Raffaella Sciarra
“In trade”: commercio, profitti e snobismo di casta in Emma
di Jane Austen

Abstract — Through an in-depth analysis of Emma and its main and secondary characters, I aim to demonstrate how Austen’s work increasingly engage in a complex relationship to the economy, moving through an examination of it as measure of social morality but also as agent of social disruption. Throughout the eighteenth century, commerce and trade were viewed on the one hand as necessary to the well-being of the nation and on the other as a threat to the social order. In this context, the man of commerce was figured as a cause of disorder in English culture. The fearsome personal mobility of social status was becoming more achievable as Austen wrote: in the circumscribed social context of Highbury, one of the recurring themes thus pivots on rank and its defence from attacks of a changing world. In particular, I will examine the role of all characters “in trade” or related to commerce, and the opinionated way they are depicted by the author. The stigma of commerce is indeed evident throughout the novel and it reflects the reaction of the time to the emerging commercial and consumer culture. In a time when the general order and stability of society and the “rights of property” were inseparably linked, the emerging of the new upstarts, i.e., the broad category of moneyed and professional families that struggle to conquer a place in society, becomes a terrifying menace to the old ranked “landed gentry”. However, social acceptance proves harder to achieve than material wealth.

Keywords: commerce, economy, rank, order, mobility