IN 1868, the year in which the thirty-six-year-old Louisa May Alcott made her breakthrough with *Little Women*, Annis Lee Wister, at thirty-eight, enjoyed her own first successes with *The Old Mam'selle's Secret* and *Gold Elsie*. Brisk sales followed the first appearance of these books, encouraging the publisher and translator to continue down the path they had taken and thus launching Wister’s career as the best-known, or at least the most aggressively marketed, translator of German popular fiction in America. Wister eventually translated all ten of Marlitt’s novels as well as nearly thirty additional popular German novels, most of them by women. Through translation she found a niche for herself within nineteenth-century print culture without excessive public exposure and without compromising her place in the social stratum of her birth and life experience.

What, then, was the shape of Wister’s career? When an obituary in the *New York Times* summarized her life largely in terms of male connections, it provided only scant indication as to why her death merited notice:

Mrs. Annis Lee Wister, widely known as a translator of German novels, died to-day at the home of Dr. Horace Howard Furness, the Shakespearean scholar, at Willingford [sic], where she had lived for several years. Mrs. Wister began writing in 1864, and in a few years her translations were being read throughout the country. In 1888 thirty volumes were published from her pen. One of her translations was “The Old Mam'selle's Secret.” Mrs. Wister lived in an atmosphere of culture all her life. Her father, the Rev.
German Fiction Clothed in “so brilliant a garb”

William Henry Furness, was the first pastor of the First Unitarian Church. During the agitation of the slavery question, just before the war he was known throughout the country as an abolitionist. Her husband was one of the most prominent physicians of the city and a close friend of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. Capt. Frank Furness, the architect and Dr. Horace Howard Furness are survivors of the original family. Owen Wister is her nephew.¹

After detailing her achievements, the reporter drifted in the obituary to her family connections and fixed on the men in the family, apparently unaware that Wister herself, not merely her husband, was a close friend of physician and novelist Silas Weir Mitchell (1829–1914). The reporter of course could not have read the gallant words of Wister’s brother Horace Howard Furness (1833–1912): “[Mitchell will] reserve No. 1 for you, who, as he said to me, always write half his stories. I replied that you wrote all my work, which you do.”⁴ Nor presumably was he familiar with the preface to the Austrian writer Ossip Schubin’s Countess Erika’s Apprenticeship, where the author lavishes praise upon her translator as realizing her intentions and “clothing [her] ideas in so brilliant a garb.”⁵ While doggedly enumerating Wister’s famous male relatives, the reporter lost his grip on the fact that many American novel readers could have reeled off the titles of the thirty volumes mentioned here and that the wide circulation of these books was the reason for including an obituary for Wister in the New York Times in the first place, not her connections to important men.

The New York Times had come closer to getting it right a year and a half earlier upon the publication of Wister’s final translation with a notice that recalled,

Mrs Annis Lee Wister’s translations of German novels, beginning with “The Old Mam’selle’s Secret” in 1864 [sic], used to be held in the highest esteem by habitual novel readers who were particular in their choice of books. . . . She was one of the few translators of foreign fiction in our literary history who made literary fame for herself by translating. Mrs. Wister’s books were what people used to ask for in the bookshops.⁶

Yet after confessing uncertainty as to whether Wister’s reputation had endured to the present day, this article too lapsed into enumerating Wister’s relations to famous men.

Had Wister, however, not issued from a family of famous men, we might know her only as a dashing signature on the cover of many a German novel still found today in the obscurity of used bookstores or as a name that frequently
appears online in digitized books and reprints from the nineteenth century. Her extant correspondence might, furthermore, have been discarded—in a letter to her brother she herself maintains that such correspondence ought best be destroyed⁷—had it not been directed largely to her famous brother Horace Howard Furness (and preserved in the Annenberg Rare Book Library at the University of Pennsylvania) and to Mitchell, the famous physician and author (and preserved at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia). Without her connections, Wister might never have entered the public life of print culture at all, first as the premier American translator of Marlitt and later as a de facto arbiter of American (women’s) taste and mediator of German culture as she became known in the world of “light” reading for selecting the most entertaining German books to translate.

Like Alcott, who was the daughter of a utopianist and educator, Wister, as the daughter of a Unitarian abolitionist minister, grew up in a family that valued virtue as well as intellect. Her politically active and cultivated father, William Henry Furness (1802–96), whom Henry A. Pochmann identifies as belonging to the transcendentalists and among the critics and translators most “active in transmitting German authors to American readers,” undoubtedly introduced her to German. As a “young girl,” she had translated Struwwelpeter, and her father had made a present of it to one of his closest friends, that same Emerson whom Alcott adored.⁸

Despite “living in an atmosphere of culture all her life,” Wister spent much of her time hovering on the edge of cultural significance and public life. As her obituary indicates, her father, her famous brothers, and her husband guaranteed her access to intellectual and social circles in Philadelphia, circles with a penchant for high culture. She, along with her wealthy sister-in-law, Kate, assisted her brother Horace Howard with his scholarly work. Her husband, Caspar, a prominent physician, belonged to the American Philosophical Society and was a fellow of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. This company of men and a number of Philadelphia societies solemnly commemorated Caspar’s passing in 1888, barely mentioning his wife.⁹ Another sister-in-law, Sarah B. Wister, a well-known Philadelphia writer and crusader for social causes, was the daughter of the famous British actress Fanny Kemble, who herself was known, among other things, for her Shakespeare readings.¹⁰ With The Virginian, Wister’s nephew Owen fathered western fiction in 1902. These eminent connections mark the ghostly outlines of Wister’s circumscribed life.

Jones Wister, a relative, remembered Annis Lee in 1921 as a “scholar and social leader and also as an untiring worker in hospitals during the Civil War.”¹¹ His mention of her charitable activity recalls that, aside from such
good works, social class and marital status virtually barred Wister from work outside the home. Translation took place at home, and yet through translation, Wister emerged from domestic obscurity and her uncompensated and unacknowledged labor on behalf of scholarly men engaged with high culture to enter the publicity of print culture and the world of sentimental, moral, and entertaining reading. And as the translator of German fiction, she became a willing and self-conscious agent of transatlantic cultural transfer.

In the years immediately following the Civil War, J. B. Lippincott strove to recoup the wartime losses of his publishing house by expanding and diversifying its products with, among other things, “gift books, deluxe editions and standard editions of favorite British authors.”12 We do not know, however, what prompted Lippincott and Wister to begin publishing and translating Marlitt in particular. The enterprising Lippincott, “the Napoleon of the book trade,” appears in any case to have had his eye on the German publisher Ernst Keil and his family magazine, Die Gartenlaube, whose circulation had expanded rapidly beginning in 1865, at least in part because of the Marlitt serializations.13

In 1869, the year after the publication of The Old Mam'selle's Secret and Gold Elsie, Lippincott used Marlitt, as did Keil in Germany, to sell his own magazine. Lippincott's Magazine had been launched in 1868 as “a new monthly of science, literature, and education” that promised “light reading together with articles of the more thoughtful class”; like Die Gartenlaube, it promised to address a broad range of readers.14 In its second year the magazine serialized two of Marlitt's shorter pieces: “Blaubart,” translated by Mrs. B. Elgard as “Over Yonder,” and “Die zwölf Apostel,” translated as “Magdalena.”15 Wister herself, whose first Marlitt translations were selling well and whose name was becoming linked with Marlitt's, also contributed to the magazine in 1869 with a serialized translation from the German of the anonymous “Only No Love.”16 Wister's name also appeared in this volume in repeated advertisements for her first three Marlitt translations. Thus in 1869 the magazine attempted in multiple ways to fuel and capitalize on an emergent vogue of German domestic fiction in translation as American recreational reading initiated by Wister's Marlitt translations.

While Wister's first two Marlitt translations are based on Keil's book publications, some of the later ones appear either in the same year or even in the year before the respective novels were published as books in Germany. Textual evidence confirms that their serialization (and not their subsequent book publication) provided the basis for the later translations.17 As Marlitt caught on with the American public, it became increasingly imperative for
Lippincott to bring out the translations quickly before some other publisher and some other translator claimed the territory.

From 1868 to 1891 Wister published at an astonishing rate, turning out thirty-eight of her forty-two titles. She had impressive examples of scholarly industry in her father William and her younger brother Horace Howard and no doubt herself brought considerable powers of concentration to the task. One additional life circumstance may, however, explain the long-term dedication, indeed addiction, to translating. On December 14, 1869, in the very year in which she could find on the pages of *Lippincott’s Magazine* ready evidence of the success of her first three Marlitt translations, Wister lost her thirteen-year-old son, Caspar, her only biological child, “a promising boy.”18 His death notice indicates that he died of “consumption of the bowels,” some form of dysentery. This untimely and painful death can only have brought his mother heart-rending grief. It is startling, therefore, that in less than a year and a half, Wister had translated and published two additional translations of full-length novels—Wilhelmine von Hillern’s *Only a Girl* (announced May 7, 1870), and Julie Adeline Volckhausen’s *Why Did He Not Die? or, The Child from the Ebräergang* (announced April 15, 1871)—and a collection of five fairy tales by Friedrich Wilhelm Hackländer—*Enchanted and Enchanting* (announced May 16, 1870).19 By November 1871 the notice of the publication of a fourth translation, Marlitt’s *Little Moorland Princess*, had appeared.20 Wister then went silent for a time, only to return with three more novels published in a short period of time: Marlitt’s *The Second Wife* (1874), Fanny Lewald’s *Hulda; or the Deliverer* (1874), and Ernst Wichert’s *The Green Gate* (1875). The publication pattern suggests translation as a welcome diversion immediately following Caspar’s death only to be followed by exhaustion and, later, renewed vigor. From 1874 to 1891 Wister translated at least one novel a year (in 1885, three); in the banner years 1888 and 1889 she published four and three translations, respectively. Not until age sixty-one did she lapse into silence for sixteen years, from 1891 to 1907.

Wister’s decision to wear spectacles in photographs taken of her bespeaks a wish to record her devotion to reading and study, hinting at the passionate single-mindedness necessary for her to complete so many translations at so rapid a pace (see Figure 8.1). A note from 1896 corroborates her resolute toil and devotion, characterizing her as habitually exhausting “her nervous system by intense mental application.” In that same note she is prescribed the universal cure for “nervous” women of the age: “to take waters mildly alkaline & containing iron.”21 The irony of Wister’s submitting herself to this nineteenth-century cure-all, the medical substitute for the improvement of women’s political and social status, cannot be missed.22 Nor can we overlook
Figure 8.1 Annis Lee Wister. From the Furness Manuscripts, Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Van Pelt-Dietrich Library, Philadelphia.
the irony of Wister’s warm friendship with Silas Weir Mitchell, the originator of the rest cure, a course of treatment that dictated that suffering women be isolated from mental activity of any kind. In a letter to Mitchell himself, written when she was abroad in Europe and ailing, Wister mournfully describes herself as “nothing but [my doctor's] puppet.”

Wister, however, differed from such women as Alice James and Meta Fontane, the frustrated, sick, and neglected daughters and sisters of famous men. She did not simply languish in the shadow of important men; rather, she found in translation a public and creative outlet that enabled her to employ her intellectual gifts and yet retain the middle-class respectability and security conferred upon her by her prominent husband’s name, her “Mrs. Wister.” The status of translator spared her the anxiety of authorship and the competition of a man’s world and yet brought her approbation. Endowed like her signature author, Marlitt, with an excellent voice, she refused to sing in public. Translation offered a more tolerable form of publicity, one that granted Wister the quiet gratification of circulation and recognition without requiring her physically to enter public life. In translating she could exploit and transform into a lifelong occupation the talent that she had exhibited as a girl, which had in turn been fostered in a highly educated household.

Over the decades of her translating Wister acquired fame in the world of popular reading and, among those men who knew her personally, intellectual stature. Her correspondence from the 1890s with the historian and former publisher Henry Lea (1825–1909) and Mitchell, who beginning in the 1880s tried his hand at literature, suggests that both men looked to her for intellectual exchange and affirmation, implicitly deferring to her well-established fame. A shaky hand, identifiable as Lea’s, recorded her public achievement under the signature of one of her letters “Mrs. Caspar Wister / Translator & rewriter of German novels.” We shall return to the designation “rewriter.”

Nevertheless, despite success and fame, Wister permits herself in her extant letters to express little more than ambivalence toward her translations, if she mentions them at all. In a letter to an autograph collector, she refers to her literary abilities as “so slight that I must beg you to [remove] my name from your collection.” Writing to a Miss Dickinson, she speaks dismissively of her books: “I am rather ashamed of them, for it seems to me that my father’s daughter and my brother’s sister ought to do something better.” However, in that same letter, she concedes, “I become half reconciled to them when I hear such kind words as you speak to me.” This time she is prepared to grant the autograph: “For my ‘likeness’ which you are good enough to want—there is none extant—for my autograph—it is with all my heart yours.”
certain pride shines through her deprecating manner here, as she disarmingly yet tellingly displaces appearance in public—her likeness—with writing—her autograph.

Wister felt that she was engaged in work less important than that of her younger brother Horace Howard, who, after all, was editing Shakespeare. The novels she translated were unlikely ever to number among the books that family friend Emerson had deemed worthy in an essay titled “The Progress of Culture” (1867). Although the St. Louis Republic lauded “Mrs. Wister’s successful translations of the very best German authors,” these novels did not have the “vital and spermatic” character that Emerson required. Although read for decades, they still did not fulfill the spirit of the criterion he formulated, when he cautioned against reading popular works: “Never read any book that is not a year old.”

No German book that Wister translated, with the exception of Eichendorff’s Taugenichts (The Happy-Go-Lucky; or, Leaves from the Life of a Good for Nothing [1888]) belongs to the present-day German canon. Tellingly, in the case of this text by a male author of distinction, Wister permitted herself for once to express cautious pride in her work. Presenting a copy to Mitchell, she confessed, “I am vain enough to think that this rendering into English is the truest to the spirit of the original, which is so charming that, as you see, I do not hesitate to ask your acceptance of it in its English dress.”

Wister’s modesty notwithstanding, some of her translations did command the attention of pundits, appearing, for example, among “the most desirable and important books” in Hints for Home Reading (1880), even if only on the third-ranked list of such books. Wister and Lippincott were not cultivating an audience interested solely in what came to be known as highbrow or, in Emerson’s terms, “spermatic”; rather, they targeted readers, largely female, who sought pleasure in fiction that also rewarded reading with moral edification and lightly served cultural and social information. As such, Wister’s translations, published in affordable (but not cheap) editions, facilitated what Barbara Sicherman characterizes as “expanding access to culture that brought with it new consumers and new opportunities for self-creation.”

The combined efforts of translator and publisher had an impact on American popular reading that exceeded anything the modest Wister could have imagined of her “slight” literary abilities. Together they mined German print culture for entertaining and wholesome novels and transformed them into American best sellers for leisure-time reading. Its specialty in novels, strength in advertising, and eagerness to turn out new products and to recirculate old ones in new packages enabled the publishing house to encourage and profit fully from Wister’s talents. Even if Wister shrank from publicity, Lippincott
thrust it upon her, striving to make her name synonymous with a good read “from the German.”

Marlitt’s ten novels form the centerpiece of the corpus that Wister translated and Lippincott sold, marking a fortunate conjuncture of a translator’s skill and energy, supply from Germany, publishing enterprise, a burgeoning industry, and reader demand. Ten novels were not, however, sufficient to keep Wister occupied and Lippincott’s lists fresh over a thirty-five-year period. Having discovered Marlitt’s appeal on the American market, Wister and Lippincott sought to expand the corpus of novels from the German with similar works that likewise promised to fascinate American readers.

In time Wister’s imprimatur sufficed to sell any fiction she translated from the German and to guarantee it an afterlife among American readers even if only as a hanger-on in boxed sets. The New York Times confirmed in 1907: “We have known novel readers to make a complete list of her translations, with the intent to read them all, with anticipations of pleasure, just as they noted the titles of the various series of Trollope novels.”34 As The Critic asserted in 1884, “Mrs. Wister may safely be trusted not to select anything poor for translation and not to translate anything poorly.”35 Wister’s selections did resemble one another, and in making these choices she helped shape American readers’ perception of what German novels generally had to offer. We shall return below to these selections.

The Americanization of German Fiction

The success of this German domestic fiction in America rested not merely on its content, engaging plots, and messages, but also on the enterprise and marketing skill of the publisher. Lippincott pursued a number of strategies, touting the books not as important works of German literature that educated Americans ought to read but as American/ized products that provided access to German life and delivered a good read. How, then, did Lippincott appropriate German novels to make of them an American product calibrated to American tastes?

In the period during which Lippincott began publishing Wister’s translations, the American literary world, led by, among others, the New York publisher William Henry Appleton, had begun to discuss the merits of international copyright with renewed fervor.36 Yet up to 1891 “most works of foreign authors were ineligible for copyright protection under U.S. Law.” Exceptions included foreign residents or collaborations with American citizens.37 While legislation of 1891 recognized the principle of international law,
no effective law was passed until 1909. The American argument in favor of international copyright tended to center on unauthorized foreign editions of such worldwide American hits as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) or on the wish of American publishers to secure exclusive rights in America to foreign works; the idea of an obligation on the part of American publishers to compensate foreign publishers and authors for translations undertaken in America, however, remained in the background.

Lippincott, for one, did not hurry to acknowledge such an obligation to the German authors whose works the firm published in translation; in 1872 *Die Gartenlaube* complained concerning *The Little Moorland Princess*, Wister's translation of Marlitt's *Haide prinzeßchen* with Lippincott, that the translation had been undertaken without the permission of the author and the publisher. I have found no evidence that Lippincott ever remedied the situation, and there was certainly no legal action that the publisher Keil could take, for foreign works were considered common property in the United States. Indeed, the second general revision of the copyright code of July 8, 1870, reiterated "that copyright does not 'extend to prohibit' the printing, publishing, importation, or sale of works made by noncitizens." Die Gartenlaube did not complain again in print about unauthorized translation in America, leaving the question of compensation open. Silence on the matter could mean that in the end Lippincott, as did occasionally other American publishers, voluntarily paid a token fee. Yet in the enduring absence of an international copyright law, it is equally probable that Lippincott paid the German author and publisher no compensation whatsoever for Wister's translations, although, according to *Publishers' Weekly*, by the late 1870s it was common to remunerate the foreign author if "the book prove a paying success."

Lippincott, however, from the start pursued a strategy in its advertising and packaging of these books that presented them not so much as the German Marlitt's work as Wister's adaptations and thus as an *American* product. With the idea of creative American labor, the firm moved the issue of copyright to the question of protecting Wister's work and away from the rights of the original German authors. Furthermore, Lippincott apparently effectively protected its rights in America to the fruits of Wister's labor; the publishing house kept her translations in print into the new century, retaining them under the firm's label and its copyright protection. As cheap reprint editions of Marlitt and Werner, for example, proliferated under the auspices of a variety of publishers, none of these was a reprinted Wister "adaptation."

Almost from the beginning, Lippincott accorded Wister a prominence unusual for a mere translator. In 1870 *Lippincott's Magazine* listed Wister, alongside E. Marlitt, Julia Ward Howe, and Anthony Trollope, as a contribut-
ing “well-known writer” [my emphasis]. Altogether omitting the name of the original German author of “Only No Love,” the magazine simply ran the story under Wister the translator’s name. This gesture was part and parcel of Lippincott’s broader strategy of displacing the German authors—even Marlitt—whom Wister translated, in favor of Wister, the American “writer.” A closer look at the bindings and title pages of the books themselves makes this strategy visible.

While the spines of early editions of Wister’s translations of Marlitt’s novels identified the books as “From the German of E. Marlitt / Mrs. A. L. Wister” with both names in the same size print, later editions simply read “Translated by Mrs. A. L. Wister.” Marlitt’s name had vanished from the cover, although the author is credited on the title page. Similarly, in 1869 Lippincott included an advertisement on the back facing leaf of Countess Gisela that promoted the German author: “Recently Published. By the Author of this Volume.” Three years later, however, in 1872, the firm highlighted the translator with an advertisement on the leaf facing the title page: “Popular Works after the German. By Mrs. A. L. Wister.”

In 1879 a reviewer for The Nation remarked on Wister’s growing fame: “Mrs. Wister’s translations from the German are better known by her name than by those of their several authors, and a new translation by her is as sure of a welcome as if the merits of the original were already notorious.” In the absence of copyright protection against translations of the same German works by rival publishers, the prominence of Wister’s name served Lippincott well as it enabled a de facto claim to the German property by virtue of superior American production. Indeed, in 1881 the New York Times deployed an economic metaphor to describe Wister’s relationship to Marlitt’s works: “Long ago Mrs. Wister laid a natural embargo on the novels of Marlitt.” In other words, Wister acquired the status of an adaptor with special claims on this fiction.

A year before her death, The Dial summarized her near-status as an author: “Mrs. Wister’s translations from the German have long been recognized as contributions to English literature. Librarians and booksellers find that these romances are almost invariably called for as Mrs. Wister’s books, not as E. Marlitt’s or Werner’s or Frau von Hillern’s. This involuntary and inevitable ascription of authorship to the translator is without a parallel.” The notice substantiates its claim by pointing out that in the A. L. A. Catalogue of 5000 Volumes for a Popular Library “Mrs. Wister’s name appears in its proper alphabetical place, at the head of her translations—or such of them as are included in the selected library; but no other translator is similarly honored.” Catalogues of public libraries likewise support this assertion of
Wister’s reputation. In 1893 the state of Pennsylvania sent Wister’s ten Marlitt translations to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago for the Library of the Women’s Building as American book products.\textsuperscript{51}

In 1892, after Wister had all but ceased to translate and Marlitt had been dead for five years, Lippincott offered the public a boxed set of Wister’s Marlitt translations just in time for the Christmas rush. It led the advertisement with Wister’s name:

Even those (and they are legion) who have read Mrs. A. L. Wister’s delightful translations through all the years of their perennial appearances have not realized what a handsome set they would make collected on the shelf, or encased in a convenient box for a Christmas-gift. For at least one portion of them this last office has now been done by the J. B. Lippincott Company, who have brought forth a new edition of the ten volumes of E. Marlitt, Englished by Mrs. Wister, in uniform binding and with abundant illustrations from the German edition. It would be hard to find, up and down the holiday counters, anything more thoroughly acceptable than such an armful of fiction to both giver and receiver, or even to the lonely buyer himself.\textsuperscript{52}

Lippincott’s repackaging of books made agreeable to the American reader by Wister’s “Englishing,” a process that added value to them, invited the consumer to rediscover these well-known and beloved books in an appealing new format.

Lippincott had some years earlier begun issuing a series titled “Popular Works from the German, Translated by Mrs. A. L. Wister” that included, in addition to Marlitt’s novels, new editions of Wister’s translations of works by E. Werner, Claire von Glümer, the Austrian writer Ossip Schubin, Wilhelmine von Hillern, W. Heimburg, and others. Data from the Public Library of Muncie, Indiana, corroborates the effectiveness of Lippincott’s strategy for marketing these translations from the German under Wister’s name. From November 5, 1891, to December 3, 1902, 203 borrowers at the Muncie Public Library checked out Marlitt’s *The Old Mam’selle’s Secret*. Numbering among the top thirty-two choices in the eclectic list of over 2,300 additional books that these borrowers read are twelve additional Wister translations. Furthermore, in the aggregate, the twenty-four Wister translations held by the library logged 2,157 transactions. These numbers rival the 2,967 transactions recorded for the forty books by Alcott in the library’s holdings. Alcott was the seventh most widely circulating author in the library in that period (Marlitt—not always in Wister’s translation—follows in position number ten with 1,823 transactions). Were Wister under-
stood as an author, she would assume position eight immediately following Alcott.\textsuperscript{53}

Lippincott tried out different bindings to embellish the set, seeking to create recognizable and distinct American products whose value surpassed their story content. One such product consists of clothbound books in duodecimo format whose embossed front covers feature Wister’s signature along with a cupid perched on a flowery bough. Although the cover design is uniform, each cover is of a different color, making the individual volumes easy to spot on the shelf. Each spine displays the title, the publisher, and the designation “After the German by Mrs. A. L. Wister.” Whereas Wister’s name is displayed prominently on the spines and front covers, the names of the original German authors appear only on the title pages. The books are designed to ornament a home, both in size and cover. As Frank Mott remarks concerning the rise of the handy duodecimo format, buyers of cheaper books preferred “volumes they could put on their shelves” to the old quartos.\textsuperscript{54}

Amanda A. Durff acquired eleven volumes from this series over a span of eight years (1884–92).\textsuperscript{55} She meticulously recorded in pencil the month and year of the acquisition of each and also carefully placed inside the front cover a bookplate with her printed name and a picture of a young woman in eighteenth-century dress. As material objects these books take on a life of their own. Their covers lend them a decorative or shelf value. One can imagine them lining bookcases in Amanda’s parlor or perhaps her bedroom. The meticulous care accorded them, the delicate cherishing of them, suggests that Amanda understood the objects themselves to have an inherent value.

Fifty years later Good Housekeeping characterized the tendency of such books to encourage their purchasers, in Janice Radway’s formulation, to “invest material forms exchanged on the market with certain naturally occurring inherent properties.”\textsuperscript{56} The magazine noted that the very bindings of certain books “hint repose, the welcome quiet hour in this rushing world of ours. Moreover, books are full of suggestion. . . . They are essentially feminine, too. They hint mystery, the alluring unknown.”\textsuperscript{57} Lippincott’s decision in the 1880s to clothe Wister’s famous translations with hearts and flowers, the emblematic possibility of romance, anticipates Good Housekeeping’s notion of books as suggestive elements of interior decoration.

Even as Wister, thanks to Lippincott, began to acquire something akin to authorial status, she also acquired something akin to that of a literary critic; she became known as a critical reader on behalf of her audiences. We recall that as early as 1871 The Nation remarked on the “strong family likeness” among “five or six” German novels translated by Wister.\textsuperscript{58} Subsequent translations bore out that family likeness and in the process guaranteed readers
who enjoyed this kind of fiction that Wister chose novels they would like. In 1879 the Literary World declared that with Castle Hohenwald Wister “proved her eminent capacity, not as a translator only, but—rarer gift still—as a selector. Her happy faculty of insight, like a spiritual divining-rod shows her just where and how to dig rewardfully into the mine of foreign fiction.” A few months later the Literary World repeated its belief in Wister’s ability to choose good books: “We have learned to place an almost implicit confidence in the selections from German fiction presented to us by Mrs. Wister, so surely has each successive translation from her hand proved an interesting and profitable tale.” Seven years later a notice in Publishers’ Weekly praised Violetta in a similar vein, making clear that Wister in particular understood what women wanted to read:

It is sufficient for the lover of good novels to know that “Violetta” is translated by Mrs. A. L. Wister. Mrs. Wister selects novels for translation into the English with an educated discrimination, and in the fullness and richness of her English vocabulary has a great advantage over most other American translators of foreign stories; and long familiarity with the taste of average American womanhood enables her now to feel sure of the success of her books. They can always be relied upon for sparkling and witty illustrations of character, agreeable situations, delightful scenery, and dramatic action.

Likewise, in 1879 Lippincott quoted the New York Tribune in advertisements for In the Schillingscourt, according to which “Mrs. Wister shows both admirable taste and unusual knowledge of current German literature in the novels which she selects for translation.” In 1890 H. C. Walsh still marveled at Wister’s ability to find German literature that would appeal: “It is a wonder where Mrs. Wister finds so many clever German novels to translate, for really clever novels are rare, and the Germans furnish their quota of dull and stupid ones.”

Lippincott fueled—and profited from—the idea of Wister as a pundit. Nearly two decades after Wister first translated The Old Mamiselle’s Secret, the firm continued to point out the importance of her discriminating taste. In an advertisement for Saint Michael, Lippincott declared in 1887: “Mrs. Wister’s refined and pure taste never leads her amiss in making her selections.” Godey’s Lady’s Book repeated the phrase verbatim a year and a half later in its brief notice of Wister’s translation of The Owl’s Nest. A review published in 1889 in Lippincott’s Magazine agreed: “She selects her books with such admirable judgment that one is always sure of being richly repaid for the reading.” Having supplied the public with quality reading experiences over
many years, Wister—and by implication Lippincott—could be touted simply as knowing and delivering what Americans wanted to read.

In point of fact, following the success of the first two Marlitt novels in 1868, supplying the public with “what they wanted to read,” with books “full of suggestion,” had presented a challenge. Marlitt wrote slowly and with long gaps between her publications; from 1869 to 1874 and 1881 to 1885 the public had to wait five and four years, respectively, for the next novel. To keep Lippincott’s customers satisfied and herself occupied, Wister had to look elsewhere for equally entertaining and wholesome reading. In addition to identifying novels by other regular Gartenlaube contributors such as Werner, she looked to the popular Deutsche Roman-Zeitung, published by O. Janke, a Berlin publishing house that, like Lippincott, sought especially to profit from the publication of fiction. Here, she found six novels: Only a Girl (1870), Hulda (1874), Margarethe (1878), A New Race (1880), From Hand to Hand (1882), and Violetta (1886).

Even as she relied on promising German venues to yield fiction appealing to her American public, she tried out various authors: one novel each by E. Juncker, Claire von Glümer, E[va] Hartner (Emma von Twardowska), Wilhelmine Heimburg, Wilhelmine von Hillern, Fanny Lewald, Ursula Zöge von Manteuffel, E. Oswald (Bernhardine Schulze-Smidt), Valeska von Bethusy-Huc (a.k.a Moritz von Reichenbach), Hedwig Schobert, and two male authors, Ludwig Harder and Ludwig Ernst Wichert. Her failure to translate a second novel by any of these authors when most of them had more to offer—not even a second novel by Heimburg, who did eventually make a splash in America—suggests that Wister and Lippincott indeed brought literary discrimination, attention to reviews, and an eye to sales to bear on each subsequent selection.

None of her translations from the German found the same resonance with American readers that Marlitt did. Wister did, however, judge a few authors worthy of more than a single translation: she tried twice with Golo Raimund (Bertha Heyn Frederich), and four times each with Werner and Adolf Streckfuss, a male author. At the very end of her career in 1889 she discovered the Austrian writer Ossip Schubin (Aloisia Kirschner) whose work sold well enough in America in the 1890s to warrant translations of twelve different titles. While in Schubin’s work Wister potentially identified a new set of novels to please her readers, she herself rendered only three of them, ostensibly concluding her series of translations with Schubin’s Countess Erika’s Apprenticeship. In this last work, readers were reminded again of Wister’s abilities as a discriminating reader and translator. “What a rare delight it is to an author,” Schubin writes in her preface,
to be so admirably rendered and so perfectly understood only those can feel that have undergone the acute misery of seeing their every thought mangled, their every sentence massacred, as common translations will mangle and massacre word and thought. Therefore let every writer thank Providence, if he find an artist like Mrs. Wister willing to put herself to the trouble of following his intentions. . . . It is only natural, therefore, that, having been lucky enough to find so rare a translator, I should authorize the translation to the absolute exclusion of any other.67

Neither Wister nor Lippincott (with some other translator) pursued the opportunity for the future exclusive relationship intimated here. In fact, even as Wister translated the preface, she rendered words that pertained to herself as translator: “I should like to shake hands with them at parting,” Schubin declares in closing her preface, “and say good-bye with the Old World saw, ‘Auf Wiedersehen.’”68

In the end Countess Erika’s Apprenticeship was not Wister’s last word, although it appeared to be so for sixteen years. In 1907, one year before her death, she rendered one last text, Adolf Streckfuss’s novella Das einsame Haus: nach den Tagebüchern des Herrn Professor Döllnitz (1888) as The Lonely House; after the diaries of Herr Professor Döllnitz. Lippincott’s advertisement for this murder mystery in the New York Times celebrated Wister’s return: “Mrs. A. L. Wister who made the names of Marlitt, Werner, and Streckfuss famous throughout America, after fifteen years has acceded to the popular demand and translated one more work—a novel by her favorite German author, Adolf Streckfuss.”69 The claim of Wister’s special liking for Streckfuss is of doubtful veracity, but its purpose in an advertisement is clear. Wister’s reputation as a sharp reader able to select entertaining German novels apparently endured in 1907 (or at least could be usefully recalled) and still served to sell one last book.70

Lippincott capitalized on the event, producing an edition with color illustrations by Charlotte Weber-Ditzler that begged to be collected. Its front cover features a house on a hill, white clouds, butterflies in the four corners of a frame, and the white outline of a dagger that telegraphs murder and mystery as Lippincott’s nineteenth-century editions of Marlitt and other authors had not (see Figure 8.2). The large print and the color illustrations of some of the more sensational incidents in the novel make an appeal to a young reader or at least suggest that the book offers engrossing and undemanding reading. Below the title, the cover proclaims in large capital letters: “Translated by Mrs. A. L. Wister.”
Figure 8.2 Adolf Streckfuss, *The Lonely House* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1907). Author's copy.
German Fiction Clothed in “so brilliant a garb”

Thirty-nine years after her publication of *Gold Elsie* and *The Old Mam’selle’s Secret*, the seventy-seven-year-old Wister dedicated this translation, which this time she explicitly (and correctly) insisted would be her last, “to the children and grandchildren of those who so kindly welcomed the first, published a lifetime ago.” And as if responding to this dedication, a reviewer wrote of those who read her translation of *The Old Mam’selle’s Secret* “more years ago than we are anxious to confess to.” Wister had, the reviewer continued, translated “mostly masterpieces” and of course this new one was, like all the others, “charming.”

The word “charming” provides an important key to the status of these translations as American products. Even as Wister’s translations were aggressively marketed by Lippincott under Wister’s name and privately cherished by their owners over “more years than we are anxious to confess to,” another transformation took place. The American reviews of Wister’s translations of German novels increasingly conferred upon them the status of an American literary product. Laudatory reviews of Wister’s translations of Marlitt noted Wister’s skill in rendering the novels in an American idiom. A review in *Lippincott’s Magazine* made the exaggerated claim that it was “impossible to detect a single Germanism in these pages,” declaring, “Mrs. Wister’s work is singular in the freedom and force of its English.” Such phrases as “attractive in style” and “force of its English” express more than praise of competency in translation; they attribute literary quality to these translations, implying that in this case something more significant than “mere” translation was occurring. Some reviewers proved willing to make a still greater claim for Wister’s accomplishment as a cultural mediator.

In 1888 a reviewer of *The Owl’s Nest* (Wister’s translation of Marlitt’s *Eulenhaus*) hinted that Wister was not merely translating the tales but rewriting them, observing, “there is seldom any lack of picturesqueness in a novel which has gone through the hands of Mrs. Wister, whatever be true of the German Original.” Similarly, a notice from that same year in *Publishers’ Weekly* regarding Wister’s *Owl’s Nest* underscored the notion of the translator as an adaptor: “Thus far [Wister] has steadily demonstrated the possession of that peculiar ability which understands what to translate and how to translate it.” Three years earlier a review of *A Penniless Girl* had explained that Wister’s “secret” lay “not nearly so much in translating as adapting; gracefully putting in a light here or shadow there while the original tale has no liberty taken with it by which the author could feel aggrieved.” And a year before that, the *Literary World* had praised *Quicksands* as “another example of the unerring instinct with which Mrs. A. L. Wister detects the best German fiction of the day and rehabilitates it for American readers.”
The awkward word choice—“rehabilitates”—suggests that German fiction required American therapy. In 1891 a review of a work by another translator remarked, “That there is a large class of people who enjoy the typical German sentimental novel is amply proved by the popularity of Mrs. A. L. Wister’s adaptations.”

While the reviews and advertisements imply that Wister rewrote the novels, she did not do so in quite the way intimated by some of her reviews. She did not alter the plots or digest the texts. Rather, quite simply, she freely (and sometimes very freely) and stylishly translated; she seized opportunities to make Marlitt’s prose sparkle in English; she expressed with a single word lengthy locutions that could only sound clumsy in English or added words to make Marlitt’s prose more forceful. In other words, her so-called rewriting consisted of minute work at the level of the sentence. As we saw in chapter 4 in the case of Only a Girl, liberties at the sentence level could matter significantly to meaning. Nevertheless, many of Wister’s liberties had more to do with style; they yielded a lively, light prose that is pleasant and easy to read.

Thus, for example, at the conclusion of The Lady with the Rubies, Wister writes of rubies, “They must never glitter in your hair,” while the original reads, “In dein Haar werden sie nie kommen” (They will never come into your hair [my translation]). Where Marlitt’s text proclaims, “Dieser verderbliche Zauber muß sich meiner armen Blanka förmlich an die Fersen gehetzt haben, als sie von hier wieder in die Welt hinausgegangen ist; setzte die alte Frau mit gepreßter Stimme hinzu” (326; “This corrupting magic must have dogged my poor Blanka at every step when she left here and went out again into the world,” the woman added in a tense voice [my translation]), Wister translates the sentence as “That baleful charm must have possessed my poor Blanka, and have pursued her out into the world when she left us,” the old woman added in a low voice” (333). In the German text, “Blanka bog sich, voller Neugierde, wie es schien, aus dem Blätterrundbogen; dabei fielen zwei dicke Flechten darüber und hingen jenseits des Geländers lang herab, sodaß der Zugwind die blauen Bandschleifen an ihren Enden hin- und herwehen machte” (6; Filled with curiosity, so it appeared, Blanka leaned over from out of the curved arch of leaves; as she did so, two thick braids fell over it and hung down long on the other side of the balustrade so that the breeze caused the blue ribbons at their ends to blow back and forth [my translation]). In Wister’s version, however, Blanka “leaned forward curiously, it seemed, from her leafy screen. As she did so two thick braids of hair fell far over the balustrade, so that the breeze fluttered the blue ribbons with which they were tied” (18). By taking small liberties Wister produced an English text that is at once tighter and richer.
Wister did make mistakes and also by no means avoided Germanisms—despite reviewers’ exaggerated claims to the contrary. These Germanisms, intentional or not, often lend the English translation a gaiety, a pleasant touch of foreignness that can come across as an English speaker’s attempt to convey Germanness rather than as a failure to render German in standard English. The American reviewers—if they were not simply mechanically reproducing received opinion about Wister—may have been reacting to this quality in their mention of the charm of the translations.

Ultimately, the making familiar of the foreign proved the key to Wister’s success. Readers “learned to expect with pleasure” “German stories” when the American Wister “rehabilitated” them.\(^1\) Praising Wister’s translation of Streckfuss’s *Castle Hohenwald* in 1879, *Arthur’s Illustrated Home Magazine* relished Wister’s ability to make the foreign palatable to American tastes: “We do not feel the oppressive atmosphere of a different country than our own, filled with institutions repugnant to our feelings. We forget that we do not see and converse with men and women of flesh and blood like ourselves, living beneath walls, and trees, and skies exactly like our own.”\(^2\)

In this regard, too, Wister’s translations fit Lippincott’s program. Lippincott, it appears, had a keen sense for the American reading public’s appetite for Europe as long as it was presented in a digestible and not too alien form. Thus, while in *Lippincott’s Magazine* Wister’s sister-in-law, Sarah B. Wister, taught eager readers and would-be tourists how to visit European art museums,\(^3\) the same magazine aggressively marketed Wister’s translations. These translations offered their readers a good read in the safety of the armchair as a sentimental and much less arduous entry into German life and romance, or to put it another way: German life and romance entered the American home looking familiar.