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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.