Jane Austen and the State of the Nation

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Introduction: Jane Austen's Legacy

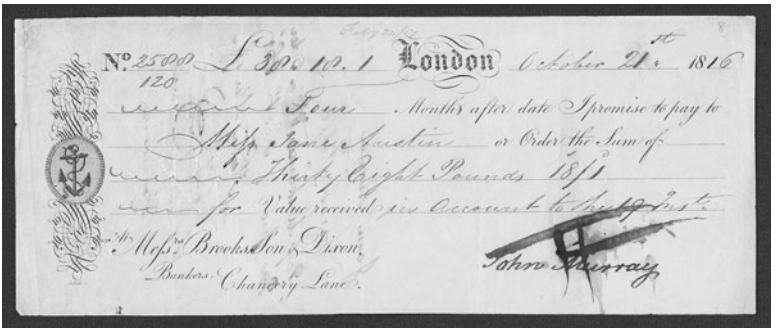

Figure I.1 Publisher John Murray misspelled Jane Austen's name when he sent her a modest royalties payment for *Emma* in 1816
Source: Image courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

In 2017, a wide-eyed, youthful image of Jane Austen is to appear on the reverse of all newly-minted, Bank of England £10 banknotes. It is an appropriate gesture, as no one, except perhaps the Queen on the other side of the banknote, is more quintessentially English. The mere mention of Jane Austen's name conjures up images of Georgian manor houses, such as Godsmersham, Austen's brother's estate in Kent, which will also feature on the new banknote. The banknote's depiction of the author's world is calm and prosperous, a safe haven unaltered by time, war, and economic upheaval, exactly the way the Bank's Board of Directors would like the public to think of their

financial institution – solid as the Bank of England. The decision to feature Jane Austen on the currency of the realm could not have been better timed nor the denomination more aptly chosen.

The banknote will make its debut exactly 200 years after Jane Austen's death in 1817, but Austen neither lived nor died in a manor house such as the one depicted on the new £10 note. She could not afford to. Although she visited such places as a guest, Austen lived in rented houses and rented rooms and was repeatedly uprooted as her father's and then her widowed mother's incomes dwindled. Her final home was Chawton Cottage, a grace-and-favor brick house on her brother's estate in Hampshire. Jane Austen never enjoyed the security of a comfortable income, the £2,000 to £10,000 a year she routinely doled out to her male characters.

Jane Austen optimistically estimated her father's income to be "very nearly six hundred a year" (*Letters* 9 January 1801), but, as Deirdre Le Faye reminds us in *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, "Mr. Austen's income from his parishes and the sale of his farm produce fluctuated unpredictably" depending on the harvest of his crops and the price of livestock (112). Contemporary sources estimated that an income of £600 was sufficient to comfortably maintain a single woman living a gentry lifestyle, as long as she was already provided with a house and "if she was careful" (Rizzo 35). It was not enough to maintain a carriage. The widowed Mrs. Austen supported herself and her two daughters with an income of £450 a year, although, after the bank crashes of 1815, the amount was reduced to £350. As an adult, Austen was given an annual £20 allowance by her parents, paid to her in quarterly £5 installments. Jane Austen sold her first copyright to a publisher for £10. Oh, the irony.

Georgian England and Jane Austen's life were much more economically and politically unstable than the reverse of the Bank of England's new £10 note indicates. She lived through recessions, depressions, bank failures, and political and economic scandals that make ours look tame by comparison. It is hardly surprising then that all of Austen's books engage in the ongoing debate about the national economy and reflect the political and economic tensions of the year or years when each book was written. Austen's modern readers know that England survived the Napoleonic Wars and all of the political and economic upheaval that they caused, but Austen and her original reading public did not have that assurance. Therefore,

the serenity and stability we find in Austen's novels, and depicted on the new £10 banknotes, are actually political statements.

Political economics in its infancy

When Jane Austen was born in 1775, the Bank of England was 81 years old, a well-established if not yet venerable institution that had been printing and circulating paper money for only 16 years. The British banking system was almost entirely unregulated. The 1720 South Sea Bubble stock scandal, which ruined investors and significantly impacted the national economy, was still within living memory. The insurance company, the Society of Lloyd's, now Lloyd's of London, was four years old, and the underwriters were still meeting to conduct business in Lloyd's coffeehouse. Adam Smith was writing the definitive text of classical economics, *Wealth of Nations*, which would be published and distributed as Jane Austen slept in her cradle. Austen was 24 years old when the first income tax was levied and 26 years old when the London Stock Exchange opened for business. In spite of the 1720 Bubble Act, investment was a very risky business. Economically, it was an exciting and a perilous age, a brave new world of credit, paper money, high finance, and personal and national debt, which the majority of the British public found baffling.

Domestic economics

Throughout Jane Austen's life, most business transactions involved an exchange of coins, and all anyone needed for a shopping excursion was a heavy coin purse. But more people were living on borrowed money than ever before, and the debtor's prisons were perpetually overcrowded. The average daily wage for a working-class man employed full-time at manual labor was a shilling, more or less, depending on if the man worked in the country or in the town, which county he lived in, and the year in question. The average annual income for a man was about £30 (Picketty 413). Women were paid half the wages of men employed at the same jobs, and children were paid even less. People whose jobs required reading and writing earned more, but the majority of the population was illiterate. As economist Thomas Picketty observes in *Capital*, wages remained low,

"very stable reference points" throughout Jane Austen's life (105), although the cost of consumer goods fluctuated wildly. In the midst of all of this economic chaos, Picketty notes that Jane Austen obviously understood her nation's economy and "knew what she was talking about" (362): "Austen was fully aware of how the working class lived, on their £30, and she also knew that to live comfortably and elegantly," a person needed an income of "at least twenty to thirty times that much. The characters in her novels consider themselves free from need only if they dispose of incomes of 500 to 1,000 pounds a year" (105–06), though Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters in *Sense and Sensibility* find it difficult to live on £500.

Small, thin, silver pennies, or fractions of pennies, sufficed for the majority of purchases, but base-metal token coins minted by counties, cities, mines, factories, banks, and businesses were also in wide circulation. As tokens contained no precious metal, they, therefore, had no intrinsic value. Individuals decided for themselves whether or not to accept tokens in exchange for goods and services. As everyone realized, should the issuing bank or business fail, the token coins they were holding would be worthless, but the public's main concern was with paper money. Like token coins, paper money also had no intrinsic value, and most Britons considered a paper banknote to be no better than an I.O.U. Most paper banknotes were either deposited in bank accounts or exchanged for coins within a month. Some people refused to accept paper money at all and demanded payment for large sums in gold guineas.

At the time, people were generally suspicious of a financial system built entirely on trust, but not necessarily trustworthy, so Adam Smith, and writers who published after Smith's death in 1790, attempted to explain the free market system to the minority of the population who were literate, roughly estimated to be the wealthiest 30%. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was immediately hailed as a classic. Tory Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger and his Whig rival Edmund Burke both claimed to be disciples of Adam Smith, as did almost every other member of Parliament, and it is impossible to imagine that Jane Austen had not also read *Wealth of Nations*, as well as Smith's other bestseller, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. But as the old century receded and the new century progressed, the relatively stable economy Adam Smith described was undeniably deteriorating, and Smith's invisible hand of the marketplace was unaccountably inactive.

A series of economic disasters, harvest failures, decreasing wages, increasing food prices, growing unemployment, and the rapidly multiplying national debt, a necessary evil required to fund the Napoleonic Wars, were conspiring to impoverish the majority of Britons and to exponentially increase the demands on the existing welfare system. There was no escaping the national malaise, not even in the most remote areas of Jane Austen's rural Hampshire. News of the debates in Parliament and the price of bread in London spread throughout Britain on the stagecoaches and mail coaches that carried newspapers everywhere they went. Wherever Jane Austen lived or traveled, the latest London news was never more than a day away.

Amateur economists

Explaining the economics behind the nation's poverty and debt and proposing solutions was considered to be everyone's business and anyone's right. In *A/Moral Economics: Classical Political Economy & Cultural Authority in Nineteenth-Century England*, Claudia Klaver refers to this as the "uneven development of economic discourse" (XXIII). Economics was not yet considered to be a science, and economists were not thought of as professionals, at least not before David Ricardo attempted to apply scientific principles to the national economy in his 1817 treatise, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, published the year Jane Austen died. Before Ricardo's call for order and reason, and reliable, verifiable statistics, anyone who could get into print felt informed enough to offer opinions and suggestions.

Historian Deborah Valenze, in *The Social Life of Money in the English Past*, notes that "money became the topic *du jour*" of authors in the late seventeenth century: "Writers engaged the subject from the perspective of political economy and the state, as developments in public credit, stock investments, and the appearance of the Bank of England in 1694 required debate" (159–60). Men and, increasingly, women wrote about the political, social, moral, and cultural implications of money, and on intrinsic value, commerce, and taxation. As historian Kathryn Gleadle explains in *British Women in the Nineteenth Century*, even without the vote, women were politically active and particularly conspicuous in the anti-slavery movement, campaigning for Chartism, and against the Corn Laws: "By the turn of the nineteenth century a rich tradition of women's political writing had

evolved which used not only the conventional political genres of the pamphlet and the political disquisition, but also poetry, novels and letters" (71). Women also bought, sold, and paid taxes, so they felt as knowledgeable and as entitled as men to express their opinions on the economy. But, without a doubt, Members of Parliament wrote the most and claimed to be the best authorities on the nation's financial situation, and they were the only ones in a position to actually do anything about it.

A contentious parliament

The old Elizabethan Poor Laws, enacted in 1601, stated that no one could be allowed to starve to death or to die from exposure. The law required that every parish provide a poorhouse as a shelter for the homeless and that the residents of the poorhouse were given daily bread. The funding was to be provided by local landowners, who also set their own tax rates. The supervision of the poorhouse and the care of the residents was the duty of the Church of England clergyman in the parish, the local magistrate, and the parish council. Jane Austen's father, the Reverend George Austen, would have been personally responsible for the care of the poor in his parish. The Reverend James Austen, Jane Austen's brother and another parish priest, and Edward Austen Knight, another brother, a landowner, and a magistrate, were also directly involved in the administration of welfare. Edward Austen Knight would have additionally been paying the taxes that supported his parish poorhouses in both Hampshire and in Kent. Political apathy and indifference to the Poor Laws was not an option for the Austens.

Liberal Tories and moderate Whigs, led by Prime Minister Pitt, were proposing to raise taxes in order to expand welfare benefits to provide food for the poor. Pitt's plan included a new ten percent income tax to be levied on upper incomes. It would become the first tax on income when it was finally approved in 1799, but getting the bill through the House of Commons proved to be an uphill battle. Pitt was only able to muster enough votes by promising to use the money exclusively to wage war, not for helping the poor, and by promising that the tax would end as soon as the war did.

Ultra-conservative reactionary Tories insisted that the old Elizabethan Poor Laws already in place were adequate measures to provide for the poor and that nothing else needed to be done, no additional welfare

benefits and no new taxes. Radical Whigs, like William Pitt's political rivals, Edmund Burke and Charles James Fox, went further. Radicals argued that too much was already being done for the poor, and they advocated reducing the Poor Law benefits in order to cut taxes on the wealthy. Thus, how writers referred to the economy, how they depicted the rich and the poor, and the solutions they offered for their characters' economic problems were unavoidably politically charged.

Politics

The Tory versus Whig political ambiguity of Jane Austen's age has led to some erroneous twentieth-century assumptions about Austen's political sympathies. In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler maintains that Jane Austen was "a Tory rather than a Whig" (2), but Edward Neill in *Jane Austen and Politics* disagrees with Butler and argues that, in her novels, Austen "seems to embody, and then to deconstruct, myths of Tory patriarchy" (8), supposedly proving that Jane Austen sympathized with the Whigs. But this either/or scenario is based on an oversimplification of the politics of Georgian England, as Josephine Ross in *Jane Austen: A Companion* explains:

> The clear-cut distinctions of modern parliamentary politics had yet to emerge; and while the Whigs in the House of Commons tended to represent the interests of the aristocracy and upper classes, as well as expressing liberal ideals, the Tories – with their broad adherence to the more traditionally middle-class principles of upholding the Crown and keeping disaffection in check – were more identified with the landed gentry, and educated, but modestly situated, families such as the Austens. (237)

At the time, the two-party system was evolving. Political historian Stephen Lee describes it as "a rudimentary party system" (19), and there was a great deal of dissention in both parties' ranks. For instance, William Wilberforce began his career as a Whig, but he crossed the aisle and voted with the Tories whenever he agreed with them on an issue, which turned out to be frequently. When the Whigs attempted to rein Wilberforce in, he resisted. Acknowledging his alienation from the Whigs, but not willing to label himself as a Tory, Wilberforce declared himself to be an independent, and Wilberforce was hardly the only MP to go rogue.

Tory Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger's father, former Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder, was a Whig, and Pitt the Younger's predecessor as Prime Minister, William Henry Cavendish-Bentinck, the Duke of Portland, began his career as a Whig and switched parties. Although a liberal Tory himself, William Pitt the Younger claimed, rather unconvincingly, to be "an independent Whig" (qtd. in Hague 582), but as he consistently voted with the Tories and was a Tory Prime Minister, he is considered to be the father of the modern British Conservative party. His supporters and political appointees were an assortment of Tories and Whigs, and William Pitt the Younger was the only man in the House of Commons who could command so much crossover support. In fact, Pitt would have been powerless without a majority of Members, both Tories and Whigs, who felt free to vote independently.

While other people called the Prime Minister's coalition "Pittites," they referred to themselves as "Mr. Pitt's friends" (Hague 356), implying that they voted with William Pitt rather than with the Tory party or against the Whigs. There were reactionary, conservative, moderate, and liberal Tories, and the Whig party was factionalized into moderates and radicals, who then subdivided into Portland Whigs, Rockingham Whigs, Benthamites, Foxites, Old Whigs who voted with Edmund Burke, and New Whigs who voted against Burke. Party platforms were vague, open to interpretation, and subject to change, but Tories generally represented the agricultural interests of the landed gentry, and the Whigs represented aristocrats, bankers, manufacturers, merchants, and anyone else who lived primarily on investments or by trade. Tories predominated in rural areas, and Whigs represented big cities and manufacturing interests. The working class were on their own.

In lieu of campaign buttons, Tories wore red coats to proclaim their political affiliation, and Whigs wore blue coats. Thus, a man could declare his political opinion without saying a word, but there were a great many political "turncoats" who voted independently, as depicted in the 1799 print, *Trying on a Turn'd Coat*. In the print, Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, as the tailor, wears a pale pink coat to demonstrate his own slightly-ambiguous political affiliation, and he helps a Whig into a new red coat with a blue lining that can be turned to be either red or blue, as the vote required. Blue-coated radical Whigs Richard Sheridan and Charles Fox look

on in horror. In political prints, William Pitt is often depicted in a pink coat, suggesting that he is a weak Tory, but he sometimes wears a purple coat, to denote that he is a blend of the two parties. The cartoon Pitt is also depicted in a blue coat with red trim, thus a turncoat, but still other prints show Pitt wearing a bright scarlet coat, leaving absolutely no room for doubt. The Prime Minister's various coat colors in the political cartoons of the era only reflects the lack of cohesion in party politics.

The death of William Pitt in 1806 left a void that, in such a divisive House of Commons, no one could muster enough support to fill, so a national unity government was hastily formed under Prime Minister Lord Grenville and optimistically christened "The Ministry of All the Talents." A former Tory who deserted Pitt in 1801 to join the Whigs, Grenville attempted to form a Pitt-like coalition composed of both Tories and Whigs, but Grenville lacked Pitt's considerable powers of persuasion. Most of Grenville's appointees were Whigs, and not necessarily moderates, who had little in common with the Tories in his cabinet. Consequently, Grenville's advisors spent the majority of their time squabbling amongst themselves. The Ministry of All the Talents survived only one contentious year, but it was time enough to provoke Jane Austen to write a poem, *On Sir Home Popham's Sentence, April 1807*.

In its opening salvo, the *Popham* poem condemns Grenville's government as "a Ministry pitiful, angry and mean" (*MW* 446). Brian Southam describes the *Popham* poem as "the kind of ferocious little squib (in the tradition of Pope and Swift) which commonly appeared in the press on contentious political issues and personalities" (*Navy* 142). As Southam notes, the *Popham* poem "burns with indignation, a document (if we want to look at it in this light) which upsets any notion of Jane Austen's indifference to the battle-ground of public life and the to-and-fro of political debate." The *Popham* poem and a later political poem, *On the Weald of Kent Canal Bill* written in 1811, firmly side with the Tories and insult "Wicked" politicians, that is the Whigs, who oppose them (*MW* 449). However, it could be argued that the *Popham* and *Kent Canal Bill* poems were written in response to two isolated political issues and do not, therefore, prove anything beyond the author's opinion in these particular instances. And, when even the political affiliations of the era's Prime Ministers proved difficult to pin down, Jane Austen's political leanings have also, and not surprisingly, been open to speculation.

In *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, Deirdre Le Faye records that a politically partisan Jane Austen wrote bold statements in the margins of the Austen family's edition of Oliver Goldsmith's *The History of England*: "marginalia in Goldsmith show that in her teens she was staunchly anti-Whig and anti-Republican" (59). One of Austen's marginal notes seems clear enough: "Nobly said! Spoken like a Tory!" (qtd. in Tomalin 137). However, Austen's youth and her precocious sense of irony afford some justification to doubt her sincerity. This was, after all, written by the same irreverent young hand that recorded her own fictitious and bigamous marriage entries on the specimen page of the marriage register in Steventon church, where Miss Jane Austen was united in ink to "Henry Frederic Howard Fitzwilliam, of London," to "Edmund Arthur William Mortimer, of Liverpool" and to the no-doubt rakish "Jack Smith," address unknown (Le Faye, *Family Record* 70). But there is more evidence to suggest that the Goldsmith marginalia was sincere.

Josephine Ross convincingly argues that Jane Austen would have recognized a kindred spirit in the witty and eloquent Prime Minister William Pitt, and that Austen would have been unimpressed by the radical Whigs who opposed him:

> The cool, pragmatic, upright and clever Tory, William Pitt the Younger, who was Britain's Prime Minister during much of Jane's adult life, was far more to her liking than a swaggering, flamboyant populist such as the brilliant Whig leader Charles James Fox; and as the French Revolution disintegrated into misgovernment and bloodshed, in the early 1790s, she would have had no sympathy with the outlandish views of a crusading MP such as Thomas Paine. (238)

Nor does it seem likely that Austen would have aligned herself with radical Whig Edmund Burke, who made a public spectacle of himself while debating William Pitt on the floor of the House of Commons. Burke worked himself into a rage until, crimson-faced and shaking in anger, he was literally screaming at Pitt and accusing the Prime Minister of treason, to the shock and embarrassment of Burke's Whig colleagues (Hague 90). Spectators from both political parties concluded that Burke was either intoxicated or mentally deranged, and even radical Whigs were impressed by Pitt's unflappable composure

on the occasion, rising above it all like the hero in a Jane Austen novel.

Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, also believes that Austen was a Tory, but Armstrong adds an important proviso, that Austen was not a reactionary or even a moderate Tory: "we would have to place Austen with the liberal Tories of her day" (159), which implies that while Jane Austen believed that Britain's economy was basically sound [reactionary Tory], she also acknowledged the country's serious financial problems [moderate Tory], and she favored change [liberal Tory], such as William Pitt's reform bills. So, although Jane Austen was a Tory, and thus a conservative, she was also a liberal, that is a liberal conservative, which was not then the contradiction in terms that it seems to be in the twenty-first century, particularly in the United States. The terms liberal and conservative were not at the time considered incompatible, just as the 1890s Progressive Movement in the United States was composed of Republicans, therefore conservatives, who advocated change, thus making them liberals. As a liberal conservative in her own time, Jane Austen supported Parliamentary reform, as becomes obvious in *Mansfield Park*, although *Catharine: or the Bower* is even earlier proof.

That Jane Austen should choose to write *Catharine: or the Bower* in 1792 comes as no surprise when one considers the political scandal of that year, when it was alleged that, due to rotten and pocket boroughs, 157 newly elected members of the House of Commons had been chosen by 84 men, and another 150 members were re-elected by 70 individuals (Hammond & Hammond, *Village Labourer* 13). The 1792 scandal inspired a petition drive, and in 1793, the petition demanding political reform was delivered to the House of Commons. In a rare act of non-partisan unity, both Whig and Tory MPs agreed to ignore it. As it was, only one in eight Englishmen could vote (Ross 237), and the Members of Parliament they had voted for saw no problem with the existing political system.

A busy press

Between 1790 and 1817, the years of Jane Austen's adult life, economic treatises written by politicians were controversial, partisan, and extremely popular. Bestsellers, such as Frederic Eden's 1797

The State of the Poor, Thomas Malthus's 1798 *Essay on the Principal of Population*, Patrick Colquhoun's 1806 *A Treatise on Indigence*, and Jeremy Bentham's 1812 *Pauper Management Improved*, were all written by radical Whigs who depicted the poor as drains on the taxpayers [Eden], as the culpable creators of their own and of Britain's poverty [Malthus], and as a dangerous, criminal class who threatened the safety and financial security of their betters [Colquhoun and Bentham]. The books described, in more or less detail, the alleged immorality, criminality, and violent tendencies of the poor. There was a strong element of gothic horror in the depictions of the working class, especially vivid in the writings of Malthus and Colquhoun. Colquhoun estimated that three quarters of all poor people were alcoholics, thieves, and prostitutes, and, thus, undeserving of charity.

Publications on politics were the favorite reading material of private book clubs, and political non-fiction competed with novels, romances, and plays for space on the bookshelves of circulating libraries (Oldfield 16–17). Even if the Reverend George Austen had carefully avoided adding political treatises to the more than five hundred books in his personal library (*Letters*, 16 January 1801), a highly unlikely scenario, his daughter Jane would still have encountered the bestsellers of Eden, Malthus, Colquhoun, and Bentham at the circulating libraries to which she subscribed. As an avid reader, Jane Austen must have read at least some, if not all, of the Whigs' books.

As a clergyman in the Church of England and as a parish priest, Jane Austen's father would almost certainly have read and probably owned Frederic Eden's three-volume *The State of the Poor* (1797), a fascinating, ground-breaking, early example of investigative reporting and exposé journalism about England's poorhouses and their residents. Eden and an anonymous assistant visited poorhouses in every county in England and reported on the food, clothing, bedding, and housing of the residents, as well as the tax rates that supported these institutions. Eden interviewed the poor and those in charge of their care, including a large number of clergymen, inspected food and sleeping quarters, recorded the age of poorhouse residents, inquired into the care of children, and published daily and weekly menus and the weight of daily bread rations. *The State of the Poor* contained information that could be found in no other contemporary source.

Eden's report on the implementation of the Poor Laws in every county in England must have been of professional interest to the

Austen family, and the geographical placement of the characters in Jane Austen's novels, dispersed throughout the counties of England as they are, reflects exactly the kind of knowledge easily gleaned from *The State of the Poor*. If, unaccountably, Jane Austen had not actually read Eden's book, her novels reveal that she was certainly familiar with its content, as the following chapters demonstrate.

Jane Austen would also have known the opinions of the leading politicians of her era, and not only through their speeches, pamphlets, books, and reputations, but by reading the newspapers. *The Hampshire Chronicle*, the weekly newspaper in Jane Austen's home county, would have been one of the newspapers that regularly found its way into the Austens' homes and the homes of their friends and acquaintances. Published in Winchester, roughly sixteen miles from both Steventon and Chawton, *The Hampshire Chronicle* was a major point of reference for the discussion that follows. Steventon, Jane Austen's home for the first 25 years of her life, was a small, rural village with a population of about 150 (Le Faye, *Country Life* 18), too small to support its own newspaper. Chawton was larger, with 347 inhabitants in 1811 (Le Faye, *Country Life* 246), but still too small to support a press. Jane Austen would certainly have read other newspapers when she traveled, when she lived in Bath and Southampton, and when she visited her brothers in London and Kent, but *The Hampshire Chronicle* would have been the Austens' local newspaper for the majority of Jane Austen's life and at least one of the newspapers she would have been reading when she composed her novels. Today, the Hampshire Records Office in Winchester has a complete set of *The Hampshire Chronicle* on file, and the newspapers provide the researcher with a context for Jane Austen's novels as Austen would have seen history unfold, without the benefit of 200 years of historical hindsight.

The Hampshire Chronicle covered local politics on its first page and devoted the second of its four pages to reports of political events in London including the proceedings in the House of Commons. As Jane Austen was well aware, the Whig party represented the interests of bankers, factory owners, merchants, and people whose primary source of income was invested money. Wealthy women – like Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* – also fell into this category, as women could not legally own land. The leader of the Whigs was a radical, Charles James Fox, who was routinely depicted

in the political cartoons of the day in tattered clothing or rags. The joke here was that the wealthy Fox continually complained of being impoverished by taxes. As there was no income tax until 1799, the Whigs paid taxes only on their private property, such as houses and carriages. The landowning Tories paid the majority of the Poor Law taxes. Taxes on consumer items, such as tea, sugar, and salt, spread the tax burden throughout society, but ironically the Whigs, who paid the least amount of their incomes in taxes, nevertheless complained about taxes the most.

Representing the interests of the rural gentry and agriculture, Tories were often put on the defensive and forced to attempt to refute the most outlandish claims of the radical Whigs. But people tend to believe whatever they want to believe, so discrediting an assertion that has no basis in reality can still prove to be surprisingly difficult. This is how Jane Austen and her novels enter the national political discourse.

Jane Austen enters the fray

Political satires, such as Jonathan Swift's 1726 *Gulliver's Travels*, were a well-established form of fiction dating back to the plays of the Greeks, but more realistic fiction, such as William Godwin's 1794 novel, *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, demonstrated the persuasive effectiveness of embedding a political point of view in a novel. Godwin's title alone explains the form; the political statement – *Things as They Are* – takes precedence over the tale of the main character – *Caleb Williams*. Jane Austen must have been intrigued with the possibilities of writing political novels as she first experimented with realistic political fiction as a teenager in her 1792 story, *Catharine: or the Bower*, where the narrator and main character take a liberal Tory/moderate Whig political position and laugh at the radical Whig hostess, Mrs. Percival, and her reactionary Tory house-guest, Mr. Stanley, a Member of Parliament. *Catharine: or the Bower* clearly delineates the characters' different places on the political spectrum, but the plot fails to develop from there. Significantly, there is no love story. The fragment that survives is clearly the beginning of a political novel.

Jane Austen wrote her original version of *Sense and Sensibility*, an epistolary novel titled *Elinor and Marianne*, in 1795, and

Mrs. Dashwoods' financial problems reflected those of Georgian England at the time, as the vast majority of people were learning to live on less. Between 1750 and 1794, the price of consumer goods increased by 50% to 100% (Burnett 137), although wages did not rise in proportion to the cost of living, only increasing about 25% (Hammond & Hammond 111). Economically, things were already bad enough, but the harvest failure of 1794–95 doubled the price of bread and created widespread poverty and hunger.

Exactly what Parliament would do in the long term was anyone's guess, but the characters in *Sense and Sensibility* are reenacting the Poor Law debates in the House of Commons and reflecting the politicians' response to the crisis. Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger advocated instituting a national minimum wage based on the price of a loaf of wheat bread, expanding the existing welfare system, and raising Poor Law taxes. The 1795 radical Whig political cartoon print, *The Night Mare*, depicts John Bull's sleep being disturbed by his two greatest fears: The invading Frenchman at the window, wearing a small guillotine around his neck, is less menacing than Prime Minister William Pitt, labeled "taxes," sitting on the sleeping taxpayer's chest. Pitt is poised to shove an expensive loaf of bread – representing welfare taxes and a national minimum wage – down John Bull's throat. Other prints from the era picture Pitt with a giant club labeled "taxes" swinging back to pummel a cowering John Bull, or Pitt mercilessly pulling John Bull through a wringer. Still more prints show John Bull besieged by "the blue devils" of depression, all labeled as various taxes, or being plagued by troops of tax "monsters."

Of course, Prime Minister Pitt had his supporters as well as his critics, and Tory prints depict Pitt as the English patron saint, St. George, doing battle with a Whig dragon, or Pitt being confronted by a nest of "Billy Biters," a repulsive clutch of little birds of prey with the heads of prominent Whig politicians. Pitt's tax, welfare, and minimum wage proposals seemed reasonable measures to his supporters among the liberal Tories and moderate Whigs. After all, Pitt was not proposing anything that some counties and parishes had not already done themselves on the local level.

The county of Berkshire had already adopted a minimum wage based on the price of wheat bread, commonly referred to as The Speenhamland System, and various counties and parishes had voluntarily increased their Poor Law taxes and expanded their welfare

benefits. Jane Austen's geographic placement of her admirable characters on estates in southwest England reflects the generous response to poverty that William Pitt proposed and which the landowners in Sir John Middleton's Devonshire and Colonel Brandon's Dorset had already voluntarily adopted. The no-new-taxes position that radical Whigs opposed to Pitt argued for is echoed in the conversations and actions of the miserly John and Fanny Dashwood in the county of Sussex, where nothing had changed and taxes and welfare benefits remained low.

Pride and Prejudice was originally written as *First Impressions* in the year following the harvest failure and in the midst of massive hunger and unemployment. Prime Minister Pitt continued to support a more generous welfare program and the imposition of a national minimum wage, but the majority of the Members of Parliament opposed Pitt's tax and wage increases. In her depiction of Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Kent, Austen sets her text in opposition to the radical Whigs of her day, and, by her placement of Mr. Darcy's estate in Derbyshire in the industrial north, Austen's hero serves as an example of a moderate Whig who supports the higher taxes, higher wages, and generous welfare benefits that Pitt and the liberal Tories and moderate Whigs in his Cabinet advocated.

Northanger Abbey was composed in the year following the Restriction Act, a government intervention planned and executed by William Pitt to save the Bank of England from collapse, a bank bailout that Pitt skillfully maneuvered without the approval of Parliament. The financial situation of Catherine Morland and her family is an analogy for the economic stability of the Bank of England, much like the workman, businessman, farmer analogies Adam Smith uses to illustrate national financial concepts in *Wealth of Nations*. Catherine Morland's irrational fears based on gothic novels are similar to the horrific French-invasion rumors that created an actual panic and a run on the Bank. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney functions as the voice of reason, and, as he encourages Catherine to "remember the country and age in which we live" (*NA* 197), Henry employs the same line of reasoning that William Pitt used to reassure the nation in his speeches in the House of Commons. Austen – once again – shows support for Pitt, and for his Bank bailout and liberal Tory policies.

Mansfield Park was the first Austen novel written after the death of Prime Minister Pitt in 1806 and the failure of the short-lived coalition

government that followed him in 1807. In *Mansfield Park*, the focus expands into the British Empire, but the novel is primarily a scathing satire of the incompetence and corruption at home in the House of Commons. Sir Thomas Bertram's plantation in Antigua suggests that the most competent Members of Parliament were distracted, to the nation's detriment, by Britain's lucrative overseas financial investments. The Mansfield Park play is a reenactment of a contentious session of Parliament where nothing is actually accomplished, and Jane Austen spoofs the politicians who seemed to be fiddling as their country burned, or at least deteriorated economically. Villain Henry Crawford is depicted as a smooth-talking, corrupt, and corrupting politician, while villainess Mrs. Norris serves as a cipher for the radical Whigs and functions as a condemnation of their miserly and self-serving motives.

Emma appears to be Jane Austen's suggestion of a solution to the national welfare problem – that Britain's poor can be adequately helped at the parish level and by local authorities, such as the novel's hero, Magistrate George Knightley. Significantly, in Surrey, where the novel is set, the gentry had willingly adopted the main points of William Pitt's 1797 welfare proposal, expanding welfare benefits, raising Poor Law taxes to cover the expense, adopting a minimum wage, and imposing a moratorium of acts of enclosure, which deprived the poor of food. Thus, Austen's novel offers Surrey's fictional Highbury as a safe haven for the poor, like the Bateses, and a model to be emulated by the rest of Britain.

Austen's last completed novel, *Persuasion*, was written in the year following the post-Waterloo economic crash, when one third of the banks in England failed and the country descended into an economic depression, but the novel ends a few months before the crash. *Persuasion*'s timing suggests that Austen is speculating on the cause of the crash and how the nation will respond in the aftermath. Foolish wastrels like Sir Walter Elliot, Member of Parliament, are about to be weeded out. Sensible characters like Anne Elliot, Captain Benwick, and Mrs. Smith realize that they must persevere and recreate themselves in order to begin again, but they can, and they do, which is *Persuasion*'s hopeful message to the nation.

Sanditon, the first 12 chapters of a novel that Jane Austen began but was unable to complete due to her death, revolves around a man who has invested all of his money in building upscale housing for a booming economy. As no one is buying or even leasing his empty

houses, his investment scheme is clearly doomed to failure that will leave him bankrupt. Not only is the story eerily similar to the recent housing crisis in the United States, Austen is prefiguring the social-problem novels of the Victorians. Like Austen's 1792 fragment, *Catherine: or the Bower*, *Sanditon* is well underway without a love story.

Jane Austen's agenda

To consider Jane Austen's novels as merely escapist love stories is to do the author a grave disservice and to miss the political messages that would have been obvious to Austen's original readers. As state-of-the-nation novels, Jane Austen's books promote a liberal Tory political agenda. Austen's political bias remained consistent throughout her career, and all of her novels uphold the Tory party line, although not an ultra-conservative, reactionary, extremist position. Additionally, each of her books alter in response to the specific national economic and political upheaval at the time of each novel's composition. In her early novels, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey*, Austen advocated political action at the national level to care for the poor and to stabilize the economy. Austen appears to have lost confidence in the national government after the death of Prime Minister William Pitt in 1806, as *Mansfield Park* is a condemnation of politicians in the House of Commons, and the conclusion offers little hope for change.

The novels that followed *Mansfield Park* suggest that local government and individuals working together in their parish communities were the only hope of achieving economic stability and adequate provision for the poor, as Parliament had made it clear by this time that they would not be intervening to help the needy. *Emma* offers a successful formula for caring for the poor based on a wise and benevolent local magistrate and a concerned and active parish counsel. In *Persuasion*, the 1815 financial crash and subsequent economic depression calls for a fundamental change in government, a realistic evaluation of the state of the nation, and a new beginning. Those unwilling to change or to make sacrifices, such as Sir Walter Elliot, would be winnowed out by their own perversity.

The discussion in this book does not include consideration of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, or the British Empire. This is not to imply that Jane Austen had nothing to say about

international politics, foreign policy, war, or imperialism. No doubt, Jane Austen held opinions on all of those subjects, and Chartism, abolition, and the Irish Question as well, but the focus of this work is limited to English politics in the House of Commons and national economic policies in England because the subjects are worthy of attention, have not been thoroughly explored, and are pervasive throughout Austen's writing. The focus is further limited to politics and political economics as Jane Austen's original English reading public would have understood and discussed them, as reflected in Austen's writing and in the newspapers and political treatises written by Austen's contemporaries. This is by no means an exhaustive study.

Jane Austen's love stories have stood the test of time, but her concerns about the poor and the economic decline of her nation, also, remain as relevant today as they were when they were written 200 years ago. However, what was obvious to Austen's first readers has become obscure, even undetectable, to her readers in the twenty-first century. Today, when we encounter references or statements in Jane Austen's novels that we do not understand, we tend to read over them or perhaps to misinterpret them, hence the need for this book. An appreciation of the political controversies, debates, and economic problems of Jane Austen's era opens up a new way to read her novels, or more correctly, the old way of reading her novels, with the understanding that there is more at stake for Austen's characters, and her readers, than Mr. Darcy's pounds per annum.

1
Juvenilia: A Liberal Conservative

National politics and political economics play a prominent role in Jane Austen's *Catharine: or the Bower*, dated August 1792 and written when Jane Austen was 16 years old. The protagonist, Catharine or Kitty, lives with her aunt and guardian, Mrs. Percival, a radical Whig, who maintains that "the welfare of every Nation depends upon the virtue of it's [sic] individuals" (*MW* 232), a common evangelical, radical Whig refrain at the time. Mrs. Percival's the-sky-is-falling scenario is similar to the predictions of radical, evangelical Whigs, like Jeremy Bentham and Patrick Colquhoun, who blamed the immorality of the poor for Britain's supposed impending economic collapse (Wilson, *Making of* 91–2). Moderate Whigs expressed less evangelical zeal and were considerably more hopeful of Britain's economic survival, but to radical Mrs. Percival, the personal is definitely political, and she is appalled to think that her niece "who offends in so gross a manner against decorum & propriety is certainly hastening [the Nation's] ruin."

Just to stir things up a bit, Mrs. Percival's houseguest, Mr. Stanley, is "a Member of the house of Commons" and a reactionary Tory (*MW* 197). Throughout Jane Austen's lifetime, the Tory party was increasingly factionalizing into "Reactionary" and "Liberal" Tories (Lee 28), the reactionaries opposing all change and the liberals, led by Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger calling for political and economic reform. There were also, of course, moderate Tories who supported some reforms and opposed others. In *Catharine: or the Bower*, MP Stanley is a reactionary Tory, which, in Mrs. Percival's house, is bound to cause trouble.

Figure 1.1 In the 1794 print above, John Bull doesn't know what to think as Whig Opposition Leader Charles James Fox (on the left) predicts the nation's impending doom while Tory Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger (on the right) assures him that Britain is flourishing

Source: Image courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Whenever Mrs. Percival and Mr. Stanley are together, they represent the two opposing, extremist viewpoints of Parliament, and they are unable to refrain from beginning "their usual conversation on Politics":

> This was a subject on which they could never agree, for Mr. Stanley who considered himself as perfectly qualified by his Seat in the House, to decide on it without hesitation, resolutely maintained that the Kingdom had not for ages been in so flourishing & prosperous a state, and Mrs. Percival with equal warmth, tho' perhaps less argument, as vehemently asserted that the whole Nation would speedily be ruined, and everything as she expressed herself be at sixes & sevens.
>
> (*MW* 212)

While Mrs. Percival provides no evidence to justify her prediction of the imminent collapse of the economy, Mr. Stanley dismisses Britain's real and pressing problems, such as deficit spending for the war, the unprecedented national debt, high unemployment, and widespread poverty. As everyone was well aware, the flood of British immigrants to America and the transportation of petty thieves, many of them children, to Australia suggested that all was not well at home. In defending their own extreme political persuasions, Mrs. Percival and Mr. Stanley exaggerate the economic state of the nation until they both become ridiculous.

The character of Catharine or Kitty functions as the voice of reason in her thoughts and dialogue, a harbinger of intelligent and prudent characters to come, such as *Sense and Sensibility*'s Elinor Dashwood and *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet. Listening to Mrs. Percival's and Mr. Stanley's arguments without becoming involved in their irrational quarrel, Kitty's calm, non-partisan attitude invites the reader to assume a similar point of view, that of the liberal Tory or moderate Whig:

> It was not however unamusing to Kitty to listen to the Dispute … without taking any share in it herself, she found it very entertaining to observe the eagerness with which they both defended their opinions, and could not help thinking that Mr. Stanley would not feel more disappointed if her Aunt's expectations were fulfilled, than her Aunt would be mortified by their failure.

The message here is plain: Political extremists lose sight of what is at stake, namely the welfare of the nation, and descend into an endless series of disputes based not on reality but on their own gross exaggerations. Mrs. Percival and Mr. Stanley MP, thus, reenact the debates in the House of Commons.

When Mr. Stanley refuses to acknowledge that problems exist, he suggests that nothing needs to be done. By insisting that the nation is doomed, Mrs. Percival implies that it is futile to attempt any intervention. Thus, both extreme political positions produce the same result – inaction – a very astute observation for a 16-year-old author. Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour reached the same conclusion a century later: "conservative prejudices are rooted in a great past and liberal ones planted in an imaginary future" (qtd. in Williams 13). Balfour thus agreed with Jane Austen that, regardless of party affiliation, politicians err by ignoring the reality of the present. Balfour's uncle, Lord Salisbury, another conservative Prime Minister, contended that the business of politicians was to effect change in the here and now: "the object of our [conservative] party is not and ought not to be simply to keep things as they are" (qtd. in Williams 12). Both Jane Austen and Tory Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger would have agreed.

According to James Edward Austen-Leigh, his aunt, Jane Austen, "probably shared the feeling of moderate Toryism which prevailed in her family" (*A Memoir* 71). Jane Austen's niece, Caroline Austen, assumed likewise: "The general politics Tory – rather taken for granted I suppose, than discussed, as even my Uncles seldom talked about it" (*My Aunt* 173). Remaining non-confrontational about their political opinions was no doubt prudent of the Austens. Jane Austen's father, the Reverend George Austen, was dependent on patronage for his clerical livings, as was Jane Austen's eldest brother James, and clergymen had to remain in the good graces of their patrons, whether they were Tories or Whigs. The clerical Austens' patrons were Tories. Because there was no separation of church and state, people's religions usually dictated their political affiliations. The Church of England has been referred to, with some justification, as the Tory party at prayer, but Church of England evangelicals were generally Whigs, as were dissenters and non-conformists, such as Methodists and Quakers. Oxford graduates, like Jane Austen's father, were generally Tories, and Cambridge graduates tended to be Whigs. And then, as today, there were one-issue voters.

Whig William Wilberforce championed the anti-slavery movement, and the Austen family supported the abolition of slavery; Jane Austen's brother, Captain Francis Austen, was particularly appalled by the slave trade, which he witnessed firsthand. However, although Wilberforce was leading the attack on the slave trade, the merchants who profited from slavery and who were most vehemently opposed to the regulation of the slave trade were also Whigs. Prime Minister William Pitt and many other Tories supported the abolitionists. In this case, as in many others, a person's party affiliation was not necessarily an indication of his position on some of the hotly debated topics of the day, and Members of Parliament voted independently whenever they felt so inclined.

Hampshire, the Austens' home county, was staunchly and dependably Tory. First elected in 1790, William Chute was a Tory MP for Hampshire for 30 years and well known to the entire Austen family, although Jane Austen personally disliked him. Jane Austen's brother, Edward Austen Knight, was, thanks to his adoption by wealthy relatives, a landowner in Hampshire and in Kent who became a magistrate and a High Sheriff. Although Edward was almost certainly a Tory, he showed no interest in becoming a Member of Parliament and discouraged his sons from running for political office (Honan 329).

The Austens' cousin, Edward Cooper, was an evangelical clergyman and therefore presumably a Whig. Jane Austen found her cousin tiresome. Her sailor brothers, Francis and Charles, were dependent on Whig patronage for their naval promotions. As an officer in the militia and as a London banker, Jane Austen's brother Henry would have been expected to have Whig sympathies. But when Henry changed careers and became a Church of England clergyman, he may have changed political parties as well. In short, the Austens had divided political loyalties, even if they were all in agreement on the issues.

Voters

At the time, a parliamentary borough could be classified as one of four types: Freeman; Scot and lot and potwalloper; Corporation; or Burgage. The most common voting districts were Freemen boroughs. There were 62 Freemen boroughs, where, in theory, any man who was 21 years old and free, that is self-employed, could vote. In practice, it wasn't nearly so simple nor so democratic. Most Freemen

boroughs restricted the number of voters in various ways, making it difficult to claim freeman status. In other Freemen boroughs, such as Liverpool, residency was not a requirement, and non-resident freemen could be enfranchised whenever it seemed necessary to guarantee the results of an election. For example, Bristol admitted 1,720 new non-resident voters in 1812 (Hammond & Hammond, *Village Labourer* 12).

The most democratic elections were held in the 59 Scot and lot and potwalloper boroughs. In Scot and lot boroughs, any man who paid Poor Law taxes or taxes to support his parish church could vote, but in other Scot and lot boroughs, any man not receiving welfare from the parish could vote. Voters in potwalloper boroughs were men who had families and who boiled a pot in the borough, meaning that the voter fed himself rather than eating at the table of his employer. In theory, the ability to provide for himself and his family demonstrated that the voter was not subject to another man's influence, as voters undoubtedly were in corporation boroughs.

In the 43 Corporation boroughs, a patron served as the head of the borough, somewhat like the CEO of a company, and the other voting members of the Corporation were men who had been appointed to clerical livings, or who worked as government clerks, or who held commissions in the military, meaning all voters were indebted to the patron of the Corporation, if not entirely dependent on him, for their incomes, jobs, and promotions. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins' groveling and flattery are suggestive of the behavior a patron could demand of his or her minions.

And then there were the 39 Burgage boroughs where only landowners voted. Their property titles ensured their right to vote, and sometimes one man owned all, or almost all, of the land in his district. For instance, Lord Radnor owned 99 of the 100 property titles in his borough (Hammond & Hammond, *Village Labourer* 9). The result of the borough system was that the outcome of an election was rarely in doubt. Thus, political power remained securely in the hands of the wealthy, like Mrs. Percival and Mr. Stanley in *Catharine: or the Bower*.

With Mrs. Percival, Mr. Stanley, and the protagonist Kitty, the reader has been shown three political options, two extreme and unacceptable positions and a third acceptable option of middle-of-the-road commonsense, but *Catharine: or the Bower* admits that a fourth and

thoroughly contemptible choice remains, willful ignorance. As Ivor Brown notes in *Jane Austen and Her World*, "ignorance was bliss for those with good homes and plentiful servants" (46), and the wealthy, like Camilla Stanley, the Tory MP's brainless daughter, could afford to be politically and economically ignorant, as long as her money held out. Camilla declares herself to be politically apathetic and proud of it: "I know nothing of Politics, and cannot bear to hear them mentioned" (*MW* 201). According to the petulant Camilla, still smarting over being slighted at a ball, her father "never cares about anything but Politics. If I were Mr. Pitt or the Lord Chancellor, he would take care I should not be insulted" (*MW* 224). Camilla fantasizes about using her father's position as an MP to take revenge on people who irritate her: "I wish my Father would propose knocking all their Brains out, some day or other when he is in the House" (*MW* 204).

Although Jane Austen never finished *Catharine: or the Bower* in 1792, in 1809 she made alterations to the manuscript. As Claire Harman observes in *Jane's Fame*, "It seems rather extraordinary that Austen was keeping this story from her teens in play at all" (50), but Jane Austen remained interested in politics, as her novels reveal, and two similar characters embodying the political extremes will reappear in *Persuasion*, written in 1816.

Catharine: or the Bower was not the only story in Austen's juvenilia that depicts politics as a shamelessly self-serving business. Camilla's assumption that political office should be used entirely for her personal advantage is echoed by another character, Tom Musgrove, in *A Collection of Letters: Letter the fifth: From a Young Lady very much in love to her Freind* [sic]. When Tom Musgrove learns that his fiancé is financially dependent on her uncle and aunt, Tom "exclaimed with virulence against Uncles & Aunts; Accused the Laws of England for allowing them to possess their Estates when wanted by their Nephews and Neices [sic], and wished he were in the House of Commons, that he might reform the Legislature, & rectify all its abuses" (*MW* 169). Austen's spoofing of politicians continues in another fragment with the character Lady Greville.

In *A Collection of Letters*, specifically *Letter the third: From A young Lady in distress'd Circumstances to her freind* [sic], Austen's quick-witted protagonist Maria Williams is repeatedly humiliated by a wealthy acquaintance, Lady Greville, an earlier incarnation of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Lady Greville's name is

suggestive of the powerful Whig politician Lord Grenville, who opposed William Pitt's attempts to expand Poor Law benefits. Lord Grenville's argument was that the poor were beyond help, that they were ignorant, extravagant, and immoral; thus any aid they were given was sure to be money wasted, probably on alcohol. This was the same line of reasoning evangelical Whig Thomas Malthus pursued in his 1798 treatise, *Essay on the Principal of Population*. Jane Austen places her protagonist Maria in direct opposition to Lord Grenville's point of view.

As a guest of Lady Greville's, Maria braces herself for "the disagreable [sic] certainty I always have of being abused for my Poverty" (*MW* 157). Lady Greville notes that Maria has a new dress: "I only hope your Mother may not have distressed herself to set *you* off" (*MW* 156), assumes that Mrs. Williams can only afford the usual diet of the working-class, "Bread & Cheese" (*MW* 157), and speculates that Maria's mother must go to bed as soon as it becomes dark because "Candles cost money" (*MW* 156). But Lady Greville saves her most venomous accusations for public recitation.

At the ball, and "loud enough to be heard by half the people in the room," Lady Greville attacks Maria on her grandfather's alleged bankruptcy: "He broke did not he?" "Did not he abscond?" "At least he died insolvent?" (*MW* 158). Maria coolly denies all of Lady Greville's assertions, but her Ladyship merely switches generations: "Why was not your Father as poor as a Rat?" "Was not he in the Kings Bench once?" Like William Pitt taking questions and abuse in the House of Commons, Maria maintains her composure throughout the barrage of false accusations, but the Greville assault continues on the following day.

Maria is invited to dine with Lady Greville, but only after her Ladyship's important guests have all gone. Maria will presumably be served their leftovers. Additionally, although Lady Greville has a carriage, she will not be using it for Maria's convenience: "I shant send the Carriage – If it rains you may take an umbrella" (*MW* 159). Lady Greville excuses this slight by applying the same illogic that the rich often applied to the poor, that, unlike the upper class, the working class was, by force of habit, impervious to suffering: "You young Ladies who cannot often ride in a Carriage never mind what weather you trudge in … some sort of people have no feelings either of cold or Delicacy." Mrs. Williams gives her daughter the same advice that

was routinely offered to the poor: "Mother is always admonishing me to be humble & patient" (*MW* 157). *Letter the third* is an early example of a theme that will appear in all of Jane Austen's novels, that when the rich draw distinctions between themselves and the less fortunate, as the radical Whig politicians did, they are making a serious mistake.

Unusual among the juvenilia is *A FRAGMENT written to inculcate the practise [sic] of Virtue*, which shares the same condemnation of the oblivious rich as *Catharine: or the Bower* and *Letter the third*, but *A Fragment* is a biting satire, and there is no silliness to soften the message:

> We all know that many are unfortunate in their progress through the world, but we do not know all that are so. To seek them out to study their wants, & to leave them unsupplied is the duty, and ought to be the Business of Man. But few have time, fewer still have inclination, and no one has either the one or the other for such employments. Who amidst those that perspire away their Evenings in crouded [sic] assemblies can have leisure to bestow a thought on such as sweat under the fatigue of their daily Labour.
>
> (*MW* 71)

One of Jane Austen's marginal comments in Goldsmith's *The History of England* expresses the same idea in one terse sentence: "How much are the Poor to be pitied, & the Rich to be blamed!" (qtd. in Honan 74).

As Emily Auerbach observes in *Searching for Jane Austen*, the narrative voice in *A FRAGMENT* is strikingly different than the omniscient narrator in Austen's novels:

> This reads more like Jonathan Swift than Jane Austen. Members of the leisured class lack the time and inclination to concern themselves with tired, perspiring laborers, so they leave their needs "unsupplied." Like the narrator of Swift's *Modest Proposal* who pretends to approve of boiling the children of poor people for food, the narrator of Austen's fragment labels it the "duty" and "business" of the upper class to ignore the plight of workers. Did Austen abandon this fragment – erase it, in fact – because it was moving in a more radical direction than she felt comfortable pursuing, or did an Austen relative later erase it? Whichever the case, it remains fascinating that Austen wrote it at all. (57)

But Jane Austen did write it, and though it was erased, no one tossed it in the fire, as happened to so many of Austen's letters. Like Camilla Stanley in *Catharine: or the Bower*, the rich in *A FRAGMENT* find poverty just too tedious a subject to dwell on, especially when there are so many pleasant things to think about instead, but their self indulgence is the lesser of their two evils. It is the conscious decision not to act, "to leave [the poor] unsupplied," that is truly inexcusable here, the sin of omission so masterfully illustrated by John and Fanny Dashwood in Austen's first completed novel, *Sense and Sensibility*.

2
Sense and Sensibility: Poor Law Reform

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 impacted by the disaster as the price of food doubled while incomes remained stagnant, 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 Jane 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 landowning squires 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

Figure 2.1 Blue-coated Whig John Bull is besieged by a troop of tax monsters in this 1798 print
Source: Image courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

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 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 135–6). 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. No doubt, many hungry people felt they were doomed to one of two eventualities, hanging or starving.

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, albeit 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 by another £20 million yet again (Hague 376). Pitt was proposing a new tax on legacies, which was doomed to failure, and, even more bold, 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, people were choosing sides, and 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, like Uncle Sam in the United States, 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" (*S&S* 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.

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, and his addition would even the numbers. But perhaps christening Colonel Brandon John 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. Still, even with the addition of Colonel Brandon, England's poor would have only a 50/50 chance of getting aid from their local gentry.

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 (*S&S* 254). In Fanny's singular act of charity, she shows sympathy, perhaps solidarity, with the displaced French aristocracy, not with England's poor, and 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 (*S&S* 9). As John and Fanny agree, an annual outlay, "those kind of yearly drains on one's income" (*S&S* 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).

John Bull, Miser

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" (*S&S* 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 becomes 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" (*S&S* 5), and the narrator gives John, and by extension the Tories, credit for originally having good, if fleeting, intentions: "He 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, the opposition, and yet "a strong caricature of [John] himself" (*S&S* 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, radical Whig MPs employed the tactics of Fanny Dashwood and remained ominously silent, but, when pushed, radicals like Burke, Eden, and Patrick Colquhoun insisted that a working man's meager wages were, in fact, already adequate, if not in excess, to his needs, just as Fanny Dashwood argues: "It strikes me that they can want no addition at all … I am sure I cannot imagine how they will spend half of it" (*S&S* 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 counter-offers 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 radical 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" (*S&S* 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 & 259). 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" (*S&S* 10). Fanny suggests an additional problem, "and then there is the trouble of getting it to them" (S&S 11). William Pitt was proposing that the tax money for the poor should be distributed by local Magistrates and Justices of the Peace, like Jane Austen's brother Edward Austen Knight. Burke objected that the tax was "to be levied at what is called the discretion of justices of peace" (254), whom Burke 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 orphan 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 as 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 radical 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 this 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 Mrs. Ferrars 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" (*S&S* 11). When challenged to offer solutions of their own, 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 at 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 a chain gang of 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, was proposing 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 orphan 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 substantial 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. Just as Fanny Dashwood congratulates her husband, "you have such a generous spirit!" (*S&S* 9), the reactionary Tories took credit for being compassionate conservatives, and the radical Whigs claimed to be concerned about the welfare of the poor while actually doing absolutely nothing to help them.

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" (*S&S* 14). While Members of the House of Commons repeatedly proposed, deliberated, debated,

and then 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" (*S&S* 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, non-committal good intentions illustrate 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 proves himself incapable of ethically handling his money, 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 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. John Dashwood, however, wastes no time in filing his application to enclose Norland Common, which will be a crippling blow to the poorest people dependent on him as the local squire. And there was absolutely nothing the working class could do about it. 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 guaranteed to be 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. Like the Dashwood sisters, the poor had no legal recourse.

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

> In an unenclosed village … the normal labourer did not depend on his wages alone. His livelihood was made up from various sources. His firing he took from the waste, he had a cow or a pig wandering on the common pasture, perhaps he raised a little crop on a strip in the common fields. He was not merely a wage earner, receiving so much money a week or a day for his labour, and buying all the necessaries of life at a shop: he received wages as a labourer, but in part he maintained himself as a producer. Further, the actual money revenue of the family was not limited to the labourer's earnings, for the domestic industries that flourished in the village gave employment to his wife and children.
>
> In an enclosed village at the end of the eighteenth century the position of the agricultural labourer was very different. All his auxiliary resources had been taken from him, and he was now a wage earner and nothing more. Enclosure had robbed him 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 *Village Labourer* 101).

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 2,000 acts of enclosure that deprived England's working class of the use of 3,180,871 acres of land (Hammond & Hammond, *Village Labourer* 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.

Seemingly oblivious to the suffering he will be causing, John Dashwood relishes the thought of "The inclosure of Norland Common, now carrying on" (*S&S* 225). John cheerfully informs Elinor about 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 (*S&S* 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 her brother 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 was also a clue to John's selfishness as, at the time, one in four people living in Sussex were classified as paupers (Eden 323), and that was Frederic Eden's conservative estimate. By way of contrast, in Colonel Brandon's home county, Dorset, in the parish of Blandford, a little more than ten percent of the acreage in the parish was unenclosed common land (Eden 176). Another problem in Sussex was that the taxes collected to aid the poor were being diverted to pay for other expenses, such as 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. John rarely feels any benevolent impulses at all, and he never acts on one.

The concept of helping anyone is so alien to him 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?" (*S&S* 294). According to John, "now that livings fetch such a price" (*S&S* 294–5), Colonel Brandon "might have got I dare say – fourteen hundred pounds" by advertising the Delaford rectory for sale (*S&S* 295). 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 result of John's unchecked greed.

Sir John Bull

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 "No 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. 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 almshouses, endowed schools, scholarships at 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" (*S&S* 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" (*S&S* 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, pays their postage, and provides them with his newspaper. Only a self-absorbed teenager like Marianne Dashwood 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" (*S&S* 109). "A Benevolent, philanthropic man" (*S&S* 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" (*S&S* 33). In 1795, most of the population of England fit that "unfortunate" description, and the Dashwoods are not the only ones to benefit from Sir John's generosity.

When Edward Ferrars walks through Barton's countryside and into the village, what Edward observed "exceedingly pleased him" (*S&S* 96), the "neat," "snug" farmhouses and "a troop of tidy, happy villagers" (*S&S* 97 & 98). Edward detects no signs of poverty or neglect, no "ruined, tattered cottages." Willoughby calls Sir John a "good-natured, honest, stupid soul" (*S&S* 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.

John Bull, Wastrel

For his part, John Willoughby is just as Sir John Middleton labels him, "a scoundrel of a fellow" (S&S 215). Willoughby calls himself "a poor dependant cousin" (*S&S* 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.
>
> (*S&S* 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 that of the tax rate in Devon (Eden 302). Perversely, Willoughby is not only a wastrel, he is also 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" (*S&S* 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?" (*S&S* 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, now-a-days; nothing in the way of pleasure can ever be given up by the young men of this age." And John Willoughby and other young men like him were filling seats in Parliament and voting against any proposal to raise their taxes in order to help the poor whom they hypocritically 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" (S&S 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" (*S&S* 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?" (*S&S* 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" (S&S 322). Elinor

reminds Willoughby that Eliza "was reduced to the extremest indigence," but Willoughby protests "upon my soul, I did not know it" (*S&S* 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. 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.

Responsible wealth

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 unworthy of charity. In 1806, Patrick Colquhoun estimated that three quarters of all paupers were undeserving poor (*Treatise on Indigence* 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 conduct 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 none of these characters seem capable of economically helping themselves. In the idealization of Colonel Brandon as a model of compassion and generosity, 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 is neglecting 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" (*S&S* 113), as Palmer hopes to become a Member of Parliament. John Willoughby is already an MP, as Charlotte Palmer observes that Willoughby "is in the opposition" (*S&S* 114), implying a radical Whig actively opposing Prime Minister William Pitt. Edward Ferrars' family has been encouraging Edward to become a politician or at least to ingratiate himself to a politician in order to secure a lucrative government appointment: "His mother wishes 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" (*S&S* 15–16). No doubt, their choice of a political career for Edward is motivated by their social climbing 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, which sets 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). However, the fact that Austen did not mention these events by name does not mean that they were not being alluded to. Likewise, *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), and the text is clearly objecting to an economic system that further enriches the already wealthy John Dashwood while entirely neglecting his stepmother and sisters and leaving them to the mercy of more responsible and compassionate people, such as the generous, tax-paying squires of unenclosed Devon and Dorset.

3
Pride and Prejudice: The Speenhamland System

When *Pride and Prejudice* was originally written as *First Impressions* in 1796 and 1797, Austen's novel appears to have been taking a stand in favor of two controversial economic proposals being debated in the House of Commons and in the press, a national minimum wage and an expansion of the existing Poor Law benefits. The minimum wage proposal, known as the Speenhamland System, was based on the price of a loaf of wheat bread. The idea was that at the end of a workday, a man should be paid enough to buy a loaf of bread in order to maintain himself. The other economic proposal was an expansion of the old Elizabethan Poor Laws, which would have made it easier for people to get welfare benefits and would have increased the benefits they were eligible to receive. Both proposals were championed by Tory Prime Minister William Pitt and supported by liberal-Tories and moderate Whigs in the House of Commons. Both proposals were opposed by radical Whigs and reactionary Tories who argued that the proposals were too expensive and entirely unnecessary. The eligible bachelors in *Pride and Prejudice* are all associated with the Whig party, as is Lady Catherine de Bourgh, but the Whig characters have very different attitudes towards money and towards the working class, as did the Whigs in the House of Commons. Moderate Whigs supported Pitt's welfare reform, but their radical colleagues argued vehemently against it.

Austen's original readers would have known that Elizabeth Bennet's agricultural county, Hertfordshire, was, at least for the working

Figure 3.1 The invading Frenchman at the window is less menacing than Prime Minister William Pitt, labeled "taxes," who prepares to shove an expensive loaf of bread, representing the minimum wage, down John Bull's throat
Source: Image courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

class, the poorest county in England, as Frederic Eden's 1797 *The State of the Poor* survey documented. At the other end of the spectrum, Fitzwilliam Darcy's Derbyshire, financially stimulated by the Industrial Revolution, was one of the richest counties in the nation, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh's Kent was a mixed county that varied enormously from parish to parish, both in prevailing wages and in the welfare available to the poor. The admirable Whig characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, Fitzwilliam Darcy and Charles Bingley, are kindly and generous, while the radical, evangelical Whigs, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Collins, are selfish and stingy. Whig George Wickham is simply an opportunist and a scoundrel. By its presentation of the different Whig characters, the text was appealing to Whig readers to be generous to the working class and encouraging Tory readers to support the Prime Minister and look approvingly on those Whigs who were willing to join with them in order to help the poor.

Pride and Prejudice also includes a large number of characters who are servants, many identified by name. As most of them have no dialogue and do nothing to forward the plot, their presence in the novel at all may seem curious, but the depiction of the working class would have been a clear message to Austen's original readers, as the servants in *Pride and Prejudice* refute the assumptions of prominent radical Whig politicians, Edmund Burke, Frederic Eden, Jeremy Bentham, and Patrick Colquhoun, who depicted the lower class as ignorant, dishonest, and wasteful. Lady Catherine's financial neglect of the poor in Kent conforms to the radical Whigs' advice based on their assumptions that the working class was already adequately compensated for their labor and that poverty was the result of the irresponsible behavior of the poor. In stark contrast, Fitzwilliam Darcy's generosity to the poor in Derbyshire serves as a model response to poverty, and the general prosperity of Darcy's home county suggests that the solution to poverty is a combination of higher wages and liberal charity, exactly what the Prime Minister was proposing in 1797.

Without an awareness of the national economic debate raging in England at the end at the eighteenth century, the modern reader tends to see only the first and still obvious economic theme in the novel, "that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (*P&P*). The economics of marriage is certainly the focus of the first half of the novel and a subject that time has done little to

obscure. Samuel Macey categorizes Jane Austen's novels as tales of "economic wish fulfillment" and "that typically vicarious pleasure which derives from a poor girl making good" (158–9), but it appears to be the economic wish fulfillment of the reader that is satisfied, rather than the financial aspirations of Elizabeth Bennet. After all, fully aware of his annual income and "his large estate in Derbyshire" (*P&P* 10), Elizabeth rejects Fitzwilliam Darcy's first offer of marriage. Darcy would never have had to ask Charlotte Lucas twice.

Through the first two volumes of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet expresses no particular inclination to marry at all. When Elizabeth is slighted by Mr. Darcy, she decides to dislike him in return. Elizabeth is also pursued by William Collins, whom she loathes, and Elizabeth enjoys a flirtation with George Wickham, although she is not "seriously in love" (*P&P* 142). Colonel Fitzwilliam's "situation in life was most eligible" (*P&P* 181), and Elizabeth's friendship with the Colonel seems potentially promising, but their entire acquaintance lasts only three chapters and ultimately, and rather abruptly, comes to nothing. Colonel Fitzwilliam's confession that "there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money" takes Elizabeth by surprise: "'Is this,' thought Elizabeth, 'meant for me?'" (*P&P* 183), but Elizabeth is only temporarily embarrassed, not heartbroken. Until the last volume of the novel, Elizabeth, like the reader, merely observes the other characters' romantic entanglements with an amused detachment, waiting to see how it will all turn out. *Pride and Prejudice* initially distracts the reader, just as Elizabeth Bennet is at first distracted, with the idea of money and matrimony, and the novel changes its focus from domestic economics to political economics so seamlessly that readers often fail to notice the transition.

Once Colonel Fitzwilliam has tactfully withdrawn from the field, then there is no more to be said on the subject of money and marriage. At Rosings, the money and marriage discussion concludes, but a second economic focus has just opened up as Elizabeth and the reader have seen how Lady Catherine de Bourgh treats her dependents in her parish in Kent. When Elizabeth Bennet leaves her home in Hertfordshire in Volume 2 to travel to Kent and then to Derbyshire in the first chapter of Volume 3, both Elizabeth and the reader are drawn out of Elizabeth's Hertfordshire to different counties where Elizabeth and the reader observe wealthy residents in their homes and learn

something significant about economics in other parts of England. Thus, in Volumes 2 and 3, *Pride and Prejudice* functions as a 1796–97 state-of-the-nation novel.

Elizabeth Bennet is a relatively poor gentlewoman from a relatively poor part of the country. According to Frederic Eden's *The State of the Poor*, Elizabeth's particularly cozy little corner of the world, appropriately named Meryton, with its balls, and assemblies, and card parties and dinners, seems to be in stark contrast to the grim economic reality of Hertfordshire's low wages, expensive food, high unemployment, and widespread poverty (205–07). Elizabeth's enjoyment of the present belies the economic threat looming in her future and just outside of her door.

Georgian economist Arthur Young estimated that after the 1794–95 harvest failure, the poor in England numbered eight million out of a total population of nine million (Himmelfarb 77). Most of the residents in poor houses were either very young or very old. Tax rates to comply with the Poor Law were set by the landowners in each parish, supposedly in response to need. The result was that taxes and welfare benefits varied enormously from county to county and parish to parish, depending on the generosity or miserliness of the local landowners. To prevent welfare shopping, parishes were only required to provide for local residents well-known in the community. Outdoor relief, that is providing benefits to people not residing in the poorhouse, was a common practice, but not every parish offered outdoor relief, and some counties, like the Bennets' Hertfordshire, were making it increasingly difficult to gain admittance to their poorhouses (Eden 206).

In 1797, Frederic Eden acknowledged the hardship of the times: "That [the poor] have, during the last two years, been subjected to great distress, from a rise, unexampled within the present century in the price of the necessaries of life, everyone will readily acknowledge" (120). Whig MP Jeremy Bentham conceded that for "the great bulk of the inhabitants of this country … their utmost means are inadequate to their own maintenance" (12). What was also indisputable was that there had been a sharp increase in the number of people requesting Poor Law relief, and the applicants included a large percentage who had never before in their lives applied for parish assistance and, most shockingly of all, were fully employed.

Normally, about ten percent of the inhabitants in a parish received some form of aid through the Poor Laws, but following the harvest

failure, the average was more than 40 percent (Rule 116), and in some parishes, more than 60 percent of the parishioners were receiving poor relief. In most parishes, the taxes that funded parish relief, the poor rates, were woefully inadequate to meet the increased demand for welfare benefits in the form of a weekly allowance of money, subsidized bread, or admittance to the poorhouse. Radical Whig Jeremy Bentham referred to the poor rates as "The Limited, or Inadequate-provision system" (151), and Church of England vicars, like Jane Austen's father, were going cap-in-hand to the local gentry to request additional money for the poor.

As Frederic Eden documents, magistrates in some parishes and counties, such as Hampshire, had voluntarily raised their poor rates to respond to the need (195), while in other parishes and counties, like Hertfordshire, the poor law taxes remained unchanged (206). In the parish of Chalk in northern Kent, "the great" voluntarily paid higher wages to their employees and further "assisted laboring people" by subsidizing the cost of wheat bread (Eden 209), but not so in other parts of Kent, like the parish of Westwell where, according to Eden, "The Poor are not well managed" (212). The gentry in Chipping Barnet in Hertfordshire chose to do nothing, presumably hoping to wait the crisis out, like Mr. Bennet taking refuge in his library. But, as Eden found, they were unwilling to admit it as "parish officers wholly refused to give any information whatever respecting the Poor or assessments" (206). Meanwhile, the well fed fortified their houses, barns, stables, and henhouses against their hungry neighbors.

In the two years Jane Austen was writing *First Impressions*, *The Hampshire Chronicle* was full of accounts of purloined food and missing livestock; sheep seem to have been particularly vulnerable to theft (5 March 1796, 4). Convicted thieves and poachers were either hanged or transported, but it must have been difficult to even narrow down a list of suspects when more than half of the village had a powerful incentive to steal. Everyone acknowledged that the situation was critical, but what they could not agree on was the best response.

In April of 1796, the Lord Mayor of London imposed limitations on how much bakers could charge for a loaf of bread. According to the April 16, 1796 *Hampshire Chronicle*, "So great a reduction, at one time, was never heard of in this kingdom before" (3). The Lord Mayor's

price control was only feasible because Prime Minister William Pitt, with whom the Lord Mayor was secretly colluding, was quietly using government funds to buy wheat at its high price and then release it back into the market at a lower price in order to help keep the cost of flour down (Hague 377). Mayors in other cities followed the Lord Mayor's example, and *The Hampshire Chronicle* and other newspapers regularly published the various prices of bread in major cities all over England. Additionally, William Pitt pushed a bill through Parliament that allowed bakers to mix wheat flour with cheaper rye, barley, or oat flour, as long as the resulting loaves were significantly cheaper and marked with an "M" for mixture. Previously, mixing anything with wheat flour had been illegal as it was considered adulteration of food and an attempt to defraud the consumer. In his efforts to reduce the price of bread, Pitt was encountering considerable opposition in the House of Commons where MPs were reluctant to tamper with the free market and adamantly opposed to raising taxes in order to help the poor. In local communities, people were more proactive.

On May 7 of 1796, five months before Austen began *First Impressions*, the front page of *The Hampshire Chronicle* reported the "Association and Subscription for Bread." According to the newspaper, "in this emergency of dearness and scarceness of bread," and due to "the present exorbitant prices of WHEAT and FLOUR," the local gentry had banded together to subsidize bread by their charitable donations. An article in another column on the front page contained the names of men who were contributing to a similar project but specifying that their bread subsidy was for "the deserving poor" only, which generally implied orphan or abandoned children, the blind, and the elderly.

In *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, Gertrude Himmelfarb maintains that "the situation in this period, especially in the critical post-Smith, pre-Malthus decade of the '90s (Smith died in 1790 and Malthus's *Essay* was published in 1798), was extremely fluid, and it was by no means clear what direction social thought and social policy might take" (65). In October of 1796, William Pitt proposed an ambitious plan to reform the Poor Laws as "The present situation of the laboring poor in this country, was certainly not such as could be wished, upon any principle, either of humanity, or policy" (qtd. in Hague 380). What Parliament might do in response was anybody's guess. In the same month, Jane Austen began writing *First Impressions*.

The Prime Minister's proposal was an early attempt to create a welfare state, and, had William Pitt's Poor Law reform been adopted, it would have made a tremendous difference in the lives of the working class, providing short-term relief and long-term assistance. But so much welfare to the poor would have raised taxes, thus impacting the bank accounts of the upper classes, which made Pitt's Poor Law proposal about as popular as the French with the radical Whigs. Liberal-Tories and moderate Whigs, such as the Whigs in Pitt's Cabinet, supported the bill, but radical Whigs vehemently opposed Pitt's proposal, claiming the bill rewarded "the *idle* and *negligent*" at the expense of the allegedly prudent and industrious, upper class taxpayers (qtd. in Himmelfarb 75). Radical Whig Edmund Burke dismissed Pitt's proposal as "the zeal of foolish good-intention" and labeled the Prime Minister and his supporters "zealots of the sect of regulation" (251 & 257).

The majority of MPs, a coalition of both extremes, the most radical Whigs and conservative Tories, favored the do-nothing approach to welfare and obstinately waited for Adam Smith's invisible hand of the marketplace to set everything right, but they did not care to be quoted in the newspapers as saying so. Consequently, Pitt's Poor Law reform bill languished in the House of Commons until it died there of neglect. It was never given a hearing, debated, or voted on. In the meantime, as the *Hampshire Chronicle* recorded, the House of Commons chose to debate the dog tax instead (30 April 1796, 2).

The pragmatic Prime Minister made a tactical decision to focus on passing only one aspect of the bill, the feature that had the most bipartisan support, a national minimum wage. Although Pitt had considered Whig Samuel Whitbread's 1796 minimum wage bill to be an inadequate response to the dire situation, in 1797 the Prime Minister proposed his own nationally-subsidized minimum wage based on the price of wheat bread and the number of children in a laborer's family. Pitt's minimum wage proposal was based, like Whitbread's, on the Speenhamland system, a minimum wage plan devised by local magistrates in Berkshire in 1795 which guaranteed that at the end of a working day, a laborer's wages would be sufficient to buy a loaf of bread. If a man's wages were not, the laborer's parish would supply the difference. With Whitbread's support, and the support of other moderate Whigs and liberal Tories, Pitt's national minimum wage proposal had a fighting chance.

In *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith supports a living wage: "A man must always live by his work, and his wages must at least be sufficient to maintain him" (72). Smith also drew a correlation between high wages and a healthy national economy:

> The liberal reward of labour, therefore, as it is the necessary effect, so it is the natural symptom of increasing national wealth. The scanty maintenance of the laboring poor, on the other hand, is the natural symptom that things are at a stand, and their starving condition that they are going fast backwards. (77)

Additionally, Smith asserts that a living wage is only just recompense for the laborer's contribution to the national economy, and his wages should not, therefore, be begrudged by his employer:

> Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconveniency to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged.
>
> (*Wealth* 83)

But Smith left just enough ambiguity for his self-proclaimed disciples to seize on: "what is precisely necessary for their own maintenance … I shall not take upon me to determine" (72). Twenty years after the publication of *Wealth of Nations*, radical Whigs Edmund Burke, Frederic Eden, Thomas Malthus, and Patrick Colquhoun vehemently opposed any minimum wage, claiming wages should be whatever the employer offered and that the survival of the working class depended on their ability to adapt to their paltry incomes. As historian David Kent maintains, "the rhetoric of political economy seemed to prompt only one question, how little could the labourer live on" (6). Burke, Eden, and Colquhoun insisted that laborers and their families could be maintained on their low wages, if they adopted a more Spartan diet.

Frederic Eden reports that laborers in Lady Catherine de Bourgh's home county formerly ate meat daily, but by 1796, the working class had been reduced to a meager and monotonous vegetarian regime of tea, barley or oat bread, potatoes, and cheese (208). As Eden conceded, they could not afford wheat bread, and not everyone could afford tea or cheese: "Potatoes are a principal diet in large families," and milk had become "very scarce" (210). Although Eden was skeptical of their conclusion, he recorded the consensus of public opinion: "Poverty is generally ascribed to the low rate of wages and high price of provisions" (208). Eden disagreed: "the miseries of the laboring Poor arose, less from the scantiness of their income … than from their own improvidence and unthriftiness" (100). Eden's fellow radicals concurred, and they all identified the working class addiction to wheat bread as a formidable obstacle to be overcome.

Edmund Burke recommended rye bread or oat cakes to the poor, but Burke grumbled about "the known difficulty of contenting them with any thing but bread made of the finest [wheat] flour" (243). Patrick Colquhoun favored replacing bread entirely with "nourishing, frugal, and wholesome" potatoes (*Treatise on Indigence*, 274). Eden championed porridge as a new staple diet: "In the North of England, Scotland and Wales the poorest labourers, however, regale themselves with a variety of dishes" (101), which all turn out to be oatmeal varied "with a little milk or beer poured upon it, or with a little cold butter put into the middle, or with a little treacle."

Although they differed in their menu suggestions, all three agreed that the poor drank too much ale at the public house and too much tea at home. According to Colquhoun, "the alehouse swallows up a large proportion of [their] annual earnings" (*Treatise on Indigence* 234), and Eden referred to tea as "the deleterious produce of China" (101). It seems doubtful that they were truly concerned about what a laborer ate or drank but rather with how much he was paid, and they were firmly, even fanatically, united in their opposition to a national minimum wage.

According to historian Roy Porter in *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, the top priority in the House of Commons was to further enrich the Members and their constituents, not to raise their taxes: "Taxation policy indicates how the state functioned blatantly as the patrimony of grandees" (118), who were devoted to "protecting their [own] interests." Landowners, like Mr. Bennet, who were usually

Tories, had to pay property taxes, ten percent tithes on their farm produce, and poor rates to support the poor in their local parishes. Poor rates varied dramatically from county to county, from two shillings in the pound, in Elizabeth Bennet's Hertfordshire (Eden 206), to six or seven shillings in the pound, in Jane Austen's Hampshire, a taxation rate which Frederic Eden considered "excessively high" (195). If the Speenhamland system became the law of the land, poor rates in many counties would increase, as Hampshire's had already voluntarily done.

The Whigs insisted that raising wages would be a monumental mistake with catastrophic and yet vague consequences. Burke maintained that a man's labor was "a commodity like every other, and rises or falls according to the demand" (254), so a national minimum wage would entirely undermine the free market system and economic chaos would follow: "The moment that government appears at market, all the principles of market will be subverted" (268). According to Eden, the Speenhamland system was "pregnant with dreadful mischief" (123), and he stressed "the fatal tendency of the system" (122). Colquhoun insisted that a "general rise of wages to that point which might be supposed sufficient, would be dangerous in the extreme" (*Treatise on Indigence* 279). There was also a consensus of opinion among the radicals that the poor were ultimately responsible for their own poverty, as they were lazy, ignorant, wasteful, and immoral, and the last thing they needed or deserved was a pay raise. Apparently, the majority of people in England disagreed. As it became increasingly evident that the poor would be getting no assistance from Parliament, every county in England which had not already done so adopted the Speenhamland system on their own, so that by the time *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813, the Speenhamland system had become the national minimum wage without Parliament's assistance and in spite of opposition in The House of Commons.

In *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, published in 1817, David Ricardo pointed out that taxation for the maintenance of the poor "falls with peculiar weight on the profits of the farmer" (179), while merchants, bankers, and people living off of invested money, like Charles Bingley, presumably Whigs, were not yet taxed on their financial assets – nor did the Whigs in the House of Commons intend to be. As Roy Porter reminds us, many wealthy people paid no taxes whatsoever on their assets: "liquid capital as such escaped, and investment incomes of financiers and industrialists got off scot-free … most new levies were

indirect taxes upon consumption. Thus in the late seventeenth century 35 per cent of taxation had been direct: by 1790 that had dropped to 18 per cent" (117). Even with a war, the threat of foreign invasion and an unprecedented national debt, tax cuts were easy to pass, just as proposals for national welfare legislation were doomed to fail.

By the autumn of 1797, as Jane Austen was finishing *First Impressions*, Pitt was raising taxes where he could, as additional sales taxes on consumer items such as alcohol, sugar, tea, and postage stamps, but the £2 million infusion from the new taxes was not nearly enough to fund the war, only enough to keep up with the interest on the mounting debt. The Prime Minister needed all of his political clout for his revolutionary 1798 income tax proposal, the revenue from which would go exclusively to fund the war effort. Both Tories and Whigs in the House of Commons were polarizing in anticipation of the income tax debates, and, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen made it easy for her reader to identify the Whigs, both admirable moderates and detestable radicals, among her characters.

When Charles Bingley first appears in the flesh, the Bennet sisters note, and the reader learns, that Bingley "wore a blue coat" (*P&P* 9). As historian Venetia Murray reminds us, a blue coat was the well-known "Trademark of the Whigs" (26), so donning a blue coat was as good as wearing a political campaign button. As Bingley is soon to convert his money into land, however, he may not remain a Whig for much longer, but, even as a Whig, Bingley is a good, kind, and "sensible" man (*P&P* 14). Regardless of political affiliation, once he becomes a landowner, Bingley will be subject to taxation, and his poor rates will support the needy in his local parish.

George Wickham also has "his blue coat" (*P&P* 319), but, as a military man, like Colonel Fitzwilliam, Wickham is dependent on Whig patronage for promotions. Wickham's political statement, which could be put on or taken off as the occasion required, could be merely a reflection of his rapacious opportunism, but we are also told that old Mr. Darcy "supported [Wickham] at school, and afterwards at Cambridge" (*P&P* 200). As historian Ben Wilson maintains, in the 1790s, Cambridge had a reputation for turning out religious non-conformists, hell raisers, and Whigs (169). As students, Cambridge alumni, like radical Whigs Lord Byron, Thomas Malthus, and the yet-to-be-converted William Wilberforce, had dined, drunk to excess, and gambled at The True Blue club.

Mr. Darcy is certainly a Whig as well. As Janine Barchas notes in *History, Location, and Celebrity: Matters of Fact in Jane Austen*, "the hero's name, Fitzwilliam Darcy, amalgamates two branches of the Wentworth family of Whigs" (27). Lord Fitzwilliam, later Earl Fitzwilliam, was from the north of England and, as historian William Hague describes him, one of the "Three great Earls of the Whig aristocracy" (357), who were chosen to be members of William Pitt's Cabinet in 1794 in an effort to form "a junction of parties if it could be attained" (356). A nephew of former Whig Prime Minister Lord Rockingham, Lord Fitzwilliam's house, intriguingly named Wentworth Woodhouse, was and still is the largest private residence in Britain. As Lord Fitzwilliam was able to put aside party politics in order to support the Tory Prime Minister's proposals and to work with other Cabinet members in the opposition, Fitzwilliam Darcy is similarly open to compromise in order to achieve the greater good, even when it means negotiating with a bounder like George Wickham.

The last name, Darcy, brings the wealthy, northern, industrialist Darby family to mind. The Darbys made an enormous fortune in smelting iron, and Abraham Darby the third, who died in 1791, built the world's first iron bridge, but he was also famous for his philanthropy to his employees. As Roy Porter summarizes them, the Darbys were among the group of northern Whig entrepreneurs, like Robert Owen, noted for their "industry, frugality and sober living, their secret being not to dissipate profits but to plough them back" into their employees (320). Darby bought farms to raise food for his iron workers, built housing for them, and offered higher wages than other competitive employers. With a name like Fitzwilliam Darcy, in 1797 England, Austen's hero was bound to be a Whig, but a benevolent, moderate Whig, not a radical, and not opposed to reaching into his own pocket in order to help the poor.

Stingy Whigs

Even without a blue coat, tutoring at Cambridge, or a suggestive name, Lady Catherine's political affiliation with the radical Whigs is also apparent. In Volume 2 of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and the reader are no longer dependent on William Collins' descriptions of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, tainted as they are by his "veneration for her as his patroness" (*P&P* 70), instead we are allowed to observe Lady Catherine for ourselves through the lens of the novel's narrator.

Lady Catherine's incessant interference in other people's affairs, her lecturing, accusing, and scolding conveyed a wealth of information to Austen's original readers who would have quickly identified Lady Catherine's assumed superiority and unrelenting bossiness as a caricature of someone following the lead of the radical Whigs, such as Burke, Eden, and Colquhoun, who felt entitled to look into the minutia of the day-to-day lives of the working class and to draw conclusions, pass judgment, and offer advice.

Like Lady Catherine, "delivering her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved that she was not used to have her judgment controverted" (*P&P* 163), Patrick Colquhoun in his publications was free to make statements without considering any opposition. Certainly the poor were unable to defend themselves in print. This was one of the criticisms leveled at Colquhoun by his contemporary and earliest critic, journalist R. Shaw (Wilson 103). Although Lady Catherine possesses no "extraordinary talents or miraculous virtue" (*P&P* 161), she assumes that because of her money and social position, she is more knowledgeable than the people around her. Distributing a "great deal of advice" and "dictating to others" (*P&P* 163), Lady Catherine's "many instructions" and "advising" are all she offers to the less fortunate (*P&P* 176 & 213). According to the radical Whig economists, that was appropriate.

Frederic Eden insisted that the gentry should resist any misguided impulse to pay their employees higher wages but should, instead, "consult and co-operate with them in the practice of economy; it is far more useful to teach them to spend less, or to save a little, than to give them much more" (128). Eden maintained that the real problem with the working man was that he wasted his daily shilling:

> Instead of the ill-grounded complaints, which have so often been reiterated by writers on the Poor, that the wages of industry are in general too inadequate to provide the labourers with those comforts and conveniences which are befitting his station in the community, they would better serve the cause of the industrious peasant and manufacturer by pointing out the best means of reducing their expenses. (100)

Colquhoun provided a list of topics to be elaborated on for the edification of the poor, including "providence and economy," "frugal

housewifery," "frugality and sobriety," "frugal cookery," "patience under adversity," "female chastity," and "the commendable pride of rearing a family without parish assistance" (99–100). Edmund Burke also advised advising: "Patience, labor, sobriety, frugality and religion, should be recommended to them" (253). According to the group consensus of the radical Whigs, poverty was the direct result of the gross ignorance and rampant immortality of the working class, and the only possible remedy was to make clear to the poor the error of their ways.

The humorlessness, priggishness, and self-righteousness of Lady Catherine, William Collins, and Mary Bennet is suggestive of a stereotype of the evangelical movement, which had political as well as religious connotations. Almost all evangelicals, dissenters, and Quakers were Whigs, and in the 1790s, they were founding "visiting societies" to call at the homes of the poor, to inspect the living quarters, question the inhabitants, and offer advice and religious counseling (Wilson 92). Whig MP Jeremy Bentham and political economist Patrick Colquhoun helped to form The Spitalfields Benevolent Society. Evangelical author Hannah More describes an idealized version of one of the Spitalfields Benevolent Society home visits in her 1817 religious tract, *The Delegate*.

The visitors in *The Delegate* give the poor protagonist money at the conclusion of their home inspection, but first he must prove himself above reproach and be judged morally worthy; his poverty is never in doubt. Victorian stereotypical evangelical characters very much like Lady Catherine de Bourgh are Mrs. Pardiggle, "a formidable style of lady" in Charles Dickens' 1853 *Bleak House* (94), and the "habitually authoritative" Mrs. Proudie in Anthony Trollope's 1857 *Barchester Towers* (23). In *The Angel Out of the House*, Dorice Williams Elliott examines this busybody character in Victorian literature, but Lady Catherine de Bourgh is surely its predecessor. As "Visiting lady" characters (Dickens 95) like Lady Catherine, Mrs. Pardiggle, and Mrs. Proudie demonstrate, the primary focus of the visiting society evangelicals was to offer advice, not financial aid.

According to Ben Wilson, the apparent stinginess of the radical Whig politicians and the religious zeal of the evangelicals made them oddly compatible in their opinions:

> The doctrines of political economy and evangelicalism said that wealth creation, discipline and competition were not just good in themselves but religious and moral duties. For those uneasy

> people worried about the personal disadvantage of suppressing their emotions, the exploitation of others in a fierce capitalist economy or the social stigma of new money, it offered immediate reassurance that what they were doing was natural, perhaps even a noble thing, and certainly the inevitable consequence of progress. It reassured people as consumers as well, for conspicuous consumption of luxuries was a stimulus to the economy. The successful deserved their riches by natural right; by the same token, the benighted poor merited their own position. (377)

No doubt, Lady Catherine would have agreed.

In *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, Irene Collins reminds us that a system for poor relief was already in place: "The parish vestry, at its annual meeting, elected not only the churchwarden but two overseers of the poor whose duty it was to collect and dispense the Poor Rate …. The overseers of the poor were responsible to the magistrates" (118), but in *Pride and Prejudice* Lady Catherine usurps the established system. Instead of going through the usual channels with the church council, Mr. Collins, in his self-appointed roles as toady and busybody, carries all parish business directly to Lady Catherine who assumes the duties of the overseers and magistrate:

> Elizabeth soon perceived that though this great lady was not in the commission of the peace for the county, she was a most active magistrate in her own parish, the minutest concerns of which were carried to her by Mr. Collins; and whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty.
>
> (*P&P* 169)

The reader will note that money plays no part in Lady Catherine's dealings with the poor. All Lady Catherine offers is unsolicited advice and criticism. The poor are no better off for Lady Catherine's meddlesome visits. She leaves them just as hungry and poverty-stricken as she found them, and Lady Catherine does not limit her officious interference exclusively to the poor.

When Lady Catherine visits Hunsford parsonage, she conducts a tour of inspection similar to the fact-finding tactics of Eden and Colquhoun who forced their way into poorhouses, almshouses,

charity hospitals, and cottages all over England. Like the poor targeted by the politicians and the visiting societies, Charlotte Lucas Collins never knows when Lady Catherine may descend:

> Now and then, they were honoured with a call from her Ladyship, and nothing escaped her observation that was passing in the room during these visits. She examined into their employments, looked at their work, and advised them to do it differently; found fault with the arrangement of the furniture, or detected the housemaid in negligence; and if she accepted any refreshment, seemed to do it only for the sake of finding out that Mrs. Collins's joints of meat were too large for her family. (*P&P* 169)

Lady Catherine's interest in what the Collinses were eating and her suggestion that Charlotte should be more frugal with the household budget seems to be an echoing of the radical Whigs' advice to the poor. As the text suggests, Lady Catherine's accusations and fault-finding do nothing to render her advice more palatable; the same was true of the politicians and presumably of the evangelical visitors.

Lady Catherine stages yet another "intrusion" at the Bennet's home (*P&P* 351). Arriving uninvited and unannounced, Lady Catherine obviously intends to take the family by surprise. She barges into the room as "the door was thrown open" (351), criticizes the Bennets' park and sitting room, and further inspects the house on her way out: "As they passed through the hall, Lady Catherine opened the doors into the dining-parlour and drawing-room, and pronouncing them, after a short survey, to be decent looking rooms, walked on" (352–3). Like the evangelicals during their home inspections, Lady Catherine expects Elizabeth Bennet to be humble and contrite through her accusatory tirade: "I will not be interrupted. Hear me in silence" (*P&P* 356).

According to Edmund Burke, the haves were far too indulgent in listening to the have-nots at all: "The cry of the people … the most regarded, ought, in *fact*, to be the *least* attended to … for [the poor] are in a state of utter ignorance" (262). In her "extraordinary visit" to Longbourn (*P&P* 360), Lady Catherine assumes a similar ignorance in Elizabeth Bennet and proceeds to tell Elizabeth, "if you were sensible of your own good" (*P&P* 356), what she should think. Elizabeth, naturally, resents Lady Catherine's "interference" (*P&P* 360), but, in

the novel, Elizabeth is free to do what the poor and the readers of the politicians' writing were not: to answer back.

When first hearing of Lady Catherine from Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet remarks that "It is a pity that great ladies in general are not more like her" (*P&P* 67), but Lady Catherine's presence in the novel at all suggests that there may already have been too many. As historian David Kent observes, in Georgian England "desperate poverty existed in the midst of great wealth, none of which trickled down to ease the condition of the laboring poor" (5), certainly not in Lady Catherine's parish at any rate.

The irony of the rich advising the poor on how to spend less money never seems to have occurred to the radical Whigs. In their view, the wealthy were inherently qualified to offer sage advice, but it was decidedly a case of do as I say, not as I do. As William Collins is ever-ready to point out, Lady Catherine is not at all hesitant to spend her money frivolously and in ostentatious display. In "only one of Lady Catherine's drawing-rooms … the chimney-piece alone had cost eight hundred pounds" (*P&P* 75). Given that the average British family survived on a combined annual income of £45, according to Patrick Colquhoun (*Treatise on the Wealth* 124), other estimates, such as Frederic Eden's, were considerably lower, Lady Catherine's conspicuous consumption seems insensitive, rather vulgar, and utterly shameless. Lady Catherine's "elegance of dress" (*P&P* 160), and "several" carriages (*P&P* 157), demonstrate that she routinely purchases expensive things she does not need and probably has no use for, and Lady Catherine's rampant consumerism appears to be a corrupting influence on the impressionable. Mr. Collins' "enumeration of the windows in front of the house, and his relation of what the glazing altogether had originally cost Sir Lewis De Bourgh" betray Collins's parroting of Lady Catherine's own boastful materialism (*P&P* 161). Although "the dinner was exceedingly handsome, and there were all the servants, and all the articles of plate which Mr. Collins had promised" (*P&P* 162), Elizabeth remains unimpressed, at least until she travels into Derbyshire.

"Mr. Pitt's Friends"

When "glancing over" a newspaper in Hunsford parsonage, Darcy asks Elizabeth her opinion of the county: "Are you pleased with Kent?" (*P&P* 179), but Elizabeth's "calm and concise" reply is limited

to the scenery and is not recorded as dialogue. The omniscient narrator is likewise uninterested in waxing eloquent over the landscape: "It is not the object of this work to give a description of Derbyshire" (*P&P* 240). While the text makes it clear that the choice of different counties was not a pretext for a travelogue, it also suggests that there must be another motive, a different "object," for locating Rosings Park in Kent and Darcy's Pemberley in the north of England.

As mentioned earlier, at the time Jane Austen was writing *First Impressions*, the major difference in Hertfordshire, Kent, and Derbyshire was in the availability of employment and in the wages paid to laborers. While unemployment and underemployment were chronic problems in Hertfordshire and Kent, and daily wages hovered around the price of a loaf of bread, things were much different in Derbyshire where there were, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, plenty of jobs, and landowners like Fitzwilliam Darcy had to pay their servants and agricultural laborers wages which were competitive with those of laborers working on canal projects and in foundries, factories, and mills. The result was that a laborer in Derbyshire could earn three times the daily wage of a laborer in southern England (Eden 171). Additionally, factory workers were employed year-round instead of seasonally, and food in Derbyshire was plentiful and relatively cheap (Eden 171–2). Derbyshire's mills chiefly employed women and children, allowing working class families to substantially supplement their incomes, and enabling widows and orphans to support themselves rather than living in Derbyshire's parish poorhouses, which just happened to be, by Eden's account, the best system of poorhouses in England.

Derbyshire's poor rates remained low, two shillings in the pound (Eden 169), the same as Hertfordshire's, but the combination of the poor rates and generous private charity proved sufficient to provide for the poor. According to Frederic Eden, all of Derbyshire's poorhouses opened their doors and their books for inspection, and Eden found them to be "airy, clean, and well provided with good bedding" (169). Additionally, the residents were surprisingly well fed and ate meat daily. The resident children were "kept very clean" (172), and, at the Wirksworth poorhouse, were taught to read and write, an early example of taxpayer-funded education in England. Additionally, the gentry of Wirksworth generously contributed to a special fund to purchase "coal, beef, and potatoes" for the poor during the winter (Eden 172). A separate fund was "distributed yearly among the Poor

who do not receive any parish relief" (Eden 173). Given the county's superior treatment of the working class, when Austen's original readers learned of Fitzwilliam Darcy's "large estate in Derbyshire" (*P&P* 10), they would have anticipated the character's benevolence.

Darcy is "generous" (*P&P* 311), "the most generous-hearted" (*P&P* 249), "the most generous of his sex" (*P&P* 312), and he can afford to act on his magnanimous impulses as "he had liberality, and he had the means of exercising it" (*P&P* 326). Even in the act of character assassination, George Wickham allows that Fitzwilliam Darcy is "liberal and generous" and spends "his money freely" in order "to assist his tenants, and relieve the poor" (*P&P* 81). Wickham's story of his own mistreatment would have been immediately suspect without this disclaimer. Only Elizabeth's prejudice prevents her from questioning Wickham's allegations of Darcy's cruelty and neglect. Jane Bennet remains unconvinced by Wickham's account: "It is impossible. No man of common humanity, no man who had any value for his character, could be capable of it" (*P&P* 85), and when Elizabeth travels to Derbyshire, she learns that her sister was right and that a significant part of Darcy's income is invested back into the local community.

At Pemberley, Wickham's grudging admission of Darcy's generosity is seconded by the much warmer commendation of Darcy's housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, who gives Darcy "a most flaming character!" (*P&P* 248). Mrs. Reynolds praises Fitzwilliam Darcy for being "affable to the poor … the best landlord, and the best master …. There is not one of his tenants or servants but what will give him a good name" (*P&P* 249). As Mrs. Gardiner observes, high wages will ensure the loyalty of a man's employees: "he is a liberal master, I suppose, and that in the eye of a servant comprehends every virtue" (*P&P* 258), but, to remove all doubt, Mrs. Gardiner's friends in Lambton also "acknowledged, however, that he was a liberal man, and did much good among the poor" (*P&P* 265). Darcy's kindness to his underlings in Derbyshire covers a multitude of social *faux pas* in the ballrooms and drawing rooms of Hertfordshire, and Darcy is redeemed by his philanthropy.

As Elizabeth stares at Darcy's portrait, she reflects on his generosity and begins to fall in love with him:

> There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance. The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise

> is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship! – How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow! – How much of good or evil must be done by him!
>
> (*P&P* 250–51)

Darcy's "valuable qualities" are revealed in how he spends his money (*P&P* 265), and Elizabeth and the reader are simultaneously converted into admirers of a moderate Whig. Now assured that Darcy is "perfectly amiable" (*P&P* 376), the reader and Mr. Bennet are united in their acceptance of Darcy as Elizabeth's husband: "I could not have parted with you, my Lizzy, to any one less worthy" (*P&P* 377). Everyone is prosperous and content in Darcy's Derbyshire, which suggests that a combination of higher wages and more liberal charity would produce similar results in the rest of the nation.

Just as Fitzwilliam Darcy has been maliciously slandered, *Pride and Prejudice* also calls into question the radical Whigs' assumptions about the working class. The politicians blamed not the crop failures, nor low wages, nor high prices, but the poor themselves for their failure to thrive. In Edmund Burke's opinion, the poor had a volatile, bloodthirsty, mob mentality, like the French revolutionaries, and would "rise to destroy the rich" by cutting their throats (252), if they were given a chance. Jeremy Bentham argued that the rate-payers should feed the poor out of "regard for the safety of the other classes" (150). Patrick Colquhoun also believed that the working class harbored decided criminal tendencies, and he compared the poor to an infectious disease spreading through the nation, "a gangrene in the body politic" which would grow "to threaten [the government's] total dissolution" (64). But none of this paranoid fear of the poor is evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, neither does *Pride and Prejudice*, or any of Jane Austen's other novels, depict servants as fools for the purpose of comic relief.

Silly and unscrupulous servants were common characters in popular fiction such Laurence Sterne's 1767 novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Tobias Smollet's 1771 *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, and in David Garrick's popular plays, *High Life Below Stairs* and *Bon Ton; or, High Life Above Stairs*, plays Jane Austen knew well (Byrne 9). According to an 1809 edition of *A Collection of*

Farces and Other Afterpieces, High Life Above and *Below Stairs* were both still being performed on the stage in London as Jane Austen was writing *First Impressions* and revising *Pride and Prejudice*. As John Mullan reminds us in *What Matters in Jane Austen?*, servants "are ever-present in Austen's fiction … the servants see everything, and we as readers should see them watching and listening" (131), as Austen's first readers would have, and it is significant that there are no servant buffoons in any of Austen's novels.

The presence of so many industrious servants in *Pride and Prejudice* suggests the codependency of the classes and the inherent stability of Georgian England, in stark contrast to the radical Whigs' negative stereotypes and violent predictions. American traveler Louis Simond recorded in his 1810 journal that the servants in England were surprisingly cheerful, hardworking, "civil and attentive" (2), especially so when compared to the servants in the United States: "Domestics are here not only more obliging and industrious, but, what is remarkable, look better pleased and happier" (5). As Simond noted, the tranquil lives of the gentry would not have been possible without staffs of competent and dependable menials: "The creditable and decent look of the servants is no less remarkable, and they are the mainspring of all the other comforts" (14). The servants in *Pride and Prejudice* would appear to confirm Simond's observations and to supply ample evidence that, as the Bible says, "the labourer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7).

Mrs. Nicholls at Netherfield, Mrs. Hill at Longbourn, and Mrs. Reynolds at Pemberley keep the home fires burning. Charles Bingley's acknowledgement that the Netherfield ball is entirely dependent on his housekeeper's preparing "white soup enough" is a tactful reminder that all of the gentry's social events were made possible by the labor of their servants (*P&P* 55). Mrs. Jenkinson and her four nieces, Miss Pope, and Mrs. Annesley care for and educate their employers' children. What would the Collinses do without their manservant John, or Mr. Philips without his man, Richard, or the Gardiners without their own John, or the Bennets without their footman? The Bennets' upper maid Sarah and Bingley's upper housemaid no doubt have an easier time of it than Mrs. Forster's maid Sally and the chambermaid at the inn in Lambton (*P&P* 41). Dawson, Lady Catherine's "waiting woman" (P&P 353), has, perhaps, the most unenviable job of all and would presumably be happy to change

places with either of "the two elegant ladies who waited on [Bingley's] sisters" (*P&P* 41), but they all serve their employers without any hint of a complaint on either side.

The gardener at Pemberley escorts Elizabeth, her uncle, and aunt through the grounds and, "with a triumphant smile" (*P&P* 253), reveals his pride in his work. Austen's original readers did not need reminding that all of those carriages transporting people here and there were being driven by coachmen, the horses cared for by grooms and ostlers, and that the various estates were also working farms that employed villages of agricultural laborers. Miss Darcy's former companion, the perfidious Mrs. Younge, proves unworthy of the trust placed in her by her employer, but she is the shocking exception that proves the general rule. Mr. Darcy is so well served by his employees that he does not even suspect Mrs. Younge's duplicity. When Mr. Bennet teases Jane that, with her placid temperament and Bingley's ample income, "every servant will cheat you" (*P&P* 348), no one, not even Mrs. Bennet, takes his remark seriously.

In a letter to Cassandra dated 29 January 1813, Jane Austen wrote to say that she had just received "my own darling Child from London" (*Letters* 201), the newly published first edition of *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Austen, she had significantly "lopt & cropt" *First Impressions* in the process of revision: "I imagine it must be rather shorter than S. & S. altogether" (*Letters* 202). Exactly what Austen edited out of the original manuscript we have no way of knowing, but perhaps there were more political references that the intervening years had rendered unnecessary or obsolete. At the time *Pride and Prejudice* was published, the Speenhamland system and the reform of the Poor Laws were still topics of heated debate in the House of Commons. The radical Whigs now wanted to reform the Poor Laws themselves, but in order to cut taxes by reducing aid to the poor.

The Speenhamland system became both a minimum and a maximum wage in practice, a blessing and a curse to the working class. Beyond a doubt, it helped the poor to survive, but Speenhamland guaranteed the laborer bread and nothing more. When the cost of bread went down following a good harvest, the working man's wages were reduced as well, which was not at all the original intention of the Berkshire magistrates who met at Speenhamland. In Jane Austen's Hampshire, in 1830, agricultural laborers decided that

their daily loaf was not enough, and the Swing Riots broke out, but in 1796 and 1797, Speenhamland seemed to be the best and most humane solution to England's massive poverty, or at the least the one that the majority of Englishmen could agree to.

The issue of Poor Law reform remained controversial, and the old Elizabethan Poor Law continued in effect until the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed by a Whig government in 1834. Stephen Lee in *Aspects of British Political History* calls it "the most contentious piece of legislation passed during the whole era of Whig rule" (69). The Poor Law Amendment Act overturned Speenhamland and significantly cut taxes by making it much more difficult for poor people to qualify for aid on the "less eligibility" principle. All outdoor relief was abolished, meaning the only people eligible for assistance were those confined in workhouses or poorhouses, and there were no more temporary hardship allowances.

To further discourage people from applying for aid, the workhouses and poorhouses were intentionally made more unpleasant. For instance, married couples and families with children were arbitrarily separated and only allowed to visit one another or to see outside visitors on Sunday afternoons. After the Amendment Act was in place, taxes going to poor relief were reduced by one third, but it meant that someone elderly and infirm who applied for parish relief, like "Poor old John" Abdy in *Emma* (383), would have to leave his family and home to live in the poorhouse or get nothing. Having read *Pride and Prejudice* in its political and economic context, it is impossible to imagine that Jane Austen would have found that acceptable.

4
Northanger Abbey and *The Watsons*: The Restriction Act

Northanger Abbey begins with an "ADVERTISEMENT, BY THE AUTHORESS" (*NA* 10). In this preface, Jane Austen is very particular about the exact time-frame of the novel's setting: "The public are entreated to bear in mind that thirteen years have passed since it was finished, many more since it was begun, and that during that period, places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes." The change in books refers to the 1790s' craze for gothic novels that had, by 1816, somewhat abated. Catherine Morland overindulges in the romanticism of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, published in 1794, and John Thorpe mentions *The Monk* published in 1796: "I read that t'other day" (*NA* 48). In a letter to Cassandra dated 24 October 1798, Jane Austen wrote that their father was reading the circulating library's copy of *Midnight Bell* published earlier that year. *Midnight Bell* also finds its way onto Isabella Thorpe's reading list, as do two other gothic novels published in 1798, *Clermont* and *Orphan of the Rhine* (*NA* 40). All of this is important because it places *Northanger Abbey* in a specific time-frame and demonstrates that the author considered the timing to be significant information for her contemporary reader "to bear in mind," a reader who would have known that the novel was written at the time of the 1797 Restriction Act, a law which economically impacted everyone living in Britain at the time as it called into question the value of paper money, the reliability of the Bank of England, and the honesty of the British government.

Figure 4.1 In this 1797 print, a patriotic John Bull ignores the warnings of the Frenchman (on his left) and Whig Charles James Fox (on his right) and accepts paper banknotes from Tory Prime Minister William Pitt
Source: Image courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

In light of the Restriction Act, mendacity and breach of promise in Austen's novels assumes even greater significance. Mary Poovey asserts that the three broken promises at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* suggest that the author was reacting to the paper money crisis of confidence "because she wanted to acknowledge the situation caused by the Restriction so that she could use her fiction to manage the anxieties it caused" (*Genres*, 370). If Poovey is right about the Restriction Act's impact on the ending of *First Impressions*, which was begun as the Restriction Act was being argued in the House of Commons, debated in the press, and depicted in the popular cartoon prints of James Gillray, then what Poovey says of *Pride and Prejudice* should at least equally apply to *Northanger Abbey*, written in the year following the Restriction. By the time *Northanger Abbey* was penned, the economic crisis of early 1797 was generally acknowledged to have been a panic based on groundless fears (Hague 399), not entirely unlike Catherine Morland's wild surmises inspired by lurid gothic fiction.

On the front page of the March 11, 1797 issue of *The Hampshire Chronicle*, where the Hampshire Whig Club placed announcements of their regular meetings, is a large, eye-catching advertisement which would seem bizarre had it been printed at any other time: "WE, the undersigned, do agree to receive, as usual, the NOTES of the BANK of ENGLAND." Following a short paragraph explaining their intention to continue to accept as legal tender the banknotes used by their nation's government are the names of dozens of local landowners who felt compelled to reassure the public of their confidence in paper money. Presumably, all of the men who paid for the ad and signed their names to it were known to the Austen family. Certainly, the Austens were friends of "Wm. Chute, Esq. M.P." and of Lovelace Bigg-Wither, the father of the man who would propose marriage to Jane Austen in 1802. Such an extraordinary ad could only have been written as a result of the 1797 Restriction Act, which, after a heated debate in the House of Commons and repeated reassurances from Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, all duly noted in the *Hampshire Chronicle*, had been approved by Parliament on the previous day.

The British public had always been somewhat suspicious of paper money which contained no intrinsic value of its own and only served as a promissory note, pledging to exchange itself for gold. Adam Smith, in *Wealth of Nations*, saw the oversupply of paper

banknotes, founded on nothing but trust, as being problematic, but Smith reassured his 1776 reader that banknotes "payable upon demand without any condition, and in fact always readily paid as soon as presented, is, in every respect, equal in value to gold and silver money; since gold and silver money can at any time be had for it" (263). The difficulty was that by 1790, everyone knew the Bank of England had insufficient gold reserves to back the paper banknotes already in circulation, and almost everyone in print at the time identified paper money as the major destabilizing force at work in the Georgian economy (Poovey 177). In June of 1796, *The Hampshire Chronicle* reported that the proliferation of paper money with insufficient gold or silver to back it had "increased to a dangerous pitch," that "the fictitious circulation exceeds the real numerical circulation by more than double," and so the entire system was doomed to collapse, as "with the *real capital* the *fictitious must fall*" (3).

The fictional element of paper money referred to the text printed on every banknote issued by the Bank of England, "payable to the bearer on demand in gold." As everyone knew that this promised exchange of paper for gold was neither realistic nor even possible, the words, or story, printed on the banknote functioned as a brief work of fiction, but the promissory phrase was also a legally binding contract, meaning that the Bank of England had been operating one rush on the Bank away from insolvency for years. Nevertheless, the Bank kept printing more paper banknotes bearing the promise the Bank's directors knew they could not, if pressed, honor, until 1797.

Rumors of a French invasion around Christmas time of 1796 prompted panic-stricken farmers in Newcastle to besiege their local banks demanding gold in exchange for their paper banknotes. Three rural banks with insufficient gold reserves immediately collapsed as a result of the rush, and others closed their doors to avoid a similar fate. The directors of the Bank of England were horrified, as they knew that the same thing, albeit on a much larger scale, could happen to them. The Bank's enemy was not the French, but fear itself. The Bank was potentially one panicky mob away from collapse, and, even if the riot never occurred, troubles were coming as battalions of single spies. By the end of February, £100,000 a day in gold was being withdrawn from the Bank of England, and the Bank's bullion reserves had been depleted to £1.2 million (Hague 397–8).

According to David Ricardo, in spite of the proliferation of paper money and the unprecedented national debt, in 1797 the British economic system was sound, but the British public was not: "Neither the Bank nor government were at that time to blame; it was the contagion of the unfounded fears of the timid part of the community which occasioned the run on the Bank" (248–9). As William Pitt's biographer William Hague put it, if something were not done to stem the flow of gold, the Bank of England would fail, and, as a result, "the nation would be bankrupt and the entire system of finance and credit which had provided the tens of millions of pounds to sustain the war would collapse." In short, the Bank of England was too big to fail, and British Prime Minister William Pitt needed another loan.

After decades of deficit spending, Britain already had an unprecedented national debt when Prime Minister Pitt went to the Bank of England, as per usual, but this time the Bank directors were hesitant to comply. William Pitt, however, was not a man to be denied, and Pitt proposed to solve the Bank's problem in return for a substantial loan to carry on the war effort. The Restriction Act was a bold, sly, perhaps unethical political maneuver devised and executed by Pitt. Knowing that the House of Commons would be uncooperative, Pitt waited until Parliament adjourned and then flew into action. Pitt's solution was a new law, the Restriction Act, which absolved the Bank of England from the obligation to redeem its banknotes with gold specie, in spite of the words clearly printed on each paper banknote. The 1797 Restriction Act essentially gave the Bank, like a woman at a dance, "the power of refusal" (*NA* 77). Additionally, Pitt placed a military guard at the Bank to discourage riots.

The Restriction Act began as an Order in Council, which was similar to an Emergency War Powers Act. All Pitt needed in the short term was the signature of the King, who was cajoled into cooperation. Pitt knew the House of Commons would be stunned by his audacity and enraged by his deception, but, once the dust settled, the gloating Pitt was confident that Parliament would be forced to comply, as the Prime Minister spun the entire affair as an act of patriotism which, in light of the threat from the French, any true Englishman would support. Whatever Britons may have thought of the Restriction Act, they could not help but be struck by their government's collusion with the Bank of England to make it legal for the Bank to disregard its oft-printed promise to the public. Paper money was more fictional

than ever and the politicians in Parliament even less trustworthy. No wonder the characters in *Northanger Abbey* make an effort to keep abreast of the developments in London.

In Bath, Mr. Allen "joined some gentlemen to talk over the politics of the day and compare the accounts of their newspapers" (*NA* 71), and at Northanger Abbey, General Tilney spends hours "poring over the affairs of the nation" and his "many [political] pamphlets" (*NA* 187). Catherine Morland shows no interest in Mr. Allen's newspapers, and she considers General Tilney's "stupid pamphlets" to be a rather flimsy excuse to be left alone (*NA* 187), but, even if Catherine is not, the British public in 1798 were generally keenly interested in political economics, as, aside from the Restriction Act, William Pitt's new, controversial 1799 income tax to fund the war effort was looming large. It was the first income tax in British history, and, as Nicholas Roe observes in *Jane Austen in Context*, the tax "fell most heavily on those people with moderate incomes of from £200 to £600 a year, incomes that provided only a marginal hold on the consumer symbols of genteel life" (319), that is people with enough income to employ two or three servants but not enough to keep a horse (Adams and Adams 16), exactly the kind of people Jane Austen had written about in *Sense and Sensibility* and her target readers who frequented circulating libraries because they could not afford to buy books.

Heavily taxing the lowest strata of the gentry, the professional class, and the upper strata of the working-class while leaving the wealthy comparatively unscathed was the only way Pitt had a chance of getting the tax approved by the House of Commons, but there was no system for auditing the tax. It was based entirely on trust, that the taxpayer would be honest in his accounting, and the rich had the most to gain by dishonesty. As it turned out, the income tax raised £6 million in 1799 and 80 percent of all of the new tax revenues imposed between 1793 and 1815 (Roe 319). Like Poovey, Claudia Johnson in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* also notes the preoccupation with politics in *Northanger Abbey*:

> Given the political ambience of British fiction during the 1790s, it is not surprising that of all Austen's novels, *Northanger Abbey*, arguably her earliest, should be the most densely packed with topical details of a political character … In anti-Jacobin novels,

> pernicious or merely benighted characters philosophize as they break their words and betray their trusts left and right. (41)

Of course, Isabella Thorpe breaks all of her promises, as Henry Tilney reminds Catherine: "And did Isabella never change her mind before?" (*NA* 133). Isabella's consistent inconsistency should have prepared Catherine for Miss Thorpe's failure to honor her engagement to James Morland. Similarly, when General Tilney ungraciously thrusts Catherine Morland from his house, the General betrays not only Catherine's but also the Allens' and the Morlands' trust in him. What is so striking about the behavior of the Thorpes and General Tilney is the way they say precisely the opposite of what they are actually thinking.

Isabella Thorpe claims to "hate money" (*NA* 136), and Isabella's brother John declares that "Fortune is nothing" (*NA* 124). General Tilney also dissembles: "The money is nothing" (*NA* 176). As General Tilney has disingenuously assured Catherine that "he only valued money as it allowed him to promote the happiness of his children" (*NA* 205), Catherine is puzzled: "why he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood?" (*NA* 211). The Thorpes' and General Tilney's declarations reflect the irony of the printed promise on the Bank of England's paper money, a disingenuous statement to a trusting public, but then *Northanger Abbey* is a novel about truth versus artifice, "broken promises and broken arches, phaetons and false hangings, Tilneys and trap-doors" (*NA* 87).

By way of contrast, Catherine Morland is "unequal to an absolute falsehood" (*NA* 174), and is thus confined to telling the truth: "I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible" (*NA* 133), a confession which Henry Tilney applauds: "Bravo! – an excellent satire on modern language." Henry teases Catherine that her honesty is out of sync with the current standards of her society, that her "mind is warped by an innate principle of general integrity" (*NA* 219). Henry not only values Catherine's honesty, he is "open and bold" himself (*NA* 247), and Henry keeps his promises, even when they are only implied: "He felt himself bound as much in honour as in affection to Miss Morland."

Significantly, when Henry is forced to leave for Woodston earlier than he had planned in order to prepare for Catherine's visit, Henry

frames the event for Catherine and Eleanor in terms of accepting a questionable banknote: "I am come, young ladies, in a very moralizing strain, to observe that our pleasures in this world are always to be paid for, and that we often purchase them at a great disadvantage, giving ready-monied actual happiness for a draft on the future, that may not be honoured" (*NA* 210). As it turns out, of course, the debt for future happiness is, indeed, honored, and Henry was right to trust in the short-term uncertainty for a long-term reward, a thinly disguised statement about paper money.

Mr. Morland and the Bank

Northanger Abbey appears to break down the economic crisis resulting from the paranoia about paper money into terms everyone can readily understand, into the domestic economics of a wealthy man with a large family. Thus, Jane Austen does what Adam Smith repeatedly does in *Wealth of Nations*; she uses the microeconomics of the individual to explain the macroeconomics of the British financial system. Like Catherine Morland's father, the Bank of England was truly rich, but there were many demands for its gold. Should all of Richard Morland's ten children marry at once, like a run on the Bank, Mr. Morland's resources would be sadly depleted, and he must always reserve enough money to remain financially solvent himself. When applied to, Mr. Morland provides marriage settlements for his children, certainly as much as he can afford, so Catherine's father has fulfilled his financial obligations, as the Bank of England had.

James Morland's £400 a year and at least another £400 when his father dies is "no niggardly assignment to one of ten children" (*NA* 135). As we find out later, when Catherine's dowry is revealed, Mr. Morland is being very generous to James, but Isabella Thorpe is extremely disappointed with what she dismisses as "an income hardly enough to find one in the common necessaries of life" (*NA* 136). Catherine is incapable of being disappointed: "'I am very sure,' said she, 'that my father has promised to do as much as he can afford'" (*NA* 136), and "entirely led by her brother, felt equally well satisfied" (*NA* 135). It is only after Catherine begins to think of marrying Henry Tilney that the disparity between Mrs. Tilney's income of £1,000 a year and James Morland's £400 begins to dawn on her.

Miss Morland and the reader learn only at the very end of the novel, and well after Henry Tilney's marriage proposal, that Catherine's dowry is £3,000. John Thorpe, believing that he has acquired Catherine and her dowry for himself, exaggerates her wealth to General Tilney, and Thorpe also later maliciously exaggerates Catherine's poverty. Like the investors who panicked and ran on their banks demanding gold, General Tilney seizes rapidly and indiscriminately on rumors and only learns the truth "as soon as the General would allow himself to be informed" (*NA* 251). As it turns out, the Morlands are "in no sense of the word … necessitous or poor" (*NA* 251), just as a Commons Committee of Inquiry found on inspection that the Bank of England actually had considerably more gold than was generally assumed (Hague 399). £150 a year may sound like a modest income, but the reader must not forget that Catherine is one of ten children, and Catherine Morland suffers financially from her superfluity of siblings. Assuming that Mr. Morland would give at least equal amounts to all of his children, had Catherine been an only child, she would have been an heiress indeed with a dowry of £30,000, the same dowry as Georgiana Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma Woodhouse in *Emma*. With an income of £1,500 per annum, Catherine would have fulfilled John Thorpe's wishful thinking and exceeded even General Tilney's "greedy speculation" (*NA* 252), but innocent Catherine fails to consider that they have any financial expectations of her at all.

Henry Tilney takes up the burden of Catherine's education where the Morlands have left off when he lectures Catherine on the picturesque and then ventures into politics:

> to forests, the inclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics, it was an easy step to silence. The general pause which succeeded his short disquisition on the state of the nation, was put an end to by Catherine, who, in rather a solemn tone of voice, uttered these words, I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London. (*NA* 111–12)

Ever the unpromising pupil, Catherine's mind wanders from politics to gothic novels, but, following her brother's line of reasoning, Eleanor Tilney is still thinking of "the state of the nation" when

Catherine abruptly switches the subject: "It is to be uncommonly dreadful. I shall expect murder and every thing of the kind."

Rather than sharing Catherine's enthusiasm for a new gothic novel, Eleanor Tilney jumps to a different conclusion and is genuinely horrified. Eleanor assumes Catherine is referring to political protest, mob violence, and military intervention to restore the peace. As Henry explains, Eleanor imagines a different kind of fictional horror:

> A mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons, (the hopes of the nation,) called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents, and the gallant Capt. Frederick Tilney, in the moment of charging at the head of his troop, knocked off his horse by a brickbat from an upper window. Forgive her stupidity. The fears of the sister have added to the weakness of the woman; but she is by no means a simpleton in general. (*NA* 113)

Far from a simpleton, Eleanor Tilney is, in fact, very well informed.

Eleanor's fears of a riot in London were just what the directors of the Bank of England worried about, hence the military guard on the Bank. After all, the Bank of England had been targeted before during the 1780 Gordon Riots, and a church near the Bank had been demolished as it was feared the steeple would provide an ideal location for sharp shooters (Olsen 251). When Henry Tilney translates Catherine's description of horrors in London as a harmless, non-political reference to a gothic novel, he exposes the difference between Catherine's enjoyment of gothic fiction and his sister's more realistic but also groundless fears. Just as the French invasion had failed to materialize and the Bank of England continued to transact business as usual, the political fears of 1797 proved to be imaginary terrors, not entirely unlike the fantastical plots of Catherine's gothic novels. Both Catherine and Eleanor assume a threat where, in reality, no threat exists, which, at the time, was a Tory political position.

The political education of Catherine Morland

The Tilneys' political savvy illustrates the gap in their understandings and Catherine's, although the Morlands have tried to instruct

their daughter about politics. Mrs. Morland has Catherine memorize the poem *The Beggar's Petition*, which extols the virtues of former Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder and elaborates on his kindness to the poor. William Pitt the Elder was the former moderate Whig Prime Minister and father of the liberal-Tory Prime Minister when *Northanger Abbey* was written. Catherine shows little interest in the poem and its message about generosity to the poor, but she learns more from the papers she finds tucked away in the Japan cabinet at Northanger Abbey.

Catherine's enlightenment really begins when she goes in search of gothic "treasure" and "precious manuscript" (*NA* 169), "these memoirs of the wretched Matilda" (*NA* 160), as Henry Tilney has teasingly predicted. In her search for gothic fiction, Catherine discovers economic reality, a collection of petty bills, the financial tedium of common life. The discovery of "those hateful evidences of her folly, those detestable papers" (*NA* 173), reveal that there is no elaborate plot behind the economics of paper, only a record of exchange for goods and services. As Catherine has been ignorant of money as a reality, she is also learning about money as fiction and how people are influenced by what they believe about money whether it is true or false. Thus, because of their own fictions about her wealth and poverty, Catherine becomes first the prey and then the scorn of the Thorpes and General Tilney although she has made no effort to mislead them.

When Henry Tilney discovers Catherine snooping in his mother's bedroom, he challenges Catherine to put an end to her wild imaginings, but his advice to allow reason to prevail over fantasy and fear is again to side with the moderate and liberal Tories in the Restriction controversy and with the signers of the notice to the public in *The Hampshire Chronicle*. When Henry Tilney reassures Catherine Morland that there is no evil conspiracy afoot, and nothing to be frightened of, Henry uses the same reasoning that Pitt used in the House of Commons and in the press to reassure the British public. Henry asks Catherine to:

> Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you – Does our education prepare

> us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? (*NA* 198)

Catherine realizes that her fears, like the panic following the rumors of the French invasion, "had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion" (*NA* 199). Catherine's gothic novels have been playing on her imagination, like the Whigs attempting to frighten John Bull in James Gillray's 1797 print, *Paper Money. – Bank Notes. – French Alarmists*. At Henry's prompting, Catherine realizes that she has been indulging "an imagination resolved on alarm" and a "craving to be frightened" (*NA* 199–200). Catherine Morland learns to think rationally and to reject irrational, sensational fear, *Northanger Abbey*'s political and economic message to the British nation.

The Watsons

Jane Austen's unmistakably Tory partisanship in *Northanger Abbey* may explain why the bookseller Crosby & Co. purchased the manuscript in 1803 but then declined to publish it. But having been assured that her first novel would soon be in print, Austen began writing *The Watsons* in 1804. The manuscript copy of *The Watsons*, which features Emma Watson, a heroine "without a sixpence" (*MW* 352), is described by Brian Southam as an "undated first draft, heavily corrected and revised" (*MW* 314). As relatively insignificant as it may appear at first glance, *The Watsons* offers us a unique opportunity to glimpse Jane Austen at work in an early stage of her writing process and to note that her novel begins as a story about money, not love.

Poorer even than Jane Fairfax in *Emma* and lacking Fanny Price's safety net of rich relatives in *Mansfield Park*, heroine Emma Watson's financial situation is too limiting to allow the character to make any choices at all. A heroine must have at least some money, like Catherine Morland's dowry in *Northanger Abbey*, in order to exercise "the power of refusal" (*NA* 77), but Emma Watson can only watch and wait, entirely at the mercy of the author's ingenuity, to see what will happen to her next.

As old Mr. Watson's health declines, Emma's future hangs ever more precariously in the balance, as, when Emma's father dies, his parsonage home and his income go with him. And Emma Watson's brothers cannot save her, as Robert, a solicitor, and Sam, a surgeon, are in the lower ranks of their professions. As Thomas Picketty notes, "a dignified life … was totally out of reach for anyone content to practice a profession, no matter how well paid: the best paid one percent of professions did not allow one to come anywhere near this standard of living (nor did the best paid 0.1 percent)" (412). Thus, Emma Watson is backed into a poverty-stricken corner, as she confesses to Lord Osborne: "Female Economy will do a great deal my Lord, but it cannot turn a small income into a large one" (*MW* 346). Emma's economic vulnerability makes it highly unlikely that she would dare to turn down the marriage proposal of a wealthy man like Lord Osborne, although this is apparently exactly what she was destined to do.

According to Jane Austen's nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, Cassandra Austen told her nieces how the story was to develop:

> Mr. Watson was soon to die; and Emma to become dependent for a home on her narrow-minded sister-in-law and brother. She was to decline an offer of marriage from Lord Osborne, and much of the interest of the tale was to arise from Lady Osborne's love for Mr. Howard, and his counter affection for Emma, whom he was finally to marry. (qtd. in *MW* 363)

If justice prevailed, and in an Austen novel that was a given, then Emma's brother Sam Watson, the surgeon, would have also won his fair lady, Mary Edwards, and her £10,000 "at least" (*MW* 321), in spite of the opposition of Mary's parents. And then there is Emma's older sister, Elizabeth Watson. Perhaps Purvis, Elizabeth's first love, would have reappeared as a widower, or perhaps Lord Osborne might have been persuaded to transfer his affections and his income to Elizabeth, however improbable either of those plot twists might seem.

Granted, aside from his money and title, Lord Osborne is no great catch. He is "out of his Element in a Ball room … was not fond of Women's company, & he never danced" (*MW* 329–30), but Lord Osborne probably would not qualify as one of the few "very

disagreable [*sic*] Men" whom Elizabeth Watson says she would refuse to marry (*MW* 318). Lord Osborne only attends the ball because "it was judged expedient for him to please the Borough" (*MW* 329), so he just chances upon Emma Watson while endeavoring to advance his political career. The fact that dimwitted Lord Osborne has political aspirations is highly suggestive.

There appears to be another economic theme with attorney Robert Watson whose role in the novel was to become more significant:

> Robert was carelessly kind, as became a prosperous Man & brother; more intent on settling with the Post-Boy, inveighing against the Exorbitant advance in Posting, & pondering over a doubtful half-crown, than on welcoming a Sister, who was no longer likely to have any property for him to get the direction of. (*MW* 349)

In this one sentence, the narrator reveals Robert Watson's reduction of everything and everyone around him into money coming in or money going out, and little interest in anyone or anything that did not equate into money. Robert's "doubtful halfcrown" is probably not a government-minted coin but a bank or business token coin, and Robert appears to be wondering if the bank or company that issued the halfcrown token is still solvent.

At the time, England was awash with token coins and paper script issued by banks, businesses, mines, and factories, and by the counties of Hampshire and Cornwall (Olsen 246), as there was a shortage of government-issued gold, silver, and copper coins. As Niall Ferguson reminds us in *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*, our modern coins "are literally made from junk" (30), and we expect no better, but Georgian coins actually contained, or were supposed to contain, their stamped value in precious metal. Unlike government issued coins, bank, business, and county tokens, like our modern coins, contained little, if any, intrinsic value and were only accepted on faith that the issuing firm would make good on its tokens and script by exchanging them for government-minted coins or Bank of England banknotes. However, there was always the possibility of disappointment.

Should the bank or business fail, the token or script was worthless, as the five pound note on the Town and County Bank proves to be in Elizabeth Gaskell's 1853 *Cranford*: "the notes issued by that bank were

little better than waste paper" (123). Like Emma Watson's inheritance, which failed to materialize, Robert Watson's halfcrown, in fact any economics based entirely on trust, could prove to be equally disappointing. The reinstatement of Emma Watson's inheritance, or her Aunt Turner's gift of a dowry, could change the economic message to agree with *Northanger Abbey*'s point about paper money and to argue that the short-term absence of intrinsic value did not necessarily prove disastrous. Perhaps Robert Watson's preoccupation with money explains why Robert, like Lord Osborne, is also interested in politics.

When Tom Musgrave arrives at the Watsons' house, Robert Watson demands to hear the political news before Tom is allowed to converse with the Watson sisters:

> for as he came avowedly from London, & had left it only 4. hours ago, the last current report as to public news, & the general opinion of the day must be understood, before Robert could let his attention be yielded to the less national, & important demands of the Women. (*MW* 356)

As Robert Watson shows no interest in any topic other than money, his curiosity about politics no doubt stems from his concern about the nation's economy, but what Jane Austen would have ultimately done with the story of *The Watsons* is a mystery.

With her cast of characters in place, and hints of an economic theme to be developed, Jane Austen unaccountably put down her pen. The death of Austen's father in January of 1805 is generally assumed to be the reason for her abandonment of *The Watsons*, but there may have been other reasons as well. For one thing, Prime Minister William Pitt died in office in February of 1806, and the entire nation went into mourning. Pitt's famous dying words, "Oh, my country! How I leave my country," were reprinted in the newspapers, as were long obituaries and gushing tributes. Pitt's body was put on public display in the Palace of Westminster, and for two days, tens of thousands of mourners paid their respects; as many as 75 people a minute filed past Pitt's coffin. Even Pitt's arch political rival, Charles Fox, said he was "very sorry, very, very sorry" that Pitt had died. Fox claimed that without Pitt there was "something missing in the world – a chasm, a blank that cannot be supplied" (qtd. in Hague 579). One thing that was definitely missing was Pitt's leadership and

consensus building in the House of Commons. Without Pitt, the liberal-Tory agenda that Jane Austen favored had no hope of going forward, as Lord Grenville, Pitt's replacement as Prime Minister, was a Whig. Additionally, if Austen planned the novel around the theme of suspect coins, the British government surprised her and, in effect, stole her thunder.

When Jane Austen was writing *The Watsons*, everyone acknowledged that the shortage of government-issued coins was stifling the British economy, but the government could not easily acquire enough gold, silver, and copper to mint more coins in order to alleviate the situation. Finally, politicians decided on a course of action. Shortly after Pitt's death in 1806, the government issued new, smaller, lighter-weight, debased coins. The new coins contained one third less precious metal than the old coins of the same denominations still in circulation, although the House of Commons refused to admit it. In fact, it would take an investigating committee of MPs years to acknowledge what was obvious to the naked eye, and average citizens were not as ignorant and gullible as politicians like Edmund Burke, Thomas Malthus, and Patrick Colquhoun claimed they were. People of all classes began hoarding the old coins and spending the new ones. As any coin collector will attest, 1797 Cartwheel pennies can still easily be found in nearly mint condition, but pennies issued in 1806 and after are usually worn nearly smooth from use.

Whatever her reason or reasons, Jane Austen put *The Watsons* and their financial problems both large and small aside, but she kept the manuscript in the drawer of her writing desk. Perhaps Austen planned to resurrect *The Watsons*, eventually, or perhaps she actually did. The author was not finished with a dowerless heroine, a rich, politician buffoon, a clergyman hero, a smooth-talking scoundrel, or a sympathetic brother who had to take up a profession in order to make his way in the world. Emma Watson, Lord Osborne, Mr. Howard, Tom Musgrave, and Sam Watson in *The Watsons* seem to have paved the way for Fanny Price, James Rushworth, Edmund Bertram, Henry Crawford, and William Price in *Mansfield Park*, where the economic discussion continued and the political satire escalated.

5
Mansfield Park: The Condition of England

In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler reads *Mansfield Park* as an affirmation of Tory politics, yet Butler acknowledges that the novel questions the basic tenants of conservatism: "[Austen] can exploit to the full the artistic possibilities of the conservative case; and, at the same time, come face to face with the difficulties it presents" (219). Edward Neill, in *The Politics of Jane Austen*, claims that the text constructs a political bait and switch, first seeming to embrace and then undermining the conservative point of view. In *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, Claudia Johnson maintains that "Austen's enterprise in *Mansfield Park* is to turn conservative myth sour" (97), but *Mansfield Park* is neither a condemnation of Tories nor an affirmation of Whigs but an accusation against the Members of Parliament from both parties, an equal-opportunity, non-partisan criticism of the House of Commons.

In *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England*, Roger Sales notes that many Georgian authors, both Tories and Whigs, represented the nation as a landed estate, which "allows *Mansfield Park* to be read as a Condition-of-England novel that debates topical issues such as the conduct of the war and the Regency Crisis" (87). Sales notes that Austen's depiction of the estate/nation in *Mansfield Park* is similar to the estate/nation analogy in Edmund Burke's 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Saul David, in *Prince of Pleasure*, considers the wastrel depiction of young Tom Bertram to be "Austen's thinly veiled criticism of the Regent" (366–7). Brian Southam, in *Jane Austen and the Navy*, agrees that *Mansfield Park* "was designed by Jane Austen as a 'condition of England' novel"

Figure 5.1 Members of the House of Commons are depicted as actors preparing to go on stage in this 1807 print
Source: Image courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

(187), but Southam focuses on the text's references to colonialism and to the slave trade, as does Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*. Said reminds us that "these are not dead historical facts but, as Austen certainly knew, evident historical realities" (89), and, to Jane Austen and her first readers, current events. Although Sales, David, Southam, and Said do not mention it, the most pressing and alarming topic in Regency England was the nation's troubled economy, even, as in our own day, overshadowing war as the primary subject of public concern and political debate.

While the ink was drying on the manuscript pages of what would become *Mansfield Park*, written in 1811 through 1813, the public was appalled by a series of events precipitated by the deteriorating British economy. Jane Austen would have read columns of print in the newspapers reporting Luddite riots and the mass hangings of convicted Luddites in 1811. For many of the accused, it was a case of guilt by association, and those not hung were transported. In May of 1812, as *Mansfield Park*'s plot thickened, the nation was shocked when conservative Tory Prime Minister Spencer Perceval was shot in the chest in the lobby of the House of Commons by a middle-class merchant, John Bellingham, who blamed the Prime Minister and the British government for his bankruptcy. News of the Prime Minister's murder was met with a surprising show of support for the assassin, feasting, bell ringing, bonfires, cheering, and what the newspapers referred to as "the most enthusiastic demonstrations of joy … savage joy" on the part of people (qtd. in Hanrahan 89–90), who, like John Bellingham, also held Perceval's government responsible for their poverty.

The Regency's economic problems may seem a long way from "every thing else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park" (*MP* 473), but a dismal economy threatens there, too. The first Austen novel written entirely in the nineteenth-century, *Mansfield Park* plunges into the political fray, as it was, at the time, an obvious parody of politicians and of business as usual in the House of Commons. Like actors in the theatre, politicians took turns giving rehearsed speeches on the floor of the House of Commons, performing to the audience in the gallery and to the larger audience who read excerpts of their speeches in the newspapers. Page two of *The Hampshire Chronicle* was devoted to Parliamentary reports and to the actions and emotions of the politicians as they spoke. The 1807

James Gillray print, *A Peep behind the Curtain or Preparation for the meeting of Parliament*, depicts members of the House of Commons not as politicians but as a troupe of actors preparing to go on stage. Another print produced a year earlier, *A Scene in the Forty Thieves. Performing at the Theatre Royal*, depicts radical Whig Charles James Fox as the leader of a band of actor/thieves who are also Members of Parliament. Their plunder stored in the secret cave includes government jobs and pensions. The disreputable characters in *Mansfield Park*, with their amateur theatricals, are a similar spoof of politicians, and the ever-watchful and silent Fanny Price functions as the British public, the politicians' skeptical audience.

Throughout the novel, Fanny passively looks on as the others rehearse, form tableaux, give speeches, and enact love scenes before her. She listens to the characters' monologues and dialogues, but, as the audience, she has nothing to contribute to the action: "Fanny was wanted only to prompt and observe them" (*MP* 170). Although Edmund and Mary Crawford declare her to be the "judge and critic," Fanny, like the British public, is rarely consulted and, when she dares to express an opinion, she is immediately opposed, scolded into silence, or ignored, just as the concerns of the average citizen were dismissed by politicians at the time. According to Whig MP Edmund Burke, that was the best and only way to deal with the public: "The cry of the people ought, in *fact*, to be the *least* attended to … for citizens are in a state of utter ignorance" (262). Even when Fanny is obviously right, her cautions fall on deaf ears, and she is powerless. Like the majority of Britons at the time, she can only observe and cringe as she watches those who have the power to act make a complete hash of it.

Good intentions

Mansfield Park begins with the pompous but conscientious Sir Thomas Bertram, Member of Parliament (*MP* 20), and "master at Mansfield Park" (*MP* 370), as he formulates a "benevolent plan" (*MP* 18). Sir Thomas is confronted with the problem that continued to challenge country squires all over England, exactly how John Bull should endeavor to assist the poor, although, given Mansfield Park's location, the reader could safely assume that a great deal was already being done. Mansfield Park is located in Northamptonshire, where

wages and Poor Law taxes were both well above the national average and where commons remained unenclosed. For instance, 7,000 to 8,000 acres of Wicklewood Forest were common land where laborers pastured their cattle (Eden 266). The fact that the working class in Northamptonshire still had cattle was, in itself, worthy of comment. According to Frederic Eden, farmers in the county wanted to enclose more land but had been frustrated in the endeavor as "some great proprietors object to the measure" (265), illustrating the public-spirited self-sacrifice demonstrated by Northamptonshire's squires, like Sir Thomas Bertram.

Sir Thomas keeps his estate workers employed year round (*MP* 142), and he retains a large household staff, including an elderly servant, "the old coachman" (*MP* 69). At the time, servants in their 50s were generally replaced by younger, presumably harder-working and more vigorous, employees. As historian Amanda Vickery notes in *The Gentleman's Daughter*, "a rapid turnover of lower servants was the norm" (140), and though male servants tended to stay longer than female servants, ten years was a relatively long time for any servant to be employed by the same family. In her book on Georgian servants, *Flunkeys and Scullions*, Pamela Horn reminds us that only a few of the upper servants, "housekeepers, nursemaids and butlers, might be kept on in the household on a grace and favour basis during their declining years" (213). Servants in charge of horses tended to be young men with a fairly high turnover rate: "Coachmen, like footmen, were part of a family's 'display' to the outside world" (Horn 175), thus a coachman was expected to be "an impressive figure," youthful, tall, and handsome in his livery. But "good old Wilcox" seems unlikely to convey any message to the outside world other than his master's unwillingness to dismiss him (*MP* 251). Further proof of the benevolence we may assume in Sir Thomas could be found in the superiority of Northamptonshire's poorhouses.

Eden declared Northamptonshire's poorhouses to be "very clean and neat, and the Poor live there comfortably" (263). In most poorhouses in England, Eden found that food was carefully rationed and doled out in meager portions, but in Northamptonshire's poorhouses, "The victuals are not weighed, but the Poor have generally as much bread and meat as they can eat." In the parish of All Saints, 22 residents in the poorhouse were between the ages of 90 and 100 years old (Eden 262). The imagery of prisons, bars, chains, and

confinement have often been noted in *Mansfield Park*, and perhaps it is no coincidence that Northampton's poorhouse was originally built as a jail: "The high walls which encompass the narrow courts being capped with spikes, give the place a great resemblance to a prison" (Eden 263), but no one was likely to suffer deprivation there.

Sir Thomas decides to assist the children of his sister-in-law, but he is unsure of how to proceed, so, like the politician he is, Sir Thomas "debated and hesitated" (*MP* 6). Fortified by Mrs. Norris's reassurances, Sir Thomas eventually commits himself to "so benevolent a scheme" as taking his eldest niece into his home in the capacity of a companion (*MP* 8): "We will endeavour to do our duty by her" (*MP* 9). But Sir Thomas errs in assuming a vast difference between his niece and his daughters: "Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different" (*MP* 11), but the only real difference between the Bertram sisters and their cousin is money.

Fanny Price is to live in the same house, as a member of the same family, to receive the same education, from the same governess, as his own daughters, all untitled, whether Miss Bertram or Miss Price, yet Sir Thomas declares that "still they cannot be equals." Because he is to become Fanny's patron, Sir Thomas assumes the kind of money-nexus superiority to his niece that he assumes with his employees. Edmund Burke referred to "this chain of subordination" when he compared an agricultural laborer to "the beast" that pulled the "plough and cart" and to the laborer's employer as the "thinking and presiding principle to the laborer" (256–7). The dependent is all body, which Edmund Burke referred to as "animal man" (253), the employer all brain, "rational man." At the beginning of *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas would probably have agreed with Burke that any "attempt to break this chain of subordination in any part is equally absurd" (257), and Sir Thomas mistakenly attempts to maintain this superior-to-inferior relationship with his niece, with her brothers, and, by extension, with all members of their marginally-genteel, professional class.

The underlying logical fallacy of Edmund Burke and of Sir Thomas Bertram is the assumption that the wealthy man has much more wisdom than his dependents, who are presumed to be entirely ignorant due to, according to Burke, "their miserable understandings" (252). Because she is known to be poor, Fanny Price's uncle passes judgment on her sight unseen: "We shall probably see much to wish altered in

her, and must prepare ourselves for gross ignorance, some meanness of opinions, and very distressing vulgarity of manner" (*MP* 10), the same traits radical Whig politicians like Burke routinely attributed to the poor. Sir Thomas has good intentions, but his "well-meant condescensions" do little to endear him to the reader (*MP* 13).

In Austen's previous novels, the source of her characters' incomes was land, investments, or some sort of trade. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Jennings' deceased husband was a merchant who "got all his money in a low way" (*S&S* 228), just as the Bingleys' fortune in *Pride and Prejudice* "had been acquired by trade" (*P&P* 15), and Elizabeth Bennet's Uncle Gardiner "lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses" (*P&P* 139). Whether they sold wine, tea, or beer, candles, coal, or cloth is immaterial to the story, but apparently Sir Thomas's source of income is not. Even the owner of Mansfield Park must acknowledge that a considerable part of his income, and certainly much of Britain's, came from abroad, nearly ten percent in 1812 when Jane Austen wrote *Mansfield Park* (Picketty 120). In addition to Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas owns a plantation in Antigua, and he must go there because of "the necessity of the measure in a pecuniary light" (*MP* 32). As Thomas Picketty notes, "it was by no means simple to manage plantations several thousand miles away. Tending to one's wealth was not a tranquil matter of collecting rent on land or interest on government debt" (115). But there was a great deal of money to made growing sugar cane.

The Empire

At the time, as everyone knew, the West Indies were, by far, Britain's most profitable colonies, and the West Indian economy was based on sugar that was planted and harvested by slave labor. Austen's 1814 readers were also aware of the fact that in 1772 the Chief Justice of the King's Bench, Lord Mansfield, ruled in the landmark Somerset case that slavery was illegal in Britain, although Chief Justice Mansfield's ruling did nothing to interfere with the slave trade in the colonies (Picard 114). In 1789, the Austens and their contemporaries would have read newspaper accounts of slave ship Captain Robert Norris's testimony in Parliament when Norris defended the slave trade as a humane enterprise and claimed that the slaves were satisfied, even happy, with their lot as portable property (Rediker 328).

Surely, Austen's use of the names Mansfield and Norris were more than coincidental, especially when one considers the additional references to slavery in *Mansfield Park*.

We are told that Sir Thomas's "business in Antigua had latterly been prosperously rapid, and he came directly from Liverpool" (*MP* 178). In the early eighteenth-century, Bristol and London were the major slave-trading ports in Britain, but by the late eighteenth century, Liverpool had eclipsed both to become the busiest British port for slave-traders (Rediker 50). When Fanny Price "asked [Sir Thomas] about the slave trade" (*MP* 198), none of the other characters expressed any interest in the subject, but Jane Austen's point about the dubious economics of the British Empire has been made.

When Sir Thomas/John Bull chooses to secure his lucrative financial interests abroad, he leaves his home in England, but this would not, necessarily, have been seen as unpatriotic. In *A Treatise on The Wealth, Power and Resources of the British Empire* published in 1815, radical Whig Patrick Colquhoun maintained that the owners of plantations in the West Indies almost always lived in England and brought their sugar profits home where their West Indian money enriched the mother country, "so that under all circumstances, the active capital of the nation is thus annually augmented, although not always to the advantage of the proprietors of West India Estates when prices are low, but uniformly more or less beneficial to the parent state" (87). That Colquhoun felt it necessary to reassure his reader suggests that not everyone considered the colonial enterprise worth maintaining. In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas travels to Antigua to put his colonial affairs in order, but, while he is distracted in the colony, the situation rapidly deteriorates at home, a direct comment on the cost of British imperialism.

In Sir Thomas's absence, Mansfield Park descends into confusion and chaos, but with Sir Thomas's return and "under his government, Mansfield was an altered place" (*MP* 196). When Edmund Bertram maintains that "a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent" (*MP* 247), Edmund points out Sir Thomas's problem as an absentee landlord in either Antigua or in England. As the biblical saying goes, no man can serve two masters, but this was a common problem for the Members of the House of Commons. Many MPs represented boroughs they seldom visited.

Like Mr. Rushworth at Sotherton, they may have been happy to show off their manor houses and to improve their pleasure grounds, but they took little interest in the lives of their working-class dependents, as Maria Bertram notices: "Those cottages are really a disgrace" (*MP* 82). Similarly, many of the wealthy in Britain were keenly interested in the profits from their colonial investments but not at all interested in the plight of the colonists, natives, and slaves who made those profits possible.

For many Members of the House of Commons, like Sir Thomas, their loyalties were divided, and whose interests they were representing in Parliament was questionable. When a bill was introduced in the House of Commons, was it Britain's, the Empire's, the Members' constituents, or their personal financial interests which determined how they voted? Obviously, the economics of each group were intertwined and often interdependent, but what happened when those various economic and political interests conflicted with one another, as they sometimes did? And did the Members understand all of the facts and care enough to attempt to do the right thing? As Members of Parliament frequently demonstrated, they often did not.

City versus country

During the Regency, seats in the House of Commons were filled by a collection of privileged, often relatively young men who spent most of their time in London and ventured only occasionally into their districts to give speeches and canvas for votes. In the autumn, Members of Parliament routinely deserted London for country estates to collect their rents and to entertain themselves with a few weeks of field sports, just as the idle young men do in *Mansfield Park* (*MP* 114). Parliament convened in the late autumn, after the harvest and the annual extermination of the country's wildlife. As Maggie Lane in *Jane Austen's England* reminds us, "Only one-fifth of the population lived in towns" (18), so Members of Parliament living in London were by their very proximity out of touch with 80 percent of the nation, and a few weeks of shooting birds, hunting foxes, and collecting agricultural profits at the most bountiful time of the year were insufficient to acquaint them with the concerns of most Britons.

Londoner Mary Crawford demonstrates the city dweller's ignorance of rural economics when she attempts to hire a horse and cart to fetch her harp. As Edmund points out, "You would find it difficult, I dare say, just now, in the middle of a very late hay harvest" (*MP* 58). What the local gentry appreciates is that, without the hay, which must be cut, dried, and gathered in while the weather holds and before the hay begins to mold or rot, the sheep and cattle will have nothing to eat during the winter and will have to be, of necessity, slaughtered. Such a flood of meat on the market would drive meat prices down in the short term and force farmers to take a loss and then create a shortage of meat with high prices for the next few years until the area was able to recover, a local economic disaster similar to the harvest failure of 1794–95. But this never occurs to Mary Crawford: "Guess my surprise, when I found that I had been asking the most unreasonable, most impossible thing in the world, had offended all the farmers, all the labourers, all the hay in the parish."

Mary's attempt to hire a horse and cart is worse than the social *faux pas* she perceives it to be, merely a breach of "country customs." Mary betrays gross ignorance of the agricultural foundation of her nation's economy, and her brother Henry is just as bad. Instead of offering his own carriage horses to help with the harvest, Henry sends them off to London to fetch Mary's harp (*MP* 59). Mary Crawford acknowledges that "coming down with the true London maxim, that every thing is to be got with money" does little to endear her to the rural population, and she never seems to realize the absurdity of her thinking.

Edmund Bertram feels compelled to explain to Mary Crawford the reason for their many differences of opinion: "*You* are speaking of London, *I* am speaking of the nation at large" (*MP* 93). Edmund asserts that people should look to rural England for spiritual guidance, but *Mansfield Park* implies that rural England should guide people in their temporal concerns as well. The Crawfords' misunderstanding is the result of their sheltered lives as city-dwellers, but their indifference to other people's livelihoods and to the economic condition of the nation is selfish, offensive, and, as the text suggests, unpatriotic. However, the Crawfords only reflect the cash-nexus worldview of Edmund Burke, Thomas Malthus, Patrick Colquhoun, and many other politicians.

Candidates

For an eldest son in line to eventually inherit a title and to thus assume his place in the House of Lords, being a Member of the House of Commons was thought to be good preparation. The young heir presumptive learns about the political system from the bottom up; the political career of Winston Churchill is a case in point. For the untitled but wealthy, like Sir Thomas Bertram and his heir, the House of Commons was an end in itself which allowed Members to protect their personal financial interests. Many MPs merely cast their votes as directed by the handful of landowners who elected them.

It is worth noting that the young men assembled at Mansfield Park either will be or at least could be Members of Parliament and in a position to make political decisions about the economy of the nation. Their family connections, wealth, and temperaments equip them to become dependable party hacks, but not inspired leaders, and, with the exception of outsider William Price, the only one who serves in the military, the male characters in *Mansfield Park* are representative of those who actually governed Britain at the time. Mr. Rushworth is an only child and has inherited an estate; Henry Crawford, an only son, has also inherited an estate; Tom Bertram is an eldest son and heir to Mansfield Park, and The Honourable John Yates is "the younger son of a Lord" (*MP* 121). These were exactly the same assortment of "dashing representatives, or idle heir apparents" who filled the House of Commons (*MP* 469). It is a thought that should, no matter the time period, give the reader pause.

Politically unimpeded by being "an inferior young man, as ignorant in business as in books, with opinions in general unfixed, and without seeming much aware of it himself" (*MP* 200), James Rushworth, the wealthiest character in an Austen novel, is destined for a seat in the House of Commons. Mrs. Grant speculates that Rushworth "*will* be in parliament soon. When Sir Thomas comes, I dare say he will be in for some borough, but there has been nobody to put him in the way of doing any thing yet" (*MP* 161). Mrs. Grant and Mary Crawford are both politically savvy enough to know that "with not more than common sense" (*MP* 38), Mr. Rushworth can easily become the representative of some rotten or pocket borough. Mr. Rushworth's work ethic is nonexistent: "I think we are a great deal better employed, sitting comfortably here among ourselves, and

doing nothing" (*MP* 186), but his very do-nothingness will admirably suit him for a long if not distinguished political career. As useless as he is, Mr. Rushworth is no worse than the other young scions of wealth in the novel who will no doubt be assuming their own places in Britain's government.

Though certainly capable of more than Mr. Rushworth, "careless and extravagant" Tom Bertram aspires to nothing more than horseracing, shooting, gambling, and playacting (*MP* 20). In fact, in his passion for horseracing, Tom appears to be a parody of former Whig Prime Minister Augustus Henry Fitzroy, third Duke of Grafton, who, as a Member of Parliament and even as Prime Minister, routinely neglected pressing national affairs in order to spend the day at the race track (Stone, *Broken Lives* 140). Prime Minister Fitzroy was also a notorious adulterer who lived openly in London with his mistress before finally, and hypocritically, divorcing his wife for adultery. The anonymous "Junius" letters published in the newspapers at the time revealed, in detail, the Prime Minister's public and personal failings as an incompetent and negligent politician, an inveterate gambler, and a shamelessly philandering husband. As was well-known by the time *Mansfield Park* was published, the Prince Regent shared Fitzroy's passions for fast horses and fast women, lived a remarkably similar lifestyle in London with his mistress Maria Fitzherbert, and planned to divorce his own wife, Princess Caroline, for adultery.

Young Tom Bertram is not yet so thoroughly corrupted, but his interests in racehorses, gambling, and playacting are suggestive of an unpromising future. Tom's knowledge of world events comes from a casual glance at the newspaper headlines, and his political opinions are dependent on the advice of Tom's acquaintances, like Dr. Grant: "A strange business this in America … What is your opinion? – I always come to you to know what I am to think of public matters" (*MP* 119). "With no fears and no scruples" (*MP* 126), and "with all the liberal dispositions of an eldest son, who feels born only for expense and enjoyment" (*MP* 17), Tom, before his reformation at the end of the novel, is not much better than John Yates, Tom's future brother-in-law, whose theatrical turn would suit Yates well in making speeches before an audience in the House of Commons.

In the proposed Mansfield Park play, Tom Bertram is interested only in amusing himself and favors a comedy, but John Yates desires a dramatic part which would afford "some very good ranting ground,"

so that he may "rant" and "re-rant" (*MP* 132): "To storm … was the height of his theatrical ambition." As everyone knew, there was no better place than Parliament for putting on a show. Even playwright and radical Whig MP Richard Brinsley Sheridan was impressed by his colleague Edmund Burke's theatrical outbursts and what Sheridan referred to as Burke's "scream of passion" in the House of Commons (qtd. in Hague 90). Like an insincere politician delivering a prepared speech, there is no real conviction behind Yates's theatrical performance. Yates merely enjoys feigning emotion and being the center of attention, just as the radical Whigs in the House of Commons gave impassioned speeches expressing sympathy for the poor while voting against all welfare proposals.

In the Mansfield Park assembly, Edmund seems destined to remain the odd man out, continually outvoted or overruled, and forced, in the face of overwhelming odds, to comply with the majority: "As I am now, I have no influence, I can do nothing" (*MP* 155). And if Edmund refuses to cooperate with the powers that be, as Tom reminds him, he can be easily replaced by an eager and cooperative candidate: "I could name at this moment at least six young men within six miles of us, who are wild to be admitted into our company" (*MP* 148). Edmund's explanation to Fanny is reminiscent of a politician in the minority who is forced into compliance with his political opponents: "It is not at all what I like … No man can like being driven into the *appearance* of such inconsistency. After being known to oppose the scheme from the beginning, there is absurdity in the face of my joining them *now*, when they are exceeding their first plan in every respect; but I can think of no other alternative" (*MP* 154). Like an idealistic, novice politician, Edmund finds himself tainted by the corruption of his associates, and he resigns himself to the inevitable: "we shall be all in high good humour at the prospect of acting the fool together with such unanimity" (*MP* 156). Only Fanny, who steadfastly declines to become involved in the theatricals, escapes with her integrity entirely intact.

Significantly, the Mansfield Park play is coming together just after shooting season, when Parliament assembled in London, and the young men engaged in both pursuits spend their time arguing: "so many things to attend to … both sides must be pleased … No piece could be proposed that did not supply somebody with a difficulty" (*MP* 130–31). The would-be actors form into two opposing camps,

"the comic" and "the tragic side" (*MP* 130), presumably the majority and the minority parties.

Tom Bertram favors the comic play *Heir at Law* which summarizes his own and the Prince Regent's situations, and Tom's "determinateness and his power, seemed to make allies unnecessary," but the assembly continues to oppose one another until Tom finally declares: "We are wasting time most abominably. Something must be fixed on. No matter what, so that something is chosen" (*MP* 131). The rest of the assembly seems equally frustrated: "Everybody was growing weary of indecision" (*MP* 132). Tom, "the same speaker," proposes a compromise that gives something to both parties: a sex scandal, *Lovers' Vows*, a tale both tragic and comic of corruption in high places, illicit sex, and public shame. Offended by the impropriety of the thing, Edmund objects and is promptly overruled, as the rest of the actors are pleased.

As the play affords him "some very good ranting ground" (*MP* 132), John Yates is delighted: "After all our debatings and difficulties, we find there is nothing that will suit us altogether so well" (*MP* 139). Mary Crawford considers that while those involved in the play are satisfied to have reached a compromise, those looking on, their public, must be pleased as well as they have finally resolved the issue: "The actors may be glad, but the by-standers must be infinitely more thankful for a decision" (*MP* 143). What no one actually performing in the play seems to consider is that those who are merely observers – Fanny and the reader – see their squabbles for what they really are, much ado about nothing. Like the British public reading about debates in Parliament, "Fanny looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all, and wondering how it would end" (*MP* 131). Predictably, at Mansfield Park and in London, everyone assembles and debates, but nothing is accomplished, aside from the illicit understanding between Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford.

As Fanny Price observes, the actors in the Mansfield Park play certainly seem to be enjoying the process, and her description would have been equally apt of the Members of Parliament: "Every body around her was gay and busy, prosperous and important, each had their object of interest, their part, their dress, their favourite scene, their friends and confederates, all were finding employment in consultations and comparisons, or in the playful conceits they

suggested" (*MP* 159). Edmund Bertram attempts to oppose both Tom and Yates, but when Henry Crawford arrives to cast his deciding vote in favor of playacting, Edmund concedes in what the narrator frames as a political defeat: "The scheme advanced. Opposition was vain" (*MP* 129). For all of their enthusiasm, Tom Bertram and John Yates are mere amateurs beside the natural talent of a consummate politician, Henry Crawford.

Political corruption

Sensing a leadership vacuum in Tom Bertram, an ongoing problem in Parliament since the death of William Pitt in 1806, Henry Crawford puts himself forward to lead the group. Crawford's "Sotherton scheme" (*MP* 75), to improve James Rushworth's pleasure grounds, is adopted by everyone's "ready concurrence" (*MP* 62), in spite of the general ignorance about what, exactly, Crawford plans to do, how much money his proposals may cost, or whether the pleasure grounds at Sotherton actually require any alterations. Nevertheless, Crawford travels to Sotherton in order to "summon a council on this lawn," but his feckless Members cannot settle down to business: "there seemed no inclination to move in any plan … and all dispersed about in happy independence" (*MP* 90). Sensing their lack of purpose, "Mr. Crawford was the first to move forward" and began "fault-finding" with Sotherton, which inspires the other characters to "form into parties" and to occupying themselves "in busy consultation." All of these meetings bear no fruit, but Crawford is by no means discouraged: "Nothing was fixed on – but Henry Crawford was full of ideas and projects" (*MP* 97).

Tossing out a series of inspiration-of-the-moment suggestions with no consideration of the difficulties involved and no consultation with the landowner who will be expected to fund the project and then live with the results, Crawford launches into a typical politician's speech, "that their views and their plans might be more comprehensive" (*MP* 97). Crawford's "their" implies a group consensus that he obviously has not formed for a plan that he has yet to devise, but Henry Crawford is unimpeded by facts: "It was the very thing of all others to be wished, it was the best, it was the only way of proceeding with any advantage." Having established himself as the man of the hour, Crawford then disappears into the shrubbery

with a pretty, young woman towards whom he has no honorable intentions. Distracted by his impromptu tryst with Maria Bertram, Crawford seems to have lost all interest in landscape architecture and switches to the project of acting in the play at Mansfield Park with equal fervor.

Henry Crawford "was quite alive at the idea … I feel as if I could be any thing or every thing, as if I could rant and storm, or sigh, or cut capers" (*MP* 123), to feign whatever emotions the situation required. Fanny Price describes Crawford's insincerity in familiar political terms, an effort to appear to be "every thing to every body" (*MP* 306). Although Fanny considers the theatricals at Mansfield Park to have been an unmitigated travesty, Crawford remembers his playacting with pleasure and in the same terms as a politician might reflect on an exciting and contentious session of Parliament:

> There was such an interest, such an animation, such a spirit diffused! Every body felt it. We were all alive. There was employment, hope, solicitude, bustle, for every hour of the day. Always some little objection, some little doubt, some little anxiety to be got over. I never was happier. (*MP* 225)

Just as Sotherton's pleasure grounds remain unaltered, the play at Mansfield Park never actually takes place, but Henry Crawford is untroubled by his consistent lack of results.

Crawford acknowledges that Sir Thomas's return overruled him, but had luck been on his side and delayed Sir Thomas, "if Mansfield Park had had the government of the winds just for a week or two about the equinox, there would have been a difference." Of course, what any politician might have done in different circumstances, or what any political party might have accomplished, had they been given an opportunity, is always speculation without basis, but it is impossible to disprove such an assertion. As Fanny Price listens to Henry Crawford's gross exaggeration of the significance of his playacting, she can only conclude "Oh! What a corrupted mind! " But Crawford also reveals himself through his reading of the speech of Shakespeare's thoroughly evil politician, Cardinal Wolsey in *Henry VIII*. Crawford knows the power of his oratory, which was "truly dramatic" (*MP* 337), but Henry's masterful delivery reminds Fanny of his insincerity as "his reading brought all his acting before her again"

(*MP* 337). Crawford is only assuming another part in Portsmouth when he feigns concern for the poor in order to impress Fanny Price.

In the second half of the novel, Fanny Price becomes Henry Crawford's skeptical public, to be wooed and won over, and Crawford takes on Fanny as his latest project: "my plan is to make Fanny Price in love with me" (*MP* 229). Crawford approaches the process as a politician who wishes to obtain public support, and he begins with a bit of audience analysis: "I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her … Her looks say, 'I will not like you, I am determined not to like you,' and I say, she shall" (*MP* 230). Based on a campaign of personality rather than substance, Henry Crawford allows himself two weeks for the project, with "all that talent, manner, attention, and flattery can do" (*MP* 231), but Crawford discovers Fanny to be a more difficult constituency than he had anticipated. What Henry never considers is that, in his selfishness, he has wronged Fanny, and she holds him responsible for her problems. Furthermore, Fanny intends to limit the damage: "Henry Crawford had destroyed her happiness, but … should not destroy her credit, her appearance, her prosperity too" (*MP* 202). Like the silent majority, Fanny has little to say, but she is no fool, and Henry Crawford finds that he must alter his original charm campaign when it fails to produce results.

Always acting a part, Henry's decision to play the champion of the poor by paying a visit to his home county is a disingenuous show of concern. Crawford maintains a connection with Fanny by adding postscripts to his sister's letters that are "warm and determined like his speeches" (*MP* 376). In reality, Henry Crawford neglects his estate, Everingham in Norfolk, and the welfare of his tenants. Like many a Member of Parliament, Crawford only visits Everingham in the autumn for the shooting and whenever he feels it necessary to drum up political support. In the meantime, he flirts, talks "much of politics" over his dinner (*MP* 223), and considers "how to make money – how to turn a good income into a better" (*MP* 226). And it was his income Henry was interested in, not the incomes of the poor. As Frederic Eden reported, in Norfolk, wages were "very low" (254), and the poorhouses were underfunded, mismanaged, filthy, and chaotic.

The man in charge of the poorhouse in Heckingham in Norfolk was suspected of embezzlement and forced to resign. In Norwich,

Eden found the poorhouse overcrowded and dirty. The poorhouse in Gressinghall was not only dirty, it was infested with vermin, and "several reforms in the diet of the Poor" had caused "considerable clamour on their part" (255). Where the residents had formerly been allocated 12 ounces of cheese a day, they were reduced to 4 ounces of butter and "cheese was discontinued." Instead of boiled beef on Sundays, "A soup was substituted" (257).

The Poor Rates in Gressinghall were the lowest Eden recorded, so low that the poorhouse was itself in debt, and, according to Eden, "it has been resolved to apply to Parliament for authority to increase the rate, which has led to considerable discontent" (249). Eden claimed that:

> in [Norfolk] and in the adjoining county of Lincoln … laboring people complain heavily against those whom they call monopolizers of corn …. To the conduct of men of this description, the high price of provisions … and almost every evil that attends or is likely to attend the nation, are not infrequently attributed. (251)

Given Norfolk's low wages, chronic unemployment, and inadequate welfare system, such class hostility was unavoidable, but Henry Crawford claims to have put everything right during his few weeks in the country.

In his trip to Portsmouth, like an experienced political hack delivering a well-rehearsed stump speech, Crawford launches into an account, "aimed, and well aimed, at Fanny" (*MP* 404), in which he congratulates himself for even venturing into Norfolk, claims to be a friend to the poor and the disenfranchised, boasts of his efforts to weed out corruption, blames someone else for his own neglect, and grossly exaggerates the importance and scope of his accomplishments:

> Norfolk was what he had mostly to talk of; there he had been some time, and every thing there was rising in importance from his present schemes … For approbation, the particular reason of his going into Norfolk at all, at this unusual time of year, was given. It had been real business, relative to the renewal of a lease in which the welfare of a large and (he believed) industrious family was at stake. He had suspected his agent of some underhand

> dealing – of meaning to bias him against the deserving – and he had determined to go himself, and thoroughly investigate the merits of the case. He had gone, had done even more good than he had foreseen, had been useful to more than his first plan had comprehended, and was now able to congratulate himself upon it, and to feel, that in performing a duty, he had secured agreeable recollections for his own mind. He had introduced himself to some tenants, whom he had never seen before; he had begun making acquaintance with cottages whose very existence, though on his own estate, had been hitherto unknown to him. (*MP* 404)

The reader will note that Crawford talks at Fanny, not to her. Fanny is Crawford's audience, and he delivers a self-congratulatory stump speech rather than participates in a conversation.

Like the politicians who lived in London and represented boroughs they rarely visited, Henry Crawford assumes Edmund Bertram would do as Henry himself would in Edmund's situation, hire a curate at a very meager salary to do all of his work, rent out his vicarage house, and live with his parents, leaving Edmund free of responsibility and all of his income for pocket money (*MP* 226). When his sister observes, "You would look rather blank, Henry, if your menus plaisirs were to be limited to seven hundred a year," Crawford concedes but also asserts his superior claims to wealth: "all that you know is entirely comparative. Birthright and habit must settle the business." So some people are born to enjoy their wealth, and the rest are untroubled by poverty because they are used to being poor. Thus, Henry Crawford dismisses the problem of an income gap, not only for himself but for all of the wealthy young men at Mansfield Park and in Parliament.

Unsullied by greed

As the younger son of Sir Thomas and the younger brother of the wastrel heir apparent, Edmund Bertram is literally the voice of the opposition whose warnings are ignored, overruled, or shouted down. As a clergyman, Edward declares that it would be inappropriate for him to "be high in state or fashion. He must not head mobs, or set the ton in dress" (*MP* 92). Edmund clearly lacks the disposition for a life in politics: "I am worn out with civility … I have been talking

incessantly all night, and with nothing to say" (*MP* 278). Mary Crawford, however, wishes for more. Mary calculates that Edmund is always just a heartbeat away from becoming "Sir Edmund" as his elder brother's untimely death would leave him "with all the Bertram property" (*MP* 434). As Mary observes, a man with an estate "might escape a profession and represent the county" (*MP* 161), and she later recommends a political career to Edmund.

Mary first suggests that Edmund "Go into the law" (*MP* 93), no doubt in preparation for a more lucrative profession: "You ought to be in parliament" (*MP* 214). Personally, Mary finds national affairs boring, as she makes obvious in her letters to Fanny Price: "I have no news for you. You have politics of course" (*MP* 415). Although Mary betrays no interest in the state of the nation, she considers politicians to be fashionable and well paid. Edmund, however, is just not cut out for the job. For one thing, he insists on being scrupulously honest, and his concerns are not those of the other Members of the House of Commons: "as to my being in parliament, I believe I must wait till there is an especial assembly for the representation of younger sons who have little to live on" (*MP* 214). As Edmund observes, Parliament represents the interests of the rich, not the middling, and certainly not of the working class.

A young man with a negligible income in *Mansfield Park* is midshipman William Price, Fanny's brother, who represents the fighting men busily engaged in waging and winning wars, enduring danger and hardship while the idlers they protect and whose financial interests they defend lounge in safety at home, amuse themselves with theatricals, plan unnecessary improvements, plot sexual intrigues, and fritter away other people's money. Though the most admirable male in the novel, William Price has no luck: "Every body gets made but me" (*MP* 250). In spite of his "good principles, professional knowledge, energy, courage, and cheerfulness – every thing that could deserve or promise well" (*MP* 236), William has no political patronage to assist him in his career.

William Price realizes that Mr. Rushworth's social position will do him no good in the navy: "I would rather find him private secretary to the first Lord [of the Admiralty] than any thing else" (*MP* 246). William is eventually promoted to lieutenant, but not on merit, as he deserves. In order to promote William as a key part of his manipulative efforts to win over Fanny Price, Henry Crawford uses a corrupt

system of "interest" (*MP* 266), influence with his Admiral uncle, the same type of military corruption which became public knowledge in 1809 when the "Duke and Darling" army scandal was revealed in the House of Commons.

Political scandal

As was gleefully reported in the press, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, the Duke of York, the younger son of King George III and younger brother of the Prince Regent, lived openly in London with his mistress, as does Admiral Crawford in *Mansfield Park*. The political scandal was that the Duke promoted his officers at the suggestions of his mistress, Mary Anne Clarke, who testified in the House of Commons that, in exchange for a specified sum of money, she added soldiers' names to the army promotions lists and pinned the lists to her bed curtains where her royal lover was sure to find them (David 296–7). The Duke's letters to "Darling" were read aloud in the House of Commons, much to the amusement of the assembled Members, and the most salacious, silly, and damning excerpts from the incriminating letters were reprinted in the newspapers, along with the long list of bankrupts and the rising price of bread. The scandal proved to be a lucrative gift to London's printmakers who produced a variety of comic spoofs of the Duke and his coy mistress. Contrary to all of the evidence, Parliament found the Duke of York innocent of any crime, but the Duke bowed to public opinion and resigned his commission in disgrace.

Following Mary Anne Clarke's testimony, the House of Commons went on to be entertained by the lurid details of their next sex scandal, as Parliament devoted a great deal of time to listening to the evidence presented in divorce cases, such as the divorce case of Rushworth v. Rushworth in *Mansfield Park*. On average, Parliament only granted three or four divorces a year, almost exclusively cases of a man suing another man for committing adultery with his wife, legally referred to as crim.con. At the time, a woman could not divorce her husband for adultery. As historian Lawrence Stone maintains in *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England 1660–1857*, the husband had to be wealthy as the litigation was prohibitively costly: "The procedure was so expensive, because it involved three separate lawsuits, one in an ecclesiastical court, for separation from the

adulterous wife; one in a common-law court, for damages for crim. con. against the wife's lover; and a private bill before Parliament, for full divorce" (25). Considering the nation's abysmal economy and its ongoing wars, obviously an inordinate amount of the government's attention was being devoted to the scandalous personal lives of the wealthy, and the newspaper accounts, full of suggestive innuendo and titillating details, could not have gone down well with the financially-distressed public.

After hearing the evidence of the wife's infidelity, previously presented in both ecclesiastical and common-law courts, the House of Commons ultimately decided how much in damages the accused man would have to pay the cuckolded husband, anywhere from £500 to £25,000 (Manning 85), meaning the House of Commons determined the monetary value of the wife as a wife. As Lawrence Stones reminds us, the exchange of money marked a new way of thinking about adultery: "It is difficult to imagine a clearer sign of a change from an honour-and-shame society to a commercial society than this shift from physical violence against, or challenge to a duel with, one's wife's lover to a suit for monetary damages from him" (23).

A second financial decision the House of Commons made in a divorce case was how much money would be settled on the adulterous wife in order to maintain her in her new lifestyle as a social outcast. Regardless of her husband's superfluous wealth, or of the original amount of the woman's dowry, or how much money she had inherited since her marriage, the divorced woman was usually granted no more annual income than the amount specified as pin money in her marriage settlement, perhaps £100 to £200 a year, and no alimony at all (Stone 22). No one expected a divorced woman to live in the manner to which she was accustomed, and impoverishing her was considered to be an appropriate punishment for her adultery. To add insult to injury, accounts of crim.con proceedings were published in newspapers throughout England to everyone's maximum embarrassment.

The Hampshire Chronicle reported plenty of titillating innuendo, but, according to the *Chronicle*'s coverage of the crim.con proceedings of Lord and Lady Westmeath, much of the testimony was unprintable: "delicacy forbids our particularizing" (12 March 1796, 2). For those with inquiring minds, however, a full and unedited transcript of the trial could be purchased. Lord and Lady Worsley's

divorce transcript was a bestseller, going through seven printings in its first year (Manning 84), and then there were comic prints inspired by the most outrageous details. In light of the public scrutiny sure to accompany a divorce, Fanny and the Bertram family's reaction to Maria's elopement with Henry Crawford obviously stems from more than prudery. As a Member of Parliament, Sir Thomas will either be listening to the testimony of his daughter's infidelity, and to the ribald laughter of his colleagues which was sure to accompany it, or staying away from Parliament altogether. It was more difficult to avoid all of the newspapers, booksellers, and print shop windows.

As Jane Austen wrote *Mansfield Park*, and Britain's economy went from bad to worse, the House of Commons and the British public were considering the evidence presented in the landmark divorce case of Otway v. Otway in 1811. In 1813, as *Mansfield Park* was completed, the newspapers were printing the lurid details of Parliament's "Delicate Investigation" into the alleged infidelity of Caroline, the Princess of Wales, obviously warming up for the Prince's attempt at a Parliamentary divorce. As the testimony in the House of Commons revealed, multiple branches of the government had been wasting time for years, at least since 1805, with their investigations of the Princess's personal life. The March 22, 1813 *Hampshire Chronicle* devoted several columns to the incriminating testimony against the Princess presented in the House of Commons. When she read Caroline's letter in the newspaper, Jane Austen sided with the Princess, "Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can" (*Letters* 208), but the author of *Mansfield Park* and her contemporaries surely believed that the House of Commons had more pressing national business, if they would just get on with it. Year after year, Parliament first argued about the economy, could agree on no course of action, blamed one another for inaction, and then diverted themselves with a divorce case, just as the characters proceed in *Mansfield Park*.

"Mr. Rushworth had no difficulty in procuring a divorce" (*MP* 464), which implies that his case moved rapidly through the ecclesiastical and common-law courts before being introduced into Parliament. Inevitably, once the case made it to the House of Commons, all of the lurid details of Maria Rushworth's adultery would be published in the newspapers for the entire nation to read and, as Julia Bertram foresees, "bring a public disturbance at last" (*MP* 163). As Fanny Price's father comments when he reads of Maria's elopement in

the newspaper, "so many fine ladies were going to the devil now-a-days that way" (*MP* 440). The affair of Henry Crawford and Maria Rushworth is the major plot twist of the novel and serves as another condemnation of the national government in the face of a looming economic crisis, but what is also significant about the adultery and divorce in *Mansfield Park* is that it is a reminder of the increasing tendency in the legal system to consider women as marketable commodities, like bread or candles. In that way, Mrs. Norris's perverse cruelty to Fanny serves as a warning of what could result from adopting the radical Whigs' reductionist view of people as economic units.

Surplus population

According to Edmund Burke, "Labor is a commodity like every other, and rises or falls according to the demand" (254), so the price of a man's labor, his daily wage, determines his relative value. If the labor market becomes flooded by unemployment, the laborer's worth is diminished; thus Burke asserts that poverty is the direct result of superfluous population: "The laboring people are only poor, because they are numerous. Numbers in their nature imply poverty" (252). As the poor have brought poverty on themselves by their birthrate, Burke is unsympathetic to their suffering: "let there be no lamentation of their condition."

Claiming that his ideas first originated with David Hume and Adam Smith, radical Whig Thomas Malthus, in his 1798 *An Essay on the Principal of Population*, written two years after Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, echoes Burke and asserts that, regrettable as it may be, extreme poverty and subsequent deaths are inevitable as it all comes down to a simple mathematical equation: "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second" (13). Mrs. Norris would no doubt agree with Burke and Malthus as she is similarly annoyed by her relatively poor sister's tendency to procreate and shows no real sympathy for Mrs. Price or for her many children.

Mrs. Norris expresses her irritation to Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram when she informs them "as she now and then did in an angry voice, that [Mrs. Price] had got another child" (*MP* 4). When she proposes "that poor Mrs. Price should be relieved from the charge and expense

of one child entirely out of her great number" (*MP* 5), Mrs. Norris reduces her niece Fanny to a surplus commodity. Fanny's removal to Mansfield Park is seen as an act of charity, but one predicated on the notion that Mrs. Price will consider the loss of her child to be a financial benefit, one less mouth to feed.

Aunt Norris dismisses the cost of Fanny's upkeep, the "expense of it to them, would be nothing" (*MP* 8), and the cost of Fanny's upbringing will certainly be minimal to Mrs. Norris, as she "had not the least intention of being at any expense whatever in her maintenance." Like the radical Whigs, Mrs. Norris recommends charity to other people, but when an act of kindness threatens to encroach on her pocketbook, "the ardour of generosity went off" (*MP* 387), and, like John and Fanny Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Norris reasons her way out of having to make any personal sacrifice. Mrs. Norris's unrelenting stinginess once again illustrates the flaw in Burke's logic; selfish people are not going to live up to their charitable responsibilities unless they are compelled to do so.

One of the great limitations of the age's politicians was that in their speeches and writing they shared a tendency to consider the poor as a large, ignorant, immoral, and dangerous mass only awaiting a favorable opportunity, as Burke puts it, to "rise to destroy the rich" (252). Burke's inflammatory rhetoric, "the throats of the rich ought not to be cut," resembles Mrs. Norris's tendency "to be heightening danger in order to enhance her own importance" (*MP* 432). The depiction of the Price family in *Mansfield Park* somewhat legitimizes Thomas Malthus's stereotypical depiction of those who must earn a living:

> The laboring poor, to use a vulgar expression, seem always to live from hand to mouth. Their present wants employ their whole attention, and they seldom think of the future. Even when they have an opportunity of saving, they seldom exercise it; but all that is beyond their present necessities goes, generally speaking, to the ale-house. (40)

This is a fairly accurate description of the Prices' home in Portsmouth, a rhetorical concession, but *Mansfield Park* also points out the arrogance and the inhumanity of categorizing anyone without money as an inferior being, and the Prices are certainly no threat to anyone's wealth or throat, as Edmund Burke suggests.

Assuming a vast superiority, and the Radical Whig's antagonistic us-against-them relationship, Mrs. Norris applies the politicians' assumptions about the laboring poor to the poorest members of her own family. *Mansfield Park*, however, makes the point that Fanny and William Price and their siblings, including their little sister Mary, a "remarkably amiable" little girl who had died (*MP* 386), are real people, not some faceless, nameless, troublesome mass. Yet this is how Lady Bertram also thinks of her unseen nieces and nephews, when she condescends to think of them at all:

> Three or four Prices might have been swept away, any or all, except Fanny and William, and Lady Bertram would have thought little about it; or perhaps might have caught from Mrs. Norris's lips the cant of its being a very happy thing, and a great blessing to their poor dear sister Price to have them so well provided for. (*MP* 428)

The cant from Mrs. Norris's lips, of course, originated with the radical Whigs' assumptions about the inevitable fate of the surplus population.

As Mrs. Price observes to her daughter Betsey, out of sight was out of mind: "Aunt Norris lives too far off, to think of such little people as you" (*MP* 387). Mary Crawford's detached attitude is similar to Mrs. Norris's: "Indeed how can one care for those one has never seen?" (*MP* 288), and yet, for all of their limitations, Mr. and Mrs. Price produce children who are industrious, moral, and useful members of society, while Mrs. Norris is sterile, like her apricot tree, and Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram have only one admirable child from their four.

Mrs. Norris's relentless persecution of Fanny Price seems unrealistically perverse until the reader considers Mrs. Norris as a cipher for the Radical Whigs. According to Thomas Malthus, anyone unable to earn his or her own living was not a respectable person: "Hard as it may appear in individual instances, dependent poverty ought to be held disgraceful" (40). But how then may a dependent poor relation like Fanny Price be considered anything other than a disgrace? Mrs. Norris would certainly agree with Malthus, as she continually attempts to humble Fanny: "Remember, wherever you are, you must be the lowest and last" (*MP* 221). Nothing Fanny says or does meets

with Mrs. Norris's approval, and Fanny's usefulness and loyalty are counted as nothing. Aunt Norris continually finds fault with Fanny where no fault actually exists, an analogy for the politicians' criticisms of the working class.

Also like many of the era's political economists, Mrs. Norris has the distinct tendency to make claims without any real evidence to back to them up: "Give a girl an education, and introduce her properly into the world, and ten to one but she has the means of settling well, without farther expense to any body" (*MP* 6). Of course, this was absolute rubbish. As everyone knew, there was a well-documented surplus of unmarried women, including Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra, who would remain spinsters and dependents as the supply of single women much exceeded the demand for wives, particularly in their social class.

Undeterred by all evidence to the contrary, Mrs. Norris continues to brag of her superior common sense, "I *am* of some use I hope in preventing waste and making the most of things" (*MP* 141), and to congratulate herself for every "economical expedient, for which nobody thanked her, and saving, with delighted integrity, half-a-crown here and there" (*MP* 163). In reality, of course, Fanny's Aunt Norris is penny wise and pound foolish, or at least foolish with other people's pounds. If she were merely saving and careful, Mrs. Norris's economies would have been understandable for a woman in her circumstances, and even thought admirable in someone like Mrs. Price. As Fanny is forced to admit, her mother "might have made just as good a woman of consequence as Lady Bertram, but Mrs. Norris would have been a more respectable mother of nine children, on a small income" (*MP* 390). A good wife was expected to be practical and frugal, as Regency conduct books and housekeeping books were quick to remind them.

In 1811, Jane Austen's future publisher John Murray released *The New Family Receipt-Book*, which included several recipes for making homemade ink and instructions for recycling almost everything. Little bits of candlewick, "the contents of the common snuffers collected in the course of the evening" (205), could be reformed into tinder, and ashes from the fireplace could be mixed with water, compressed, and dried to form little lumps of "coal" to be mixed with fresh wood or coal for a second burning in the fireplace. According to Murray's *Receipt-Book*, absolutely nothing should be thrown out before being carefully examined for any possible recyclable potential:

"The very high price of paper, at present, renders the saving of even the smallest quantity of linen or cotton rags of consequence" (204). When the educated, book-buying gentry were resorting to such expedients, times were hard indeed.

It is not difficult to imagine Mrs. Norris recycling her own fireplace ashes, but at Lady Bertram's house, Mrs. Norris "was entirely taken up at first in fresh arranging and injuring the noble fire which the butler had prepared" (*MP* 273), thus wasting her sister's expensive fuel. Even worse, Mrs. Norris has made sure that Fanny has no fire in her own room, although there is "snow on the ground" (*MP* 312), an unnecessary economy which Sir Thomas excuses in Mrs. Norris but rectifies himself. All of Mrs. Norris's financial decisions are based on selfishness; she stints the poor, plunders the wealthy, and hoards. Eventually, Sir Thomas acknowledges that "he had considerably overrated her sense" (*MP* 465), and, at the end of the novel, Mrs. Norris and her false economies are banished from Mansfield Park, and thus from the country.

Tolerable comfort

The narrative voice of *Mansfield Park* rather abruptly announces the novel's concluding chapter: "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest" (*MP* 461). So having admitted that people are miserable and that others are guilty for their suffering, the narrator consciously chooses neither to assign further blame nor to discuss the most likely but unhappy outcome. No matter how unrealistic the narrator acknowledges it to be, the good shall have their reward: "My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing" (*MP* 461). The lot that falls to Susan Price, perpetual, dependent companion to her aunt and uncle, demonstrates what Fanny's fate would have been had reality prevailed over the generosity of the author. Having told her cautionary tale of national woe, the narrator proceeds to patch on a highly improbable happy ending for the nation by reforming the idle rich who controlled the country and by exiling those beyond reformation.

"Sick of ambitious and mercenary connections, prizing more and more the sterling good of principle and temper" (*MP* 471), Sir

Thomas Bertram, MP is made to see the error of his ways. Sir Thomas had "been governed by motives of selfishness and worldly wisdom" which blinded him to the virtues and faults of the people around him (*MP* 461). His "own errors in the education of his daughters" were that Sir Thomas taught by example his own arrogance and materialism, but he was not wholly bad. Like the man who has cast his bread upon the waters, Sir Thomas's happiness returns as the direct result of his benevolence to Fanny Price and her siblings: "His charitable kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself. His liberality had a rich repayment" (*MP* 472), suggesting that helping the needy is actually a good, long-term investment.

After his near-fatal illness, young Tom Bertram, who will succeed his father at Mansfield Park and in Parliament, abandons "the thoughtlessness and selfishness of his previous habits" (*MP* 462). Most important of all, Tom "had learnt to think." For no particular reason, Julia Bertram becomes "humble," and even Julia's husband, who "had not much to recommend him" (*MP* 121), is not entirely a lost cause: John Yates "was not very solid; but there was hope of his becoming less trifling – of his being at least tolerably domestic and quiet; and, at any rate, there was comfort in finding his estate rather more, and his debts much less, than [Sir Thomas] had feared" (*MP* 462). There is the suggestion here that it is almost never too late to reform and that wastrels and fools, even some of those less-hardened scoundrels in the House of Commons, are capable of amendment. So much for those "not greatly at fault."

The deeply flawed characters in *Mansfield Park* seem beyond even the omniscient narrator's powers of redemption, and here, once again, unpleasant reality intrudes. The narrator takes a parting stab at the divorce laws and sides squarely with parliamentary reform. As the narrator reminds the reader, the husbands in divorce cases always fared much better than their wives: "In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished." Mr. Rushworth can afford a divorce, will keep Maria's dowry, and is able to marry again. The charitable narrator wishes him "good humour and good luck" (*MP* 464). Henry Crawford suffers "vexation and regret" (*MP* 468), and as the seducer in a crim.con divorce case, Henry would have to pay £10,000, more or less, to compensate Mr. Rushworth for his part in Maria's flagrant infidelity. But having paid James Rushworth off, Henry Crawford may also begin anew. Maria Rushworth is not so fortunate.

Probably forbidden by her divorce settlement from marrying her seducer, the usual practice at the time (Manning 84–5), and possibly forbidden to remarry at all, Maria Rushworth enjoys "no second spring of hope or character" (*MP* 464), and her fate is decided by the men in control of her life: a "mortified and unhappy" husband (*MP* 463), an estranged and humiliated father, a bored lover, and the House of Commons who had the power to end Maria's marriage and to decide her annual income. Maria, the adulteress, and Mrs. Norris, the self-proclaimed economist, are both banished to "another country" (*MP* 465), just as adultery and self-serving economics should be banned from the business of the House of Commons. With all of her loose ends now neatly tied up, the narrator can pronounce, "Here was comfort indeed!" (*MP* 462), but it was a consolation not to be found in the Regency's newspapers.

In *Mansfield Park*, the cause of Britain's financial problems was identified, and the blame assigned, but a realistic solution remains elusive. The new ultra-conservative Tory Prime Minister, Robert Jenkinson, the Earl of Liverpool, and the other conservative Tories and radical Whigs in the House of Commons were not going to renounce their wicked ways and reform. Selfishness would continue to motivate them and adultery to divert them. The narrative voice acknowledges that *Mansfield Park*'s ending is wish fulfillment, not reality, but the next novel would offer a way forward.

6
Emma: William Pitt's Utopia

Elsie Michie, in *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James*, notes the many similarities between Adam Smith's depictions of rich and poor women and Jane Austen's similar characters in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. None of Jane Austen's novels borrows more heavily from Adam Smith than does *Emma*, but there are more references to Adam Smith than the ones Michie focuses on, and they have national as well as personal implications. Jane Austen wrote *Emma* in a year of economic chaos, and *Emma* is a novel which reassures readers that the economy was, as Adam Smith had assured his readers in *Wealth of Nations*, basically stable. But, as Smith had also written in *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, men and women had a moral obligation to behave sensibly, responsibly, and frugally for the welfare of their nation. According to Adam Smith, using one's resources wisely was an act of patriotism. *Emma*'s fictional village of Highbury demonstrates Smith's principle; England could carry on through any financial crisis, but only if the majority of people in the community cooperated and acted for the common good.

As Jane Austen was writing *Emma* in 1814, the British public was appalled by the national debt, an unimaginable £744.99 million (Poovey 15), but what people could easily imagine were the soaring consumer prices and plummeting wages which perversely combined to further impoverish most of the people living in England. Between 1790 and 1814, wholesale prices doubled (Ashton 90), while wages for agricultural laborers fell from around 15 shillings a week to 6 shillings, slightly more than one-third of the laborer's former income

Figure 6.1 The Poor Laws guaranteed bread and shelter for the mother and child depicted in this 1800 illustration, but only in their home parish
Source: Image courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

(Murray 85). In *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith assumed that the invisible hand of the marketplace would adjust to accommodate any such wage and price disparity, but what seemed logical in theory failed to happen in reality. The 1815 *Housekeeper's Receipt-Book* referred to the economy as "the present critical period, when the burtherns of domestic life are so generally felt" (245).

Shopkeepers wanted to sell, and the public wished to buy, but the goods in the shops were too expensive and the would-be consumers too impoverished, so shopkeepers and their customers expanded further into the world of creative finance, such as credit on account (Olsen 247), or they simply regressed into bartering, as they had done at Samuel Oldknow's factory in 1793, when factory workers accepted oatmeal, potatoes, and beef in lieu of wages (Valenze 265). England's communities were being forced to become economically self-reliant, but, in *Emma*, this financial autonomy is not at all a bad thing as "cheerful, happy-looking Highbury" provides a solution to the nation's financial woes (*E* 196). In "dear Highbury" in rural Surrey (*E* 261), the villagers have banded together to see that everyone is taken care of. As Miss Bates observes, "there are few places with such society as Highbury. I always say, we are quite blessed in our neighbours" (*E* 175), as indeed she is, as all of Highbury seems to have conspired to keep the Batses provided with the necessities of life.

Although *Emma*'s Highbury appears impossibly idyllic, there was an element of realism here. As economist Frederic Eden recorded in *The State of the Poor*, the wages in Surrey were "the same as in London" and therefore the highest in the nation (316), roughly three times the wages paid for the same work in Jane Austen's Hampshire and "somewhat more during harvest." Additionally, Surrey's poor rates had more than doubled in response to the increased need. The residents in Surrey's poorhouses were fed meat and cheese daily, and their food in general Eden declared to be "plentiful, wholesome and good." An additional boon to Surrey's poor, there was more than 4,000 acres of common land in Walton-Upon-Thames. In its high wages, doubling of Poor Law taxes, and moratorium on acts of enclosure, the gentry in the county of Surrey had voluntarily conformed to three major features of William Pitt's 1797 Welfare Reform proposal, and without falling prey to the economic collapse the radical Whigs like Edmund Burke, Jeremy Bentham, Frederic Eden,

and Patrick Colquhoun had predicted would inevitably result. Thus, Austen's utopian Highbury suggests that there was an alternative to the economic chaos plaguing England, and one need look no further than rural Surrey to find it.

Because they all know one another, and one another's business, Highbury's residents extend charity in their mutually beneficial society, an economic community that bears no relation whatsoever to the survival-of-the-fittest world described by Thomas Malthus and Patrick Colquhoun, presumably festering just 16 miles away in London. Highbury is, in fact, a world turned economically upside down, with Jane Austen's only "rich" heroine (*E* 5), and a hero, Mr. Knightley, who has "little spare money" (*E* 213). In Highbury, the characters have formed a communal consciousness, a group-think, which allows the village to devalue money and to value people instead.

The residents of Highbury have different priorities than the purse-proud intruders, Philip Elton and the Coles from London and Augusta Hawkins from Bristol. These outsiders bring their materialistic, big-city values to Highbury and must be converted before they can be fully accepted into the community. Highbury natives, Mr. Weston, John Knightley, and Jane Fairfax, risk having their morals corrupted by their sojourns in London, but they remain fundamentally sound and escape the commercial influence of the City to return to Highbury whenever they can. Because they have been exposed to both worlds and their different values, Mr. Weston, John Knightley, and Jane Fairfax esteem Highbury and can see what Emma Woodhouse is "blind" to (*E* 427), that is the superiority of her own community. The imperious Miss Woodhouse must learn that she has "been used to despise [Highbury] rather too much" (*E* 221). Had she paid more attention to the communal wisdom of her village, instead of dismissing it as "the tittle-tattle of Highbury" (*E* 56), or the "trivial communications and harmless gossip" of Miss Bates (*E* 21), Emma would never have made such "a series of strange blunders" (*E* 331).

Worth their salt

Historian Deborah Valenze, in *The Social Life of Money in the English Past*, notes that the idea of fixing a price to a person dates back to the medieval legal concept of *wergeld* or "worth payment" (183). According to Valenze, this commodification of persons inspired "an

early modern predisposition to apply monetary thinking to social relations through rhetorical means, in speech concerning the 'worth' of people" (224). First Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* and then Jane Austen in *Emma* tap into this rhetorical tradition in order to challenge the reader to reconsider what traits constitute a valuable or worthy member of society.

When Highbury's citizens use economic terms like "value," which appears in the text fifteen times; "valuable," nine times; "worth," thirty times, or "worthy," eighteen times, they are referring to their neighbors' characters and not to their incomes. The text speaks of "the value of such a reconciliation" (*E* 447), the "hope for good, which no inheritance of houses or lands can ever equal the value of" (E 437), or of Emma's being "worthy of" Mr. Knightley (*E* 475). Frank Churchill proves himself to be "a true citizen of Highbury" not by buying gloves in Ford's shop but by preferring poor Jane Fairfax to rich Emma Woodhouse (*E* 200). The despicable Eltons and socially inept Coles esteem their wealthy neighbors and slight their poor ones and will never be entirely accepted into the community unless their values change. There is hope for the Coles.

As Adam Smith explains in *Wealth of Nations*, the term *value* may be used in two ways: to describe intrinsic worth for which there is no monetary equivalent or to describe the exchange rate at which material goods may be purchased:

> The one may be called "value in use;" the other, "value in exchange." The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing is more useful than water: but it will purchase scarce any thing; scarce any thing can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it. (34–5)

In *Emma*, Miss Woodhouse has value in use, as Mrs. Weston observes: "With all dear Emma's little faults, she is an excellent creature. Where shall we see a better daughter, or a kinder sister, or a truer friend?" (*E* 39–40), but, as "the heiress of thirty thousand pounds" (*E* 135), Emma also has considerable value in exchange.

It is worth noting that Emma's dowry is the only specific income provided in the novel, a distinct change from the income hierarchies carefully delineated in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Mrs. Elton's dowry, "so many thousands as would always be called ten … 10,000£ or thereabouts" (*E* 181), is given as an approximation and an unreliable one at that. Jane Fairfax's "very few hundred pounds which she inherited from her father" is also an approximation (*E* 164), proving that Miss Bates can, on occasion, hold her tongue, but then so can the narrator. All of the remaining characters in the novel are vaguely prosperous or poor, leaving Emma and the reader to attempt to determine their value in exchange as well as their value in use, based on the clues provided.

In stark contrast to the other female characters, Mrs. Elton has no admirable character traits, thus no value in use, but her dowry, however much it is, has value in exchange. Jane Fairfax's value in use is considerable, enough to make even Miss Woodhouse jealous, but her value in exchange is negligible. Like the rest of Regency England, Harriet Smith's financial future, her value in exchange, is uncertain, but Harriet has, as George Knightley eventually concedes, "some first-rate qualities …. An unpretending, single-minded, artless girl" (*E* 331). Harriet's character traits constitute value in use, so, as Mr. Knightley predicts, "in good hands she will turn out a valuable woman" (*E* 58). The "good hands" are "open, straight forward, and very well judging" Robert Martin's (*E* 59), and, with the Martin family, Harriet is proclaimed to be "most worthy" (*E* 431).

Early in the novel, Emma Woodhouse seems to be familiar with Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as she paraphrases Adam Smith when advising Harriet Smith. Emma begins her attack on Robert Martin's marriage proposal with "I lay it down as a general rule, Harriet" (*E* 52), which is nearly a quotation of Adam Smith's phrasing "we may lay it down, I believe, as a general rule" (121), or the "We thus naturally lay down to ourselves a general rule," and "lay down to ourselves a rule of another kind" (153). Emma also paraphrases *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* when she remarks to her father that "One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other" (*E* 81). Smith worded it somewhat differently, "one half of mankind make bad company to the other" (30), but the idea is the same. *Emma*'s referencing of Adam Smith's

earlier work suggests a mental nudge to the reader, reminding him that Smith believed that people had an obligation to consider value in use as well as value in exchange. Emma Woodhouse's appropriations of Smith suggest that Emma has read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* without entirely appreciating its morality, as others, perhaps Edmund Burke and Thomas Malthus, may also have done. As Mr. Knightley says, "Better be without sense, than misapply it as you do" (*E* 64).

Perhaps *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is one of the books that Emma has neglected to "read regularly through" (*E* 37), and yet Emma rightly discriminates between Augusta Elton and Harriet Smith just as Adam Smith describes two similar character types:

> the one of proud ambition and ostentatious avidity; the other, of humble modesty and equitable justice. Two different models, two different pictures, are held out to us, according to which we may fashion our own character and behavior; the one more gaudy and glittering in its colouring; the other more correct and more exquisitely beautiful in its outline; the one forcing itself upon the notice of every wandering eye; the other attracting the attention of scarce any body but the most studious and careful observer. (59)

Harriet Smith's first "studious and careful" observers are the Martins, whom Emma Woodhouse fails to appreciate for their value in use and dismisses for their value in exchange.

Emma originally undervalues Robert Martin as a "gross, vulgar farmer … thinking of nothing but profit and loss … business engrosses him" (*E* 33). Emma's depiction of Robert Martin as a money-grabbing bore is baseless, and, if Mr. Martin actually were "too full of the market" (*E* 34), as Emma assumes, he would have, like Mr. Elton, no interest in marrying Harriet Smith. Emma actually faults Farmer Martin for his prosperity, which, to Mr. Knightley and any other unbiased observer, should have further recommended Martin to Harriet as he can afford to give Harriet a comfortable home, while Miss Smith has "no settled provision at all" (*E* 61). In appraising Robert Martin, Emma makes the same error as the Eltons and the Coles when she considers only Robert Martin's value in exchange and fails to consider his value in use.

The character of Robert Martin fits the description of the successful man in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> In the middling and inferior stations of life, the road to virtue and that to fortune, to such fortune, at least, as men in such stations can reasonably expect to acquire, are, happily, in most cases very nearly the same. In all the middling and inferior professions, real and solid professional abilities, joined to prudent, just, firm, and temperate conduct, can very seldom fail of success. (59)

Here, again, Emma should have heeded George Knightley's superior knowledge of the subject, as Adam Smith maintains that the acquaintances of a respectable man will acknowledge him and contribute to his advancement: "The success of such people, too, almost always depends upon the favour and good opinion of their neighbours and equals; and without a tolerably regular conduct these can very seldom be obtained" (59–60). Robert Martin's appreciation of Harriet's value in use and his indifference to her value in exchange speak highly of him, and here Robert Martin, his mother, and sisters prove themselves to be more discerning than "clever" Emma Woodhouse (*E* 5).

Another character Emma misjudges is Miss Bates. Hetty Bates possesses sweetness of temper and humility: "She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness" (*E* 21), but Miss Bates fails to attract Emma's interest or, at times, even to receive Emma's grudging civility. Emma is not entirely unappreciative of Miss Bates' finer qualities, as Emma admits: "Poverty certainly has not contracted her mind: I really believe, if she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it" (*E* 85). But as Mr. Knightley asserts, Emma must learn to respect Miss Bates for her value in use, in spite of her negligible value in exchange: "She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion" (*E* 375), and gain Miss Bates the sympathy of *Emma*'s original readers as well, as their incomes, too, seemed likely to sink with Miss Bates's.

"Highbury entire"

Miss Bates may well speak for all of Highbury: "If ever there were people who without having great wealth themselves, had every

thing they could wish for, I am sure it is us" (*E* 174). The individual residents of the village work in unison for "Highbury entire" (*E* 145), and the village extends its collective good will to Jane Fairfax, who "belongs to Highbury" (*E* 163 & 201), and to Frank Churchill, who is similarly "a kind of common concern" (*E* 17). The only disruptions in the village are caused by Emma, who fails to appreciate the interconnectedness of the community, and by the Johnny-come-lately outsiders, the Eltons and Coles, who make the same mistake.

Whether they are aware of the fact or not, all of the characters in Highbury enjoy a certain level of safety from the dog-eat-dog world described by Thomas Malthus in *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, with its "constantly operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence" (13). Highbury's residents defy Malthus's depiction of Britain's general "misery and vice" (14), and they seem to understand the benefits, security, and responsibilities of communal living, as delineated in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> All the members of human society stand in need of each others' assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where the necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy. All the different members of it are bound together by the agreeable bands of love and affection, and are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices. (86)

Thus, concern for the community will naturally extend to welfare for the poor. Certainly, daily acts of charity abound in Highbury, as even a cursory reading of Miss Bates' monologues reveals.

Radical MP Jeremy Bentham claimed that the problem with relying on private individuals for charity was that "What is every body's business is nobody's business" (13). But this is not the case in Highbury. The village's residents are like the baker Mrs. Wallis, "extremely civil and obliging" to Miss Bates, and not, as Miss Bates notes, because Mrs. Wallis hopes to make money from her neighbors: "And it cannot be for the value of our custom now, for what is our consumption of bread, you know" (*E* 237). Mrs. Wallis not only bakes Miss Bates' apples, apparently without charge, but she also sends her boy to deliver them, but Mrs. Wallis is only conforming to the general standard of behavior in the village.

Mr. Perry, the local apothecary, also offers his professional services to the Bateses *pro bono*, although his failure to send a bill worries Miss Bates: "he is so liberal, and so fond of Jane that I dare say he would not mean to charge anything for attendance, we could not suffer it to be so, you know. He has a wife and family to maintain, and is not to be giving away his time" (*E* 162). When Frank Churchill makes a joke about Perry profiting from other people's colds, mild Mr. Woodhouse flares up to defend him: " 'Sir,' said Mr. Woodhouse, rather warmly, 'you are very much mistaken if you suppose Mr. Perry to be that sort of character. Mr. Perry is extremely concerned when any of us are ill' " (*E* 251). Without even knowing anything about him, it is difficult to imagine John Saunders charging Miss Bates to fix the rivet in her mother's spectacles, but the generosity of "the second rate and third rate of Highbury, who were calling on [the Bateses] for ever" only reflects (*E* 155), in more modest ways, the benevolence of the local gentry.

Mr. Woodhouse and Emma send Mrs. and Miss Bates a hind-quarter of pork, which Miss Bates describes as "too bountiful" (*E* 173), and Mr. Knightley annually provides a "most liberal supply" of apples (*E* 238), food which could easily have been sold or bartered instead of given away. And the gentry's good will is returned to them by the working class. According to Miss Bates, Mr. Knightley's steward, William Larkins, "thinks more of his master's profit than any thing" (*E* 239), and as Emma tells Frank Churchill, all that is required to be "adored in Highbury" is to "lay out half-a-guinea at Ford's" (*E* 200).

Ford's, of course, "was the principal woolen-draper, linen-draper, and haberdasher's shop united; the shop first in size and fashion in the place" (*E* 178), and Ford's serves as Highbury's economic hub. Emma, the Westons, Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, Frank Churchill, Harriet Smith, and the Martins all go into Ford's. Even as a stranger to Highbury, Frank Churchill appreciates Ford's significance to the community:

> Ha! this must be the very shop that every body attends every day of their lives, as my father informs me. He comes to Highbury himself, he says, six days out of the seven, and has always business at Ford's. If it be not inconvenient to you, pray let us go in, that I may prove myself to belong to the place, to be a true citizen of Highbury. I must buy something at Ford's.
>
> (*E* 199–200)

The simple act of buying a pair of gloves is taken as evidence of Frank's "patriotism." As Deborah Valenze notes, in the eighteenth century, such a purchase would have been understood as an act of good stewardship, as "letting go of one's money constituted a social virtue, a form of largesse in a commercial society" (156). *Emma*'s characters occasionally shop in London, Weymouth, and Bath where they go to procure expensive items that could not be found in a rural village shop, Jane Fairfax's mysterious pianoforte, Mrs. Bates's shawl, Mrs. Elton's trousseau, and Mr. Elton's carriage, but, as Miss Fairfax says of the pianoforte, luxuries "have no business here" (*E* 384).

The view from Ford's door affords Emma, and the reader, a moment's reflection on the economics of the village:

> Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury; – Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole's carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect. (*E* 233)

What Emma and the reader both observe in this passage is that in Highbury professional men come and go as their neighbors require their services, even a boy is gainfully employed, and a retired merchant like Mr. Cole continues to create jobs.

Even Emma's seemingly useless father, Henry Woodhouse, employs a number of people at Hartfield, including Miss Taylor, James the coachman, Serle the cook, and a variety of other unnamed servants, and it is Mr. Woodhouse who finds a job for Hannah, James's daughter, as housemaid to the Westons. Mrs. Goddard, too, "owed much to Mr. Woodhouse's kindness" (*E* 22), so Henry Woodhouse appears to have bankrolled Mrs. Goddard's school. And, no doubt, Mr. Perry is adequately compensated for his regular calls at Hartfield to attend to the whims of his wealthy, hypochondriac patient. As all of the lives in the village are economically interconnected, what is good fortune to one person sooner or later benefits everyone else. As Deborah Valenze notes, this was sound and accepted economic theory in the eighteenth century (178).

Emma's next observation from her vantage point in Ford's is on Highbury's abundance of food. According to Maggie Lane in *Jane Austen and Food*, "One thing we can be sure of is that nobody will

ever starve in Highbury. Food is always passing hands there" (154). Emma's view from Ford's door proves Lane's point, as:

> when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain. (*E* 233)

No one, not even a stray dog, is going hungry in Highbury. From Miss Taylor's wedding cake to Mr. Woodhouse's gruel, throughout the novel, the characters are continually feeding one another.

It is interesting to note that Mr. Woodhouse adopts for himself the gruel diet that radical Whigs like Edmund Burke, Frederic Eden, and Patrick Colquhoun recommended for the poor, and also significant that none of the other characters are willing to join Mr. Woodhouse in his Spartan regime. It appears to be a rhetorical concession that, yes, a weak and sickly, old man could survive on such a limited diet, but no rational, healthy person would willingly choose to do so. Emma and the Westons provide their friends with ample dinners, and Mr. Knightley invites everyone to Donwell Abbey to feast: "When you are tired of eating strawberries in the garden, there shall be cold meat in the house" (*E* 355). These social occasions provide Mrs. Bates, Miss Bates, and Jane Fairfax with an abundance of food that they could never afford to buy for themselves.

Newcomers to Highbury's gentry class, the Coles reveal their social ineptitude when they neglect "the less worthy females" (*E* 214), and invite Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, and Harriet Smith to come for tea, but only after the two-course dinner for the wealthier guests has been eaten and cleared away. As Amanda Vickery notes in *The Gentleman's Daughter*, "Ladies offered tea in the parlour to social inferiors" (208), so in excluding Miss Bates, her niece, and Harriet Smith from the dinner, Mrs. Coles is asserting her own, assumed, social superiority, at the cost of depriving Miss Bates, Miss Fairfax, and Miss Smith of a good meal. This is an antisocial blunder that the Woodhouses, Mr. Knightley, and the Westons do not make. Emma feels a bit guilty about her own neglect of Mrs. and Miss Bates, "not contributing what she ought to the stock of their scanty comforts. She had had many a hint from Mr. Knightley and some from her own heart, as

to her deficiency" (*E* 155), but, when Emma does act, she is very generous.

Mr. Woodhouse means to send the Bateses a leg or a loin of fresh killed pork, but Emma sends the whole hind quarter instead. Mr. Woodhouse's pork and Mr. Knightley's apples are delivered to Mrs. and Miss Bates, just as the Martins' goose, "a beautiful goose: the finest goose Mrs. Goddard had ever seen" (*E* 28), is sent to Mrs. Goddard's school. In her turn, Mrs. Goddard promptly invites "all the three teachers, Miss Nash, and Miss Prince, and Miss Richardson, to sup with her" (*E* 28–9). As Maggie Lane observes, "the giving and sharing of food becomes a symbol or extended metaphor for human interdependence, resonating through the entire text" (*Jane Austen and Food* 154). Even Mrs. and Miss Bates offer their guests tea and "sweet-cake from the beaufet" (*E* 156), the best offering their humble means can afford. But food is only one manifestation of the characters' generosity.

At the Crown Inn, "a couple of pair of post-horses were kept, more for the convenience of the neighbourhood than from any run on the road" (*E* 197), and, while the horses do not seem to be making much money for Mrs. Stokes, attending to the horses provides employment for young John Abdy. "Keeping no horses, having little spare money" (*E* 213), Mr. Knightley is able to take advantage of Mrs. Stokes's public-spiritedness when he presumably rents horses to convey Miss Bates and Miss Fairfax in his carriage. Mr. Knightley, Mr. Woodhouse, Mr. Weston, Mr. Cox, and Mr. Cole may confer "on business" (*E* 170 & 221), but it is parish business and nothing likely to financially benefit any of them. As principal landowner and magistrate, Mr. Knightley, with "his farm, his sheep, and his library, and all the parish to manage" (*E* 225), keeps a vigilant eye on all of the doings in and around Highbury, but, as Irene Collins reminds us in *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, Mr. Knightley's services are free: "The duties of a magistrate demanded a great deal of time and effort for no material reward" (119).

William Pitt's 1797 Poor Law Reform proposal identified magistrates as the people in the best position to administer and distribute the funds raised by the national Poor Law taxes. Pitt maintained that the local magistrates, like Jane Austen's brother Edward Austen Knight, already knew the residents of their parishes and understood their needs. Additionally, Pitt proposed that the magistrates should set the minimum wage in their local communities, based on the price of wheat bread, which varied from parish to parish and county to

county. Radical Whig Edmund Burke opposed every part of Pitt's bill and argued that the magistrates would be incompetent and wasteful, as their decisions would be based on their "blind and rash discretion" (261). Burke failed to elaborate on why the magistrates would be either blind or rash, and he dismissed the magistrates' minimum wage proposal as more unwarranted "interference." However, Mr. Knightley's exemplary superintendence of Highbury refutes all of Burke's claims.

George Butte has declared that of all of Jane Austen's novels, *Emma* "is the least challenging for the landed gentry" (5), but what Butte does not consider is that the gentry in *Emma* are already pulling their weight in the community and thus serving as examples to be emulated in the nation. Even Emma and Frank Churchill do their bit for the village: "the distresses of the poor were as sure of relief from [Emma's] personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse" (*E* 86), and we are given a demonstration of Emma's philanthropy when she has "a charitable visit to pay to a poor sick family" (*E* 83). Emma considers "what the poor must suffer in winter" (*E* 155), and, presumably, she would assist "an old servant who was married, and settled in Donwell" (*E* 186), if, on her visit, Emma found the woman in need.

Frank Churchill "on recollecting that an old woman who had nursed him was still living, walked in quest of her cottage from one end of the street to the other" (*E* 197). No doubt, Frank is using the cottage-to-cottage search as an excuse to loiter in Highbury where he hopes to attract the attention of Jane Fairfax, but his knowledge of his former servant nonetheless demonstrates a sense of obligation to the working class, and Frank "shewed, altogether, a good-will towards Highbury in general." But, of course, George Knightley is the benevolent mastermind whose unflagging efforts keep Highbury a safe haven in a cruel world.

"Disinterested benevolence"

Mr. Knightley is like the wise man Adam Smith refers to in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* who delights in a well-ordered and harmonious community:

> The orderly and flourishing state of society is agreeable to him, and he takes delight in contemplating it. Its disorder and

> confusion, on the contrary, is the object of his aversion, and he is chagrined at whatever tends to produce it. He is sensible, too that his own interest is connected with the prosperity of society, and that the happiness, perhaps the preservation of his existence, depends upon its preservation. (88)

Like Smith's good citizen, Mr. Knightley is frustrated and annoyed by the "disorder and confusion" brought on by Emma, Frank Churchill, and the Eltons, and he does his best to counter their disruptions.

What Mr. Knightley finds most provoking is that Emma has gone beyond meddling and interference, and her witticism at Miss Bates's expense constitutes an unprovoked attack on one of the most valuable-in-terms-of-use members of the Highbury community. Mr. Knightley speaks for all of Highbury when he chastises Emma: "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates" (*E* 374)? Just as Smith explains in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, it is the contemptuous disregard for another person, and not the specific insult, that people find intolerable:

> What chiefly enrages us against the man who injures or insults us, is the little account which he seems to make of us, the unreasonable preference which he gives to himself above us, and that absurd self-love, by which he seems to imagine, that other people may be sacrificed at any time, to his conveniency or his humour. The glaring impropriety of this conduct, the gross insolence and injustice which it seems to involve in it, often shock and exasperate us. (95)

As Miss Bates is unwilling and perhaps unable to retaliate, Mr. Knightley comes to her defense.

According to Jane Austen's nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh in his 1870 book, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, George Knightley was one of his aunt's favorite characters, and *Emma*'s author protested against assertions that Mr. Knightley was too good to be true (118). Mr. Knightley is always "considerate" and "humane" (*E* 223), and he deserves to be Highbury's leader as he is motivated by "simple, disinterested benevolence" (*E* 224). An example of George Knightley's exemplary stewardship is that Highbury, like Surrey's Walton-Upon-Thames, is an unenclosed parish and still retains its "common field" (*E* 126). Rather than close off a footpath through one of his fields

and create "inconvenience to the Highbury people" (*E* 106–07), Mr. Knightley is willing to inconvenience himself instead.

Another native of Highbury, Mr. Knightley's brother John, is a successful London attorney, but John Knightley may have become tainted by living in the City, as he is, by Highbury's standards, a little antisocial. Although he attends the Westons' Christmas Eve dinner party, John Knightley grumbles about it, considering the evening to be a bad financial exchange, "nothing in the visit worth the purchase" (*E* 113), and he expresses a similarly jaded attitude towards receiving "letters of friendship" (*E* 293): "Business, you know, may bring money, but friendship hardly ever does." John Knightley frames social interactions as no more than financial exchanges, but, unlike the radical Whigs, John does so as a joke, as Jane Fairfax realizes: "Ah! You are not serious now. I know Mr. John Knightley too well – I am very sure he understands the value of friendship as well as any body" (*E* 293–4). In actuality, John gives his brother, and thus all of Highbury, the benefit of his free legal advice, so everyone knows that his mercenary remarks are all in jest. Mr. Elton's, however, are in earnest.

Enemies in the camp

The romantic Harriet Smith assumes that newlywed Mr. Elton must "have fallen in love" (*E* 271), but a recently enlightened Emma quickly undeceives her: "A pretty fortune; and she came in his way." As Emma concludes after his proposal to her, Mr. Elton "only wanted to aggrandize and enrich himself; and if Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty thousand pounds, were not quite so easily obtained as he had fancied, he would soon try for Miss Somebody else with twenty, or with ten" (*E*135). In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong observes that Mr. Elton "overvalues the income a woman will bring to a marriage and thus undervalues her as a woman" (141), but Mr. Elton makes the same error with the men in his parish as well, continually playing cards and dining with the gentry while neglecting the poor.

Mr. Elton is like one of the "hypocrites of wealth and greatness" that Smith describes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> He assumes the equipage and splendid way of living of his superiors, without considering, that whatever may be praiseworthy in

> any of these derives its whole merit and propriety from its suitableness to that situation and fortune which both require, and can easily support the expence. Many a poor man places his glory in being thought rich, without considering that the duties (if one may call such follies by so very venerable a name) which that reputation imposes upon him, must soon reduce him to beggary, and render his situation still more unlike that of those whom he admires and imitates, than it had been originally. (61)

As a clergyman with a small, rural parish, Mr. Elton's situation is humble enough, but he continually refuses to accept his financial circumstances. He aspires to marry an heiress, although he has nothing to offer her in return. He admires John Knightley's carriage and acquires one for himself, although he cannot possibly afford it or the horses he buys to pull it on his and his wife's combined incomes. Even George Knightley has given up keeping his own carriage horses, but Mr. Elton is undeterred.

As the local clergyman, one of Mr. Elton's duties is help the poor, but here Elton fails miserably. Many readers have wondered that Jane Austen, the daughter, sister, cousin, and aunt of clergymen, should have created so many obnoxious vicars. Admirable clergymen like *Sense and Sensibility*'s Edward Ferrars, *Northanger Abbey*'s Henry Tilney, and *Mansfield Park*'s Edmund Bertram are countered by a buffoon, a glutton, and a bounder, *Pride and Prejudice*'s William Collins, *Mansfield Park*'s Dr. Grant, and *Emma*'s Philip Elton. But Austen's reasoning becomes apparent when one considers that the welfare system in place at the time was administered by clergymen. The obvious incompetence of Austen's selfish clerical characters points out the flaw in the existing system and the need to reform it, as Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger had suggested.

A lovesick Harriet Smith declares that "Mr. Elton is so good to the poor" (*E* 155), but there is no evidence of Philip Elton's charity anywhere in the novel. Mr. Elton's only cited act of benevolence is to Mrs. Bates in "wanting her to sit in the vicarage-pew" (*E* 175), a very public demonstration of consideration that costs the bachelor clergyman nothing and fills an otherwise conspicuously empty pew at the front of the church. After leaving the poor cottager on their charity visit, Emma and Harriet meet Mr. Elton in the lane. Mr. Elton claims he was just "going to call" at the cottage himself (*E* 87), but he never

makes it down "the narrow, slippery path through the cottage garden," as he immediately turns back to walk with Emma and Harriet. Elton subsequently confesses to Harriet that he had not actually been on his way to the cottage at all: "he had seen them go by, and had purposely followed them" (*E* 90). Mr. Elton is perfectly willing to take part in "a very interesting parley about what could be done and should be done" to assist the poor (*E* 87), but actually helping them is another matter. As Mrs. Elton betrays, the Rev. Elton considers his poor parishioners to be nuisances.

When young John Abdy calls at the vicarage to talk to Mr. Elton about getting parish relief for his father, an indisputable case of the deserving poor, Mr. Elton hurries the son away so he can return to his tea and card games, but Miss Bates manages to get the full story:

> Poor old John, I have a great regard for him; he was clerk to my poor father twenty-seven years; and now, poor old man, he is bedridden, and very poorly with the rheumatic gout in his joints – I must go and see him to-day; and so will Jane, I am sure, if she gets out at all. And poor John's son came to talk to Mr. Elton about relief from the parish: he is very well to do himself, you know, being head man at the Crown, ostler, and every thing of that sort, but still he cannot keep his father without some help; and so, when Mr. Elton came back, he told us what John ostler had been telling him. (*E* 383)

As vicar of the parish, Mr. Elton could have given young John Abdy money from the parish's emergency funds and added his father's name to the parish relief role, but we are given no indication that he has done either. The fact that Miss Bates is still so concerned about old John Abdy suggests that Mr. Elton has turned his son away with nothing, but the Abdys have one more chance. As Irene Collins reminds us, "The overseers of the poor were responsible to the magistrates," and the magistrate in Highbury is George Knightley.

When Emma pays her last social call on the Bateses, Miss Bates is conspicuous by her absence, but Mrs. Elton is there and complaining about her husband's being "engaged from morning to night. – There is no end of people's coming to him, on some pretence or other" (*E* 455), though young John Abdy's visit was certainly no "pretence" of need. Miss Bates returns while Emma and Mrs. Elton are still there,

but, uncharacteristically, Miss Bates makes no mention of where she has been or whom she has seen. When Mr. Elton arrives, we find that Mr. Knightley has also been absent from Donwell Abbey: "Knightley could not be found. Very odd! Very unaccountable! After the note I sent him this morning, and the message he returned, that he should certainly be at home till one" (*E* 457). Jane Austen creates a little mystery of missing persons here, but Emma Woodhouse and the reader are given sufficient clues to piece together the story.

Austen subtly suggests that Miss Bates appealed to Mr. Knightley and that they have both been to call on old John Abdy before the parish meeting at the Crown Inn scheduled for the following day, when applications for parish relief would be discussed and decided. With Miss Bates to plead his cause, with Mr. Knightley as attending magistrate, and with Mr. Weston, Mr. Woodhouse, and Mr. Cole as the parish council, the reader may rest assured of old John Abdy's receiving assistance, in spite of the indifference of his vicar. Thus, the magistrate and the parish counsel act as a necessary check and balance to the apathy of the local clergyman, but the Abdys would have been better served if their local magistrate had direct administration of the Poor Rates without the impediment of Mr. Elton.

In his neglect of old John Abdy, Mr. Elton has violated the cardinal rules of Highbury and of Christianity, to love one's neighbor as one's self and to care for the poor, although Mr. Elton would have been following the advice of radical Whigs in attempting to limit the number of names on welfare rolls. In *A Treatise on Indigence*, Patrick Colquhoun claimed that "three fourth parts of the adult population of the 1,040,716 paupers who received parochial relief in 1803" were, because of their immorality and drunkenness, undeserving poor and should, therefore, be denied public assistance (236). Imagine the savings. Colquhoun could, and he proposed a reduction in Poor Law taxes.

For her part, Mrs. Elton is no better than her husband. Decked out in her finery, "I would not wish to be inferior to others. And I see very few pearls in the room except mine" (*E* 324), Augusta Elton truly believes herself to be as Miss Bates describes her at the Westons' ball, "Quite the queen of the evening" (*E* 329). Mrs. Elton, "as elegant as lace and pearls could make her" (*E* 292), compares herself to her neighbors based entirely on the expense of the other women's clothes, and she assumes that everyone else is judging by the same

materialistic standard. Like her impractical husband, the vicar's wife seems oblivious to the financial reality of her situation and admittedly shows no moderation in her lifestyle:

> My greatest danger, perhaps, in housekeeping, may be quite the other way, in doing too much, and being too careless of expense. Maple Grove will probably be my model more than it ought to be – for we do not at all affect to equal my brother, Mr. Suckling, in income. (*E* 283–4)

Of course, aping the Sucklings is the joy of Mrs. Elton's life.

All of Highbury is privy to the Eltons' carriage and horses, "income, servants, and furniture" (*E* 184). The Eltons employ so many servants that Mrs. Elton cannot keep track of them, "one of our men, I forget his name" (*E* 295), and she protests that her servants do not have enough work to do. As Adam Smith cautions in *Wealth of Nations*, a man "grows poor by maintaining a multitude of menial servants" (270), but Mrs. Elton's conspicuous consumption betrays an even more vexing problem, as, according to Smith, "frivolous objects, the little ornaments of dress and furniture, jewels, trinkets, gewgaws, frequently indicates, not only a trifling, but a base and selfish disposition" (290). Mrs. Elton esteems her brother-in-law because he has an estate, a large house, two carriages, and all of the other trappings of wealth, and she trusts that everyone else in Highbury will be similarly impressed by Mr. Suckling's value in exchange.

It is also worth noting that Mrs. Elton works Mr. Suckling, of Maple Grove, into every conversation, but she has absolutely nothing to say about her own family or her home in Bristol. Austen's original readers would have understood why. By the time *Emma* was written, Bristol was infamous for its role in the British slave trade. When abolitionist Thomas Clarkson was gathering information for a report on the slave trade to be distributed in the House of Commons and subsequently published in 1788 and 1789, Clarkson began his investigation in Bristol, but an even more obvious connection to the slave trade is Mrs. Elton's maiden name, Hawkins.

As everyone knew, Admiral Sir John Hawkins had been a pioneer in the British slave trade in the sixteenth-century and was the first man to run the Golden Triangle trade route between Bristol, Africa, and the West Indies, making a hefty profit at every stop. Another Sir

John Hawkins was a Member of Parliament in the late eighteenth-century who argued in favor of the slave trade in the House of Commons and publicly sneered at the abolitionists (Porter 266). An American slave trader, Joseph Hawkins, published a popular memoir in 1797, *A History of a Voyage to the Coast of Africa, and Travels into the interior of that country; containing particular descriptions of the climate and inhabitants, and interesting particulars concerning the slave trade*. No wonder Augusta Hawkins Elton bristles when Jane Fairfax refers to "the sale – not quite of human flesh – but of human intellect" (*E* 300): "Oh! my dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean a fling at the slave-trade, I assure you Mr. Suckling was always rather a friend to the abolition." Significantly, Mrs. Elton never mentions the Hawkins's stand on abolition.

Slave ship captains could make as much as £10,000, Mrs. Elton's dowry, on a single successful voyage (Rediker 190), but it was a very high-risk business. One half of the Europeans who traveled to West Africa died within a year (Rediker 244), mostly from disease, but ship captains were also in danger of slave revolts and mutinies among their own sailors. Most slave ship captains came from working-class families and began as sailors who worked their way up the chain of command. Those who managed to return to England alive retired as quickly as they could, but, as historian Marcus Rediker maintains, "a captain who survived four voyages or more would likely have made a small fortune, far beyond what most men of his original station in life could expect to achieve" (190), but the money was obviously tainted, as Augusta Hawkins' dowry would be.

Mr. Elton's bride is a stranger to Highbury, but Emma Woodhouse has no difficulty in learning all she needs to know about the former Miss Hawkins: "*What* she was must be uncertain; but *who* she was, might be found out … She brought no name, no blood, no alliance" to do her any credit (*E* 183). Mrs. Elton is an orphan, from "the very heart of Bristol," that is from near the harbors where the slave ships docked, and Emma doubts the respectability of her father's occupation: "the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol – merchant, of course, he must be called; but, as the whole of the profits of his mercantile life appeared so very moderate, it was not unfair to guess the dignity of his line of trade had been very moderate also" (*E* 183). By contrast, Mr. Weston and Mr. Cole were both merchants in London, but Emma Woodhouse has no qualms about their lines of business.

Mrs. Elton's possible connection with the slave trade heightens the contrast between her selfish, materialistic worldview and the very opposite values of Highbury, whose residents value human beings over money.

Although Mrs. Elton brags of Mr. Suckling wherever she goes, she never credits her brother-in-law with even one admirable character trait, absolutely no value in use, although it is doubtful that Mrs. Elton would detect or esteem such qualities, even if Mr. Suckling possessed them. As Smith puts it in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "We frequently see the respectful attentions of the world more strongly directed towards the rich and the great, than towards the wise and the virtuous" (58). In her adoration of Mr. Suckling and in the Eltons' cruelty to Harriet Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Elton expose their moral perversion as encapsulated in Smith's title for Chapter 3: "OF THE CORRUPTION OF OUR MORAL SENTIMENTS, WHICH IS OCCASIONED BY THIS DISPOSITION TO ADMIRE THE RICH AND THE GREAT, AND TO DESPISE OR NEGLECT PERSONS OF POOR AND MEAN CONDITION." In contrast, Emma appreciates Harriet Smith's "tenderness of heart" and deems this trait "invaluable" (*E* 269). Mr. Knightley agrees with Emma's assessment of the two women: "Harriet Smith has some first-rate qualities, which Mrs. Elton is totally without. An unpretending, single-minded, artless girl – infinitely to be preferred by any man of sense and taste to such a woman as Mrs. Elton" (*E* 331).

Though *Emma* suggests the possibility of a better way of life, the very real financial problems of the Regency occasionally undermine the novel's hopeful message. In 1797, Edmund Burke claimed that he did "not know of one man, woman, or child, that has perished from famine" (277). It is doubtful that Burke could have made the same statement when Austen was writing *Emma*, or would have been believed if he had. The March 15, 1813 *Hampshire Chronicle* reported a coroner's inquest into the death of Elizabeth Kilminster, whose emaciated body was found in a field near a farmhouse where she had gone to beg for food. The official verdict at the coroner's inquest was "*Visitation of God,*" although the woman had clearly starved. Nothing so grim could ever happen in Highbury, but the threat of what someone driven by desperation might do terrifies Harriet Smith and Miss Bickerton when they are assailed by the "gipsies" (*E* 333).

As Deirdre Le Faye reminds us in *Jane Austen's Country Life*, gipsies were not romanticized as free spirits who chose to live on the open road but categorized as common criminals who stayed on the move in order to avoid criminal prosecution: "More so than highwaymen, gipsies were hated and feared in the country side, since they operated in gangs and pilfered from homes and gardens as well as threatening and robbing travelers" (144). Harriet Smith, a "soft-hearted girl" (*E* 473), gives the gypsies a shilling, which was the usual amount Dorothy Wordsworth records that she gave to beggars in her Alfoxden and Grasmere journals. On hearing Harriet's story, Emma immediately sends "notice of there being such a set of people in the neighbourhood to Mr. Knightley" (*E* 334), so charity is extended, but law and order are demanded, exactly the kind of liberal-Tory response that William Pitt would have suggested. And the magistrate of the parish, Mr. Knightley, immediately comes to Emma's mind as the best person to deal with the homeless beggars.

In *Growing Older With Jane Austen*, Maggie Lane comments on the numerous glimpses of poverty in Highbury: "For all its celebration of agricultural prosperity and interdependence of community, *Emma* reveals more than any other Austen novel glimpses of the dark side of life in rural England" (176). But then, in Jane Austen's lifetime, the economy had never been worse. When thieves make off with all of the Westons' turkeys and "Other poultry-yards in the neighbourhood also suffered" (*E* 483), the reader is again reminded of the hunger that must be allayed in order to maintain private property. But it is an ill wind that blows no good, especially in Highbury, and even these acts of "Pilfering" turn to Emma's advantage, as Mr. Woodhouse's fear of "*housebreaking*" reconciles him to Mr. Knightley's residence in Hartfield as Emma's husband. Mr. and Mrs. Elton, however, remain in Highbury and incorrigible to the last paragraph, still firmly entrenched in a world of value in exchange. Even in an ideal Surrey village, there are enemies in the camp, and the selfish, materialistic values represented by the Eltons in *Emma* are poised to live on and to create further havoc in the Elliot family in *Persuasion*.

7
Persuasion: The Post-Waterloo Crash

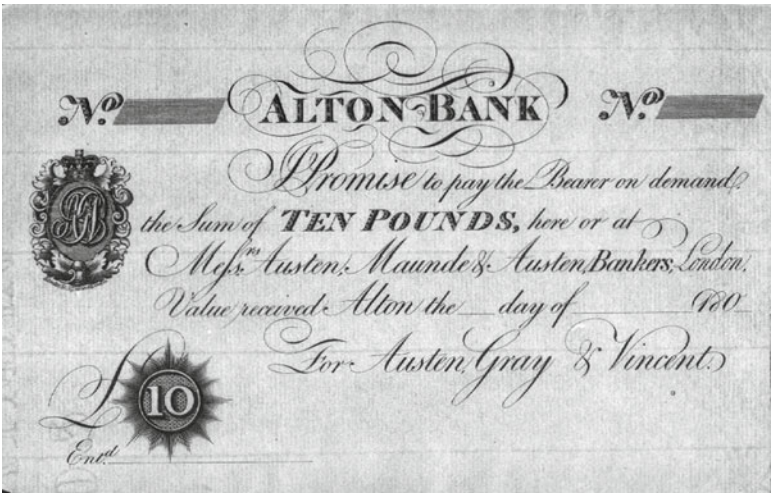

Figure 7.1 The banknote above was legal tender once it was dated and signed, but it became worthless when Henry Austen's bank failed in 1816
Source: Image courtesy of Jane Austen's House Museum.

The first three chapters of *Persuasion* repeat a scenario that Jane Austen had already experimented with in her 1792 fragment *Catharine: or the Bower*. As far as it progresses, *Catharine* is the story of two

political extremists, radical Whig Mrs. Percival and reactionary Tory Mr. Stanley, arguing their political positions in a domestic setting. Commonsense moderate Catharine, or Kitty, maintains her silence but detects the flaws of each character's extreme and unrealistic position. In *Persuasion*, the Mrs. Percival and Mr. Stanley characters are revived as the extravagant Sir Walter Elliot, MP [radical Whig] and his political polar opposite, the overly-cautious Lady Russell [reactionary Tory]. The manor house domestic setting is not just the characters' political battlefield. As in *Mansfield Park*, Kellynch serves as an analogy for the British nation, as England was, following the Battle of Waterloo, like Sir Walter Elliot's world, teetering on the brink of economic collapse.

As the embodiment of ultra-conservative Tory values, Lady Russell errs on the side of caution by harboring an irrational paranoia, "a horror," "of anything approaching to imprudence" (*P* 27). At the other end of the political spectrum, Sir Walter embraces imprudence as a lifestyle. This corresponded to the ultra-conservative Tory hand-wringing over the national debt and the radical Whig unconcern with it. As in Jane Austen's *Catharine, or the Bower*, the two political extremists are much more similar than Jane Austen's present-day reader may realize. Like the Members of the House of Commons, Lady Russell and Sir Walter both choose to remain blind to the truth. Lady Russell sees only what she wants to see from her carriage window in Bath; she refuses to notice Captain Wentworth when he is in plain sight. Sir Walter also chooses his own version of reality by distracting himself with the *Baronetage*. Once again, as in *Catharine: or the Bower*, extremists were insisting on their own versions of the truth, and compelling other people to suffer the consequences.

By way of contrast, Anne Elliot is willing to admit who and what stands before her, even when that reality causes her pain. Thus, Anne, and by extension the reader, learns that heeding the warnings of extremists is a grave error, even when their advice may appear to be reasonable, "persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk" (*P* 244). In Jane Austen's original manuscript of *Persuasion*, the words "Safety" and "Risk" are capitalized (*P* 267). Lady Russell's "over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence!" is set in opposition to Captain Wentworth's "cheerful confidence in futurity" (*P* 30). Lady Russell's fears prove unfounded, thus discrediting the most extreme group of reactionary Tories, labeled the "Ultras" (Lee 33), who were refusing to support conservative Tory

Prime Minister Lord Liverpool in economic reform. At the same time, the most liberal Tories were also deserting Liverpool but in order to cross the aisle and vote with the Whigs, so *Persuasion* is, once again, Jane Austen's call for moderation and reform.

Sir Walter's impracticality is held entirely responsible for the economic problems at Kellynch, as, before he was allowed to run amok, when his wife and Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger were both still alive, there had been "method, moderation, and economy … such right-mindedness" (*P* 9). The radical Whigs' predictions of impending doom, such as the economic Armageddon forecast by *Catharine: or the Bower*'s Mrs. Percival and in Thomas Paine's 1796 tract *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*, had failed to materialize, and 20 years later, the radical Whigs had entirely changed their economic predictions and were celebrating the booming wartime economy. Ironically, the Whigs had completely changed their minds just as the economy was about to fulfill their earlier grim predictions.

The banks

Originally compiled in 1814 as a report written for the Tory Prime Minister, Whig Patrick Colquhoun's 1815 *A Treatise on the Wealth, Power and Resources of the British Empire* was a smug, self-congratulatory appraisal of Britain's economy. Although Colquhoun admitted that one in four Britons, "a much under-rated estimate" (111), did not earn enough money to feed themselves and were officially classified by their government as paupers, Colquhoun brushed aside the bad news to boast of British imports and exports and declared that the British "banking system, having been in the progress of gradual improvement during the last and the present century, has at length reached a state of perfection" (79). The reality was that banks were printing and issuing paper money entirely at their own discretion, or indiscretion.

According to Colquhoun, this posed no problem as paper money would conform to the same laws of supply and demand that regulated consumer goods in the marketplace; therefore, banks required no government regulation: "Bank notes, in as far as they perform the functions of metallic money, appear to be regulated in point of amount or quantity by the same principle which regulates the other articles of life which are desirable to man, – where nothing is

supplied beyond the actual demand" (83). When Colquhoun speculated that "A new [economic] era appears to be at no great distance" (86), he was certainly right, but the future of the British economy was not the secure and robust "new era" that Colquhoun predicted. In the economic depression that followed Waterloo, more than one in four of Colquhoun's perfect English banks failed (Olsen 251), including the banks directed by Jane Austen's brother Henry.

Listed first in the "BANKRUPTS" column in the March 18, 1816 edition of *The Hampshire Chronicle* was "Henry Thomas Austin [sic], Henry Maude and James Tilson, Henrietta-Street, Covent-garden, bankers." The failure of Henry Austen's banks meant that he was legally liable for the banks' financial losses, "to his last shilling and acre" (Poovey, *Financial* 16). Consequently, Henry lost all of his money, his house, furniture, horses, and carriage. It was a long way down for Henry Austen, who fell back on the Church of England for employment and became the curate at Chawton for a humbling salary of one pound and one shilling per week (Myer 223), but the collapse of Henry's banks also impacted the finances of the entire Austen family.

Jane Austen's sailor brothers, Captains Francis and Charles, lost hundreds of pounds, most of their savings and prize money from the wars, and were reduced to living, like *Persuasion*'s Captain Harville, on their half-pay from the British Navy. Another Austen brother, wealthy landowner Edward Austen Knight, could better sustain his loss of £20,000, though a fortune in itself. Jane Austen lost £13 and seven shillings when Henry's banks failed (Myer 223), which may not sound like much, but it was nearly six months' wages for the average laborer. The £600 profits from her copyright sales were safely invested in the Navy Fives, government bonds paying five percent interest. Henry and Frank were no longer able to contribute their annual £50 each to Mrs. Austen's household budget, so, like the Elliots in *Persuasion*, the entire Austen family was retrenching. More desperate people were protesting, rioting, vandalizing, and looting.

The crash

Lady Russell's prediction that "Time will explain" is much more than a cliché (*P* 147), as the novel's precise timing is vital to the story. In

Persuasion, the timing is announced by the narrator in the first chapter, "at this present time, (the summer of 1814)" (*P* 8). Thus, the narrative voice alerts the reader and sets the stopwatch running. Given the timeframe assigned to the story, the author and her original readers shared a secret, one that *Persuasion*'s characters cannot possibly know, that the England the characters inhabit is about to economically implode.

Jane Austen began writing *Persuasion* in August of 1815 and finished the manuscript exactly 12 months later. As Austen started her final completed novel, England was experiencing the worse financial crisis of Austen's life and one of the worst economic depressions in British history. The collapse of the wartime economy, easy credit, an unregulated banking system, an unprecedented national debt, high unemployment, and the notorious Corn Law, which drove up the price of food, conspired to create the economic perfect storm, but the inevitable consequences of collective foolishness and greed nevertheless took the country by surprise. In the wake of the financial crash which followed the Battle of Waterloo, the House of Commons took decisive action and made the situation much worse by ending William Pitt's 1799 income tax in order to give the wealthy a substantial tax break.

The loss of the income tax revenue meant that the national debt would continue to go unpaid, and, even more problematic in the short term, there would be insufficient funds to pay even the interest on the debt. During all of Jane Austen's life, through a series of foreign wars and the expansion of British imperialism, the economy had been building up to supply the military. As Stephen Lee describes it in *British Political History 1815–1914*, "the government had become the major customer of the Industrial Revolution … Orders had been placed to supply the Royal Navy, and the troops fighting Napoleon in the Peninsular War, with uniforms from Lancashire and Yorkshire and arms from Sheffield and Birmingham" (21). By 1811, Britain's military expenditure was 16 percent of the national income, the same level as in 1914–1918 during World War I (Southam 125). For decades, bankers and merchants in the City had been growing rich from war profiteering, and the government had become the nation's major consumer and employer. But Britain had never maintained a standing army in times of peace, so the end of the war meant the cancellation of government contracts for guns, swords, canons, ammunition, uniforms, boots, tents, blankets,

horses, wagons, food, and all of the other supplies required by the military.

Before Waterloo, Shropshire had 34 blast furnaces. After Waterloo, only ten remained open (Lee 21). Factories closed, and factory workers were turned out to wander the countryside in search of jobs. To add to the unemployment, 300,000 men were demobilized from the military in 1815; 85 percent of the British Navy was discharged (Rogers 122). Members in the House of Commons were complaining about the expense of half-pay military pensions to wounded soldiers and sailors, like *Persuasion*'s Captain Harville. Politicians had failed, rather spectacularly, to anticipate the economic consequences of peace, and, when confronted with the reality, they, like Sir Walter Elliot, chose to remain oblivious.

The foreknowledge of the impending financial crisis would have added a heightened tension to *Persuasion* as Jane Austen's original readers considered the characters' financial decisions in light of the future. Lady Russell's too modest proposals for retrenchment and her clinging to what had been feasible in the past aligns her with the reactionary Tories, the Ultras. Austen's first readers would also have seen the parallel between Sir Walter Elliot's financial problems and Parliament's deficit spending followed by a refusal to deal with the nation's debt. The extravagance and foolishness of Sir Walter clearly identifies the root cause of Britain's financial problems.

The economic disaster that followed the Battle of Waterloo in June of 1815 can be compared to the American stock market crash of 1929 in that it was unexpected and abrupt, with a knock-on, domino effect that no one seemed to anticipate. Wealthy people were impacted through bank and business failures and working-class people through low wages and unemployment. And there were no government bailouts or economic stimulus packages. Parliament's response to the depression was a combination of opportunism and apathy. Unlike America's Great Depression, taxes were cut on the wealthy and the price of food was raised and guaranteed to remain artificially high by the extremely unpopular Corn Law, which Parliament passed in March of 1815, three months before the battle of Waterloo and six months before Jane Austen began writing *Persuasion*.

The Corn Law

Due to the importation of cheap foreign grain and the bountiful harvests in 1813 and 1814, the price of bread had dropped by 50 percent, which came as a great relief to British consumers (Erickson 148). However, the landed gentry had grown accustomed to high prices for their grain, as the wartime blockades had eliminated all foreign competition and guaranteed hefty profits. The 1815 Corn Law was a protectionist tariff designed to keep cheap, imported grain out of Britain and thus to artificially drive up the price of homegrown grain, ensuring British farmers, like the Musgroves and the Hayters, the same agricultural profits they had enjoyed during the war years. While this was all well and good for the rural gentry, the Corn Law meant a return to expensive bread for the nation and hunger for the poor. *Persuasion*'s depiction of kindly Mr. Musgrove, who only concerns himself with local government, suggests that farmers were not the problem.

The obvious villain here is Sir Walter Elliot, MP and landowner, who in the House of Commons would have been cutting his own taxes and ensuring farming profits in anticipation of raising the rents on his land. Harvest failures and wartime blockades were unavoidable hardships that everyone acknowledged, but the lower classes bitterly resented paying high prices for food because the already rich had conspired to further bloat their own bank accounts. As historian Carolly Erickson summarizes it in *Our Tempestuous Day: A History of Regency England*, the vast majority of people saw the Corn Law as being "initiated by rich and greedy landowners bent on enriching themselves still further at the expense of ordinary citizens" (148).

Hundreds of thousands of people signed anti-Corn Law petitions, which the House of Commons refused to hear or even to acknowledge. During the Corn Law debates, thousands of people stood outside of Parliament and disrupted the proceedings within by shouting, chanting, and jeering. MPs complained that they were harassed coming and going, and, once inside the House of Commons, they were unable to hear one another speak due to the noise outside. In the final days leading up to the Corn Law vote, a mob, estimated at between 700 and 800 people, vandalized and looted the London houses of the Lord Chancellor, the evangelical

Whig Chief Justice, and the seven MPs who were known to be strong advocates of the Corn Law bill (Erickson 149). Another Corn Law supporter was the Prince of Wales, but his London residence, Carlton House, was spared because the property was completely surrounded by soldiers. Much to the Prince's horror, a loaf of bread soaked in blood – symbolic of the "Bread or Blood" food riots – was deposited by his gate. When the heir apparent dared to venture out, he was booed and hissed by the crowds, and his carriage was pelted with stones and garbage.

In spite of the general public outcry, the Corn Law was passed in the House of Commons on March 10, 1815 by a vote of 245 to 72 (Erickson 150). The Members' rare display of unity did not go down well with the public. Prime Minister Lord Liverpool became very unpopular, and as Carolly Erickson notes, as far as the average Briton was concerned, "Parliament was the villain" (147). MP Sir Walter Elliot's allegiance to his own self-interest would have been a foregone conclusion.

According to Captain Rees Gronow in his memoir *Regency Recollections*, 1816 was "a most dangerous period … In the riots and meetings of those troublous times, the mob really meant mischief" (140). The May 27, 1816 *Hampshire Chronicle* reported the "alarming state of the county" of Suffolk where magistrates felt compelled "to request the assistance of Government to restore tranquility." Suffolk's "malcontents" were identified as unemployed agricultural laborers, as were protestors in Essex and Cambridgeshire, but miners were also rioting in Newcastle, as were Luddites in Cambridgeshire and Nottingham. "Owing to the late advance in [the price of] corn and the lowness of wages," a mob, estimated to be about 1,500 strong, rioted in Norfolk, Henry Crawford's home county in *Mansfield Park*. According to *The Chronicle*, magistrates read the Riot Act, and the crowd was dispersed by soldiers.

The Spa Fields riots of 1816 were precisely the kind of mob violence and military intervention that Eleanor Tilney fears in *Northanger Abbey*. The British government assumed that the 20,000 protestors were plotting to attack The Tower of London and the Bank of England in order to seize their gold reserves, but most historians now believe the mass meetings were probably just more protests against low wages, unemployment, and the high price of food. Once again, soldiers forcibly dispersed the crowd.

Parishes reluctant to continue feeding their poor, or hanging them for theft, or calling in the army to subdue them began providing unemployed men with one-way tickets to America, and many people who could afford the expense were leaving voluntarily, but the mass exodus was also causing problems. The wives and children left behind were applying for parish relief, and, in Lincolnshire, 4,000 acres of farmland were deserted and left fallow when an entire village, including the curate, left for America (*Hampshire Chronicle*, 27 May 1816). For those who could not leave, the economy was about to get even worse, as a new wave of unemployment dominated the news a week later.

The June 17 *Hampshire Chronicle* sympathized with the "great numbers of persons connected with the hosiery business, who are almost daily turned out of employment, in this town and country. We understand, that several hundreds were discharged on Saturday last, and many more are expected to share a similar fate." As the newspaper reported, former agricultural workers who had adjusted to factory work, factory hours, factory pay, and factory housing were left with nothing: "It is computed that not less than 12,000 persons in the counties of Stafford and Salop have been dismissed to wander in search of subsistence, in consequence of the falling off in the iron trade since the peace." In desperation, more people were seeking jobs as domestic servants, but, according to the *Chronicle*, the supply of willing workers greatly exceeded the demand.

In an effort to restore some faith in Britain's economic system, the government announced that it would issue new silver coins with a higher silver content, not an altogether successful tactic, as it was an admission on the government's part that the coins already in circulation were debased. The June 10, 1816 *Hampshire Chronicle* reported a "disturbance" in Norwich, "in consequence of notice from the banks that they would receive no old shillings and sixpences in future. The people immediately attempted to make what purchases they could with the interdicted pieces of money, which the shopkeepers refused to take in payment." In a letter dated 20 February 1817, Jane Austen made light of the situation to her niece Fanny Knight: "You are worth your weight in Gold, or even in the new Silver Coinage" (*Letters* 328). For Jane Austen and her contemporaries, the economy had never been worse, and Austen would die before it began to show any signs of improvement.

The undeserving rich

An unrepentant and incurable wastrel, Sir Walter resists the inevitable "contractions and restrictions" on his lifestyle for as long as he can (*P* 13), but as the pragmatic Lady Russell points out, Sir Walter's disastrous financial situation was not at all unusual for a person in his social class: "What will he be doing, in fact, but what very many of our first families have done, – or ought to do? – There will be nothing singular in his case" (*P* 12). Unfortunately, there was nothing particularly unusual in Sir Walter's inability to retrench either.

While Lady Russell wisely keeps abreast of current events by reading all of the "states of the nation that come out" (*P* 215), Sir Walter and his cypher, daughter Elizabeth, avoid "tiresome" books and turn away from unpleasant financial realities, such as the national debt and "the heavy bills of his tradespeople" (*P* 7). Like the aristocrats before the French Revolution, and extremists in the House of Commons, Sir Walter chooses the dangerous expedient of denial. He refuses to acknowledge that "the person who has contracted debts must pay them" (*P* 12), and this pragmatism applied to the government as well. Realist Admiral Croft accepts that "he must pay for his convenience" (*P* 22), but Sir Walter insists that, because he is who he is, his situation is different. The House of Commons was doing the same. Because they were the government, they argued, their debt could remain unpaid.

When asked to retrench, Elizabeth Elliot's solution is "to cut off some unnecessary charities" (*P* 9), just as the House of Commons proposed to make up for their tax cut by cutting welfare benefits. Sir Walter's response to the poor was the same as Parliament's, an acknowledgement of their existence, "condescending bows for all the afflicted tenantry and cottagers" (*P* 36), but neither Sir Walter nor Parliament would be feeding them or their children, and the country was destined for no better government in the foreseeable future.

As his exploitation of Charles Smith and his marriage to "a rich woman of inferior birth" reveal (*P* 8), Mr. Elliot uses other people in order to enrich himself: "Money, money, was all that he wanted" (*P* 202). In his dealings with the people around him, William Elliot betrays the radical Whigs' tendency to view people as commodities, both exploitable and expendable. However, like the poor in Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, the Elliots are also superfluous human commodities. Thus, *Persuasion* serves as

a warning to the powers that be; they are subject to the same laws of supply and demand that they apply to the lower classes. If working-class people are no more than marketable goods, then everyone, regardless of social class, may also be subject to appraisal and to the harsh consequences that follow. Like Mr. Elliot when he chose his wife, Penelope Clay coolly appraises Sir Walter and Mr. Elliot for their market values and callously chooses "the richer of the two" (*P* 140).

As historian Venetia Murray reminds us in *An Elegant Madness: High Society in Regency England*, "one of the classic characteristics of the nobility at the time was a sublime indifference to economic reality. Debt was a way of life, a matter only of juggling credit. Deficit financing may not have been invented as a term during the Regency, but they certainly knew the principle" (62). At Sir Walter's rented house in Bath, the "elegant little clock on the mantle-piece had struck 'eleven with its silver sounds,' and the watchman was beginning to be heard at a distance telling the same tale" (*P* 144). It is the *eleventh hour*, and time is running out for Sir Walter, as the pages of *Persuasion* hasten towards the impending economic crash only a few months away.

Sir Walter's conceit and apathy frees the reader from any inclination to feel sorry for him. The debts of the "foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him" would soon be called in (*P* 248). The land he used as collateral for his loans will be sold, and Sir Walter "had condescended to mortgage as far as he had the power" (*P* 10), just as the government had borrowed as much money as the Bank would loan. Sir Walter could well wind up in a debtor's prison, like the character William Dorrit in Charles Dickens' 1857 novel *Little Dorrit*. In 1816, 1,000 "gentlemen" in England were imprisoned for debt (Kelly 229), but many more debtors escaped the country before they could be arrested.

While Jane Austen was writing *Persuasion*, the June 17, 1816 *Hampshire Chronicle* reported a mass exodus: "Above two thousand passports have been issued to Noblemen, Gentlemen, and Manufacturers, about to proceed to the Continent, within the last month." One of those "gentlemen" was the famous Whig and dandy Beau Brummell, who in May of 1816 secretly bolted from London in the middle of the night and hastened to France in order to avoid being arrested for debt. Within four days of Brummell's departure,

the contents of his London house had been seized, advertised in the newspapers as "The Genuine Property of A MAN OF FASHION Gone to the Continent," and sold at auction (Kelly 225). Within three months of Brummell's sale, the final draft of *Persuasion* would be complete, beginning with Sir Walter Elliot's financial problems two years earlier. Like Brummell, Sir Walter is a dandy who aspires to be a wit and a Whig, but Sir Walter is, in addition, a politician.

Sir Walter's copy of the *Baronetage* notes that among his family's accomplishments is "representing a borough in three successive parliaments" (*P* 4). No doubt, Sir Walter's borough is rotten. The narrator notes that Sir Walter himself "travelled up to London" every spring to take his place in "the great world" (*P* 7). When he wished to confer favor on young William Elliot, Sir Walter appeared with his heir "twice in the lobby of the House of Commons" (*P* 8). Once again, Austen makes a point of showing that the men who were handling the nation's finances were incapable of managing even their own money and only rallied themselves to act in Parliament when it enriched them. On their stroll down the gravel path in Bath, Anne and Captain Wentworth are oblivious to the "sauntering politicians" around them who were neglecting the business of the nation in London (*P* 241).

The deserving rich

Economist Thomas Picketty claims that Austen's modern readers, in "the wealthiest societies," may draw erroneous conclusions from her novels, as the way we think and talk about the super-rich has changed. As we tend to admire and to emulate the wealthy, "Jane Austen's points about need and dignity make little sense" (417). But the characters themselves provide all of the clues that the attentive reader needs in order to understand the author's intent. As reluctant as she is to leave her home, even to-the-manor-born Anne Elliot must acknowledge that her family's loss is ultimately for the best as it benefits so many other people. Anne:

> felt the parish to be so sure of a good example, and the poor of the best attention and relief, that however sorry and ashamed for the necessity of the removal, she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch-hall had passed into better hands than its owners. (*P* 125)

As Sir Walter slips away to Bath "to be important at comparatively little expense" (*P* 14), the Crofts move into Kellynch and assume their responsibilities in the community. Thus, the bankruptcies and the end of easy credit are making something of a clean sweep of the nation.

Admiral and Mrs. Croft enjoy a "very handsome fortune" (*P* 21), but they wisely continue to live frugally. After years of living rent-free in the Captain's quarters of five ships, they lease Kellynch Hall, just as Captain Francis Austen rented Chawton House from his brother Edward. In their 1825 self-help guide *The Complete Servant*, Samuel and Sarah Adams estimate that "Rent, Taxes, and Repairs of House and Furniture" would amount to no more than "12 ½ per Cent. or One-eighth" of a gentry family's annual income (15), much less for housing than one would imagine today. Additionally, there are indications that the Crofts employ only a skeleton household staff and are largely self-sufficient when at home. For instance, when Admiral Croft wishes to remove the many "large looking-glasses" from Sir Walter's dressing room (*P* 127), the Admiral does the heavy work himself: "I got Sophy [Mrs. Croft] to lend me a hand" (*P* 128). Similarly, the Crofts use an umbrella stand instead of depending on a butler to fetch their umbrellas for them as the Elliots had done, and one can only assume that the Crofts know about the laundry-room door and repair it because they have passed through the door themselves. The Crofts also drive themselves instead of employing a coachman, as Sir Walter had done. The Admiral is not an experienced driver, so the reader must admire his self-sufficiency and willingness to learn.

In contrast to Sir Walter's large carriage and four horses, the Crofts travel about the countryside in an economical, one-horse, two-wheeled gig. The Crofts' modest form of transportation translates into one quarter of the expensive horseflesh Sir Walter purchased, one fourth of the hay and grain, fewer horseshoes, less harness, a quarter of the annual tax on the horses, half the annual carriage tax, which was assessed per axle, and half fare on toll roads. Unlike Sir Walter, the Crofts are not embarrassed by their economies, and they recall their former lean years with great fondness, implying that people can be happy with less, considerably less – an encouraging example to readers whose incomes were diminished by the 1815 economic crash and a hint as to how the government could also retrench.

As Anne Elliot says of the seemingly inconsolable Captain Benwick, "I cannot believe his prospects so blighted forever … He will rally again" (*P* 97), as, indeed, he does. Admiral Croft assumes a similar resilience in Captain Wentworth: "Now he must begin all over again with somebody else" (*P* 173). All of *Persuasion*'s sensible characters are capable of beginning again to find love and to seek financial security, and the rest of Britain could presumably do the same.

The theme of loss and recovery is evident in the literature referred to in *Persuasion*: *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *Marmion*, and *The Lady of the Lake*. As William Deresiewicz observes, "the central theme of each of these bodies of work, the Tales and the romances, is survival: who and what lives on, and on what terms, after the experience of loss" (128). Deresiewicz also draws our attention to *Persuasion*'s repeated motif of rising and falling:

> Little Charles's injury is the result of a fall; Wentworth praises his famous nut for having clung to its high perch "while so many of its brethren have fallen"; and even the cliff at Pinney has experienced a "partial falling" – height itself tumbling down. But of course, the most important of the novel's falling bodies is Louisa's, the imagery of descent and ascent reaching its apogee of importance at the novel's very pivot-point. Indeed, Louisa's fall is an event that, with her repeated climbings and jumpings, possesses an emblematic significance. What goes up must come down, but by the same token, what goes down eventually comes back up – just as (the pun is inevitable) the season of "spring" inevitably succeeds that of "fall." (142)

It is this repetition of rising again after a fall that also suggests the possibility of economic recovery on the national level. As *Persuasion* suggests, after the economic crash, England, like the houses of the Musgroves, was "in a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement" (*P* 40).

In *Jane Austen and the State*, Mary Evans maintains that "Poverty, [Austen] recognizes, is constructed: Mrs. Smith is poor because Mr. Elliot cheated her" (83), but it is not Mr. Elliot alone who reduced Mrs. Smith to penury. Ultimately, as Mrs. Smith confesses, the Smiths' financial troubles have the same root cause as Sir Walter's. The Smiths' "income had never been equal to their style of living" (*P* 209). Just as the government had spent more money than it

brought in as tax revenue, both the Smiths and the nation have bankrupt themselves by "careless habits" and "general and joint extravagance." It is significant that the Elliots and the Smiths are not the victims of paper banknotes, debased coins, the Restriction Act, Poor Law taxes, the Corn Law, bank failures, or the post-Waterloo depression, but suffer the predictable results of their own "thoughtless" actions (*P* 201). In *Persuasion*, the fault is not in the economic system [a Tory political position] but in ourselves and in our abuse of the system. But, like Mrs. Smith, Parliament also had the ability to reform.

Anne Elliot persevered and recreated herself. Anne Wentworth "gloried in being a sailor's wife" (P 273), but she knows that "she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession." There is always a tax to be paid, but Anne gladly pays it [a liberal Tory/moderate Whig position], as it is the price of admission to her lifestyle. Other people must do the same. As the world-weary Mr. Shepherd assures Sir Walter, "consequence has its tax" (*P* 17). Unrepentant Sir Walter is a lost cause, but *Persuasion* calls for conservative Tories, like Lady Russell, at heart "a very good woman" (*P* 249), to "learn to feel that she had been mistaken … to admit that she had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and of hopes," and not just for Anne Elliot's sake. If the Tories in the House of Commons united and voted as a block, then Lord Liverpool's economic reform was possible. The last two words of *Persuasion* are "national importance" (*P* 252). In Austen's original manuscript version, "National Importance" is capitalized (*P* 273).

8
Sanditon: A Political Novel

Jane Austen's final attempt to write a novel resulted in the 12-chapter fragment *Sanditon*, originally titled *The Brothers* (*MW* 363), begun in January of 1817 and put aside in March as Austen's health declined. As in Austen's earlier fragment *The Watsons*, the reader is lured into the world of *Sanditon* when the story abruptly and frustratingly ends. Just as in *The Watsons*, *Sanditon* has only a vague hint of a possible romance to develop. Both works abandoned in progress are clearly not about love but are political statements.

The Reverend Howard, the "quietly-chearful, gentlemanlike" clergyman in *The Watsons* (*MW* 333), is only a vague, peripheral character who dances with Emma Watson at a ball and has almost no dialogue. We only know for certain that Howard was meant to be the heroine's love interest because Cassandra Austen told her nieces that he was (*MW* 362–3). The presumed hero of *Sanditon* is even more of a nonentity, entirely absent until the last chapter and only briefly glimpsed then. *Sanditon*'s Sidney Parker, "very good-looking, with a decided air of Ease & Fashion, and a lively countenance" (*MW* 425), can be identified as the heroine's love interest only because of a distinct lack of competition. Before the arrival of Sidney, heroine Charlotte Heywood has met only two single men, a comical hypochondriac, Arthur Parker, who is more interested in his cocoa and toast than in Charlotte, and an aspiring libertine, Sir Edward Denham, who has dedicated himself to the seduction of another character, Clara Brereton.

Figure 8.1 Blue-coated Whig John Bull is no longer plump and prosperous when the tax collector comes for his property tax in this 1819 print. The portrait of "Good Queen Bess" has been replaced with an image of John Bellingham, the assassin of Tory Prime Minister Spencer Perceval

Source: Image courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

From their first meeting, Charlotte considers Arthur Parker laughable and only "kept her countenance" with some effort (*MW* 416). When introduced to the "certainly handsome" Sir Edward Denham (*MW* 394), Charlotte is initially impressed, but, after "her halfhour's fever" (*MW* 395), Denham's character flaws become apparent, and Charlotte rejects him; "she had had quite enough of Sir Edw: for one morng" (*MW* 398). But Charlotte never even has a conversation with Sidney Parker, never drinks a cup of tea, takes a turn in the garden, or dances a reel with him. Love is conspicuous by its absence in the 12 chapters of *Sanditon*. The economic future of the village dominates the fragment.

Clever observer Charlotte Heywood is used to introduce us into the world of her very-married, family-man host, Thomas Parker, an amateur entrepreneur. The action and interest of the story revolves around the relentlessly optimistic Parker, who ignores the many ominous warning signs that his investment in Sanditon has been a horrible blunder. Parker has used his inheritance to build upscale housing near the beach and is hoping to profit by turning the seaside village of Sanditon into a vacation/health resort, but the discussion here is not just about the financial viability of a sleepy little fishing village with doubtful spa potential.

As Oliver MacDonagh observes, the reader is "scarcely launched into the opening chapter of *Sanditon* before the Political Economical debate begins" (151). Roger Sales concurs that *Sanditon* is clearly a "Condition-of-England" novel (201). The primary problems that continued to plague England, and which had exacerbated throughout Jane Austen's adult life, were expensive bread, low wages, and unemployment. *Sanditon* suggests a solution, the same advice Adam Smith offers in *Wealth of Nations*, that those with capital should invest in food production and not in a service-based economy (287–8), and this is a political as well as an economic distinction.

Sanditon's premise is that there are two economic Englands. One England is the practical, stable, and vital agricultural England, not coincidentally represented by the Tories in Parliament. Agricultural England is embodied in the heroine's father, Farmer Heywood. The other England is the impractical, risky world of financial speculation, represented by the Whigs in Parliament and by the fanatical and misguided Thomas Parker, "an Enthusiast; – on the subject of Sanditon, a complete Enthusiast" (*MW* 371). Like the wise and foolish

homebuilders in the Bible, the wise man, Farmer Heywood, builds on a rock, while the foolish man, Thomas Parker, builds on sand. Mr. Heywood's foundation is the financial bedrock of food production, with its capital invested in land and livestock. People must eat, so there will always be a demand for what Farmer Heywood supplies. Heywood's very name, hay and wood, is composed of two tangible and renewable commodities, and it was the Tories in Parliament who were representing agricultural England.

In contrast, Thomas Parker's speculation is built on sand, his own overly-optimistic, commercial pipedreams. There is apparently little demand for the kind of sea-bathing resort Parker markets and already an overabundance of spa towns, "Places, like Brighton, or Worthing, or East Bourne" (*MW* 368). Sanditon's hotel, bathing machines, billiard room, milliner's shop, shoe shop, and the Library, well stocked with "all the useless things in the World" (*MW* 390), require consumers with disposable income who are willing to dispose of it, exactly the kind of planned-obsolesce spending that twentieth-century political economists like John Kenneth Galbraith warned against. Nothing for sale in Sanditon is practical or necessary, so, in an economic depression, like the post-Waterloo debacle, tourists fail to arrive, Sanditon's "useless" merchandise gathers dust, and Parker's upscale, vacation housing remains unoccupied. Thomas Parker boasts of the village's "fine hard Sand" (*MW* 369), but Sanditon is built on nothing lasting or substantial, and investors in mercantile schemes like Parker's were represented in the House of Commons by the Whigs.

Tory economics versus Whig economics

The story of *Sanditon* begins at the agricultural community of Willingden, which is everything that Sanditon is not. The residents of Willingden are indeed *willing* to work and willing to help their fellow men, even strangers in distress, like Thomas and Mary Parker. When the reader is first introduced to Farmer Heywood, he is busy in his hayfield supervising the "Men, Women & Children" he employs (*MW* 365), an entire village. In *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argued that such labor also benefitted the nation (288). As agricultural work produces tangible products to sell, Smith considered it "productive" as opposed to "unproductive" labor (*Wealth* 271). Smith maintains

that investing money in agriculture "promotes industry; and though it increases the consumption of the society, it provides a permanent fund for supporting that consumption, the people who consume reproducing, with a profit, the whole value of their annual consumption" (*Wealth* 243). It is a mutually beneficial, win/win situation for the employer, employee, and for "the gross revenue of the society."

In contrast, labor which produces nothing tangible offers no benefit to the nation. Smith classified the work of servants as unproductive labor: The servants' efforts "generally perish in the very instant of their performance, and seldom leave any trace or value behind them" (*Wealth* 270). Mr. Heywood also employs at least "two or three" maids (*MW* 370), Smith's unproductive labor, but they are definitely the minority of Heywood's workforce. Smith claims that a society can function with a small class of unproductive laborers who serve an even smaller leisure class, but those who produce nothing must be the minority of the workforce, as the unproductive minority are ultimately dependent on the productive majority who feed and clothe the nation: "Both productive and unproductive labourers, and those who do not labour at all, are all equally maintained by the annual produce of the land and labour of the country" (*Wealth* 271).

According to Smith, the man who invests his resources in unproductive labor makes a serious mistake, both personally and politically, as he "tends not only to beggar himself, but to impoverish his country" (*Wealth* 279): "As the one mode of expence is more favourable than the other to the opulence of an individual, so is it likewise to that of a nation" (*Wealth* 288). Mr. Heywood's agrarian pursuits, therefore, enrich Heywood and his community and strengthen England, while Mr. Parker's efforts to create a service economy in Sanditon diminish Parker's resources, impoverish Sanditon's villagers, and weaken his country's economy. So there are both practical and patriotic elements to Farmer Heywood's financial investment that Thomas Parker's investment lacks, and though Parker does not realize it, his investment strategy poses a threat to England.

In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith maintains that the good citizen will consider not only his own self-interest, but also the good of his nation: "All the members of human society stand in need of each others' assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where the necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is

happy" (86). After their carriage wreck, Thomas and Mary Parker are fortunate to fall into the hands of Mr. Heywood who, like Smith's wise man, comes to the Parkers' rescue with "ready offers of assistance" and with no intentions of receiving financial compensation (*MW* 365). But things are much different in commercial Sanditon, where people must pay to recover their health, and even rich old Lady Denham's relatives are not allowed to stay in her house as she begrudges their food and the expense of paying her maids to clean their rooms.

Yet another villainous Austen character who reduces people into economic units to be exploited, Lady Denham's goal in life is to make money out of everyone who crosses her path, be they strangers or kin. Were she like Smith's wise man, Lady Denham would be "sensible, too, that [her] own interest is connected with the prosperity of society, and that the happiness, perhaps the preservation of [her] existence, depends upon its preservation" (*Theory* 88). Lady Denham's insatiable greed sets her at odds with the rest of society, and the community around her suffers because of her selfishness. In Farmer Heywood's agricultural community, everyone thrives.

The right-thinking Farmer Heywood is unimpressed with Thomas Parker's ambition to turn "a small cluster of Fisherman's Houses" into "a small, fashionable Bathing Place" (*MW* 383 & 371), and Heywood is extremely skeptical of the viability of a service-based economy and of its value to the nation:

> Every five years, one hears of some new place or other starting up by the Sea, & growing the fashion. – How they can half of them be filled, is the wonder! Where People can be found with Money or Time to go to them! – Bad things for a Country; – sure to raise the price of Provisions & make the Poor good for nothing. (*MW* 368)

As Oliver MacDonagh notes, "'Where People can be found with Money or Time to go to them!', are clearly pejorative comments, implying idleness and waste" (151), but, more importantly, Mr. Heywood has put his finger on the larger problem, what a service economy does to the working class. Parker's seaside resort is creating havoc with the local fishing-village economy, exactly as Farmer Heywood predicts and precisely as Adam Smith explained.

Parker's impracticality suggests that the poverty in Sussex was not entirely the result of stingy landowners like *Sense and Sensibility*'s John

Dashwood. Thomas Parker means no harm; nevertheless, Parker's financial bumbling will ultimately impoverish the other residents of Sanditon and not just Parker himself. As Adam Smith maintained, more people coming into a community create a greater demand for the available food supply, thus driving up the price of food, as miserly Lady Denham also realizes: "I should not like to have Butcher's meat raised, though – & I shall keep it down as long as I can" (*MW* 392). Additionally, Sanditon's new service economy creates only low-paid, part-time, seasonal jobs for "Cooks, Housemaids, Washer-women & Bathing Women" (*MW* 414). Meanwhile, working-class men, like Sanditon's grocers, "old Stringer & his son" (*MW* 381–2), are having difficulty staying in business, and "Mrs. Whitby at the Library was sitting in her inner room, reading one of her own Novels, for want of Employment" (*MW* 389). The evidence is plainly set before Thomas Parker and the reader: As a financial investment, Sanditon is clearly failing, but Parker, like speculators then and now, refuses to be deterred by reality.

A man of "easy though not large fortune" (*MW* 371), Parker is "risking his fortune" on Sanditon (*MW* 372), which has become "his Mine, his Lottery, his Speculation & his Hobby Horse … the object, for which he seemed to live" (*MW* 371). Austen's use of a mine which could become worthless at any time and a lottery gamble with thousands of losers for each winner reinforces the risky nature of amateur investments. What Parker fails to take into account is supply and demand. Parker supplies where there is no demand. Parker fantasizes that he will get rich quick and that what would be financially beneficial for him would, in one way or another, benefit everyone else. As Oliver MacDonagh puts it, Parker presents "Political Economy's counter to the traditionalists like Heywood" (151), who supplies a constant and real demand.

MacDonagh notes that Thomas Parker's investment tactics prefigure those of twentieth-century political economists, like John Maynard Keynes, who believed that infusions of capital would stimulate and revive a depressed economy:

> Parker is a primitive Keynesian, a Keynesian, as it were, before the modern state. For all his folly, he argues consistently for investment, for expenditure, for inflation, for consumerism, and for economic growth as the basis of general prosperity; he even foreshadows, in rudimentary form, Kahn's multiplier! The naivety

> of the economic language, and the Lilliputian scale and farcical nature of the speculative activity, should not deceive us. (152–3)

As MacDonagh points out, Parker's economic premise can be, and has been, applied on a national scale, but Parker's scheme tosses money indiscriminately at a fantasy. In his marketing of Sanditon, Parker has "planned & built, & praised & puffed, & raised [Sanditon] to a Something of young Renown" (*MW* 371). Parker's planning, praising, and puffing are merely empty words, but his building of empty houses is emptying his pockets as well.

Parker could have followed the advice of Adam Smith and invested in the home farm he had inherited, "the honest old Place" (*MW* 380), an obviously stable and profitable enterprise of long standing, or in fishing boats to boost the maritime industry already established in Sanditon. Either investment would create much-needed, new, long-term jobs and bring more food into the economy, presumably benefitting everyone locally and nationally. Parker might have had something useful to sell, and to tax, like Farmer Heywood's crops or the fishermen's catch of the day, but all Parker has to show for his investment in Sanditon are new houses that no one wanted.

A housing bust

A man "with more Imagination than Judgement" (*MW* 372), Parker practically chants his magical-realism mantra: If we build it, they will come. And Parker has been building, "a Prospect House, a Bellevue Cottage, & a Denham Place" (*MW* 384), as well as a line of row houses called The Terrace, and Parker projects more building in the coming year, Waterloo Crescent, "for Waterloo is more the thing now" (*MW* 380). Like the twenty-first century, suburban housing developments of Starter Castles and McMansions that sit empty and unsold, built on the premise that inflated prices and easy credit would continue, Parker's housing has been similarly erected on the assumption that some aspiring someones from somewhere would have the desire and the means to occupy them. Parker's lack of success suggests the foolishness of schemes built entirely on self-delusional optimism, such as Whig Patrick Colquhoun's in *A Treatise on the Wealth, Power and Resources of the British Empire*, rather than on economic reality. Lady Denham points out what Parker refuses to acknowledge: "Here are

a great many empty Houses – 3 on this very Terrace; no fewer than three Lodging Papers staring us in the face at this very moment" (*MW* 402). While Parker's wild optimism is based on his child-like innocence, his business partner has a different motive for her investment.

Lady Denham, Parker's "Colleague in Speculation" (*MW* 375), is a shameless *laissez-faire* capitalist whose business philosophy would give Ebenezer Scrooge pause. Lady Denham plots to exploit the invalids coming to Sanditon in hopes of recovering their health. In Lady Denham's predatory view, the sickly West Indian heiress Miss Lambe comes to Sanditon as a sheep to the slaughter, an innocent to be fleeced. The benevolent Parker naively believes that the disposable income of the tourists will "excite the industry of the Poor and diffuse comfort & improvement among them of every sort" (*MW* 368), but Lady Denham demonstrates the flaw in trickle-down economics, as she has no intention of letting any money trickle beyond herself.

Lady Denham's ideal Sanditon requires a superfluity of very rich and extremely gullible victims, and the few visitors coming to Sanditon are not at all the sort to satisfy her:

> Families come after Families, but as far as I can learn, it is not one in an hundred of them that have any real Property, Landed or Funded. – An Income perhaps, but no Property. Clergymen may be, or Lawyers from Town, or Half pay officers, or Widows with only a Jointure. And what good can such people do anybody? (*MW* 401)

Like Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park* and Mr. Elliot in *Persuasion*, Lady Denham shares Thomas Malthus's view of people as economic units to be utilized, but such selfishness was condemned by Adam Smith in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As Smith maintains, "he is certainly not a good citizen who does not wish to promote, by every means in his power, the welfare of the whole society of his fellow-citizens" (232). Therefore, Lady Denham is not only repulsive but unpatriotic.

Legacy

How *Sanditon* would have ended is as open to speculation as Sanditon itself, but how Jane Austen would have developed the novel seems less significant than the fact that she created the village of Sanditon in the first place. Austen began writing *Sanditon* in January of 1817,

just after the November and December 1816 Spa Fields Riots, when 20,000 protestors assembled to complain about the high price of food. Austen abandoned *Sanditon* in March of 1817, during the March of the Blanketeers, as historian Edward Royle describes them, 5,000 "desperate and angry, powerless rather than passive" unemployed weavers (47). Only a few weeks after the Pentridge Uprising in June, when unemployed ironworkers began a similar protest march, Jane Austen died. Austen could not have foreseen the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 which shocked the nation, when the British cavalry charged into a crowd of between 60,000 and 80,000 unarmed civilians who had assembled to call for parliamentary reform. 15 people were killed by the soldiers, and at least 400 were seriously injured.

Tory Lord Liverpool continued as Britain's Prime Minister, though he became less conservative. As historian Stephen Lee puts it, Liverpool gradually evolved into a liberal Tory, "shifting from reaction to reform" (28). Unfortunately for Liverpool, the Tory party was continuing to factionalize just as the Whigs were achieving a growing consensus. When Lord Liverpool suffered a stroke in 1827, the conservative Duke of Wellington briefly succeeded him. Stephen Lee notes that Wellington "lost the most progressive wing of the [Tory] party, which crossed permanently to the Whigs" (33). This Tory defection enabled the Whigs to form the first Whig government in 1830.

When the Whigs swept into power, Poor Law benefits were reduced, and then reduced again, as historian David Kent notes:

> Of all the humiliating, mean-spirited measures the labourers were forced to endure none was more bitterly resented than the reduction of their [Poor Law] allowances. Not only was relief harder to obtain, it was worth much less. In 1822 the Winchester magistrates, whose rates determined the [Hampshire] county standard, reduced the allowance of bread by 20 per cent and in the autumn of 1830 the rate was cut again. In the villages near Andover the male allowance was reduced to a quarter loaf per day which was effectively half the minimum allowance recommended by the Speenhamland magistrates in 1795. (6)

In 1830, the Swing riots broke out in Jane Austen's Hampshire, spread across southern England, and ended predictably with hangings and transportations.

Although the Whigs considered the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act to be "their major achievement" (Lee 70), the Whig government further increased the suffering of the poor by ending all "outdoor relief" and temporary hardship allowances and by limiting government funding to the residents in workhouses and poorhouses only. Additionally, changes to the Poor Law made it considerably more difficult for people to be admitted into a poorhouse or workhouse. Instead of taking action to alleviate poverty, politicians cut aid to the poor. Discussions in the House of Commons were predictable. As Friedrich Engels summarized it in 1845, "the Liberals [Whigs] try to emphasize the distress in the rural areas and to argue away that which exists in the factory districts, while the Conservatives [Tories], conversely, acknowledge the misery in the factory districts but disclaim any knowledge of it in the agricultural areas" (31). So the politicians' finger-pointing continued, and even more people went hungry. Given her depiction of politicians in *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen would have been disgusted but probably not entirely surprised.

In order to fully appreciate Jane Austen's achievement as a novelist, we must consider the politics of her era, as Austen joined in the debate of Georgian political or state-of-the-nation novels, and Austen's novels prefigure Victorian social-problem novels such as Benjamin Disraeli's 1845 *Sybil*, Charles Dickens' 1853 *Hard Times*, Elizabeth Gaskell's 1855 *North and South*, and Anthony Trollope's 1875 *The Way We Live Now*. The genre of the novel offered Austen and her fellow novelists a forum in which to express their hopes and fears for Britain and to suggest solutions or alternatives to the nation's problems. If their fictional worlds are not realistic, they are nonetheless a comment on reality, or at least on reality as the author perceived it to be.

Jane Austen's early novels, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey*, clearly supported and promoted the expansion of the existing welfare system, a national minimum wage, and the Restriction Act bank bailout that was the political agenda of Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. After the death of Pitt in 1806, Jane Austen switched from defense to offense and went on the attack against politicians, particularly the radical Whigs, in *Mansfield Park*. In *Emma*, Austen returned to Pitt's political agenda and created a model village in Surrey, where Pitt's proposals had been voluntarily and successfully adopted. *Emma*'s Highbury suggested that there was

still hope for the nation, but only when magistrates and parish councils at the local level implemented Pitt's plan. A response to the post-Waterloo economic crash and depression, *Persuasion* suggested that the situation was not as hopeless as it seemed and that the nation would, eventually, recover. In *Sanditon*, once again, the profligate Whigs were the problem, and the Tories offered a solution.

As Austen's fragments*, Catharine: or the Bower, The Watsons*, and *Sanditon* reveal, Austen's novels began as carefully constructed texts where the author had a point to make about political economics. The love stories came later. Austen's advice to her original readers, to care for the poor, to pay a living wage, and to invest in food production at home, echoes Adam Smith's advice in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations* and reflects a liberal Tory political agenda. To ignore the political messages in Austen's novels is to misunderstand the author and to, perhaps unconsciously, diminish her achievement as a political commentator. Although they are often used as such, Jane Austen's novels were never meant to be a form of escapism, as in them Austen repeatedly confronted the political realities which confronted her.

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