Stowe, Dickens, and the Transatlantic History of Reading

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Abstract

Scholarly work over the past decade has illuminated Stowe by placing her work in a transatlantic context, and one means of doing that has been to illuminate the connections and tensions between Stowe and Dickens. These were authors who were vying with each other, in the words of Laura Korobkin, "for the position of best-loved, best-selling, and most socially conscious author in English." Dickens disliked Stowe's manner of mobilizing emotion, a surprising reaction from someone whose works we consider sentimental. However, this reaction was not, I will claim, simply the result of competitiveness; it reflected these two authors' differing understandings of the proper ways to galvanize readers to act for the social good and the proper role of emotion in inspiring this action. This paper will contribute to the scholarly conversation in a couple of ways: first, it will encourage us to dispense with monolithic ideas of sentimental rhetoric in the mid-1850s by specifying how it differed in two of its most famous and successful proponents. Registering the different understandings and mobilizations of sympathy in Stowe's works (specifically in Uncle Tom's Cabin) and Dickens' (in the contemporaneously published Bleak House) is important because modern scholars typically understand Stowe's ideas about sympathy to originate with UK thinkers like the Scottish commonsense philosophers and Adam Smith. Putting her work in the context of Dickens' allows us to see not only how sentimentality circulated transatlantically but also how it varied locally. Second, I propose we can understand this variance by placing each author in a transatlantic history of reading: How were Stowe and Dickens responding to the changes in people's reading practices that were occurring in this period? We can understand this shift roughly to be one from intensive to extensive reading, Stowe responding with horror and Dickens with something else.

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