliance setting him far above the dashing but morally and financially bankrupt John Willoughby.

Nicholas Roe maintains that in Jane Austen's novels, "The burden of heavy taxation to pay for the war effort goes unmentioned; so do unemployment, poor laws and the role of parish relief" (359). That Austen did not mention these events by name does not, however, mean that they were not being alluded to. *Sense and Sensibility* makes no mention of food riots, thievery, or public hangings, yet, as Roe notes, "the organization of society (hotly debated in national politics throughout her lifetime) is always at issue" (360). *Sense and Sensibility* clearly objects to an economic system that further enriches the already wealthy John Dashwood while entirely neglecting his stepmother and sisters, leaving them to the mercy of the more responsible and compassionate, the generous, tax-paying squires of the unenclosed Devon and Dorset.

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