German Writing, American Reading

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In 1905 Otto Heller, professor of German language and literature at Washington University in St. Louis, considered the work of German women writers mostly outside the “legitimate domain of letters.” As Heller discredits one author after another in his comprehensive essay on German women writers, one reason for his vehemence becomes usefully visible for the present undertaking. Much of this disdained work belongs to what Heller terms “amusement fiction.” His English label renders the derisive German term “Unterhaltungsliteratur,” the bane of late nineteenth-century German intellectuals who sought a national literature of pretension and who found popular fiction suspect, in part because it was often written by women and principally read by women. Still more detrimental to the project of German national literature and its international reputation was the popularity of this fiction—not only in Germany but also in America, where Heller had settled on the Mississippi as an arbiter of all things German for his university and the local community. Heller deplored the “widespread though unpardonable American ignorance of contemporary German literature.” One reason for this ignorance, he believed, was the ready availability of American translations of this shoddy German amusement fiction. A certain Mrs. Caspar Wister, a translator who plays a central role in my account of American reading and German cultural transfer, met with his particular disapproval. Her American renderings of German authors had served, Heller grumbled, as the conduit through which a clichéd and false view of German womanhood had entered American culture.
Writing in a moment of national canon formation in imperial Germany, a canon that excluded most women writers, Heller, with this critical essay, participated in the segmentation of reading that was taking place internationally at the turn of the century. Yet the translated German books he despised had circulated in America for nearly four decades in a somewhat less divided reading culture. Even if in the postbellum literary field, as Richard Brodhead argues, three strata of literary production, corresponding roughly to the later categories lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow, were in the process of segmentation and institutionalization, American readers continued to read across these divisions. As “light” or “wholesome” reading, translated novels by German women belonged to Americans’ eclectic reading, marketed and enjoyed side by side with novels now considered literary classics. These translated books rewarded virtue and upheld marriage while entertaining readers with plots that sometimes shared elements of sensation fiction. Widely advertised, sold at a broad range of prices, available in multiple translations with different publishers of varying reputation, variously reviewed, and appearing prominently in the holdings of public libraries, they became standard, reliable, and popular American reading, enjoyed, recommended, and even esteemed by American readers up to the First World War.

Over the course of this study I will have occasion to return to Heller, for his backward glance at the nineteenth century speaks eloquently to the project at hand, if not precisely in the manner he intended. If he worried in 1905 that a feminized view of his country, its people, its literature, and its culture had penetrated more deeply and broadly into American habits of reading than had the male-authored literary work that he favored, he was not far from the mark.

When in 1892—just over a decade before Heller wrote his essay—W. M. Griswold compiled a Descriptive List of Novels and Tales Dealing with Life in Germany, translated novels by German women—and in particular the women novelists who will interest us here—predominated. Griswold’s title, moreover, asserted that Americans would learn about life in Germany from reading this fiction, and the editor stated his intention to make certain that readers could use the list to be reminded of “superior old books, equally fresh to most readers,” that might serve this purpose. By “old books” he meant the fiction of the preceding forty years. This meritorious fiction could and should endure, he thought. Although, he feared, such books were often read only a short time after their publication, they remained in libraries accessible to patrons who would surely deem them to be as good as or better than brand-
new works. However, Griswold’s notion of “superior fiction” that deserved an afterlife hardly matched the idea that academics such as Heller had of important nineteenth-century German literature; Griswold had a penchant for the popular.

Thirty years later, after assembling a voluminous bibliography of German literature in English translation, another academic, Bayard Quincy Morgan, agreed with Heller, asserting that “the English-speaking public has not been getting a faithful picture of 19th century literary production in Germany.” Likewise, in 1935, in her study of the reception of German literature in England and America, Lillie V. Hathaway bemoaned “this indiscriminate vogue of third-rate writers or less at a time when Keller, C. F. Meyer, Raabe and Fontane were hardly noticed.” Although they observed the American rage for certain German novels, neither Morgan nor Hathaway investigated the phenomenon further, assuming that by pointing to economically motivated pandering to the “taste of the multitude,” they had said all that needed to be said. Hathaway in fact could not contain her scorn for the “Gartenlaube’ ladies and their American readers. She not only made factual errors in her account but also, as a researcher in an era in which popular reading was not taken seriously in the academy, offered unexamined opinions and value judgments about this literature. Unfavorable reviews of these novels were, in her estimation, those that recognized “their true value,” that is, their lack of literary merit.

My study starts where Morgan and Hathaway stopped long ago; it investigates not the German literature that Americans should have been reading in the view of academics and cultural pundits interested in highbrow literature, but rather some of the novels they did read in a period in which “everybody [read] more or less daily.” This was a German literature that seeped into American culture via popular reading in translation; it brought with it a host of beliefs and values that reinforced and sometimes expanded the boundaries of American domesticity, upholding marriage with emotionally satisfying stories in which wedlock is often embedded in an idea of nation. In translation this literature forfeited many of its national cultural valences only to highlight, as points of international entry, the plots with their inevitable happy endings, emotional appeal, and social and moral messages. Still, many of the novels were known to be “made in Germany” and sometimes they therefore sold.

In focusing on popular fiction, I follow William St Clair’s call for the broader study of reading, found in his seminal work on reading culture in England in the romantic period. “Any study of the consequences of the reading of the past ought to consider the print which was actually read,” St Clair
maintains, and “not some modern selection, whether that selection is derived from judgments of canon or from other modern criteria.” Patterns of reading depend on the availability and the affordability of books. As he demonstrates, tracing print and “understanding how certain texts came to be made available in printed form to certain constituencies of buyers and readers” can aid us in writing a history of reading as it affects cultural formations and—importantly for the present study—cultural transfer.

In the nineteenth-century American case, what Hathaway derisively labels the work of “third-rate [German women] writers” inhabited some of the same publication and reading venues as did that of now canonical writers; they appeared in the same American publishers’ series and in the same American libraries. Interested Americans thus could read German women’s novels alongside English, American, French, and other foreign classics as well as works by the iconic Goethe. A list of “Suggestions for Household Libraries” in Hints for Home Reading from 1880 gives a sense of the proximity of books that we might now consider worlds apart. Goethe’s name appears in various categories in the first and second lists but not under fiction. Although fiction is accorded relatively little space on these three lists to begin with, two popular women authors, E. Marlitt and E. Werner, do appear on the third and lowest ranking list alongside German male novelists and the likes of Thomas Hardy, Sarah Jewett, Wilkie Collins, Bret Harte, and other American, British, and French authors, both classic and popular.

While attempting to answer the question of what to read in a world inundated with books of all sorts, Hints for Home Reading prescribes, ranks, and categorizes. Even so, it provides readers with some encouragement to enjoy their reading. Offering a tempered consideration of Emerson’s prescriptions and proscription against recent, popular literature, Fred B. Perkins admits in his essay for this volume that these sorts of dicta amount to “a record of what the codifier has found to suit his individual character.” He suggests that if one simply added to Emerson’s rules a mitigating “unless you like,” they would work perfectly well. He thus acknowledges multiple pressures on choices of reading and grants readers some autonomy. Of course Americans did not need to wait for his permission.

Novels of all kinds, sanctioned and otherwise, filled library shelves. Novels by German women often claimed more shelf space than now-recognized German authors of literary pretension. In 1889 a patron of the Chicago Public Library, for example, more readily encountered German culture in novels by Luise Mühlbach than those by Goethe. The prolific Mühlbach was represented there by eleven novels; Goethe, who had only written four novels to begin with, by only three. Some American readers—such as Emerson—of
course had a keen sense of the cultural and intellectual pretension of reading Goethe and may have reached first for Goethe and then only Goethe; for others, reading Goethe did not necessarily preclude enjoying the highly accessible and entertaining Mühlbach.

In conceiving of these translated books as American products and American reading, I adhere to the descriptive turn in translation studies that views such works as “‘facts of the culture which hosts them’ and as agents of change in that culture.” A review of finding lists and catalogues of public libraries across the United States from the period 1870 to 1917 reveals that these books had indeed been naturalized as artifacts “of the culture which hosts them”; the libraries routinely list them alongside American, English, and other novels in translation, that is, not according to their national origins but as “English fiction” or “English prose fiction.” These catalogues in no respect mark any of the translated books as foreign literature, whereas holdings in narrative fiction in the foreign language in which it was originally written are so designated and overtly separated from “English fiction.” Available American translations occasionally overlap with available works in the original German, but often they do not. In 1907, for example, those patrons of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh who could read both English and German could have enjoyed ten novels by the perennially popular E. Marlitt and one by Goethe in either language under the alternate labels of “English Fiction” and “German Fiction.” Patrons, however, had access to Fanny Lewald’s Die Erlöserin (translated as Hulda) and Wilhelmine von Hillern’s Arzt der Seele (translated as Only a Girl) and eighteen novels by Mühlbach only in translated works listed under “English Fiction.”

The great bulk of North American translation of German fiction and of the publishing of new and reprint editions of these translations occurred in the Gilded Age, coinciding with years in which the greatest annual output of titles in the United States was uniformly fiction. Fiction maintained the largest share of titles through 1916, not to be surpassed until 1917, when books and editions in the category of religion and theology moved into first place. The great American book historian John Tebbel identifies a “great fiction boom” that began in the early 1870s and reached its zenith between 1890 and 1914, when reading fiction in America was “something of a mania,” or, as W. D. Howells put it, the novel was “easily first among books that people read willingly.” The American audience was enormous. As Mary Kelley emphasizes, “by the 1840s America had the largest reading audience ever produced due to high literacy rates among white men and women early in the century.” Ten years later publishing was, in Kelley’s words, “becoming ‘big business.’” In the antebellum period women and girls sometimes
only sheepishly admitted to reading novels, but they read them nonetheless, moving “back and forth across a wide spectrum of literature.” After the Civil War popular novels became ever more standard reading, often overtly marketed specifically to women and girls and hardly to be kept from them. With ornamental covers and in various handy sizes, novels were designed to be displayed and not hidden as forbidden fruit. Postbellum publishers, in search of a profit, stimulated and fed Americans’ voracious appetite for novels in various ways, sometimes with foreign food, some of it German.

From 1865 to 1917, as contemporaries frequently noted, hundreds of thousands of German books circulated in the United States, both in the original German and in English translation. Reacting in 1869 to this boom in German letters in America, the Christian Examiner supposed that books such as E. P. Evans’s history of German literature, Abriß der Deutschen Literaturgeschichte, would interest “a public numbered by millions, and . . . be sent to all parts of the land.” As the reviewer further observed, no bookstore was “so small or so remote that German books [did] not make part of its stock, and help in its profits.” The presence of these many books in the everyday life of American readers has, however, not typically been accorded much attention in mainstream American literary and cultural histories. Just as Heller feared the contamination of German national literature by such popular literature, Americans, who were creating their own national literature and its still very short story, had reason to turn a blind eye to international reading.

In his recent study of German and American literature, Hugh Ridley presents a compelling case for structural similarities between the development of the national literatures of Germany and the United States and at the same time demonstrates how national literary studies can be rethought by comparative study. Eschewing influence studies, Ridley focuses instead on what he identifies as parallel developments, in particular, during the formative years of the growth of both nations: in Germany, the anticipation and formation of empire; in the United States, the struggle of a young democracy for cultural literacy with the special problem of the postbellum years in which the nation had to be rethought and knit together again. As Ridley argues, these “nations needed national literature”; that is, both nations sought “major writers, figures who would impress other states and bestow identity and prestige on the nation.”

As Ridley outlines concerning the American side, the national project led both to encouragement of American writing in the nineteenth century and to an exclusionary focus on that writing afterward in the creation of national
literary history. Those pundits concerned with forming that canon of internationally impressive national work increasingly made judgments according to aesthetic criteria while summarily and scornfully dismissing popular writing. At the same time, Ridley observes, American readers and publishers presented an unruly obstacle to American efforts toward producing a national literature of pretension, since the actual practices of these readers and publishers were guided not necessarily by national interests but rather by such concerns as pleasure and profit. Popular reading in the Gilded Age therefore often ran counter to the aims of those who wished to promote national literature. American readers, Ridley maintains, read internationally and in translation—just as their European counterparts did.

Ridley’s observation about the internationalism of the “reading nation” is generally absent from American accounts of this period of nation formation, which focus on American production or which, when they do take a broader view, tend to expand the focus only to British literature that influenced American production. Useful basic scholarship does, however, exist on German culture in America. I have turned repeatedly in the present study to the information assembled in Morgan’s weighty *Bibliography of German Literature in English Translation* (1922). Henry A. Pochmann’s voluminous study of the philosophical and literary influences of *German Culture in America* (1957) also provides useful information on translation, as does his collaborative volume with Arthur R. Schultz, *Bibliography of German Culture in America to 1940*. In 1935 the above-mentioned Hathaway revised and expanded her painstakingly researched dissertation, an account of English and American reception of nineteenth-century German literature. Here she includes some of the same reviews that figure in my research but, as noted above, has little regard for popular novels by women. Robert E. Cazden’s *A Social History of the German Book Trade in America to the Civil War* provides a meticulous account of books published and/or reprinted in the United States. All of this work emerges from the realm of German studies; scholarship in book history and print culture based in American studies, however, has hardly taken notice of it, let alone the material it treats.

While studies in nineteenth-century American literature, reading, and book culture long focused largely on cultural materials originally written in English and particularly those of American origin, some recent trends in American studies support a broader view. Inspired and supported by the work of Werner Sollors and Marc Shell, scholarship that emerged from new interest in multiculturalism in the 1990s, American studies has especially since 2000 begun to look beyond its traditional Anglophone focus to examine literature written in the United States in languages other than English.

In the particular case of German culture in America, Sollors pointed in 2001 to German language writing in the United States as an opportunity and challenge to rethink American studies. His coedited volume with Winfried Fluck, *German? American? Literature? New Directions in German-American Studies* (2002) answers his own challenge as the second book in his New Directions in German-American Studies, an undertaking that has, among other things, supported translations and editions of German and German-American writing of interest to American studies. Sollors’s work remains one of the few impulses emerging from American (as opposed to German) studies in the United States to rethink American national literature by including the German element.

Despite these and other important new impetuses, nineteenth-century American studies tends to overlook the significance of the foreign contingent to American publishing and reading—with the exception of books in English from Great Britain. Even Sollors’s richly inclusive coedited *New Literary History of America* surprisingly does not accord much attention to international reading or multilingual America. Recent important projects in American book history—book history by its very nature having the potential to be more
inclusive than literary history—also omit the publication, translation, and reading of foreign books in the United States. Volumes 3 and 4, the pertinent volumes of the newest history of book publishing in the United States, History of the Book in America, for example, pay no attention to books in translation, and translation itself scarcely merits mention as a subject heading in the index of either volume. The older book histories by John Tebbel likewise accord scant attention to the phenomenon of translation, publishing, and reading of foreign books, although Tebbel at least acknowledges it.

Meredith McGill’s American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853, with its interest in literary property and cultural production, importantly argues against understanding literary culture as national, pointing instead to the emergence of classic works of mid-nineteenth-century American authors “from a literary culture that was regional in articulation and transnational in scope.” Nevertheless, McGill understands transnational in this study only in a limited sense; that is, transnational refers to books written in English and thus to the British-American cultural axis: American reading of books written in other languages, unauthorized translations of books written in languages other than English, books written in America by immigrants in languages other than English, and American foreign language presses that reprinted books written in languages other than English play no role in her analysis. McGill’s anthology The Traffic in Poems likewise aims to contribute to “transatlantic literary study” as a challenge “to the reflex sorting of literary texts according to the national identity of authors,” yet here too that challenge is not framed in terms that make it as great as it might be, consisting as it does largely of examination of British and American texts, that is, mostly texts originally written in English. Yet in its recognition of “social and cultural systems that operate beneath and beyond the nation-state” and in its assertion of the importance of women to transatlantic cultural transfer, McGill’s project encourages the present undertaking.

In short, American studies appears to have forgotten—or at least to consider unworthy of investigation—what nineteenth-century Americans themselves knew: many foreign texts were available in translation in the United States, and their fellow Americans enjoyed reading them, even sought them out, in their leisure hours. In later historical accounts of these periods, especially the German books under scrutiny here lent themselves to multiple marginalization: they were popular, foreign, read in translation, authored by women, and largely consumed by women. Yet, as Ridley asserts of both popular literature and women’s writing, “these ‘books’ and the authority they exert over the imagination” were “a force to be reckoned with throughout the century on both sides of the Atlantic.”
Nineteenth-century America of course had a large population that could read German books in the original as a result of immigration and education. Some of the works examined below were also reprinted in German in the United States in German-language newspapers and in book editions for an immigrant population and were available in the original German at public libraries and even on newsstands from coast to coast. Moreover, some popular literature by women—Wilhelmine von Hallern’s Höher als die Kirche, for instance—was edited for the purpose of teaching German in American schools and colleges. Teachers considered popular literature more likely to appeal to a young audience than weightier German writing, thus providing an attractive payoff for learning conjugations and declensions.

Reading German in the original in America is, however, precisely not what stands at the center of my investigation; the books that figure here are German books read in translation. My project thus concentrates on nineteenth-century American enjoyment of a hybrid product, hybrid because it came to the consumer altered by a process of Americanization. Americanization refers in my usage to “the processes . . . by which Americans took up, responded to, and adapted German cultural material for their own purposes,” that is, the “creative adaptation” of these books as they were translated, published, and marketed. While in twentieth-century German studies “Americanization” signifies the flow of American ideas, values, and products into Europe, here Americanization refers to the “productive re-signification, transformation, or re-packaging of German ideas, values, and products in the United States.”49 I examine these processes even as I also consider the degree to which these translated books could and still did register with the reading public as German. In short, I demonstrate how the translating, marketing, reviewing, and reading of this material could de-center and disrupt the national while still transferring certain elements of national culture. Furthermore, I trace how Americanization of German-authored works in a market culture destabilized authorship. Indeed, books in translation invite us to rethink cherished notions of “individualism and individual creativity,” calling into question the “empathic celebration of a narrowly interpreted uniqueness and originality.”50

IN THE NINETEENTH century the United States notoriously reprinted foreign books. McGill has outlined the American defense of the system of reprinting and the identification of print with public property in the nineteenth century, particularly as articulated in the years 1835–53.51 No law rec-
ognizing the principle of international copyright was passed in the United States until 1891, and indeed, no law with teeth until 1909. In the absence of a legal obligation to honor the rights of foreign authors and publishers, enterprising American publishers could exploit reprints of books by foreign authors to feed the demand in the United States for novels.

Whatever their intrinsic appeal and merit, in this print landscape English novels were especially desirable to publishers as they needed only to be reprinted and repackaged for the American reading public and thus potentially involved no author’s royalties or translator’s honorarium. By the 1860s Great Britain had long been a source of fiction in the form of American (pirated) reprints. While publishers continued to reprint British favorites to expand their catalogues and profit from Americans’ wish for leisure-time reading, some publishers also sought a fresh product in new fiction originally written in languages besides English. Thus Germany began unwittingly to supply America with stories, stories both oddly familiar and pleasantly foreign.

Some American pundits viewed the reading and expanding publication of foreign fiction—including fiction from Great Britain—with suspicion, even alarm, warning against the noxious effects of this foreign entertainment. In effect, they cautioned against what we now call “soft power,” that is, the potential of the attractiveness of entertainment for “shaping the preferences of others.” In 1887 Brander Matthews, for example, objected in nationalist tones: “It is not wholesome . . . for the future of the American people that the books easiest to get, and therefore most widely read, should be written wholly by foreigners . . . who cannot help accepting and describing the surviving results of feudalism and the social inequalities we tried to do away with once.” Germany, as portrayed in these novels, did capture reader attention with its enduring aristocratic privilege and crumbling castles, yet it remains to be seen whether the values thus transmitted differed radically from Americans’ own.

Beginning in the 1880s, imperial Germany generated an unparalleled supply of books for American publishers to mine. By 1910, thirty-nine years after unification, Germany could boast 31,281 book titles published in a single year, an output that far surpassed that of other leading industrial nations—for example, France at 12,615, England at 10,804, and the United States at 13,470. In 1913, a year before the outbreak of the First World War in Europe, Germany led the world with 34,871 titles published in a single year. Literature constituted a significant subgroup of these titles. Of the 14,941 books published in Germany in 1880, 1,521 belonged to the category
that included fiction, “schöne Literatur” (belles lettres), that is, 10.2% of the total output; by 1910, that percentage had risen to 13.2% of 31,281 books, a total of 4,134 titles.\(^{57}\)

In the Gilded Age in the United States, meanwhile, English works maintained their sizable lead in imported entertainment in the United States, yet the American market also experienced a significant influx of books from Germany, the number of translations from German “humane letters” into English climbing to the three peak years of 1882, 1887, and 1901, each of which logged more than 140 titles. In 1914 translations from German reached a record prewar high of more than 180.\(^{58}\) “More than 140 titles” was a significant number in these decades. A comparison of Tebbel's and Morgan's figures from 1882, for example, yields a rough estimation of new English-language editions of German humane letters as 7% of American literary publication.\(^{59}\) This first peak in 1882 may register the impact of the general growth of the German book industry on American translation and publishing: the previous year, 1881, marked a forty-two-year high in German book production with 15,191 titles.\(^{60}\)

Translations of fiction by the seventeen women who figure in my study constitute a highly visible part of the American boom in German humane letters in translation. Figure 1.1 represents the centered five-year moving averages (each bar represents the average of the corresponding year, the two years immediately preceding it, and the two immediately following it) of the total per year of first-time book publication in the United States of translations by these seventeen authors.\(^{61}\) As Figure 1.1 indicates, the appearance of these novels in American translation began with a burst in the late 1860s. Translation and publishing of them thereafter moved forward fitfully with a sharp rise just over twenty years later, then dropped off rapidly at the end of the new century, and nearly ceased altogether after 1903. The greatest translation activity clustered in the long decade centered in 1890–91. Figure 1.2 represents the centered five-year moving averages of the number of total book publications (discrete editions of new American translations and American reprints of translations) of these novels per year in the United States.\(^{62}\) As this bar graph makes clear, the publication and reprinting of translations endured a decade longer (1885–1914) than did translation of new works by these authors, with peaks in the early 1890s and especially the first years of the new century. Figure 1.2, however, only provides a partial picture of the proliferation of reprints since it cannot take account of the undated editions and reprints produced over these years. When undated editions are included, numbers rise significantly. For example, of the 101 discrete editions and reprint editions of *The Old Mam'selle's Secret* that I have been able
to document, forty-eight have no date and therefore play no role in the tallies in Figure 1.2.

Below, closer examination of the ramified publishing history of individual novels offers a more articulated view of the high profile and broad availability of German novels by women in this period that cannot be adequately conveyed by numbers alone. As will become clear, the names of many of these novels and their women authors, even their translators, were household
words with nineteenth-century American readers. This closer scrutiny of the fate of specific works in the United States will also explain some of the lows and highs in the bar graphs shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. The peaks in the late 1860s indicated in Figure 1.1, for example, mark the rapid translation of eighteen novels by Luise Mühlbach, some of which had been written in the previous decade, and the translation of two best-selling novels by E. Marlitt, one of which had first appeared three years earlier; that is, Americans translated successful novels that had, as it were, accumulated. Thereafter, translation of the domestic fiction by German women included in my dataset tended to occur soon after the first publication of these novels in Germany either as serializations or as books. The spikes in translation around 1890, as a further example, have in part to do with the slightly belated discovery by American translators and publishers of Wilhelmine Heimburg and the rapid translation of several of her hitherto untapped novels.

The presence of German novels of all kinds was in any case duly noted by the “literary system,” to use Andre Lefevere’s term for the broader cultural context in which translation occurs, and specifically by the culture of reviewing books and commenting on reading. So prominent were German novels in English translation in postbellum America that the Christian Examiner asserted in 1869: “The most popular of all romances, historical, local, of costume and of character, of life in the city and life in the country, are translations from the German.” The translations of novels from German, he further maintained, had begun to dissipate a “delusion about German literature,” namely, that German novels were “generally dull enough to make the romances of James even brilliant in the comparison and that to read one of them was such a punishment as Lowell assigns to murderers in his ‘Fable for Critics,’—‘hard labor for life.’” In short, Americans liked them. In 1874 another reviewer confirmed the American liking for this foreign fiction when he grumbled, “still [The Second Wife] is from the German, and will be read.”

In 1895 the New York Ledger maintained that German women writers had proven to be the equals of their British and American female counterparts. While The Ledger here named women whose works would later belong to the German literary canon (e.g., Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff) as well as prominent women writers whose work was recovered in the twentieth century by second-wave feminist scholars (e.g., Fanny Lewald), the article also honored popular authors. Four German women authors in particular had provided an “exceedingly large public bright and agreeable reading, even if it may be deficient in depth.” Marlitt was “the first of the coterie,” along with E. Werner, Wilhelmine Heimburg, and Nataly von Eschstruth: “Their novels which form a miniature library by themselves have
the knack of interesting readers—a trait which is so often absent in weightier works.” Furthermore, the reviewer maintained, their popularity was attested by their availability in English translation. In other words, American readers had received these German novels warmly, despite what the critics might have had to say about their literary merit.

**BEFORE WE TURN** to the authors, books, and texts, some final considerations concerning foreignness and its impact on reading are in order, especially since foreignness always remains to some degree in the eye of the beholder. In present-day North America, the case for translating literature into English tends to be based not in assertions of the universality of foreign texts but in deeply held beliefs about the importance of engagement with the Other or, as Edith Grossman advocates in *Why Translation Matters*, to free us from “our tendency toward insularity and consequent self-imposed isolation” and to “explore through literature the thoughts and feelings from another society or another time. It permits us to savor the transformation of the foreign into the familiar and for a brief time to live outside our own skins, our own preconceptions and misconceptions.”

This argument, however appealing, perforce raises the question as to how consciously real readers register the Other when they read fiction in translation. Popular literature in particular may lack or at least lose its national markers when it is read and enjoyed abroad: “under a certain level,” Ridley observes, “popular literature loses any element of national reference and shows itself to be not only international in conception and production, but also both at home in and foreign to every culture within which it is read.” “Transformation of the foreign into the familiar” may therefore be as much a process of appropriating the foreign as acknowledging it.

In what sense, then, does reading a translated text force an engagement with the Other if that other has already been made less foreign through the very process of translation and through subsequent widespread reading and acceptance in a given culture? The degree of engagement necessarily depends on the occasion for reading, the nature of the reader, her education, experience, and reading socialization, and her predisposition toward the cultural information that is mediated in a given text as well as on the cultural surround, the packaging, marketing, and reviewing of the translation.

Current translation theory and practice distinguish between translations that naturalize the original by striving for as fluent a rendering as possible, that is, texts that mask or minimize their foreign origins, and translations that in some respect attempt to preserve the linguistic foreignness and cultural
distance of the original. Lawrence Venuti, for one, has famously argued for “foreignized” translations, translations that deliberately render the translated text alien. Yet while translators can, through their choices, attempt to influence readers’ perceptions of and intellectual engagement with the culture of origin, they cannot control them. As Mary Kelley, Kate Flint, Barbara Sicherman, and other historians of books and reading have demonstrated, real readers have done different things with books and made various meanings with them. In Kelley’s words, “in the space between reader and text, they produced pluralities of meanings.”

While nineteenth-century women translators did not translate with the idea of programmatically highlighting linguistic and cultural foreignness favored by Venuti, there certainly are differences in the translations. These differences range from Annis Lee Wister’s charming preservation of linguistic features of German—deliberate or not—to Mary Stuart Smith’s competent renderings, to obvious misreadings, to clumsy verbatim translations that suggest a lack of versatility in English. Likewise important to the American perception of these novels as foreign were paratextual markers and the literary system in which the books circulated. For a variety of reasons that we shall explore below, the translations occupied different places on a spectrum of foreignness that changed over the course of time.

Nineteenth-century reviews, marketing, advertising, library cataloging, and advice on reading make clear that nineteenth-century American readers could read and were encouraged to understand the “German” in the fiction under scrutiny here variously. German could guarantee German settings, indicating that the novels provided a picture of German history or contemporary life in Germany. In its day, Griswold’s above-mentioned Descriptive List, for example, asserted and valorized the function of novels to mediate “German life.” More subtly, German could indicate to Americans that the novels were rooted in specific values or in a specific mindset or that they reflected taste. American reviews in fact sometimes base clumsy and opinionated attempts to formulate what these elements of Germanness might be in reductive reading of the novels. There is, furthermore, evidence that the designation “German” could serve as a guarantee of a good read—even of a happy ending—because that story was “made in Germany.”

Despite the apparent national specificity of the label “German,” some readers may have read some of this fiction merely as vaguely “not from here,” that is, as European, and thus merely just a little—and thus pleasantly and harmlessly—exotic. At the same time, the more popular the books became, the more frequently they were read, and the more widely available they were as “English fiction,” the more they became a part of American horizons,
the facts of American culture, and thus less German stories than American entertainment. What, then, remained legible to influence readers’ ideas of Germany?

These novels by women were originally written by Germans for Germans in a period of consolidation of German national identity. In Germany the national cultural, often patriotic, references were manifest; abroad, much less so. In considering these translated German texts as repackaged American entertainment, I examine images of Germans and Germany at stages of removal. While most of the novels rendered for American audiences betrayed their German origins in some respect—through their content or their packaging—the ability of American readers (even German Americans) to read a work in translation as did German readers the original was necessarily limited. Nevertheless—and this point was critical to the popularity of this German fiction in America—Americans could experience the pleasure of reading, follow a romance plot, or comprehend a moral lesson without possessing a strong sense of the local historical meanings of a given text. In the end, they could associate what they gathered from their reading with a place called Germany, whether or not their understanding had any basis in fact.

Yet, from the start, some texts invested more than others in urging a sense of place with its attendant history upon readers. Chapter 6 examines eleven such novels, in which German history insistently figures, and proposes what the texts might have communicated to Americans about Germany. However, it is also possible that many readers persistently read past what was for them unintelligible cultural material and instead picked up on elements that resonated more immediately with their own situation and values; in short, their reading may have had more to do with living happily in America than with learning about Germany. We shall thus have repeated occasion to consider the balance between domestication and foreign encounter in reading.

If foreignness depends, as I assert, in part on the eye of the beholder, we must also interrogate the beholder. Who were the Americans who read these nearly one hundred German novels in translation? I will be concerned with readership throughout and yet will not be able to answer questions about readership with complete certainty. Nevertheless, as will become clear, my research overwhelmingly indicates that the translations were marketed to a general Anglophone audience (and not to a niche market consisting of ethnic Germans). They were sold in international lists alongside American, British, and French favorites by mainstream and cheap publishers and reviewed in mainstream periodicals by reviewers who wrote from vantages outside of German and German-American culture. These books circulated, in the
terms of one American advertisement from 1902, as “standard books for everybody.” Even Annis Lee Wister’s translations, the set that was routinely advertised as “from the German,” were repeatedly touted not as books for people interested in Germany per se but as entertaining books from Germany that had been Americanized so as to appeal to American reading tastes. None of the three translators whose activity will be examined in chapters 7–9 was ethnically German, and none of them anywhere remarks on ethnic Germans and certainly not as their potential audience.

Did, however, the massive German emigration to the United States in the nineteenth century make a difference in the circulation and popularity of this reading material? It would be hard to imagine that it did not at some level. For one thing, the above-mentioned import and publication in America of books in the German language meant that American translators had ready access to fiction in German to translate. Wister and her sister translators combed, for example, the popular German family magazine Die Gartenlaube, which circulated widely in the United States, for stories likely to appeal to their American audiences. The cheap editions of Munro’s Deutsche Library, inaugurated in 1881 and aimed at German readers in America and available “at any news stand for a few cents,” as a further example, provided Mary Stuart Smith and her son Harry with the German texts from which to translate for the Seaside Library.

It may be useful to reflect on Munro’s Deutsche Library as a source upon which publishers wishing to cater to the taste of ethnic Germans with works in English translation could have drawn. Forty of the 236 novels in Munro’s Deutsche Library overlap with the ninety-six novels by German women in my dataset. The remainder of 196 works of fiction, eleven of which are international novels translated into German and 145 of which are German novels never translated into English, suggests that if the American publishers of the novels in my dataset had wished to target an ethnic German audience with German books in translation, they would and could have offered a much larger and more diverse set of novels; the genre would by no means have been confined to domestic fiction. The presence of eleven novels in German translation in the Deutsche Library, moreover, underlines yet again that the reading preferences of a particular ethnic group or nation are not uniformly determined by the point of origin of the fiction in question.

Did Americans of German descent comprise a fraction of the reading audience for this translated fiction by German women? No doubt they did, given that between 1870 and 1910, the number of German-born Americans fluctuated between 2.7 and 4.5% of the total U.S. population, and in 1910, moreover, 4.2% of the total American-born population claimed two
parents born in Germany. However, since these translated novels overtly target a general reading public, there is little reason to assume that Anglophone Americans of German descent flocked to them more than they did to beloved English-language novels of a similar ilk. Of the 147 borrowers of the Public Library of Muncie, Indiana, who checked out The Old Mamiselle’s Secret (1891–1902) and for whom census data exists, only five had a parent born in a German-speaking country; two additional borrowers were born in German-speaking countries, Germany and Switzerland. In the aggregate, the other books checked out by these seven borrowers indicate no special preference for books that were German in origin.

Given the complicated and diverse ways in which ethnic origin can shape the preferences of succeeding generations, it is impossible to know whether the descendent of a German family that emigrated to the United States in the 1830s chose in the 1880s to read a “romance after the German” because it was German or because it was romantic. But who was ethnic German, anyway?

The surname of the book owner Amanda A. Durff, for example, may appear to be German. What, however, does this putatively German name signify about Amanda’s reading preferences, and what does it say about her affiliation with a specific ethnic group in the 1880s and 1890s? Amanda may have been the daughter of a father of German descent or the wife of a man of German descent. Neither possibility necessarily equates to a specific interest in things German on her part. But perhaps “Durff” is not German at all, but Swiss, or Austrian. Perhaps it originates in another language group altogether or is a corruption of, for example, Durfee. In short, it is impossible to determine what the surname signifies in the case of this particular book owner. The feminine given name may, however, be more telling, as it corresponds, in the gender codes of the time, to the hearts and flowers covers of the books Amanda acquired. There were in short other, more compelling personal reasons than ethnic origin for American readers to pick up, read, and reread these books in the years 1866–1917.

Indeed, while there is little in the marketing and packaging of these translations signaling their target audience as ethnic Germans, there is ample evidence to conclude that women and girls constituted their chief readers in the United States. This female readership will become ever more visible as we examine the packaging and marketing of particular books, exemplars of books with dedications and signatures, the activity of the women translators, and the character of the books as material objects. Of the dozens of signed books I have examined, very few show signs of male ownership. Even the ambiguous “Billy Phelps,” the name of the owner of one such book, just as likely refers to a woman as a man.
Nevertheless, despite compelling evidence of a largely female readership, I do not mean to assert that women and girls were the only readers, especially of the earliest American translations of novels by Luise Mühlbach, E. Marlitt, E. Werner, and Wilhelmine von Hillern in the 1860s and 1870s. Some readers can of course always enjoy novels targeted at the opposite sex. As late as 1900, “Nelle” presented a copy of *The Old Mam'selle’s Secret* to “Uncle Jay” for Christmas. Indeed, both men and women borrowed German women’s fiction in translation from the Muncie Public Library (1891–1902). The books themselves were reviewed and advertised in periodicals that provided reading material for both men and women and even in periodicals such as the *Medical Age*, whose target audience was most certainly male. While journals aimed principally at men might have included reviews of these books to suggest to their male readers what books to buy for women, the reviews themselves are not overtly framed in terms of a gendered readership, though such ideas may be implicit, for example, in remarks about the sentimentality of the content. In the case of the historical novels of Luise Mühlbach, it is certain that both men and women read these books. As I note in chapter 7, one of Mühlbach’s translators sent her work to Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, and Andrew Johnson, assuming the interest of prominent men in them. Mary Chesnut records in her diary her husband General Chesnut’s reading of Mühlbach’s *Joseph II and His Court*. Still, in 1873 the *New York Herald* characterized Mühlbach’s readership back in Germany as “tender-hearted” women.

“A Matter of Taste,” from Edith Wyatt’s collection of Chicago stories from 1901, provides a vivid snapshot of reading predilection along the fault line of gender and ethnicity, expressed specifically in terms of some of the German books at the center of my investigation and anticipating the argument I will make throughout about the special emotional appeal to American women of this set of novels from Germany. In “A Matter of Taste” an Anglo-American brother-sister pair view one another’s taste in reading with incomprehension. The pretentious Henry Norris reads foreign literature about the Italian Renaissance aloud to his bored sister Elsie, who in such moments feels that life could not be more vacuous. Elsie, who, the narrator ironically notes with a dig at the snobbish Henry, “had no Standard,” longs instead for *The Old Mam'selle’s Secret*. In her preference for Marlitt, Elsie shares the taste of her German friend who lives nearby, the sentimental and musical Ottilie Bhaer, who is reading Marlitt in the original German: *Das Geheimnis der alten Mam’sell* and *Die zweite Frau*. In Henry’s view Ottilie too has no Standard. Henry and Elsie must quietly reconcile themselves to their differences, realizing that “in a various world every one has need of a great deal of patience.”
The affinity between American and German women’s reading so gently portrayed in Wyatt’s short story raises one final question concerning foreignness that must be addressed up front, namely, whether this set of German novels supplied readers with something that fiction migrating to America from France, Spain, Italy, and other non-English-speaking European countries could not or at least did not. A review of two lists of fiction popular in America strongly suggests that this set of German novels in translation did stand apart from other foreign fiction. In 1876 the *Publishers’ Weekly* assembled a list of 204 novels deemed by American publishers as the most salable. Most of the novels included are English and American. Of the nine German novels named, seven are domestic fiction by women. The twelve French novels on the list comprise works by five male authors—Eugène Sue, Alexandre Dumas (père), Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, and Alain-René Lesage (*Gil Blas*)—and two women—the by-then standard author Germaine de Staël and George Sand. The only other foreign works to appear are Andersen’s fairytales (Denmark) and *Don Quixote*, both staples of international reading. The only foreign novels in translation ranking higher than the German Old Mam’selle’s Secret (No. 23) and The Second Wife (No. 27) are Dumas’s Count of Monte Cristo (No. 13) and Hugo’s Les Miserables (No. 20). This list appeared ten years into the period under scrutiny here and thus could not take full account of the book publishing landscape that eventually developed. A second, late-century list of popular literature gives a better sense of what was to come.

Munro’s popular Seaside Library of more than two thousand works, including mainly American and British novels, provides a compelling snapshot of the European literature that Americans liked. Novels by Wilhelmine Heimburg, Fanny Lewald, Marlitt, Mühlbach, and Werner make up the majority of the German books on the list (Goethe is represented only by the play *Faust*). A review of French authors included in the Seaside Library—Dumas, Verne, Balzac, Hugo, Sue, Gaboriau, Gautier, Aimard, Feuillet, Daudet, Cherbuliez, Droz, du Boisgobey, and Ohnet—reveals that 1) in contrast to the German authors, they are all men, both standard and newly popular; 2) their novels for the most part operate in genres different from the domestic fiction by German women included on the list—science fiction, adventure, historical novel, the “mystery literature” of Sue, detective novel—and 3) on the whole, they offer much racier stuff. We find only a small handful of additional foreign authors in translation, all but one of them staples of late-century international reading and all of them men. These books include works by Cervantes and Andersen as well as the Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, the Italian Alessandro Manzoni’s *The
Betrothed, two novels by the prolific Polish novelist Józef Ignacy Krzeszewski, and surprisingly a couple of novels by the Dutch (and rather obscure) Carl Vosmaer. Other publishers’ lists from the late nineteenth century present a similar picture. If there was French or other foreign fiction resembling the popular fiction by German women, it did not make it to the United States in translation in a highly visible way.

I REMAIN ATTACHED to texts and accord them considerable space in this study. Yet I have informed and constructed my central avenues of investigation with attention to Robert Darnton’s “communications circuit” and thus to the broad context in which books are produced and read.86 Darnton’s schema conceives of the life cycle of the printed book in terms of the convergence of cultural, social, and economic pressures and networks, that is, as a fraught passage from the author to the publisher, the printer, the shippers, the booksellers, and the readers, each step of which influences the others, including the author’s future production. Translation expands the cycle of production and circulation. I am therefore mindful of the broader context of translating, reading, and publishing and think about the book not only as carrying and shaping texts but also as an object subject to economies of materials, production, and consumption and vice versa.87 In other words, in contributing to the history of reading in nineteenth-century America and of cultural transfer via that reading, I look at my objects of study both as commoditized books and as texts requiring interpretation and offer a braided analysis informed by the combined approaches of book history and literary criticism and theory. In so doing, I pursue many of the strategies proposed by Darnton in 1986 for a history of reading, that is, the making of meaning from reading. I study assumptions about reading by examining advertisements and marketing ploys. I examine physical evidence of historical reading, for example, inscriptions within novels that indicate how sentimental bonds were formed via books and reading. I employ textual criticism and reception theory to analyze the books and the translator’s adaptations. I evaluate autobiographical accounts of reading and translating. I look at the book as a physical object, at covers, title pages, formats, and illustrations. I consider the numbers of translations of individual books and their availability in public libraries. I also survey reviews as a component of the literary system in which the books are read, and I situate the reading of these books within its social historical context.88 I have also relied on the rich scholarship in women and gender studies, which has redirected scholarly attention to the marginalized
and the popular and encouraged us to think more complexly about what may, on the surface of it, seem obvious or simple. I have generally avoided hypothesizing a monolithic “woman reader” and instead made visible that this set of books was open to different readings (and misreading) in translation. I have been mindful, too, of the fact that they were read differently as tastes changed. But, as I shall argue, these novels did acquire a recognizable profile in America and appealed to and cultivated readers, largely women and girls, who developed a liking for them.

My study consists of three parts. The first section, to which this introduction belongs, along with chapter 2, introduces the principal popular German women authors who were translated in Gilded Age America, the social and economic conditions of women writers in the German territories—and later the empire—in that period, and the role of the liberal family magazine Die Gartenlaube in providing opportunity for these women writers and shaping their fiction and ultimately American reading of it. In this first section I supply information that contributes preliminarily to “distant reading” of the American publication and translation of approximately one hundred German novels in America and provide a characterization of these novels in the aggregate as domestic fiction.

The central section, chapters 3–6, examines thirty-three representative novels. These chapters combine close reading of texts in translation with descriptive analysis of books as industrial products and material objects to parse American reception, namely, what the novels offered that attracted and satisfied readers and what they could in turn take away from their reading as specific to German national culture. Chapter 3 focuses on three novels by the perennially popular E. Marlitt and their penetration of reading culture in the United States. Gold Elsie and The Old Mam’selle’s Secret helped initiate the vogue of German novels by women and shaped American expectations of these imports. I examine them both as pleasurable reading that combines the titillation of secrets and delayed gratification with “wholesome” messages concerning the practice of virtue and the expression of female subjectivity within domesticity. These novels conform to international, generic expectations of domestic fiction and romance even as they are steeped in German cultural information, having been written originally for a venue supporting German unification and the consolidation of German national identity. A third novel by Marlitt, In the Schillingscourt, relies on American characters and stereotypes rooted in Confederate Nationalism and myths of the Lost Cause to construct a German national imaginary. Its entry into American culture presents a rich occasion for considering mutual intelligibility, mis-
apprehension, appropriation, and assimilation. Although it reproduces patterns familiar from the two earlier novels, it also exhibits deviations in the romance plot that captured Americans’ attention.

Chapter 4 examines German novels as American reading from the perspective of the happy ending, an international signature of romance novels and of nearly all of the German novels by women in my dataset. The chapter uncovers and analyzes variations in plotting ritual death and recovery to a state of freedom that characterize these German novels and that appealed to American readers by offering them the vicarious experience of a multiplicity of female subjectivities and female-determined male subjectivities while cautiously expanding the boundaries of home in a place called Germany. I combine analysis of texts with examination of exemplars of books and the history of the book publication of each translated text.

In chapter 5 I identify and describe a significant subset that, paraphrasing Stanley Cavell, I have labeled the novel of remarriage. Deviating from the codes of romance that prescribe unmarried protagonists, these novels feature married—or sometimes betrothed—couples, tracing their breakup and reconciliation as a paean to marriage calibrated to female happiness and agency. The restored marriages project matrimony as emotionally satisfying while also economically beneficial and critical to the stability of the social order. Both men and women achieve maturity over the course of marital strife, the female characters playing a critical role in the reeducation of both sexes and the management of domestic prosperity and felicity. Close reading and book-historical analysis of ten examples, combined with examination of specific exemplars (covers, format, and inscriptions), demonstrate the variations within the genre and their American appeal.

Constructions of masculinity and German ethnicity figure centrally in chapter 6. The chapter examines how domesticated men make of German history family history and how in turn national history makes domesticated men both in Mühlbach’s historical romances, set in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in novels by Heimburg and Werner featuring critical historical events of the 1840s, 1860s, and 1870s. Here I raise anew the question of the legibility of the national context of origin and examine the pleasures afforded postbellum Americans by reading fictions of family crises and national tensions that find satisfying resolution as a result of women’s interventions.

The final section, chapters 7–9, focuses on cultural agents and the making of meaning and consists of three case studies of American translators (and their publishers) who together were responsible for nearly seventy widely circulating translations of German women’s fiction: Ann Mary Coleman, Annis
Lee Wister, and Mary Stuart Smith. Here I reconstruct their cultural labor, their public life in print, and the importance of translation to their lives and sense of self and family. In each case a well-educated daughter of a prominent father found her way to translation as a socially acceptable positioning between domesticity and public life that allowed her to profit from her education and culture. Economic necessity in the wake of the American Civil War pushed the two southerners, Coleman and Smith, to translate but in the end did not entirely define their labors. After the Civil War and the death of her famous father, Senator J. J. Crittenden, Coleman, who, unlike her father, was a southern sympathizer, used her translations to remake connections and regain access to men of power and social circles. Through translation outside of academia with publishing companies that sprang up as the American book trade industrialized and cultivated mass audiences, Smith, a university wife, daughter, and granddaughter, realized ambition that was not encouraged at the all-male University of Virginia on whose Lawn she was born, lived, and died. In the north, the well-situated and publicity-shy Wister, daughter of a famous abolitionist minister, found in translated popular fiction an outlet for her considerable drive and intellect, even as her brother Horace Howard Furness edited Shakespeare and her brother Frank made a name for himself as one of Philadelphia’s leading architects. Ultimately her labor gave birth to a vogue of German novels, and she became perhaps the best-known translator in Gilded Age America.

These translators were also readers. Their translations constitute exemplary instances of making meaning from reading and bear eloquent testimony to the American consumption of popular literature by German women. Coleman, Wister, and Smith had views about the books they selected, views that played a role in determining what German fiction reached Americans and how it was read. Analysis of these views provides a parting, illuminating glance at the assimilation of German novels by women into the North American imaginary as women expanded the boundaries of domesticity.