German Writing, American Reading

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When in 2007 Rochester University launched its online destination for “readers, editors, and translators interested in finding out about modern and contemporary international literature,” the site was polemically named “Three Percent.” Three percent corresponds to the estimated percentage of all books published in translation in the United States. As further noted on the website’s home page, the total number of books of poetry and fiction amounts to a much lower percentage of the total titles published, that is, around 0.7%.¹ We, however, mistake past American reading if we draw conclusions based on the present state of things. In the Gilded Age a significant percentage of books published in the United States consisted of books in translation, and Americans read internationally even at a moment of national consolidation after the divisive Civil War. A subset of Americans’ international reading—nearly a hundred original texts, approximately 180 American translations, more than a thousand editions and reprint editions, and hundreds of thousands of books strong—consisted of popular German fiction written by women and translated by American women. The adventures of this fiction in the United States concern us here.
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