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In 1970, U.S. pop singer Dionne Warwick reached number one on the easy listening charts with a Burt Bacharach–Hal David song that asked listeners, “What do you get when you fall in love?” The answer, it seemed, was a catalog of miseries ranging from germs to betrayal. Notwithstanding the promise and possibility that attended each new love affair, “you only get lies and pain and sorrow,” Warwick sang, “so for at least until tomorrow, I’ll never fall in love again.”

Dionne Warwick and Mary Wollstonecraft are, admittedly, an odd pairing. But the lyrics to Warwick’s hit sum up much of what we think we know about Wollstonecraft and her lovers, Gilbert Imlay and William Godwin, literary celebrities who took center stage in one of the eighteenth century’s most notorious love stories. In 1792, Wollstonecraft, already famous for the publication of A Vindication of the Rights of Men (1790) and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), traveled to Paris, smarting from the consequences of her unrequited love for Henry Fuseli. (She had confessed her feelings and then volunteered to move in with the painter and his wife; the couple declined her offer.) In Paris, Wollstonecraft met Imlay, an intensely entrepreneurial if not precisely predatory American, who was eager to make his name in literature and his fortune in commerce. The two fell in love, lived together, and had a child without benefit of marriage. In short order, Imlay abandoned Wollstonecraft and their daughter, the better to pursue new lovers and new financial opportunities. Even Wollstonecraft’s botched suicide attempt was not enough to return him to her side. A few months after cutting her ties with Imlay, Wollstonecraft (now back in London) renewed her acquaintance with Godwin, radical philosopher and man of letters. The two became friends and then lovers, partners and then parents. Their idyll was shattered by Wollstonecraft’s death only days after the birth of her second child, a daughter. Godwin’s attempt to cement Wollstonecraft’s reputation and commemorate their shared life by publishing Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman in 1798 backfired disastrously. Readers bypassed a complicated story of

intellectual, moral, and literary becoming to seize on Wollstonecraft’s sex life, branding her a fallen woman and castigating Godwin for exposing her shame. What do you get when you fall in love? Lies and pain and sorrow, in spades.

In his carefully crafted, emotionally evocative study, *Love in the Time of Revolution: Transatlantic Literary Radicalism and Historical Change, 1793–1818*, Andrew Cayton invites us to revisit this familiar story and reconsider it in the contexts of eighteenth-century political economy and literary production. Wollstonecraft, her lovers, and their friends sought to extend the benefits of commerce to personal relationships. Like the unimpeded exchange of commodities, the unimpeded exchange of ideas and sentiments and the unimpeded pursuit of happiness promised to foster “mutual sympathy” and the “spirit of benevolence” (5). Literary culture, especially novels, offered men and women a chance to explore this new emotional landscape, testing its premises and its boundaries. Novels did more than encourage the imaginative identification of “thousands of readers and writers around the North Atlantic” (10). They also insisted that “the quotidian, the personal” were as significant as the “political acts that defined public life” (10). As Cayton demonstrates, for Wollstonecraft and her circle the question was not “What do you get when you fall in love?” but rather “What can you make when you fall in love?” Their answer, he argues, was nothing less than a new world grounded on what he terms “social commerce” (7).

Rebelling against the suffocating constraints imposed by monarchy, monopoly, guilds, and established churches, radicals on both sides of the Atlantic advocated for a world in which individuals were empowered to pursue their interests and ambitions within societies bound together by mutuality and affection. The regeneration of political and economic relationships, they believed, was bound up with the regeneration of relationships among individuals; changes in the public sphere both galvanized and depended upon changes in the private sphere. If eighteenth-century radicals such as Wollstonecraft, Imlay, and Godwin thus invested personal relationships of all stripes with philosophical importance and political urgency, they paid special attention to heterosexual and heterosocial relations and singled out marriage for special opprobrium. In their minds, marriage was a breeding ground for artifice and compulsion. It impeded the kind of happiness and progress that could only arise from mutuality and exchange. Accordingly, they began to forge new kinds of intimate relationships, new forms of connection, only to discover that, as Cayton puts it, the “negotiation of romantic intimacy between geographically mobile individuals in a fluid revolutionary world was a perpetual challenge” (72).

Cayton provides an especially nuanced discussion of social commerce as both theory and praxis. Although Wollstonecraft and her con-
temporaries united around a shared commitment to social commerce writ large, they did not always agree on what it was, much less how to implement it in daily life. Consider the arguments that spelled the end of Wollstonecraft’s relationship with Imlay, arguments that collapsed emotional ruptures into intellectual ones. He privileged his right to sever his relationship with his lover and daughter at will. She believed that mutuality was the best guarantor of personal happiness and social stability, insisting that Imlay’s “notion of independence amounted to social death” (142). As this example suggests, regardless of how Wollstonecraft, Imlay, and Godwin defined social commerce, they nurtured it with an exquisite self-consciousness. They understood that their friendships and love affairs not only afforded new ways of being in the world but also provided fodder for conversation, disquisition, and polemic. From this perspective, Wollstonecraft’s attempted suicide in the wake of Imlay’s desertion was not merely an act of desperation and despair. It was also a “final effort to bring Imlay to his senses” (124) and a “rational refusal to live at the mercy of others” (123). And Godwin’s Memoirs of the Author aimed to show how Wollstonecraft overcame her circumstances and her volatile emotions and thereby “create[d] a conversation that would honor his wife by helping readers to improve themselves long after her death” (168).

Wollstonecraft, Imlay, and Godwin were exceptionally adept at connecting philosophical precept and private experience, but they were hardly unique in their efforts to do so. One of the great strengths of Love in the Time of Revolution is the way Cayton situates these familiar figures at the center of a stage crowded with lesser-known women and men who similarly struggled to realize the transformative potential of social commerce. A handful of examples must suffice: Cayton directs our attention to Fanny Blood (Skeys), a “perfect blend of ‘masculine understanding’ and ‘feminine virtue[s]’” and Wollstonecraft’s “first great friend” (16). He introduces us to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, whose infatuations with a string of women prompted a series of extended conversations about love and liberty. Cayton traces the relationship between Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, which looked to the lovers themselves like laudable “mixed-gender social commerce” and which struck everyone else as the “total subordination of self to a grand passion” (285). But he also follows the melancholy history of Fanny Imlay, Wollstonecraft’s oldest child, whose meditations on the moral and social value of poetry in the months before her suicide “succinctly summarize[d] the value of social commerce” (296). He recounts the experiences of Americans abroad, like Joel and Ruth Barlow, who “continually” negotiated the terms of their marriage, trying to square their “intimacy as lovers with the need to develop relationships with other friends and associates” (69). He also devotes a chapter to Americans such as Charles
Brockden Brown, Elihu Hubbard Smith, and the other members of New York City’s Friendly Club, who attempted to follow the example set by Wollstonecraft and her circle and harness the potential of social commerce from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

That Americans punctuate Cayton’s narrative is no accident, for he aims to tell a story that is explicitly transatlantic. The book’s strongest claims to transatlanticism rest on Gilbert Imlay. In Cayton’s telling, Imlay was “a slave to fancy” who “lurched from possibility to possibility in a seemingly endless series of . . . speculations or adventures” (55). But Imlay was also the product of a particular moment in American history, a moment marked by political revolution on the one hand and economic upheaval on the other. Part of a generation that “moved around and reinvented themselves free from the artificial shackles” (64) of patriarchal households and constrained villages, Imlay migrated to the Virginia district of Kentucky, the better to speculate in land—a venture that proved to be a spectacular failure. Just as important, Imlay gained entrée into radical, European literary circles not simply as an American curiosity but as a writer peddling ideas about America. Ranging from the utopian to the merely aspirational, Imlay’s description of America in *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1792) and *The Emigrants* (1793) was calculated to fuel the imaginations of European intellectuals such as Thomas Paine, William Godwin, and Wollstonecraft who yearned for a world of natural sociability.2

This brief review hardly does justice to the rich texture of *Love in the Time of Revolution*. Cayton mines the letters, diaries, and literary productions of dozens of women and men, weaving their experiences together in order to show how they leveraged social commerce in their ongoing attempts to make the world anew. What did the literary radicals of the eighteenth century make when they fell in love? Nothing less than “acts of imagination that unfolded in conversation” with lovers, friends, and fictional characters. “In so doing,” Cayton concludes, “they participated in the origins of a culture of engagement rooted in books, dramas, lectures, and private and public conversations that would flourish in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (333).