
Adapting to a British Reading Public: The Children's Abridgment of Maria Susanna Cummins' *The Lamplighter*

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Abstract

American author Marion Harland described Maria Susanna Cummins and her success: "No other woman writer was so prominently before the reading public. *The Lamplighter* was in every home." Harland situates Cummins and her work as one of the reading public's American bestsellers of the 1850's, in good company with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* author Harriet Beecher Stowe. As with Stowe, Cummins' domestic fiction enjoyed transatlantic success in Britain and continental Europe. Exemplified by *The Lamplighter*, her work was reproduced in a variety of mediums, and Susan S. Williams has documented *The Lamplighter's* reception and popularity of its "innumerable editions." This paper extends Williams's project to consider *The Lamplighter's* "innumerable editions" in its transatlantic crossings. In one such edition, the novel shifts between adult and youth audiences as an abridged children's edition. Published by Sampson Low, Son, Marston in 1869, *Little Gerty*, or *The First Prayer* follows Gerty and her adoption by Uncle True through the scene of her first prayer after she receives the kneeling Samuel figurine. This paper examines *Little Gerty* with Cummins' original *The Lamplighter* alongside Hesba Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer* to emphasize the transatlantic circulation and reciprocal influence these texts had on each other, particularly in their investment in the image and agency of praying children. This paper argues that *Little Gerty* presents and revises the title character to be more of Jessica's ilk, which serves to connect her and her sentimental orphan story with a British reading public's cultural consciousness regarding conditions of class and poor children.

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