

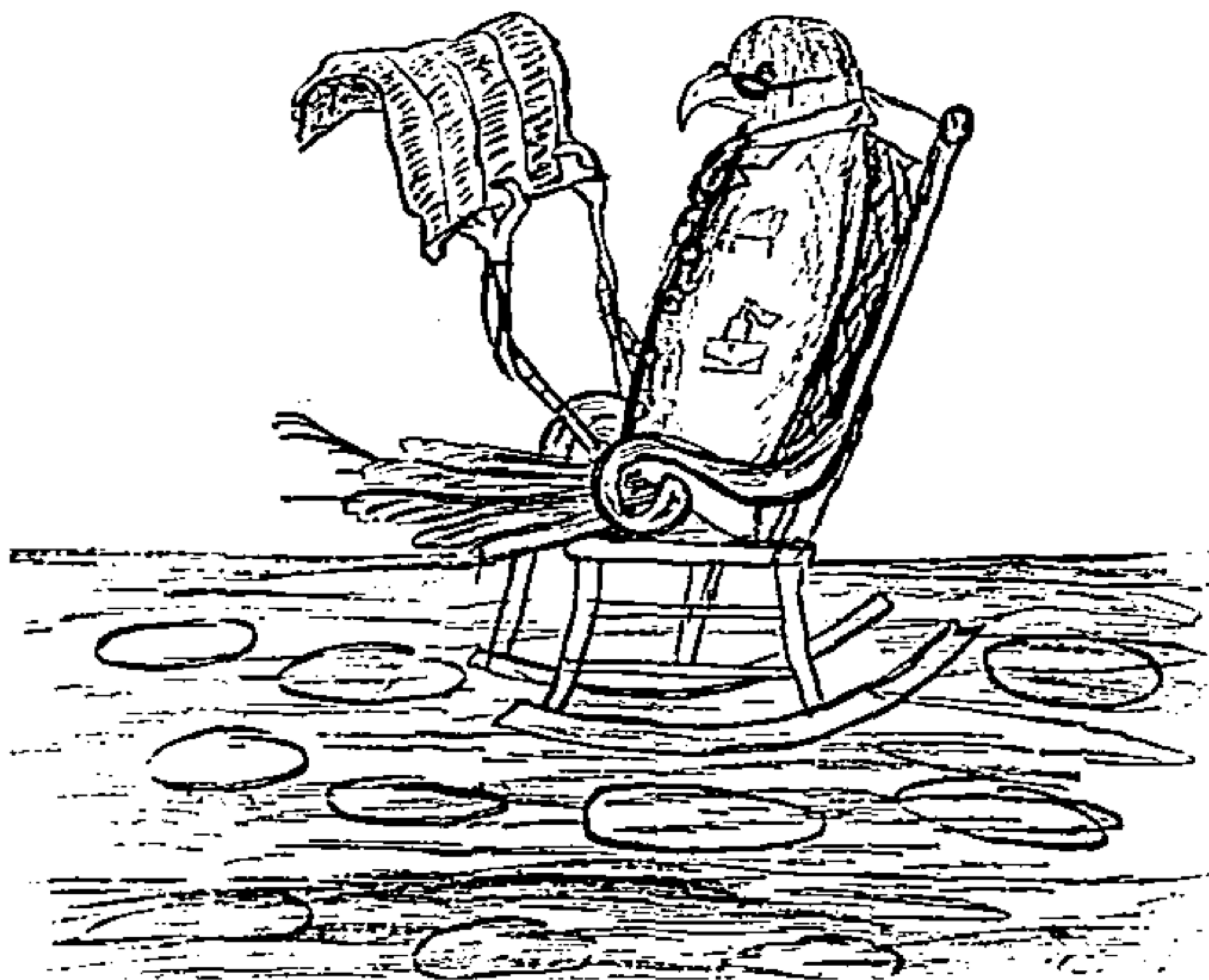


Transatlantic Constructions of Childhood in the Late 19th Century

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INTRODUCTION

This project aims to analyze the methods with which 19th century children’s periodicals cultivated and scripted ideal childhoods for their readers. This analysis was performed by examining reader correspondence (interactions between child readers and adult editors) in two magazines from the Nesbitt collection: a British periodical for girls, entitled *The Girl’s Own Paper*, and in an American periodical, *St. Nicholas*, that was written for children more broadly.



A LITTLE GIRL sends us this comical drawing, made by herself, as a portrait of the “Parrot-Professor” of Mr. Boyesen’s story “Mabel and I,” published in our January number.

Pictured: An example of correspondence from *St. Nicholas*’ “Letter-Box,” in which a child reader responded to an adult-authored essay. (1)

METHODS AND TEXTS

Major Research Questions

1. How do the editors of the two periodicals create and convey ideal models of childhood to their readers through correspondence? In what ways do readers accept and/or reject these models?
2. Does *St. Nicholas* employ similar rhetorics of community-building and specifically feminine aspirations as *The Girls’ Own Paper*? In other words: How do constructive efforts meant for girls map onto constructive efforts meant for all children?

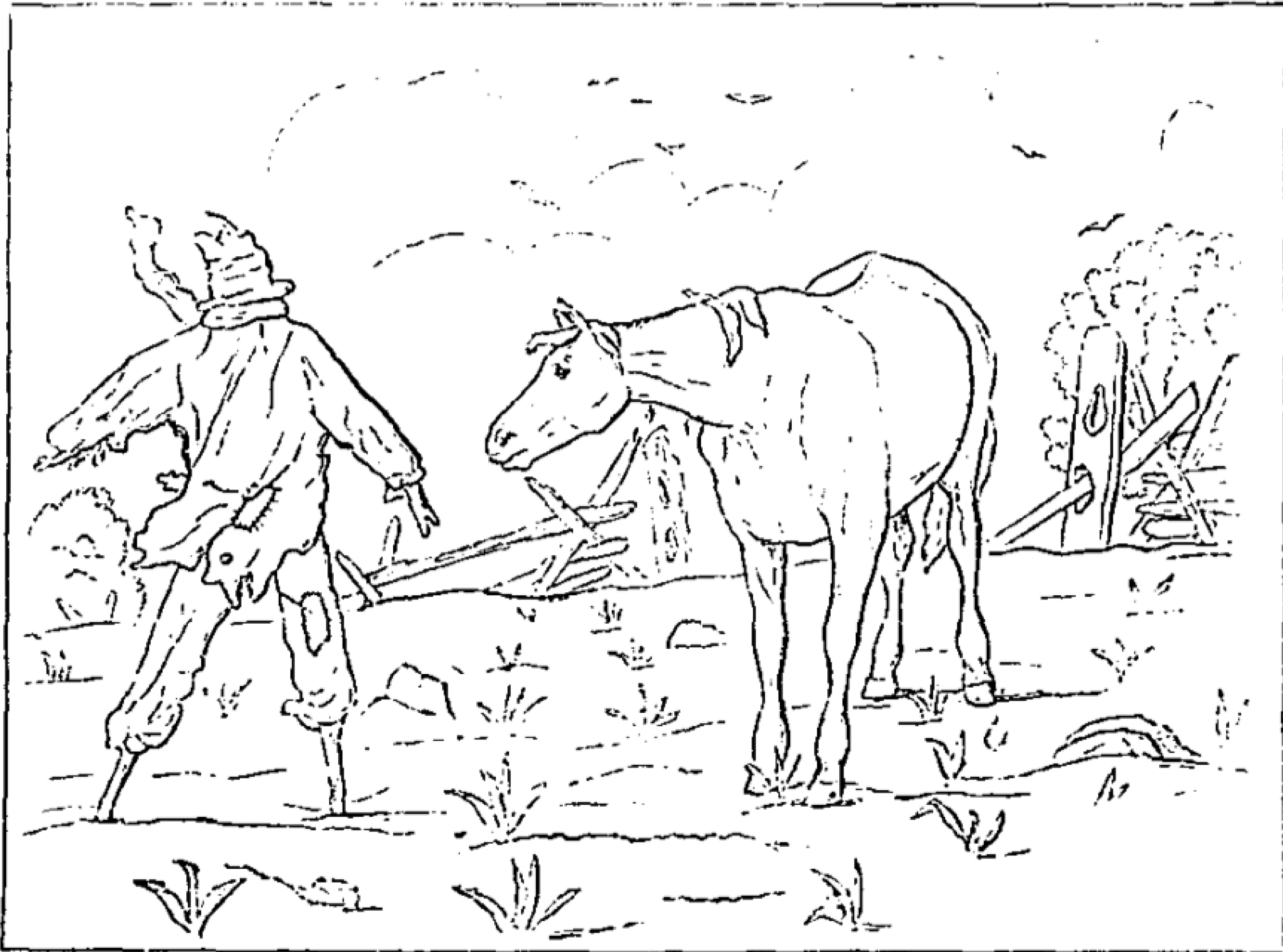
To best explore these inquiries within reasonable scope, only the first five years of each magazine’s **letter-writing columns** were examined through **close reading** tactics.

METHODS AND TEXTS

Text Profile: *St. Nicholas*

Dates of Publication: 1873-1943
Editor: Mary Mapes Dodge, editor from 1873 to 1905
Target Gender and Nationality: American boys and girls

Pictured: A picture drawn by a correspondent of the *St. Nicholas* “Letter-Box,” H. M. R. L. It was published alongside a letter from H. M. R. L. that tells the story behind the artwork. (2)



THE HORSE AND THE SCARE-CROW. (DRAWN BY H. M. R. L.)

Text Profile: *The Girl’s Own Paper*

Dates of Publication: 1880-1956
Editor: Charles Peters, editor from 1880 to 1907
Target Gender and Nationality: British female youth



“PLEASE, LADIES, THE EDITOR WISHES TRUST-WORTHY AND KIND ANSWERS TO THESE FEW NOTES IMMEDIATELY. PRINTER’S WAITING.”

Pictured: An illustration published in the “Answers to Correspondents” column by Charles Peters, editor of the *Girl’s Own Paper*. (3)

RESULTS & FURTHER RESEARCH

Through this research it becomes evident that *St. Nicholas* uses a more equitable system for transmitting ideal childhoods to its readers than does *The Girl’s Own Paper* because of its **child-centered** mediation tactics, thus granting children a greater level of **perceived agency** within the correspondence column. Examples of these tactics include:

- ❖ Publishing original letters from “Letter-Box” correspondents.
- ❖ Referencing children to other readers’ inquiries, rather than to adult-authored content.
- ❖ Creating a structurally flexible correspondence column.
- ❖ Encouraging children to offer corrections of and revisions to the magazine’s content.

Other Questions to Consider

1. How do greater levels of perceived agency for children translate into their actual lived experience?
2. How do other kinds of correspondence columns (such as competitions or child-authored fictional content) fit into the above argument? Does examining a different type of correspondence change the possibility for child-adult equitability in 19th century periodicals?

Potential Future Directions

There exists a whole host of possibilities for extending this project. These include: examining other magazines for both boys and girls to test the applicability of the claims about *St. Nicholas*, examining an all-boys’ periodical in place of an all-girls’ periodical, or considering magazines from other parts of the world.

Acknowledgements

- Dr. Amy Murray Twynning, Faculty Mentor
- Clare Withers, Archivist Mentor
- Laura Nelson, Patrick Mullen, and the OUR

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(1): “THE LETTER-BOX.: PUZZLE.” *St. Nicholas; an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks* (1873-1907), vol. 4, no. 6, Apr. 1877, pp. 421.
(2): “THE LETTER-BOX.” *St. Nicholas; an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks* (1873-1907), vol. 4, no. 10, Aug. 1877, pp. 701.
(3): “Answers to Correspondents.” *The Girls’ Own Paper*, vol. I, no. 15, 10 Apr. 1880, pp. 240.