PART THREE

Three Americanizers

Translating, Publishing, Reading

. . . words will be spoken when a woman’s soul is stirred, and she uses her tongue, the only weapon she feels to be peculiarly her own, with freedom; then we smile, perhaps not approvingly, but pleasantly withal; for the stroke of nature hits, we feel its force, and henceforth are at home, our sympathies being touched.¹

If Mary Austin, reflecting on the values of her social class with a jaundiced eye, thought that the “status of being cultivated was something like the traditional preciousness of women, nothing you could cash in upon,” three women translators from the generation preceding hers sought to “cash in upon” their culture.² As opportunistic readers, they appropriated German popular literature for their own purposes and made meaning in the process. Through active intellectual engagement with this German fiction to produce an American product, they gained a degree of cultural agency and an otherwise elusive publicity. Sometimes they made money. The activity of three women translators—Ann Mary Coleman, Annis Lee Wister, and Mary Stuart Smith—and the presses that published and marketed their translations stand
at the center of this final part. Each case sheds light on how, through translation, American women could fashion themselves as cultural agents, allying themselves with the book trade. As intentional “Americanizers” they undertook labor that shaped the consumption of Germany by American readers.

In Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women Josephine March writes her family of the impoverished German professor whom she eventually marries. “Now don’t laugh at his horrid name,” she admonishes, “it isn’t pronounced either Bear or Beer, as people will say it, but something between the two, as only Germans can give it.” While there may now be much to criticize in Alcott’s dispatching the independent Jo by means of a marriage to an older man, in the German Professor Bhaer Alcott created a clever and felicitous match within the limitations of 1860s American fiction for a strong, somewhat eccentric female character with whom “brain developed earlier than heart.” Although Mr. Bhaer dissuades Jo from writing sensation stories, putting her writing career temporarily in abeyance, he supports her ambition for self-cultivation and points her toward the kind of writing that eventually brings her success. When straitened finances later serve as the pretext for returning to her vocation in the sequel Jo’s Boys (1886), Jo produces entertaining and edifying books, while also finding a happy balance between intellectual work and domesticity in her personal life: “If all literary women had such thoughtful angels for husbands,” she declares, “they would live longer and write more.”

While imagining this German angel for the American Jo, Alcott tripped. Although she recognized that Americans could not pronounce his German name properly, she herself unwittingly misspelled it. Reinventing it as an American idea of a German surname, she transposed the symbol for a-umlaut (ae) and the “h,” which in German orthography is used to signal a lengthened vowel. As a result, her professor is named Bhaer instead of Baehr, thus looking oddly foreign to those familiar with German.

Alcott’s inadvertent transposition neatly figures the appropriation of German culture that concerns us in part 3: a romance of letters allied with the book trade, a story of reading, writing, and translating that profitably altered the original while retaining, even recreating, its foreign flavor. Coleman, Wister, and Smith and their publishers took up German fiction and both consciously and unconsciously generated, in the sense of Michael Werner and Michel Espagne, creative permutations or, in Darnton’s formulation, made meaning.
Coleman, Wister, and Smith are both representative and exceptional. All three achieved a degree of success and public recognition through their work as translators while other women translators did not. Furthermore, all three left behind substantial historical traces in addition to the books they translated that permit a more intimate look at their lives, while other women translators did not. The preservation of their letters must be attributed in part to their exceptional families of origin—to their famous fathers and brothers and each family’s sense of its own importance.

The success especially of Smith and Wister, their extraordinary capacity to translate rapidly and diligently allied with the enterprise of their respective publishers, had an impact that transcended the personal and private ambition of self and family. These translators made possible not merely the entry of German popular literature by women into American culture but also its widespread enjoyment. We turn first to the less prolific Coleman, who published only five translations but nevertheless made a lasting mark on nineteenth-century American reading by translating three books that helped launch Appleton’s Mühlbach series.
This page intentionally left blank