
‘Traduction faite à la demande de l’Auteur’: Harriet Beecher Stowe and the French Translation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin

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Abstract

What does it mean that Louise Belloc’s French translation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the “Bibliothèque Charpentier” was, as proclaimed on its title page, the edition “autorisée” and “faite à la demande de l’Auteur”? Or that the revised and corrected Librairie nouvelle edition of Léon Pilatte’s translation was, as a publisher’s advertisement maintains, both “autorisée et approuvé” by the author? Although much attention has been given to the novel’s German translation in the United States, and although the nearly two dozen French translations of the novel in 20 editions that appeared within the year following its American publication have been recognized as constituting a unique phenomenon in nineteenth-century publishing history in France, the scant scholarship that attends to the French translations points to them only as evidence of Stowe’s reputation or presumes that Stowe simply lent her name to “authorize” two completed renderings. Yet author, translator, and publisher all wrote new prefatory matter for the Charpentier edition, and this paratextual apparatus, along with contextual matter, suggests that Stowe invited and actively supervised in Paris at least part of the Belloc translation (in part because she was convinced that a feminine mind would take the imprint of hers more easily/“je suis de plus convaincue qu’un esprit féminin prendra plus aisément l’empreinte du mien” than had that of a prior male translator) and directed corrections of Pilatte’s in hopes of controlling the novel’s reception and significance in France, a hope ultimately disappointed by readers there. The story of these translations illuminates Stowe’s engagement in transnational politics, professional politics, and gender politics; contributes to the history of translation; and speaks to the conference themes of “Border Crossings” by questioning assumptions about translation in Stowe scholarship as well as the sorts of boundaries (nationalist, linguistic) that continue to constrain study of United States writers even when their texts cross borders.

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