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Allan H. Pasco, *Revolutionary Love in Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century France*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2009. 236 pp. £55.00 or \$99.95 (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-5610-4.

Review by Giulia Pacini, College of William & Mary.

*Revolutionary Love* traces the rise of a new amorous *mentalité* in France over the course of the long eighteenth century, when an ideal of rapturous love slowly displaced more traditional notions of dutiful and reasonable affection. This paradigmatic shift found support in the emergent discourse of individual rights; it was facilitated by the gradual secularization of marriage that followed the Council of Trent, and became publicly visible with the legalization of divorce during the French revolution. Pasco places this history within the context of a weakened church, monarchy, and patriarchal family structure, and he raises the important question of how eighteenth-century men and women may have understood, and felt about, these psychological, social, and political changes. He argues that the literature of this period shows an increasing anxiety about the duration of love and marriage, as well as about general conditions of life in the late eighteenth century. Indeed, even though they spoke increasingly of passion and personal happiness, the French suffered from an overarching “inability to plan and prepare with any confidence for the potentially tumultuous future” (p. 27).

Pasco starts out by noting that although historians have been able to uncover a wealth of information about eighteenth-century marriages and personal relationships, they have not been able fully to understand the ideas and emotions embedded in these hard facts. For instance, we may know that the French revolutionaries legalized divorce in 1792, but it is difficult to assess how popular, contentious, or downright scary this act actually was. To reconstruct this psychological and intellectual history, Pasco proposes that we mine the literary field, and his first chapter entitled “French Literature As Historical Archive” is, in fact, a text that could easily stand on its own and serve as a provocative spring-board for classroom discussion. With a nod toward the work of Lucien Febvre, Robert Darnton, Terry Castle, Felicity Nussbaum, and Robert Mandrou, to cite but a few, Pasco states that he too believes that “[literary texts] serve particularly well for insight into common opinions and attitudes, everyday life in the streets, in houses, apartment, and hovels,” in particular when it comes to understanding “the beliefs, mind-sets, values, social constraints, and passions of what might be called the ‘silent majority’” (pp. 6; 10). The silence of the middle and lower classes is particularly troubling for historians of the revolutionary years, since so many personal documents were either inadvertently lost or consciously destroyed out of a need for secrecy under the Terror. Luckily, according to Pasco, literary analysis can offset this problem because eighteenth-century characters’ “actions and reactions, thoughts, fears, and hopes are typical of real people in similar situations, and they take place in settings that are surprisingly accurate” (p. 8). Even if they published works of fiction, eighteenth-century authors chose familiar settings to make their stories more “acceptable” to their readers or audiences (p. 8).

To support his claim that eighteenth-century authors directly addressed their readers’ expectations, talking to them realistically about their worries and their worlds, Pasco reminds us of the demise of the literary patronage system; he points to a growing readership, and emphasizes the conditions of a new mass market that depended largely on these readers’ financial support. Even when penning a work of exotic fiction, eighteenth-century authors were presumably conscious of the fact that people would only

buy their books if they “sensed some aspect, some sort of resonance, some application, something that attracted them” (p. 18). They therefore wrote plot lines, addressed questions, and expressed feelings that were easily recognizable. Although “fantasy did exist, and the successful utopian and exotic tales leave no doubt of its attraction [...] stories of the supernatural were most often set solidly in reality” (p. 22). This equation of the readers’ interest in a plot with the “reality” in which they lived might make some twenty-first-century critics uneasy, but Pasco does nuance his argument by recognizing the non-transparency of language and by extending his argument to unconscious realities as well.

In any event, Pasco’s subsequent explanation of the function of literature stands strong as he affirms that fiction served “to elucidate aspects of [its writers’ and readers’] world [...], to explain things *so that they would be more able to understand and cope with* the turmoil they saw and sensed around them” (p. 19; emphasis added). Ultimately, “[the] inventions [of novelists and playwrights] played out deep-seated needs, concerns, and dreams of the men and women who lived during the last half of the eighteenth century [...] society was changing rapidly, leaving people desperately seeking understanding” (p. 17). In short, literature was an active force that helped people understand and accept their changing world: it clarified issues and relationships, and therefore contributed to building “social conformity and cohesion in the midst of change” (pp. 21-22).

Having thus explained the value of his literary sources, Pasco describes his interpretative methods, emphasizing that one must be trained both to read in between the lines of a text, and to place this work within its broader cultural context. One must analyze texts “in a critically sophisticated way,” showing proper awareness of contemporary “tropes, conventions, codes, recurrent patterns, metaphorical strategies, and generic considerations” (p. 28). The critic-turned-historian must also look for significant congruence within a large sample of examples, and test his or her ideas regularly against other kinds of sources. After all, “reality is never pure, simple, or linear,” and literature itself does not simply reflect its complicated referent; it can only give a “sense of social context,” by “reflection or reaction” (p. 9). Nevertheless, when properly analyzed, literature is an invaluable source that can cast “fresh light” on “attitudes about the relationships between people” (pp. 9; 179).

Eighteenth-century French literature tells Pasco that in this period love and marriage were no longer conceived as a fundamental duty toward family and society; nor did a couple’s union necessarily have to be consecrated by the church. Virtue and reason gradually lost in importance, while personal and rapturous forms of love emerged as desirable emotions to which an individual might even have a natural right. This new understanding of love and life, however, did not bring with it all the happiness one might expect. Pasco identifies recurrent plot foci in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French literature to support his claim that personally chosen love could be unsettling, not only because of the emotional toll it took on the individual and couple (passions were often violent and short-lived), but also because it disrupted society at large. It upset marital stability; was accompanied by a rise in illegitimate pregnancies, prostitution, and venereal disease; most probably it also caused an increase in the number of abandoned children. The critical presence of these issues in the fiction of this period, along with the frequency of related literary motifs (e.g. love-at-first-sight; suicide; love-tests; serial love; and divorce), allow Pasco to conclude that “instability was the rule of the day [...] Little remained to give people a sense of place, or purpose, or of community” (p. 93).

Thus, the concept of an individual right to love and happiness may have been gaining currency, but novels also expressed a (not necessarily contradictory) desire for stability and for proven relationships, especially during the turmoil of the revolutionary period. Pasco’s chapters on serial love and divorce speak particularly well to the ways in which people simultaneously wanted and feared change. The French dreamed of being able to test multiple partners and to explore different relationships, but only because they wanted to find their ideal permanent companion. By analyzing the trope of the island in the travel literature of this period, Pasco identifies a “yearning for other amorous adventures” that reflects both a basic dissatisfaction with the current state of French society, where “little was working as it

should,” and a desire to locate a viable alternative (pp. 98; 99). Eighteenth-century literature’s fixation on the workings of different natural societies where men and women meet freely for love and sexual pleasure speaks to a related desire to investigate the basis of morality, legality, and happiness: “the anguish at the end of the eighteenth century was very real, and the public was anxious to discover *a core reality that could perhaps protect them from constant flux*” (p. 114; emphasis added). Later, however, in the literature of the late 1780s and early 1790s, Pasco sees an important shift as writers lost interest in these imaginary ‘natural’ societies and refocused their attention on more concrete issues of social reform. The legalization of divorce and the issues it raised (e.g. the destabilization of the family; a woman’s ruined reputation; her limited opportunities for employment; feelings of helplessness; lost points of reference) inform one of the book’s most interesting chapters. *Revolutionary Love* concludes with a discussion of literary representations of venereal disease and of the middle class’ resistance to the century’s new social and sexual mores.

Overall, Pasco tells an engaging story. Although his conclusions are sometimes predictable, his analysis should be of interest to specialists and non-specialists alike. His sources extend beyond the literary canon, and his work is similarly supported by a wealth of footnotes that refer to excellent studies on eighteenth-century society and culture. One might wish, however, that more of this information had been presented directly within the main text. Pasco probably chose to isolate this history in order to protect the book’s clarity of focus, but unpacking these references would have given this study additional precision and welcome depth, most notably in its discussion of the ways in which “things change” (p. 122). French literary scholars may also regret that Philip Stewart’s *L’Invention du sentiment: roman et économie affective au XVIIIe siècle* only appeared in print a few months after the publication of Pasco’s study, for the former is in many ways a complementary study of French representations of passion and of their transformation into more nuanced forms of affection over the course of the eighteenth century.[1] It would have been interesting to see Pasco engage Stewart’s argument and methodology, and therefore pay closer attention to the linguistic and narratological aspects of his own corpus. These details in fact might have revealed a more pleasurable, and perhaps even a steadying, dimension to Pasco’s fundamentally anxious love.

## NOTES

[1] Philip Stewart, *L’Invention du sentiment: roman et économie affective au XVIIIe siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010).

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